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## Communication Technology and the Suspension of Disbelief

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## **Communication Technology and the Suspension of Disbelief**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the very valuable feedback received from Briankle Chang, Peter Krapp, and Greg Wise on an early draft of this essay.

Thinking about the ten years during which *comm +1* has been published, there seems to have been an increasing amount of technology-driven evolution of attitudes toward, and deconstruction of, reality. From developments in virtual reality technology to evolution of computer-generated imagery, from popular cultural texts increasingly incorporating notions of a “multiverse” to real-world examples of misinformation and disinformation, the boundaries between reality and unreality, fact and fiction, have seemed increasingly blurry. The notion of fake news has entered the lexicon as a figure of speech, a descriptor, an epithet. If Stephen Colbert’s character on *The Colbert Report* was the canary in the coal mine that warned us that we have well and truly reached the end of authenticity and that fake news was just around the corner by coining terms like “truthiness” and “post-truth,” then all of the birds have stopped singing, or perhaps been drowned out by alarm bells. Or perhaps the birds aren’t real. But are the alarm bells now sounding different than the ones that rang nearly 100 years ago when studies of propaganda and persuasion, in some tellings the progenitors of the scholarly study of communication, focused on media effects,<sup>1</sup> or different than the ones that rang 60 to 70 years ago when the media of mass communication were resoundingly excoriated as escapist<sup>2</sup> or more recently when internet addiction, or mood management and selective exposure, have come to be studied?<sup>3</sup>

There is of course a long lineage of media-related panics and anxieties, and the earliest alarms, like those already mentioned, were raised over the consequences of then-new media such as radio and television. New digital media of communication have not been exempted from raising alarms, and the ones ringing now about misinformation ought to be very loud indeed, if only because of the scale, the sheer amount of misinformation, the speed and precision with which it spreads, and what appear to be its consequences for politics in numerous localities, states, and countries. Similarly, the sheer number of popular culture references to altered realities and multiverses signals something important about the popular imagination and its acceptance of reality as malleable and/or multiple. As the Russian saying goes, quantity has a quality all its own, and discriminating between true and false seems a less qualitative project now than it once had been if only due to the sheer volume and ostensible warping of time and space that marks the difference between analog and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Lazarsfeld, “Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 2–16.

<sup>2</sup> Elihu Katz and David Foulkes, “On the Use of the Mass Media as ‘Escape’: Clarification of a Concept,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1962): 377–88.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Reinecke, “Mood Management Theory,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, ed. Patrick Rössler, Cynthia A. Hoffner, and Liesbet van Zoonen, 4 vols. (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2017), 1271–84, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0085>.

digital modes of communication. It is, however, whether qualitative or not, a binary project, a separation between fake and real, authentic and inauthentic, true and false: Winner takes all, and there is no in-between (witness contemporary politics around the world).

There is, however, quite a lot in-between, and that is where the most interesting interactions between people, and between people and technology, are taking place. Technological development is further complicating the boundaries between real and fake and making their separation, once binary, very fuzzy indeed and exacerbating a desire for the simpler binary divide between the real and the not real. Meanwhile the role that digital technology plays in perception of both the real and not real is becoming more visible just as the boundaries between them are becoming more blurred. Deepfakes, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), the metaverse, all put a technological and viscerally realistic spin on the philosophical flirtations postmodern theory had in the 1980s when simulacra were more thought experiment and less computational challenge. And this blurring of the boundary between the real and not real is occurring at a time when, as Peter Brooks put it, we are witnessing a “hyperinflation of story,” when, “swamped in story as we seem to be, we may lose the distinction between the (universe and stories about the universe), asserting the dominion of our constructed realities over the real thing.”<sup>4</sup>

At the same time as technology drives visual and aural (and in some cases tactile) construction of reality (or realities), putting audiovisual flesh on symbolic skeletons, its discursive construction seems to be stalling, or perhaps is becoming overwhelmed in the face of the technological ease with which it seems reality can be manipulated or created. Little debate seems to take place any longer regarding nomenclature with which to tag technologies that can manipulate reality; instead, they seem quickly and readily adopted into the language. Deepfakes, CGI, misinformation, and other terms enter the lexicon with nary a gestation period during which there is contestation over their meaning, as had been the case some while ago when, for example, virtual reality was first bandied about to describe the technological simulation of the real. The infinite resources of the symbolic are perhaps not a match for the mechanistic and commercial privileging and labeling of the physical and sensual.

As it has been with most every medium and technology when new, it is tempting in the present conjuncture to revisit ideas about media effects and point to individual technologies’ operation in proscribed social, political, economic, discursive,

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2022), 17.

etc. settings. I would like to suggest that it would be more beneficial if we were to seek to understand the affective dimensions<sup>5</sup> of our need and efforts to discursively and technologically construct reality with a detour through media psychology. The hope is that thereby we may address whether and how structures of feeling, as Raymond Williams put it initially, are increasingly intertwined with technology and technological discourse, or, perhaps, with technics, to borrow from Lewis Mumford. To do so, I suggest we consider two ideas that seem to have gained little traction thus far in the study of communication and communication technology: suspension of disbelief and magical realism.

The former, suspension of disbelief, originated in poetry and literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Coleridge and Wordsworth collaborated on their *Lyrical Ballads* as they sought to understand the pleasure readers take from poetry as they “partner” with poets and authors in an immersion into a fictional narrative world.<sup>6</sup> Theater scholars and critics, as well as film and media scholars, dallied with the idea, but it was media psychologists Böcking and Wirth who used the phrase “suspension of disbelief” to encourage research on affective dimensions of presence and telepresence in addition to research on media and entertainment.<sup>7</sup> They define suspension of disbelief “as a mode of using media within the usage of narrative fictional media content during which the user does not scrutinize the consistency of the plot and the basic realism of the fictional media content, nor pay attention to corresponding infractions or violations”<sup>8</sup> and later claim it ought not be limited to narrative, fictional media content. While a good definition, and one they apply to good effect in research on virtual reality and presence, there is a vexing undercurrent throughout their paper that suspension of disbelief necessitates at least some suspension of critical faculties.

Magical realism, too, has its origins in literature, and it too has slipped its bounds to mingle, very slightly, with communication research. Weinberg, writing about the use of a magical realist epistemology for conducting ethnography in *The Communication Review*, asked, “How would ethnography be remade if, instead of searching for the truth of a culture by harnessing the cold, quantitative facts of scientific method, if we approached culture with a visceral sense of awe and wonder?”

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995): 83–109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354446>.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: J. M. Dent, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Saskia Böcking and Werner Wirth, “Conceptualizing Suspension of Disbelief for Communication Research” (paper presented at the 55th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, New York, May 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Böcking and Wirth, “Conceptualizing Suspension of Disbelief for Communication Research,” 25.

What would we discover in the undoing of our knowing?”<sup>9</sup> For Weinberg such questions can assist us in moving beyond “binaristic impulses” to allow “competing notions of reality to co-exist.”<sup>10</sup> Like Google engineer Blake Lemoine, or QAnon adherents, or Fox Mulder on *The X-Files*, “I want to believe” is more fun, more interesting, than the alternatives. How might we approach understanding and theorizing the desire to believe as not a mere suspension of disbelief but as something that speaks to a fundamental human need for sensemaking?

Arthur C. Clarke’s oft-quoted “law” from the 1960s that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”<sup>11</sup> has been burnished by digital technologies and electronic visualization particularly, lending an almost literal dimension to the notion of magical realism. Suspension of disbelief requires as its simultaneous counterpart a suspension of belief, at least during the moments at which one is engaged, immersed, in the co-creation of story, in the articulation of envisioned and imagined alternatives on offer. And in both cases, suspension of disbelief and magical realism, affective engagement is paramount. Without it there is no ground for the commingling of experience and imagination. I am reminded of Carey’s employment in his seminal essay, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” of Cassirer’s work to remind the reader that as a symbol-producing animal, humans’ engagement with reality is different both imaginatively and physically. And even though he noted that, “Cassirer said it, and others have repeated it to the point of deadening its significance,” Carey felt it worth repeating:

Man lives in a new dimension of reality, symbolic reality, and it is through the agency of this capacity that existence is produced. However, though it is often said, it is rarely investigated. More than repeat it, we have to take it seriously, follow it to the end of the line, to assess its capacity to vivify our studies. What Cassirer is contending is that one must examine communication, even scientific communication, even mathematical expression, as the primary phenomena of experience and not as something “softer” and derivative from a “realer” existent nature.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michaela Django Weinberg, “Paulo and the Birds: Towards a Magical Realist Approach to Ethnography,” *Communication Review* 11, no. 4 (December 2008): 351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420802511226>.

<sup>10</sup> Weinberg, “Paulo and the Birds,” 346.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 36.

<sup>12</sup> James W. Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 26.

The forms of symbolic reality that we now have the means—and the will—to construct are likewise “the primary phenomena of experience,” and not separate from it. We would do well therefore to try to understand its place in the firmament of imagination, affect, and belief. In her conclusion to a 1978 essay on suspension of disbelief in fiction, Eva Schaper wrote,

The beliefs activating our responses are not beliefs instated only after other beliefs are suspended. Rather, to have true beliefs about characters and events in fiction and thus remove our responses from the sphere of irrational or unintelligible behavior is to acknowledge the necessity of first-order beliefs entailed by knowing that what we are dealing with is fiction.<sup>13</sup>

Do we not live with fictions of our own making particularly in the technological realm, and are these not increasingly first-order beliefs? In our studies of virtual environments or social robots, for example, we tell of people forming relationships with technological objects, sometimes virtual ones, sometimes physical ones, as they tell stories about their communication, interaction, and emotional engagement with machine-produced others. We would do well to attend in future research and theory to consider suspension of disbelief and magical realism as prisms that lens the affective and return it to a place, as Weinberg puts it, “of awe and wonder,” a place that affords us opportunities to inquire about the meaningfulness of the experience and creation of the social and technological construction of reality in the turmoil residing between the real and the fake.

We would also do well to attend to it in education. For example, increasing calls for media literacy training as an appropriate and necessary corrective with which to combat misinformation and disinformation are fine but are also likely too reliant on rationality. It would be useful to understand the extent to which self-reflexivity and awareness as additional components of such efforts could further empower individuals to understand not only the content of information but also their engagement with it. This will be particularly necessary as technologies of emotion recognition are built into machines with which humans interact, such as voice assistants or social robots. Developing the resources and skills that we may bring to bear on understanding not only the content of the interactions we have but also recognizing, parsing, and contending with the emotional entanglements they may evoke will be a useful addition to a person’s media literacy toolkit.

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<sup>13</sup> Eva Schaper, “Fiction and the Suspension of Disbelief,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 44.

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