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Article

Title: Digital media and altered states

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Example citation: Ressel, J. (2014) Digital media and altered states. *Law, Culture & Ideas Blog*. **24/04/2014**

Version: Published version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/6605/>



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Posted on [24/04/2014](#)



Recently I came across copies of a couple of my popular legal articles published by the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* in April and June 2009. It came as a shock to discover that the newspaper no longer publishes printed papers on a daily basis and is no longer even printed in Northampton. We may reflect on whether technology has altered our perception of the spaces surrounding us and those we make, how we express ourselves and how we interact with our experiences.

‘The law aims for a clean break’

Northampton Chronicle & Echo – 24 April 2009



The history of the *Chronicle & Echo*, (*The Chron*) a well-liked local daily newspaper, mirrors the trajectory of many a printed paper in analogy with creative expression of ideas: a trajectory taking it from predictable public everyday local spaces to private and yet omnipresent existence. There is no doubt that the dematerialisation of the printed word by digital technology has altered our states of perception and of our self-expression.

A brief glance at the history of *The Chron* offers an example of such transformation. The paper was established in 1931 from a merger of two weekly and two monthly papers. And one could say it was the precursor of modern-day political coalitions: the original *Chronicle* was a Tory and the *Echo* was a Liberal paper [1].

It asserted its physical and geographical existence in a strikingly visible architectural presence symbolising local endeavor, political and social identity and local sovereignty. Until 1970's *The Chron* was published out of its striking Art Deco offices overlooking Northampton's famous Market Square.

In 1978 it moved to brand new purpose built offices in Upper Mounts boasting the most up to date computerised printing presses [2]. On 26 May 2012 it ceased daily print publication. And now it is printed only a weekly basis and in Peterborough.

‘Deciding who gets the house’

Northampton Chronicle & Echo 26 June 2009

It seems that *The Chron* has now moved firmly into McLuhan's "unified electrical field" [3] directed by digital



technology which serves to manipulate and control access to and the distribution of information: information instantaneously factualised at the touch of the return button on our search engine.

As Will Self notes, in this year’s Richard Hillary memorial lecture, the web and internet has created a space of “*a permanent Now*” [4], the digital text.

In no more than the span of 21st century human lifetime, *The Chron* has moved from the a manifest physical presence in both the real and the metaphorical Market Place(s) affording a platform for free exchange of ideas mediated by its editors, to an altered state of “*permanent Now*” where creative ideas and notions of free expression become measured by digital ‘timelines’, objectivised in a state of repeating and self-affirming narcissistic assertions ‘easily’ understood and far too easily generated and disposed in the

nearest facility [5].

Will Self points to the significant political and social consequences of the digitally altered states of the ‘*permanent Now*’ [6] affecting creativity and human self expression. He writes that:-

“...the hallmark of our contemporary culture is an active resistance to difficulty in all its aesthetic manifestations, accompanied by a sense of grievance that conflates it with political elitism. Indeed, it’s arguable that tilting at this papery windmill of artistic superiority actively prevents a great many people from confronting the very real economic inequality and political disenfranchisement they’re subject to, exactly as being compelled to chant the mantra “choice” drowns out the harsh background Muzak telling them they have none.” [7]

In short, what he talks about is the notion that ideas need to be made ‘easy’, bite sized down to the narrow ‘market’ expectation, digitally policed, in a global competition for jobs, general social resources and juridical rights, deflecting the natural human need to confront political, structural and economic consequences of the neo-liberal indoctrination of ‘choice’, the altered state.

The technological and architectural rationale, as we have seen when we looked at the history of the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo*, is the digital creation of the altered state of ‘*permanent Now*’. It seems that, as Fukuyama argued in response to the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989, but since in a somewhat discredited account, history may finally be an end [8].

Yet this somewhat dour conclusion should not deflect us from taking advantage of the alterity – after all digital spaces have provided the metaphorical ‘clearing in the jungle’ for this article.

Footnotes:

[1] See further Paul Linford ‘National newsman’s memories of ex-regional daily’ 25 March 2013, *HoldTheFrontPage.co.uk*, available at: <http://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2013/news/national-newsmans-memories-of-ex-regional-daily/>

[2] See the story published by *The Chronicle*: ‘Chron moves to a new home in Northampton’ on 12 September 2013, available at <http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/business/business-news/chron-moves-to-new-home-in-northampton-1-5479857>

[3] See further: Will Self, ‘The novel is dead (this time it is for real)’ *The Guardian* Friday 2 May 2014, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>

[4] Will Self, 'The novel is dead (this time it is for real)' *The Guardian* Friday 2 May 2014, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>

[5] As we know the etymology of 'facility' lies in the Latin word *facilis* or 'easy to do', in French the word designates 'easy'. Interestingly, in Latin *factitious* represents 'artificial' and in Old English it stands for 'to do'. We could say then that '*facility*' could contain the sense of an artificial 'doingness'.

[6] This idea is reminiscent of the concept of the 'permanent state of exception' and 'bare life' developed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. See for instance his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* published in 1995.

[7] Will Self, 'The novel is dead (this time it is for real)' *The Guardian* Friday 2 May 2014, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>

[8] Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* 1992 Free Press. He wrote that "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

Suggested citation: J Ressel 'Digital media and altered states' *Law, Cult. & Ideas Blog* (24 April 2014) (available at <http://lawcultureblog.wordpress.com/>)

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