

The Whitespace Press: Designing Meaningful Absences into Networked News

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the idea of absence in the networked press. My aim is three-fold: to ground the concept of absence—generative whitespace and silence—in a normative model of the press as an institution charged with ensuring a public right to hear; to survey how other fields—from architecture and graphic design to musicology and urban planning—use absence to enrich their fields and challenge their assumptions; and finally, to show how journalism has historically neglected to use absence to help publics hear, and suggest ways it might do so today.

I never mean to suggest that the press should be censored or unreasonably prevented from speaking with, for, and to anyone. Rather, at a time when the networked press is questioning its unique role and significance, whitespace is an opportunity – a way to prototype new forms of journalism that value listening as much as speaking, that help to ensure the public right to hear and self-govern.

MEANINGFUL ABSENCE AS DEMOCRATIC SELF-GOVERNANCE

In 1948, legal philosopher Alexander Meiklejohn argued that people can only consent to a democratic institution's control over them if that institution brings people "together in activities of communication and mutual understanding" that produce the wisdom needed to continue to let themselves be governed (Meiklejohn, 1948, p. 17). Such institutions should not aim to produce consensus or agreement; rather, their focus should be on generating the "information or opinion or doubt or disbelief or criticism" critical to "planning for the general good." (Meiklejohn, 1948, p. 26) They create a *system* of freedom of expression that ideally produces a never-ending conversation about the conditions under which people consent to government (Emerson, 1970).

Meiklejohn and Emerson were founders of a small but influential school that sees democratic institutions like the press not only as vehicles to create and circulate speech – but as ways to foster the conditions under which people produce, regulate, circulate, and make sense of speech as part of the pursuit for public goods (Baker, 1989; Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009; Fiss, 1996; Scanlon, 1972; Schauer, 1998; Sunstein, 1994). They saw this seemingly subtle distinction between the individual act of speaking and the public value of speech paralleled in the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment which "does not forbid the abridging of speech...[but] does forbid the abridging of the *freedom of speech*." (Meiklejohn, 1948, p. 19, emphasis added) Western cultures that tend to trust unfettered marketplaces of speech to prevent the "peculiar evil of

silencing the expression of an opinion” and produce truth through its “collision with error” (Mill, 1859/1974, p. 76) largely equate protecting *speech* with protecting an individual right to speak. The marketplace is assumed to do the rest. But this assumption dangerously ignores the fact that, to be meaningful and powerful, speech requires both speaking *and* listening.

Distinguishing between—and simultaneously valuing—the freedom *to* speak and *of* speech requires two moves. First, it means tracing how *systems* of expression make some speech more likely to be produced, circulated, and considered than others. Second, it means appreciating how the legal right to receive information (Kennedy, 2005) and individual interests in seeking out information can be mistaken for the social and cultural process through which speech is heard, made actionable, and gains power. Someone’s right to receive information and her interest in hearing information are always patterned by forces beyond her individual control. For *democratic* institutions interested in structures of self-governance, the “point of ultimate interest is not the words of the speakers, but the minds of the hearers” (Meiklejohn, 1948, p. 25) – minds developed by enterprises that structure both freedom to speak and freedom of speech.

Commercial communication enterprises—focused on audience growth, advertising revenue, and competitive advantage—prize the production, dissemination, and interpretation of messages that achieve economic ends. They

thrive or collapse in marketplaces of speech. But institutions concerned with *democratic* communication have a different, complementary goal. Ideally, their constituents not only make consumer choices, but also encounter people, ideas, and versions of themselves that markets may not reveal. These alternative selves need other people to speak and suggest other ways of being, but they *also* require environments that make it likely for people to encounter, interpret, empathize with, and take action because of that speech. To both know who you are and become someone else people need communication systems that ensure freedom *to* speak and freedom *of* speech. This is the core challenge of hybrid institutions like the press, that have both commercial and public goals: to foster speaking *and* listening in environments governed by both economic and democratic logics (Baker, 2002).

An emerging body of literature explores this challenge. As a political act with the power to change minds and spur action, democratic listening requires exposure: a social opportunity to listen *in* and hear speech (Lacey, 2011, p. 6) and a legal “right to receive information.” (Kennedy, 2005) But it also requires an “ethical responsibility” to seek and listen *out* “for voices that are unfamiliar or uneasy on the ear.” (Lacey, 2011, p. 18) Listening is a willingness to consider someone else’s version of reality (Eliasoph, 1998) – an openness to joining an “intersubjective world...as you construct it for me.” (Bickford, 1996, p. 147) Listening also asks us not only to listen *in* to and listen *out* for, but to accept “the

possibility that what we hear will require *change* from us” (p. 149) – to accept that our freedom to both act *and* develop requires accepting the risk that speech will change how we think.

Autonomy is thus not only about *in*-dependence and *inter*-dependence, but also *intra*-dependence. It means looking within ourselves to see and nurture personal capacities that guide action. It is essential for people to cultivate “self-awareness, self-understanding, moral discrimination and self-control” if they are to sustain “freedom in the sense of self-direction.” (Taylor, 1979, p. 179) Freedom means acknowledging a “possibility of incompleteness” (Bickford, 1996, p. 151) that motivates you to listen out for voices unlike yours, a period silence that becomes a “shelter from” an expectation to speak (Brown, 1998, p. 315) – a purposeful “stilling of the self” (Bickford, 1996, p. 145) and “emptiness of awareness” (Lipari, 2010, p. 348) that reflection and openness requires. But, scholars caution, you should not become *so* overwhelmed by introspection or a “fear of being wrong” that you fall silent and stop others from hearing what *you* have to offer (Bickford, 1996, p. 151). This complex theory of democratic listening promises collective decisions with greater legitimacy because people encounter ideas that marketplaces might not have surfaced, differ and disagree in ways that create novel compromises, and experiment with holding new ideas they never could have discovered on their own (Dobson, 2012).

The press's democratic challenge is to create ways to listen. If "listening is to be understood as a political rather than a private phenomenon, then it must somehow *appear* in the world." (Bickford, 1996, p. 153) How might the press enact its political mission by helping listening appear – by creating, making visible, and valuing the absences that accompany listening? Since silence and whitespace are rarely cultivated in journalism, it is worth tracing how other disciplines understand and create meaningful absence. How might we understand *their* whitespaces as inspiration for an institutional press that values a self-governing public's right to hear?

WHITESPACE AS MEANINGFUL ABSENCE ACROSS DOMAINS

Japanese design philosopher Kenya Hara defines "emptiness" as an intentional absence that makes possible "a condition, or *kizen*, which will likely be filled with content in the future." (Hara, 2009, p. 36) Distinct from "nothingness" that lacks energy, *kizen* lets "our imaginations roam free of any boundaries [on] every possible meaning." (p. ii) Such meanings, the related *wabi sabi* aesthetic shows, come from letting absences that *seem* to lack significance achieve power by complementing and contrasting against more visible, material elements (Juniper, 2003).

Whitespace is thus often *intentional* and always *relational*: separating representations, people, ideas, or time periods into units that represent designers'

intended meanings. In “controlling differences [and] retaining only those that are most essential,” (Hara, 2009, p. 19) designers use whitespace to *activate* audiences, focusing attention and forcing interpretations (Rand, 2014, pp. 48-73). Graphic designers, for example, use margins, kerning, and font sizing to create negative space that brings “serenity to the page” – a “silence [for readers] to better hear [a] message loud and clear.” (Vignelli, 2010, p. 92)

Though most commonly considered a print technique, whitespace appears in many media forms. The Sumerians invented notations for zero as placeholders for numeric absence and ways of anticipating future mathematical operations (Kaplan, 1999). Musicians created the rest symbol to help conductors and performers coordinate silence among orchestra instruments, reducing the “spatial uncertainty” (Sloboda, 1981, p. 107) associated with of earlier notational systems that failed to synchronize silences.

But as, John Cage (1961) showed in his piece *4’33”*, even professional musicians synchronized through standardized notions cannot perfect silence. Convening an orchestra in a concert hall to play “nothing” actually makes possible a different kind of music: whirring fans, coughing, shifting bodies, opened doors, and nervous laughter. In playfully attempting to achieve silence, Cage shows its impossibility (Kahn, 1997), revealing an entirely new “soundscape” (Schafer, 1993) that could not otherwise have been heard. Indeed,

much of the history of acoustics is the story of people inventing tools and practices to limit and direct sound in search of different types of silence. From Carlyle's construction of a soundproof room in the 1850s (Picker, 2012) through the white noise of muzak (Jones & Schumacher, 1992), noise-canceling headphones (Hagood, 2011), the iPod (Bull, 2012), an audio spotlight (Yoneyama, Fujimoto, Kawamo, & Sasabe, 1983), and tinnitus-fighting remedies (Hagood, 2012), people have tried to isolate themselves through and from sound. The entire field of "sound studies" (Keeling & Kun, 2011) shows how acoustic absence means not simply inventing technologies to block sound waves, but struggling with the social, political, economic, and material forces that fill silences and create "sonic imagination." (Sterne, 2012) Pursuing silence always means exerting power, discovering and resisting against forces trying to be heard.

Such struggles also occur in architecture and urban planning. As designers of physical environments connect and isolate elements, they create absence – anticipating how people might interpret and navigate a *lack* of materiality. For example, nomadic Basarwa, Navajos, and Euroamericans use rituals and habits to *conceptually* segment spaces; instead of *materially* partitioning their homes they create absence through patterned movements that are largely incomprehensible to outsiders; people show their ignorance and non-membership by failing to acknowledge the materially invisible whitespace (Kent, 1991). Similarly, in his meditation on Japanese architecture *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki (1977)

criticizes the “progressive Westerner” who ignores the value of shadows by going from “candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light” on a “quest for a brighter light [that] never ceases.” (p. 31) The early 20th-century indeed brought dramatically new materials for making sound and light – but they were always complemented by equally novel ways of collectively resisting and reshaping the material spaces made by others (Thompson, 2002).

Cities have similarly struggled to make absence, forming “antinoise campaigns, antinoise conferences, antinoise exhibitions, and ‘silence weeks’” (Bijsterveld, 2008, p. 2) to cast silence as a *public good* that should be available to all, not only those rich enough to create private acoustic retreats (Dyos, 1982). Such initiatives, though, were hampered by: industrial revolutions that prioritized economic growth over quiet; clashing definitions of desired versus unwanted noise; lawmakers’ preference to let urban neighborhoods self-regulate; the dominance of visual over auditory senses; focuses on air and water quality over noise pollution; the mass production of personal sound-producing devices like radios and televisions; and the rise of avant-garde aesthetics that challenged centralized control through purposefully discordant sounds and acoustic disruptions (Bijsterveld, 2008). The idea of a *public* soundscape has always struggled to gain traction. A nascent architectural movement, though, tries to find and rehabilitate urban absences they call “relingos”: holes accidentally left when two or more buildings, freeways, or infrastructures collide incompletely leaving

“an ambiguous space...that can be seized by the imagination...used and reused for different purposes” than the “rational actors” who created the surrounding structures intended (Luiselli, 2014, p. 74).

Similarly, absences can emerge from social interactions. Self-help and motivational books increasingly emphasize the power of simplicity (Maeda, 2006), introversion (Cain, 2012), decluttering (McKeown, 2014), isolation (Maitland, 2014), solitude (Johnson, 2015), and disconnection (Harris, 2014). These popular movements echo mental health best practices: silences engender empathy, facilitate reflection, or make time for clients and therapists to consider what to say next (Ladany, Hill, Thompson, & O'Brien, 2004). Similarly, many artists describe the various significances of silence: choosing to “fall silent publicly” so that finished work can speak for itself (Kenny, 2011, p. 87); having to explain years of non-productivity when they lacked inspiration or economic support to work (Olsen, 1965); and the perennial struggle for enough visibility to attract patrons and earn economic stability, but not so much that they become beholden to any person or market (Star & Strauss, 1999).

Indeed, silence is not uniformly desired: it is often evidence of power, pain, ethical transgression, or spiritual anxiety. Critical-cultural studies of silence see it as elite governance through unspoken norms (Foucault, 1994); political scientists see “spirals of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) when people fail to

speak because they sense that their opinion is in the minority (or soon will be); rhetoricians and feminist scholars see the silences of women, people of color, sexual orientation minorities, or others in positions of structural disadvantage as evidence of systematic oppression (Glenn, 2004). Some holocaust survivors remain silent and refuse to record their memories because what they witnessed was too horrific to be recalled (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2011); and some archives are silent on subjects because some people are been barred from collections or because archivists have failed to read “against the grain” of history to challenge systemic absences (Carter, 2006). Finally, religious silence can be similarly complex. In some faiths, silence represents spiritual confidence and communal meditation; in others, it reveals the pursuit that accompanies a *lack* of faith – quiet skepticism among those searching for evidence that will give their beliefs conviction (Lawson, 2014).

This brief and incomplete sketch reveals diverse meanings of whitespace. It is not simply content that has failed to be produced or transmitted; rather, silence can be aspired to, made, endured, interpreted, and resisted through communication rituals (Carey, 1989). These rituals may seem too diverse to be helpful but, together, they suggest a typology of purposeful absence that might guide the tracing and creation of *journalistic* whitespace – ways to make and signify absence that help the press achieve its democratic mission of ensuring a public right to hear.

HISTORICAL MEANINGS OF ABSENCE IN THE PRESS

The mainstream, institutional press has both created and resisted absence. The most obvious example is censorship: the “removal and replacement” of an author’s text before publication, or a more subtle “dispersal and displacement” after publication, preventing an author from reaching her intended audience (Burt, 1998, p. 17). Regardless of the mechanism, journalists have historically seen censorship as the primary force opposing their role as critical watchdogs who hold power accountable by publishing uncomfortable truths.

Journalists, though, sometimes self-censor (Anthonissen, 2003). They might agree with the State that information hurts public interests – as Israeli journalists do when they determine the scope of investigative reporting collaboratively with government representatives (Christians et al., 2009, pp. 206-211), and as U.S. journalists did when they embedded with U.S. military units during Operation “Iraqi Freedom” and largely avoided critiquing the military (Pfau et al., 2004). Publishers and senior editors might bow to state requests to avoid or delay publication, as *New York Times*’ Bill Keller did when he agreed to Bush Administration requests not to publish information on weapons of mass destruction or war on terror tactics (Boyd-Barrett, 2004). Despite U.S. Supreme Court decisions discouraging news organizations from self-censorship (D. A. Anderson, 1975), many continue to let fear of libel limit their reporting. In rare

cases, an absence signals a news organization's protest against censorship – as was the case when inmate publishers of Vacaville Prison's *Vaca Valley Star* printed the word “censored” where four articles the warden “deemed excessively critical of the prison staff” were to have appeared (Truter, 1984, p. 605).

In addition to censorship and self-censorship, organizational pressures can create journalistic absences. News organizations may engage in “scoop and shun” dynamics (Glasser & Gunther, 2005, p. 386), seeing a story as “tainted” (Levy, 1981, p. 24) because someone beat them to it first; they let a *lack of coverage* signal their competitive difference. Absences also emerge from the routines and rituals of beat reporting (Molotch & Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1978): Stories tend to come from places where journalists and audiences *expect* news to come from (government offices, celebrities, stock markets), that commercial interests advertisers want to sponsor (automobiles, real estate, sports). Individual journalists typically have little freedom to ignore these forces and redirect reporting to places lacking coverage (Murdock, 1977). Even if they *were* able to broaden their beats, many locations—*e.g.*, prisons, military bases, corporate offices—are hard to access, most countries lack foreign bureaus, and a reputation for too much independent exploration may damage a reporter's employability. The result is that many people, organizations, and locations are regularly and predictably absent from coverage.

Absences can also come from systematic under-reporting of issues considered too deviant from public norms or newsroom cultures (Hallin, 1986). For example, most publications except the gay press ignored the HIV/AIDS crisis (Nelkin, 1991) until powerful, agenda-setting news organizations covered it (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991). And based on evidence that suicide coverage correlates with suicide vulnerability among certain readers (Stack, 2000), many news organizations either ban reporting on individual suicides or leave many details absent as a matter of policy (Jamieson, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003). Journalists also tend not to report on themselves—“silent bargains and silent routines” among staff make self-reporting rare (Turow, 1994)—or people that their owners suggest as beyond reproach (Chomsky, 2006) or too powerful to cover (Castle & Dalby, 2015).

Other types of absence emerge during reporting and broadcasting. Reporters may need time to confirm details, hone writing, cultivate sources, or secure their personal safety – unseen work that can seem like ignorance or idleness to outside audiences who only see final publications. Sources may speak on background, demand anonymity, limit attribution, or use pseudonyms that create an “absence of a source’s identity” that makes it difficult to hold news organizations accountable (Carlson, 2011, p. 2). And even though “all of us in radio live in fear of a second of dead air,” NPR interviewer Terry Gross tells her editors to *keep* guests’ pauses because she want audiences “to hear them think, to

hear the *process* of them thinking.” (This American Life, nd) Television news also uses purposefully empty “black hole” shots: Even though there is “no activity occurring for a viewer to see,” as long as such shots are “live” and “on-scene” images of “where events *had* occurred or *will* occur,” broadcasters can hold viewers’ attention (Casella, 2012, p. 364). And, finally, stories often follow unexplained arcs that create the ultimate absence: they are inexplicably judged to be “done” as the press falls silent and reporters and audiences move on to other topics.

Despite the dominant view of a free press as one that publishes whatever it wants and whenever it wants free of interference, absence is often a goal, result, or accident of journalism. Censorship, self-censorship, organizational routines, implicit collaborations, competition, access restrictions, taboos, and reporting styles all create journalistic whitespace. Some whitespace scaffolds the listening that the ideal democratic press enables while others represent pressures, habits, and rituals that limit the press’s ability to help publics self-govern through hearing. Going forward, with these absences in mind, we might consider how silences appear in the relationships, practices, and materials that make up the *contemporary, networked press* – how absences in its networked relationships help or hinder a public right to hear.

SOURCES OF ABSENCE IN THE NETWORKED PRESS

For the contemporary, networked press to be an institution for public hearing, it must carve out silences with *public* value amidst the forces governing online publishing. News now emerges not from news organizations alone but from a hybrid system of “technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms” (Chadwick, 2013, p. 4) that, taken together, define a field of forces (Benson & Neveu, 2005) within which human and non-human actors alike (C. W. Anderson & Maeyer, 2015; Boczkowski, 2014) vie for the power to access information, create new knowledge, govern attention, and monetize audiences.

I highlight five sources of absence in the networked press: *professional norms*, *media avoidance*, *invisible audiences*, *organizational openings*, and *infrastructural holes*. While not an exhaustive typology to be sure, my aim is to sketch sites of absence in the networked press, to illustrate the origins, complexities, and opportunities of networked, journalistic whitespace.

Professional Norms

Many networked journalists engage in a “discipline of verification” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, p. 98) – but such discipline creates absences that must compete with unceasing social media. Even in the context of high-profile breaking news, some news organizations stay silent. For example, immediately after the 2013 Boston Bombing, the *New York Times* chose not to follow other news organizations in reporting “that an arrest had been made or that a suspect was in

custody.” (Sullivan, 2013) *Breaking News* (2013) waited until at least two other news organizations confirmed information before it repeated specifics; WNYC’s Brian Lehrer turned into a kind of meta-reporter creating and filling silence as he talked about what he would not report (On The Media, 2013); and the *European Journalism Center* used the bombing coverage as a case study in how journalists and social media users alike should resist interpreting police scanner feeds or social media videos during crisis situations (Silverman, 2014). Coverage of the bombing served as a kind of master class in journalistic self-restraint with quiet news organizations ultimately emerging as mature and reliable sources. Their lack of publishing showed calculated caution – professional restraint amidst noisy networks that were quick to broadcast rumor and ridicule silence (Ananny, 2013a).

In contrast, during the Arab Spring uprisings, NPR’s Andy Carvin (2013) openly shared information he could not verify, enlisting his followers as a verification network and calculating that the harms of staying silent outweighed the risks of circulating false information (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014). For Carvin, silence and caution lost out to transparency, speed, and trust of his network. Indeed, each new crisis seems to reveal new dynamics between professional journalists and social media (Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, & Følstad, 2015) with individual reporters figuring out whether they have the time and professional standing required to endure the silences that

come with verification. Silence seems to be a luxury only available to reporters who can resist their organizations' time pressures (Reich & Godler, 2014) or who are part of an emerging "slow news" movement (Le Masurier, 2014) that rewards tempered publishing. Finally, patterns seem to be emerging for deciding when news is "over." Few online stories are updated two hours after their publication (Saltzis, 2012) and fewer still indicate that reporting continues – e.g., KPCC's appends some of its online stories with the phrase "this story will be updated." And the New York Times closes comment threads after a "discussion has run its course and there is nothing substantial to gain from having more comments on the article." (Sullivan, 2012)

Silences are fertile ground for understanding journalist-audience relationships since the significances of such absences are unclear. They may represent: careful, unseen reporting by those privileged enough to slow time and resist social media; the lack of a trusted network capable of developing or verifying a story; a story's conclusion or shift to other topics; or the expectation that more information is coming.

Media Avoidance

Writing for *The Guardian*, Jesse Armstrong (2015) ended a month-long, self-imposed ban on news consumption observing that "what you read and watch is just a reflection of what you're interested in and who you are, and that's quite

difficult to escape.” Indeed, researchers are increasingly studying the purposeful non-use and avoidance of media and media technologies. Many television watchers actively avoid the news, agreeing with statements like “there is so much on TV that I seldom watch news” and “there is always a program that interests me more than the news.” (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010) Such news avoidance is less common among internet users but still prevalent among those interested in entertainment news, who tend to avoid current affairs reporting (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). This finding agrees with the observation that whereas “journalists exhibit a strong preference for public-affairs news in the articles they consider most newsworthy, consumers lean toward non-public-affairs subjects in the stories they click most often.” (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013, p. 16)

There are similar patterns in the non-use of networked technologies – the tools and platforms that increasingly deliver news. Some people never adopt digital technologies (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003; Selwyn, 2003) or social media (Hargittai, 2007) in the first place; others intentionally and conspicuously refuse them (Portwood-Stacer, 2012); and others are caught in cycles of technological fasting, departure, and return (Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2014; Lee & Katz, 2014). People disconnect from technologies for a variety of reasons—*e.g.*, concerns about privacy, seeing social media as banal, fighting internet addictions, trying to regain productivity (Baumer et al., 2013)—but the patterns reveal that

people see “carving out quiet” (Plaut, 2015, p. np) as an essential part of communication that entails avoiding media technologies.

Such non-use is a new challenge for news organizations. They may fail to reach audiences—and thus fail to ensure a public right to hear—not because of *what* they produce, but because the *platforms* they use to circulate news are caught up in complex patterns of avoidance, non-use, refusal, departure, and return.

Though Armstrong quickly returned to his regular news routines because his professional identity depended on them, others avoid media and media technologies because disconnection is crucial to *their* identities. Some people cultivate “rational ignorance” (Downs, 1957)—why educate yourself about politics if your vote is only one of many?—and an emerging field of agnotology finds that people resist knowledge in a variety of ways: a “native state” of unknowing (a blank slate), a “lost realm” of knowing (benign disinterest in correcting acknowledged ignorance), or a “deliberately engineered and strategic ploy” to stay ignorant (active resistance to learning) (Proctor, 2008, p. 3). Instead of seeing a lack of knowledge or non-use as careless disengagement or a failure to reach an audience—Spanish researchers recently developed a system to push BuzzFeed content to mobile phone users when it detected that users were “bored” (Owen, 2015)—the press might *engage* and actually support the various reasons

people resist media and media technologies precisely because part of its mission is to help ensure the public right to hear that, sometimes, needs silence. Non-use, avoidance, and seeming non-participation may be evidence of cultivated ignorance or a press that is losing readers or revenue – but it may also be evidence of people creating space to listen and reflect upon what they have already received.

Invisible Audiences

Absences may also come in the form of audiences who exist but never appear. Most social media users leave few obvious traces (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012) and are often still pejoratively referred to as “lurkers” (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000) with secretive or asocial intentions. However, conceptualized instead as “listeners” who encourage “others to make public contributions,” (Crawford, 2009, p. 527) they are the imagined others who make social media platforms spaces for dialogue versus monologue. Though they rarely appear anywhere but in database logs, without them the internet—and networked news—lacks the relationships that discourse requires. In the rare moments, when a media event is so captivating that it renders social media’s vocal minority silent, we get a glimpse of what active receptive looks like – *e.g.*, Twitter fell largely silent during the shootouts that decided the 2014 Brazil vs Chile World Cup match as those who usually tweet the most stopped to watch (Rios, 2014).

Audiences may also be invisible because technological, social, and legal conditions fail to surface them. For example, Twitter news audiences are transient and fragmented in time (Lehmann, Castillo, Lalmas, & Zuckerman, 2013); they exist briefly and are virtually impossible for news organizations to reconvene, update, or correct as a unified whole (unlike broadcast evening news or the morning newspaper). Online audiences may also seem much larger than they actually are: people routinely self-report consuming more news than they actually do (Prior, 2009) and some issue-specific audiences dissolve into untraceable venues if they think the State is surveilling their online opinions or presence (Hampton et al., 2014; Rainie & Madden, 2015). Finally, some news audiences are at the risk of being more visible than others: In some jurisdictions, the identities of those who comment on online news stories are protected by journalistic shield laws while other jurisdictions guarantee no such anonymity (Bayard, 2009).

These absences—listening, fragmenting, dissolving, dispersing, lying, relocating, anonymizing—show audiences navigating, and being buffeted by, political, social, technological, and legal forces that make them more or less visible – forces that might be supported or resisted by a networked press focused on ensuring a public right to hear.

Organizational Openings

Sometimes, online news organizations purposefully create absences and disconnect in order to achieve their missions. Subscription-based paywalls (Pickard & Williams, 2014) sequester content in spaces that not all audiences can see but, sometimes, news organizations selectively breach these walls to strategically manipulate the scarcity that paywalls create. For example, the *New York Times* now limits non-subscribers to 10 (down from 20) articles per month on nytimes.com—other stories are effectively invisible beyond that limit—*except* if readers encounter articles through unspecified “search engines, blogs and social media” (articles are accessible through such channels even if users have reached the monthly limit) (The New York Times, 2015) or are at Starbucks (allowing for 15 free articles per day) (Soper, 2013) or if an event like Hurricane Sandy or Election Day warrants a temporarily dropped paywall and unrestricted reading (Beaujon & Moos, 2013). The strategies of scarcity driving paywall designs reveal a networked press experimenting with how and why to sometimes make its stories *inaccessible* to audiences.

News organizations also control the visibility of their work through technological infrastructures. The *New York Times*, *Guardian*, and NPR all use Application Programming Interfaces—software toolkits that selectively let outsiders access newsroom content through a system of licenses and keys—to both reveal and conceal data (Ananny, 2013b). These strategic openings and closures leave clues about which information news organizations will share, and

which is to stay hidden from public view. The *Guardian*'s "Open Newslist" was one of the boldest experiments in revealing not just data but practices. It briefly used a publicly accessible Google document to show reporters' topics, stories, and sources *while* they were working, *before* publication (Roberts, 2011) – but the project is now largely defunct with such background work once again concealed. The *New York Times* "Times Insider" (2015) similarly offers behind-the-scenes accounts of how and why news is produced – but only to premier subscribers.

Finally, akin to the *Vaca Valley Star*'s use of whitespace to protest prison censorship, several online news organizations including Wired.com blacked out their websites to protest against the proposed 2012 SOPA/PIPA legislation (Wortham, 2012). They simulated their *complete* absence to show what they thought the internet would look like if the legislation passed.

From strategically designed paywalls to APIs, premier subscriptions, and protest blackouts, news organizations use absences to achieve organizational missions. Such absence can become a powerful way to understand how and why news organizations create whitespace that orients readers, generates revenue, and regulates access.

Infrastructural Holes

Other whitespaces result not from strategic, organizational intention, but from a confluence of intertwined and largely hidden forces that add up to absence. A particularly powerful type of silence emerges when news encounters social media personalization. Computational rules of platform algorithms can systematically include and exclude people or ideas (Gillespie, 2014) that news organizations might *want* their audiences to consider – but they are effectively invisible because news algorithms fail to surface them (Ananny & Crawford, 2014). News organizations may even purposefully place their data beyond the reach of search engines by using a robots.txt file to prevent crawlers from indexing their sites. “Big data” journalists are also susceptible to infrastructural absences. They risk creating stories that echo their data sets’ exclusions if they fail to account for people whose “information is not regularly collected or analyzed, because they do not routinely engage in activities that big data is designed to capture.” (Lerman, 2013, p. 55) Such algorithmic exclusions are even creating *physical* whitespace, as the manufacturers of drones that news organizations are beginning to encode no-fly zones into their hardware, *e.g.*, automatically landing a drone if it veers too close to the White House (Sydell, 2015).

Without explanations for *why* such absences exist, people create folk theories (Mills, 1959/2000) of whitespace – saying things like “I always assumed that I wasn’t really that close to her” (Eslami et al., 2015) to explain someone’s absence from their Facebook Newsfeed, instead of attributing it to complex

infrastructural intersections. Part of a whitespace press's responsibility ideally includes explaining *why* content fails to circulate on its partner platforms.

Social media absences can also be created because of how infrastructures organize time. Users might visit Twitter at a sub-optimal time (12pm and 6pm if you want clicks, 5pm if you want retweets (Bennett, 2015)). News organizations might write tweets that decay too quickly—BBC tweets last longer than other news organizations' (Bhattacharya & Ram, 2012)—but most news tweets are effectively invisible 2 hours after posting (Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, 2011)). The popularity of postings on Digg tended to stabilize quickly, but the same content is just as popular on YouTube about 30 days later (Szabo & Huberman, 2010). Given how increasingly attuned news organizations are to metrics (Petre, 2015; Tandoc, 2014) and the influence they have on how editors conceptualize their audiences (C. W. Anderson, 2011; Vu, 2014), a *lack* of social media activity might reflect not only as disinterest or failed circulation, but intersecting platforms with non-synchronized publication rhythms. Indeed, some online news never surfaces on social media at all, instead staying in privately circulated “dark social” domains like email and instant messaging (Madrigal, 2012).

Finally, some content may be *published* but effectively absent from *public* discourseⁱⁱ because laws or policies explicitly prevent it from appearing on third-

party, para-journalistic platforms. For example, though the content remains on their own websites, the BBC (McIntosh, 2015), *Guardian* (Ball, 2014), and *New York Times* (Cohen & Scott, 2014) have all had stories removed from Google’s European search index to comply with the European Union’s “Right to be Forgotten” legislation. And Twitter blocked the account of *Independent* journalist Guy Adams after, as part of his critique of NBC’s Olympics coverage, he tweeted the publicly available email address of a senior NBC executive, in violation of Twitter’s privacy policy (Sherman & Womack, 2012). Such absences—stories, links, reporters—are not the result of algorithmic accidents or platform idiosyncrasies but the private governance of infrastructures that news organizations rely upon but that are beyond their control.

CONCLUSION

Once you look for them, the networked press is rife with absences. Some are vestiges of early forms of journalism—professional traditions enduring in contemporary times—while others are newer, emerging from nascent technologies and relationships that create and circulate news online. Indeed, technological innovations have always suggested new tensions between speaking and listening. The director of the first German news radio service in the 1920s “warned that writing for listeners as if they were readers would be like ‘trying to take a photograph with a violin.’” (Cited in Lacey (2011, p. 10).) We are again in

a time when traditional practices and expectations seem subtly mismatched with the contemporary moment. Simply creating and circulating *more* digital news without designing spaces for listening—prioritizing freedom to speak over freedom of speech—misapplies broadcast logics to networked spaces. It is like trying to take a photograph with a violin.

While a great deal of energy has gone into creating the conditions for voice and expression, we are only in the early stages of understanding what Razlogova (2011, p. 55) calls the “voice of the listener” – and what it might mean for online news organizations to design for networked listeners. Under what conditions might listening be seen as a full-fledged form of active, democratically necessary participation on par with more readily identifiable actions like speaking, writing, posting, tweeting, liking, and tagging? How might the press value a public right to *hear* just as much as its own right to speak? How might the scholars, practitioners, users, and builders of the networked press see the necessity of listening publics?

Scholars might start looking for absences in the networked press, asking when and why they are significant, what kind of power relationships create and sustain whitespace, and how they help or hinder a normative model of the press. Networked journalists, editors, and publishers might nurture professional norms that see silence as *intentional* and potentially *generative*, giving audiences the time and space to interpret pre-existing speech instead of trying to tell everything

to as many people as possible, right now. Audiences might see their desires to receive (tracked by surveillance analytics modeling their movements) as requests for the media to fill voids that could instead be generative silences; how might audiences resist the demands that content producers and advertisers manufacture, attribute to them, and then rush to meet? Perhaps most importantly, those building the networked press's technologies—digital media companies, software programmers, algorithm designers, and venture capitalists—might use radical, speculative, adversarial design techniques (DiSalvo, 2012; Dunne & Raby, 2013) to invent new forms of listening that help people thrive in, not merely endure, surfeits of online speech.

Many of the networked press's relationships to absence are about including or excluding people, beating competition, avoiding errors, struggling for visibility, manufacturing scarcity, overcoming information overload, and hiding from surveillance. Absence is largely seen as a chance to add new content, an algorithmic error, an oppressive silence, or a failure to move quickly – and *not* a necessary ingredient of democratic self-governance. To help this shift in perspective, designers and scholars of the networked press might create: criteria for trusting or challenging absences; institutions and infrastructures that create generative absences; and design languages for making and experimenting with absence.

My aim has been to sketch the democratic value, interdisciplinary richness, historical antecedents, and contemporary construction of journalistic absence. In the spirit of Tanizaki's (1977) celebration of *shadows* as intentional architectural elements with aesthetic and instrumental value, journalism might take up, debate, expand upon, and design for *whitespace* as a way to show how thoughtful silence and generative absence might ensure a public right to hear.

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