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The Image of Collaboration: Mediation and Enervation under Lockdown

Eleanor Dare  and Alexandra Antonopoulou

Throughout the pandemic and in conditions of ‘lockdown’, in which the authors could not meet in person, Alexandra Antonopoulou and Eleanor Dare adapted their long-term collaborative writing project, *The Phi Books* (2008–), to the constraints of pandemic quarantine, in the second lockdown deploying their own chatbot and AI image generator as new collaborators. Given the complexity of such a mediated experience, in which fears around surveillance, corporate control, glitch and signal loss (not to mention illness) have been consistently present, how might we theorize the encounters and complex processes of mediation we experienced online, as writers and academics but also as friends? What, if anything, have we learnt from our collaboration being mediated by one or two corporate platforms? This article elucidates the author’s patterns of interpretation and resistance as mediatized and informed by embodied experiences. It also discusses the role of third-party agents, which the authors term ‘Coagulagents’ (coagulant and agents), serving to destabilize or deterritorialize the familiar presumptions of their work.

Keywords: Collaboration; Animation; Art; Creative Writing; AI

Introduction

Social media has a significant impact on our experience of images, space and time, not to mention our social lives. It always comes with the risk of over-determination and hype, not to mention the ‘hyperdermic’ model of media influence, which many of us in higher education have worked against, as students submit proposal after proposal addressing the way in which media ‘makes’ people variously lonely, not lonely, violent, peaceful, happy, unhappy and so on. But now that the greatest part of our lives (by volume, not quality) is mediatized from 9–5 (or more like 7–11), it seems like a fitting time to reevaluate the impact of our media-centric existence, subject to what Hepp calls ‘deep mediatization’,¹ a term which describes the depth of institutional dependence on social media.

This article examines these questions through the experience of collaboration online. Throughout the pandemic and in conditions of ‘lockdown’, in which the authors could not meet in person, Antonopoulou and Dare adapted their long-term collaborative writing project, *The Phi Books*, to the constraints of pandemic quarantine, in the second lockdown deploying their own chatbot and AI image

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generator as new collaborators or ‘Coagulagents’ (coagulant and agents), explained in this article. The Phi Books project began in 2008, in which we wrote stories in two books we swapped each week. The project was intended to extend aspects of our individual doctoral practices, addressing automation and creativity. It has endured for 13 years, in which we have used code, performance and virtual reality to extend our practices as writers and researchers across education, design and computation.

Given the complexity of such a mediated experience, in which fears around surveillance, corporate control, glitch and signal loss (not to mention illness) have been consistently present, how might we theorize the encounters and complex processes of mediation we experienced online, as writers and academics but also as friends? What, if anything, have we learnt from our collaboration being mediated by one or two corporate platforms? Such platforms include Zoom, Teams, Hangouts and Collaborate, now forming a backdrop to our lives for several hours a day.

Like many researchers we have adapted to new forms of visual and sonic collaboration while also adapting to shifts in our working lives, in particular to a pattern of 10-hour working days online, with meetings, teaching and administration, entangled with our social lives and collaborative processes, all converging upon our laptop and mobile phone screens. How have these constrained scenographies, corporate hierarchies and aspect ratios impacted our understanding of mediation, informed as they are by a growing sense that the value of images is even more rapidly shifting?

The image of ourselves and others is continually destabilized by a proliferation of filters and a critical mass of epistemic uncertainty – proctoring technologies, racist facial recognition, the accelerated presence of algorithmic decision-making which reinforces systems of oppression. In this context, the language of ‘4th revolutions’ and neoliberal technological determinism is not adequate (and never has been) to define this era in our lives. Instead, we have formed our own patterns of interpretation and resistance as mediated and informed by our embodied experiences, but also by our readings of Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism*,² Xenofeminism,³ Byung-Chul Han’s *The Burnout Society*,⁴ Couldry and Hepp’s *Mediated Construction of Reality*,⁵ Ruha Benjamin’s *Race After Technology*⁶ and Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces*,⁷ among other texts.

This article outlines our processes of collaboration under quarantine, describing our contexts and offering analysis and reflections. Key issues are summarized, and the authors draw upon their own research and practice in the domain of image making in conjunction with collaborative writing, computation and ideology, in particular the political imaginary projected onto the move online within HE and corporate hyperbole, as contrasted with a pervasive ambience of exhaustion and anxiety, interspersed with moments of camaraderie and creative alliance.

Collaboration before and during lockdown

The way in which we collaborate uses a system of call and response, in which who called and who responded is lost in the long threads of conversation, and, by now, in 13 years of collaborative drawing, computer programming, digital image making,

animation, occasional performance and musical improvisation and lots of ping pong matches.

During the first Covid lockdown in April 2020, our longing and fantasies of escaping to tropical islands (as opposed to being locked at home) led to the idea of meeting online each week and inviting each other to an imaginary island. Such islands were manifest as virtual reality spaces created in Mozilla Hubs, animated islands using stop motion and physical models, backdrops tailor-made for Zoom, emails, photographs and drawings shared online. The idea of meeting on our own lockdown island appealed to both of us, and what is more, the idea to create new work together.

Alexandra wrote to Eleanor when she invited her to an imaginary island (in Mozilla Hubs, a social platform which uses a range of virtual spaces) on 9 April:

We reach the island. The first thing we notice is the slopes that are wrapped with ceramic fragments – like those that one could find in the Thames on a low tide day. The water in the island is so calm and merges with the shiny surfaces of the ceramic slopes. You know, Eleanor, I love the sea more than anything else. This island similar to the Macquire island in the Pacific ‘is a piece of the Earth’s crust from the bottom of the ocean that just happened to shoot up above sea level’. It is a child of the ocean, a socially isolated hermit that does not communicate with other entities.⁸

Online space was used as a form of invention. Like Perec, we invented new lands in which to meet each other:

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet? Space as inventory, space as invention.⁹

However, we did not just use words, we used image making, narrative, animation and technologies as a way of becoming disorientated and defamiliarized with our everyday working lives in our rooms, to escape our routines and reinvent aspects of our work. This reminded us of Brecht’s ‘Alienation Effect’¹⁰ or A-effect (which drew upon Chinese and Spanish theatrical traditions), which occurs when the audience is encouraged to question its preconceptions and look at the familiar in a new and different way – that is, to make strange, but also to surface where power is positioned, whether corporate or explicitly political. In our case one could argue that we have been actors rather than the audience, but at the same time, while we have been visiting each other’s imaginary islands we have been spectators witnessing how each other’s imaginary worlds were unfolding, watching each other’s animations or images, reading each other’s texts or while improvising music.

While meeting in the islands to take each other for a virtual wander, or while playing music, we have largely been in a state of flow. A state which, according to

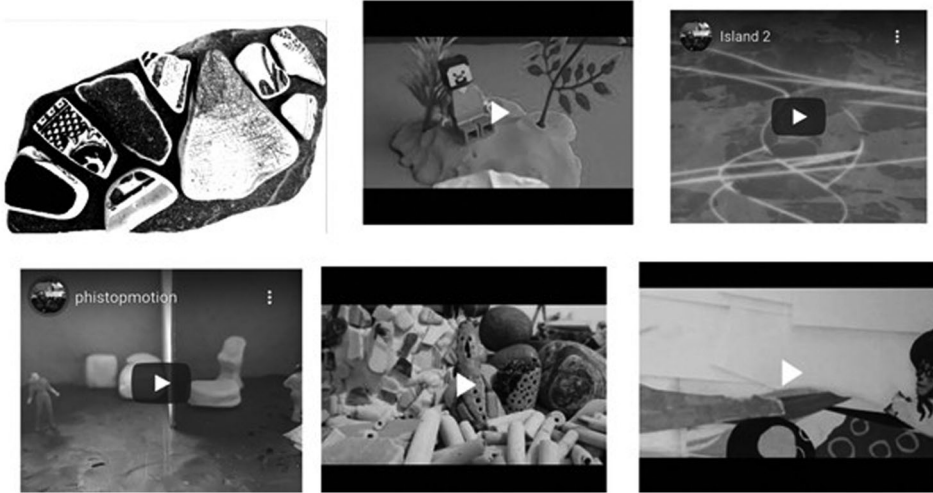


Figure 1. Animations and images produced to visualise the imaginary islands to which we invited each other.

Csikszentmihalyi,¹¹ is an intense concentration in an enjoyable skill-based task like making, drawing or playing music. This state of flow was disrupted by the technological glitches that were becoming part of the island mythologizing, and at the same time these glitches acted as a form of distraction that contributed to the defamiliarization process. The backgrounds allowed us to have our favourite authors like Perec as part of our meetings; tropical islands and birds were flying over us while our bodies were dissolving in the virtual backgrounds. Ours faces, hair and arms were disappearing and reappearing due to technological glitches, frequent loss of sound, or stuttering, sometimes losing our use of cameras or experiencing visual disturbance, pixilation due to loss of resolution, and we found it altered our practice to see glitch as the materiality of our process, to play with these unpredictable elements of online communication, within our work at universities as well as our social lives.

Being in front of a screen and talking to each other would bring to mind the long hours we had spent teaching online at work. The backgrounds would remind us of how we used those apparatuses in teaching, staging pedagogies and creating teaching performances with students.

We felt that our identities had been dissolving in the Zoom (etc) backgrounds in a similar way that tiredness during teaching had loosened the structures of our identities, much like Han puts it, via a state in which ‘things flicker, twinkle, and vibrate at the edges. They grow less determinate and more porous and lose some of their resolution’.¹²

Part of that loosening was related to our enervation, which we might frame as a material in its own right, impacting the way we worked online and created images. Working online, Legacy Russell conceives of the glitch in ecstatic terms, in which the glitch ‘is the digital orgasm, where the machine takes a sigh, a shudder, and with a jerk, spasms. These moments have been integrated into the rituals and routines of our own physical action, impacting how we interact with our own bodies, and how

we explore our deepest fantasies and desires, spurred forth by these mechanized micro-seizures'.¹³ This tension between exhaustion, a near ecstatic flow of playfulness and collaboration is at the core of the work we have done while locked down, online.

During Covid lockdown our collaboration existed in a state between defamiliarization and flow, where we have not been 'preoccupied with ourselves, in which, at times, we actually' had 'a chance to expand who we are'.¹⁴ And in fact, we discovered new skills we did not know we had, such as improvising music. It was as if the islands and the mythologizing of the technological glitches transported us into a new reality where we could bypass preconceptions and view things with a 'fresh look'.

According to Dijksterhuis and Meurs, when we are distracted, we are actually more able to make decisions based on gut feelings: 'Unconscious thought leads to the generation of ideas that are less obvious, less accessible and more creative'.¹⁵ In a similar way, as Martin-Taylor and Bial stated of the Brechtian 'Alienation Effect' in 2000, before the hyperbolic prevalence of immersion and empathy rhetoric, defamiliarization was required to make things understood.¹⁶ A-effect has been used by us as teachers and practitioners, to surface power relations in technologies, to move through and between absorption and alertness to political contexts of image making.

We both longed for the times we used to meet at Hilly Fields, a leafy, undulating park in South East London with a cafe, a bowling green, a children's playground and a ping pong table (all of which featured in our virtual version of the park, as discussed below). During the second lockdown in 2021 we decided to recreate those meetings at Hilly Fields while also creating a chatbot and training it (in the technical sense of training a neural network) to become the Hilly Fields virtual space. We wrote down some of our memories from the Hilly Fields to feed our chatbot and make it learn about the location. Alexandra wrote the following memories:

I still remember the days that we could walk in the Hilly Fields. We would meet at my house at Brockley and walk along the streets with the old, terraced houses towards the big park. I would take the ping pong bat you had bought me with me and you would bring the other one. You have kept the other one so we can always play together. Ping pong was more than a pleasure for us, it was a ritual and a way to come up with ideas. A punctuated way to take turns and co-create. Hilly Fields was more than a park to us it was almost the place that our new fields will emerge; and it was a hilly one both literally and metaphorically.

On the way to the park, we would chat about important things like drawing and our next projects. I still remember the smell of the wet grass and the tall



Figure 2. Meetings in the virtual islands created for collaboration.



Figure 3. Improvising music on Zoom.

trees every time we entered the Hilly Fields park. There was such an excitement walking through the small cement path climbing upwards to the small cafe past the children's playground. I recall the children's voices as a background noise to our conversations. They were filling up our early academic chats with background joy. We would have tea and cake in the small cafe, open our bags and show each other all sorts of stuff we have been doing, all sorts of alien objects we have been collecting and small presents just for fun. The cafe was often full of Goldsmiths staff, but we would talk about our academic worries as if we were on our own. I remember all the cafe smells, the view from the big windows, the tree leaves moving, the sounds in the cafe preparing our tea, our gestures while opening our bags and filling the table with objects, other people's curious gazes. It is all these nuances that are missing from our time-delayed online chats these days and the constant question, 'can you hear me?'¹⁷

The ping pong table was often occupied by children, but we would wait. When it is our turn to play, we would hit the ball and talk. The sound of the ball and the time it was taking to pass from one another was the time we could talk. Ping pong was an ideation method of hitting ideas back and forth. Creating them with the body, through the movement of the hand, through the anticipation of the ball and during the pauses around the table.

Since 2008, playing ping pong in Hilly Fields park has been an important collaboration methodology for us, methodology in the sense that we are framing embodiment as 'practice as knowledge', outside of Global North paradigms of knowledge as symbolic. The time to hit the ping pong ball punctuated our responses to each other. This was similar to our collaboration on the Phi Books project, only for that project we used the Phi Rations as an algorithm or set of finite instructions to formalize our process of writing together. Evolving our approach to physical activity energized our collaboration. Passing the ball to each other and the sound of the ball determined the rhythm of our conversations and exchange of ideas. The pauses when one of us missed the ball were intervals to elaborate on ideas, while focusing on the ball acted as a distraction from our academic lives; another kind of flow state or form of image making, 'hitting' each other with unexpected ideas. The digital version of Hilly Fields

enabled us to revisit the site of our memories and listen to ourselves playing ping pong and walking around the park. But of course, this was channelled through language and memory, not movement within a landscape, creating a kind of image, but one which had expanded aspects, such as spatialized sound and animation, as planes and dogs, joggers and children moved around us.

Halfway through lockdown, Eleanor created a chatbot in the Python programming language, deploying the chatterbot library. This enabled us to train it (as in the technical term for training a neural network) via a corpus of ‘common’ terms but also through the unique conversations we had about Hilly Fields. We also trained the chatbot on our creative and academic writing as well as general knowledge about Hilly Fields and South East London. After a few iterations of training, it could quite effectively evaluate probable responses. We would ask questions, such as ‘Is the park busy today?’, or ‘Where is Hilly Fields?’. Sometimes the responses were nonsensical or insightful yet lacking any intentional profundity. At other times the answers were an uncanny mirror of ourselves, bringing to mind the contradictions of a world, close to what Laboria Cuboniks’s *Xenofeminism* describes as ‘in vertigo’, a world ‘that swarms with technological mediation, interlacing our daily lives with abstraction, virtuality, and complexity’.¹⁸ This describes so closely our experience of working and collaborating online during the pandemic. The role of Artificial Intelligence and other computational processes in generating and defining many aspects of our lives, including images, and ‘real-time’ performance, is of increasing cultural urgency, not least of all the problematic implications these processes have for human agency and ethical practice.

Under lockdown, we worked with our artificial character, a chatbot/conversational ping pong partner. The ensuing conversations were based on some a priori scripting, but also on the chatbot’s capacity to learn from our (human) conversations, which we conducted via Zoom and Hangouts, conversationally focusing on the Hilly Fields area of South East London, and the loss of our ability to meet in person. The chatbot generated textual imagery (meaning images generated by its understanding of text based on neural networks and training data), but we then also produced images from the chatbot text using a range of other algorithms for text to image generation. The results might be framed as a textual extension of our ping pong method for collaborative image and text generation as well as research by practice. [Figure 4](#) is based on the chatbot to human conversation about walking in Hilly Fields and playing ping pong. It was generated by a text to image algorithm.

The words below are from a conversation between Alexandra and Eleanor and the Hilly Fields chatbot in January 2021:

Type something to begin ...

We remember Hilly Fields got it

There was such an excitement climbing the small cement path towards the small cafe past the children’s playground.

have I offended you?

I recall the children’s voices as a background noise to our conversations.
does it?



Figure 4. Text to image generated by Machine Learning, using text output from the Hilly Fields chatbot.

On the way to the park, we would chat about important things like toy robots drawing and our next projects.

boring mate

We would meet at my house at Brockley and walk along the streets with the old terraced houses towards the big park.

On the way to the park, we would chat about important things like toy robots drawing and our next projects.

I would take the ping pong bat you had bought me and you would bring the other one. one = 1

You have kept the other one so we can always play together. one = 1

Ping pong was more than a pleasure for us, it was a ritual and a way to come up with ideas

We would meet at my house at Brockley and walk along the streets with the old terraced houses towards the big park.

a punctuated way to take turns and co-create. Hilly Fields was more than a park to us it was almost the place that our new fields will emerge; and that was definitely a hilly route both literally and metaphorically.

I would take the ping pong bat you had bought me and you would bring the other one.

I still remember the smell of the wet grass and the tall trees every-time we entered the park.

On the way to the park, we would chat about important things like toy robots drawing and our next projects.

There was such an excitement climbing the small cement path towards the small cafe past the children's playground.

On the way to the park, we would chat about important things like toy robots drawing and our next projects.

I recall the children's voices as a background noise to our conversations.

We would meet at my house at Brockley and walk along the streets with the old terraced houses towards the big park.

We would queue up in the small café to have hot tea and cake You have kept the other one so we can always play together.

We would then sit down in the little wooden tables, open our bags and show each other all sorts of stuff we have been doing,

You have kept the other one so we can always play together.

all sorts of alien objects we have been collecting and exchange small gifts just for fun We would then sit down in the little wooden tables, open our bags and show each other

all sorts of stuff we have been doing,

The cafe was often full of Goldsmiths staff but we would giggle, and moan about our academic worries as if we were on our own

We would then sit down in the little wooden tables, open our bags and show each other all sorts of stuff we have been doing,

I remember all the cafe smells, the view from the big windows, the tree leaves moving,

We would then sit down in the little wooden tables, open our bags and show each other all sorts of stuff we have been doing,

The sounds in the cafe preparing our tea, our gestures while opening our bags and filling the table with objects, the people's curious gazes.

You have kept the other one so we can always play together.

Conclusion

Looking back at the methodologies we have developed and used during the last 13 years of the Phi Books project, we can identify different methodological patterns. Our work as collaborative writers and image makers has impacted our individual practice and research as well as our teaching. We have evolved writing and image-making methods which deploy algorithmic structures, starting with the Phi Books

project.¹⁹ We have created a range of virtual spaces as well as physical spaces, documenting our intersecting and separate ideas as well as their transitions. We have deployed sound structures as methods for collaborative writing, sculptures and social networks such as the ‘Digital Dream Hacker’ project.²⁰ All of these projects have taken us on a trajectory from conventional research paradigms as inculcated at a range of universities, towards a post-qualitative process of inquiry, in which practice is positioned as research, meaning is relational and contingent and technology, landscape and virtual spatiality are co-agents, with a non-neutral presence in our projects..

During our online Phi collaborations, we identified methodological approaches that were applied to pedagogic practice. These include storytelling and narrative-based methods that evolved from algorithmic structures as well as methods that involve virtual space and physical space intersections and transitions. Those outline the convergence between online and face-to-face teaching and the importance of interdisciplinarity as a shifting energy flowing from bodies to bodies. The importance of relationships and body-to-body interaction relates to our ideas of ‘immerticality’,²¹ a fusion between immersion and criticality.

Through our collaboration before and during the pandemic, we have explored what happens in the moment of breaking, of creating meta narratives and analysis – how can it be framed – as a critical or immersive space; we have questioned the difference between creative ‘flow’ and immersion. This work has extended our technological interruptions and glitches as a material with agency. Such an unpredictable agency has been present in all our technologically mediated collaborative work, which also surfaces the implications of scenography, world-building, dramaturgy, grammar, recording and post-production when we collaborate online.

During our online collaborations we also explored how we can move away from algorithmic constraints (such as those with which we started our collaboration), to establish more fluid, contingent forms of collaboration. This approach has direct applications in the performance-based pedagogic methods we used during our online and blended teaching. Additionally, we realize that throughout our work we have invented third parties – agents and collaborators (like the chatbot). Such agents help us decentre or deterritorialize our authority and remove ourselves as the main or only agents. We frame them as ‘Coagulagents’ (coagulant and agents) between the fluid and fixed, and this helps us dip in and out of our agencies and authorities as authors, creators and educators.

We contingently conclude there is a medium specificity to algorithms and a lack of neutrality embedded in their articulation. The differences between virtual reality and other forms of image making are of more interest to us than questions of whether VR can replicate a construct of reality. Likewise, our use of chatbots and algorithms focuses on what they do differently, rather than whether computers can ‘pass’ as human. The chatbot and the images associated with its words are stylized and repetitive, but still able to provide an occasionally unexpected turn of phrase which kept us engaged in our long and drawn-out encounter with online work.

Deploying and positioning social and business forms of media in our collaboration and allowing them a significant impact on our experience of the image, space, time, not to mention our social lives, has always come with the risk of over-

determination and hype. Within this problematic frame we highlight a contingent, riverine approach to image creation as a non-determined, relational and tacit form of knowing and collaborating. What we have learnt from the glitched image of ourselves and others and how we will take this into our lives after lockdown is a question we will address in the coming months and years.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DR ELEANOR DARE works at the University of Cambridge in the Faculty of Education. Eleanor is an academic and critical technologist with a PhD and MSc in Arts and Computational Technologies from the Department of Computing, Goldsmiths. Eleanor was formerly Reader in Digital Media and Head of Programme for MA Digital Direction at the Royal College of Art.

DR ALEXANDRA ANTONOPOULOU is a UK-based designer and a Course Leader at the University of the Arts London. Alexandra has also taught design, story-making and immersive environments modules at Goldsmiths and the Royal College of Art. Her work engages with wider discourses on art and design pedagogy, myths and fairy tales, interdisciplinary collaboration, and science communication. Her artistic practice has been showcased in various galleries including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Tate Modern Gallery and the London Design Museum. Her research examines child-play as well as story-making, performance and design as tools for criticality and everyday invention. Alexandra holds a PhD in Design from Goldsmiths.

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Notes

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