The Institute of Social Hypocrisy

—The Sound of Downloading Makes Me Want to Upload

by Victor Boulet

Peter J. Amdam
Markus Thor Andresson
Theodor Barth
Sophie Barth
Rasmus Thirup Beck
Victor Boulet
Merlin Carpenter
Lorenzo Cirrincione
Keren Cyter
Guy Debord
Bill Drummond
Paul Andreas Enger
Matias Faldbakken
Bentley Farrington
Ullrich Fichtner
Anna Franck
Gilbert & George
Evan Haning
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Iselin Linstad Hauge
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Jason Hwang
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Ray Johnson
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Svein Kojan
Adam Kurda
Oliver Latic
Pablo Larios
Matthieu Laurette
David Lewis
Tobias Madison
Edie McKay
Bjarne Melgaard
Han Nefkens
Hans Ulrich Obrist
Tommy Olsson
Matt Packer
Richard Parry
Dr Nina Pearlman

Thomas Petitjean
Joe Scanlan
Chris Sharp
Sutton Lane
Kristian Skylstad
Kristina Skylstad
Brad Troemel
Jonathon F. Williams
Nina Pearlman

Downloading and uploading: the foundations of public space

Recently my laptop crashed. At first I was hopeful that the problem might fix itself, like it has done many a time prior. But as the crashing persisted, as did my repeated attempts to restore my machine to its former glory, I gradually became aware of the sounds it was generating. One might suggest the audio range of a computer processing commands to be as broad as a tenor's pitch, albeit not as pleasing. It grumbles, chugs, clicks, jolts, stutters perhaps, then a murmur, a calming purr, till finally, a quiet lull. Each sound reflects a different activity – locating information, storing, loading, hibernating, calculating, burning, retrieving, downloading and uploading, shutting down. This mechanical rumble is a reminder of the tangible nature of routine activities that unfold within a digital infrastructure, activities that we routinely log as ‘virtual’, as if these occur in a space separate from that which we ourselves physically occupy.

These sounds give pause to consider how our perceptions are affected and continually reshaped when our actions cease to correspond to a chain of consecutive physical experiences. In this pause, let me provide a couple of examples of routine non-digital actions, breaking them down into a series of tactile components, to make clear what I am referring to: discarding a piece of writing – rip a crisp sheet of paper away from its block, scrunch it up sensing the change in its texture – from a flimsy leaf to that of a rugged and solid mass, chuck it away with a swoosh through the air only for it to land with a slight bounce neatly inside the waste paper basket; playing vinyl – slide the record out of its sleeve with one smooth swoop, wipe it clean in circular motions, let it slip snug into place onto the player, gently blow on the needle and drop onto the vinyl groove, hear the cackling, hear the music. In contrast to these examples, digital activities such as writing a file to disc, discarding a file by moving it to the recycle bin, uploading content to remote servers or downloading to local storage devices all of which involve a series of physical actions – pressing keys and clicks of a mouse, nonetheless fail to imprint a perceivable mechanical trace. We experience these activities by registering what might be termed as before and after state on our visual digital horizon. In other words, there is little that we grasp in between the start and the end point of an action: the file that was is no longer, downloaded content is suddenly present and uploaded content becomes swiftly visible to anyone. Ultimately, there is no direct correspondence between what we do and the imprint of our actions or the sounds these produce, since fluid digital activity is as silent as it is odourless. One can’t help but feel that like digital sound and image, our experiences are somewhat compressed.

The power of imagination is a central factor in our interaction with the digital sphere. This environment exists as much inside our head as it does inside the machines that mediate and support it. And yet, it is the ideas and perceptions inside our head that allow us to function within the set order (determined by the software) since the lay person, which is the majority of users, makes no connection between ‘what they do’ and ‘what technically happens’. It is as if an operating system is embedded inside our head, with digital actions shaping personalities and in turn personalities shaping digital environments.

Of the wide range of digital actions, downloading and uploading stand out as particularly revealing in this context. Whenever we launch a browser to surf the endless web of information ‘stored on the internet’ we are already partaking in a downloading activity, for in technical terms this is the very foundation of online activity – the browser copies a page from a remote server and displays it on our own computer by storing it on a local hard drive. And yet, downloading is a term that is most commonly used to describe the conscious and repeated retrieval of large chunks of remote content that is stored locally to personal electronic devices. The same process is inverted when uploading: we accumulate data on mobile devices such as digital recorders and cameras or produce visual and textual information and store this information on a remote server in order to share with a restricted or unrestricted audience. Ultimately, downloading and uploading are processes that are infinitely repeatable and this is intrinsic to their meaning. The very change in the meaning of familiar terminology suggests that something else is at work and at stake in this process.

Downloading and uploading are activities that reflect relationships between the remote and the local, between the individual and the idea of ‘a public’. It is through examining the nature of these activities that it may be possible to unpick the
relationships they both support and generate as well as the conceptions that feed them. In so doing it may be possible to consider how intangible digital elements – components and actions – can be brought back into the fold of the full range of our physical senses and material sphere; how, one might ask, may be possible to decompress an experience or how it might be possible to conflate two modes of ‘public space’?

Public space as the arena in which the remote-local/individual-public relationships unfold carries with it many conceptions, or indeed perhaps misconceptions and it is these very conceptions that support the downloading and uploading of digital data. These two interdependent activities rely on a notion of a virtual public space widely thought of as a space for the free flow and exchange of information and social interaction, or as a representation of a democratic political public sphere. The relationship between this virtual space and what might be termed its traditional physical precursors, namely urban public spaces, is commonly understood as a progressive relationship. In other words, given that public space in the built environment is discussed in terms of decline due to over regulation and surveillance most commentators perceived the digital space of the internet as a space that would come to fill the fast growing gap of a ‘genuinely public’ space. However, if it is the case that public space in the lived fabric of the city has been threatened and diminished due to the contentious relation between property law and human rights the virtual public space of the internet is increasingly threatened and diminished by changes in intellectual property law. Copyright law was initially introduced to promote the ‘public good’ insofar as it was seen as a way to ensure the circulation of new knowledge and ultimately encourage creativity. Yet, with increased digitisation the ‘content industry’ is continually attempting to reshape intellectual property to it becoming an unlimited economic right, strengthening protection for copyright holders and weakening rights to access and use of material. It would seem that erosion is occurring equally in both spheres.

The problem of the threat that over regulation poses to public space in either the ‘virtual’ or ‘material’ arenas is part of a much larger debate, wherein the legal system is increasingly seen as being responsible for social relations. But the part of that debate which is relevant here is that public space is frequently thought of as a space outside of regulation, or at the very least, a space that is self regulated. Yet the reality is that a space outside of regulation simply does not exist, the only useful distinction that can be made is the scope of that regulation. Such a notion can therefore only be understood as a fantasy, albeit a very powerful one. One might even call this a ‘material fantasy’ inasmuch as its presence in the realm of possibility and imagination bears material consequences. For example, the fabric of the city is parcelled up into multiple regulatory systems and sub-systems, yet these are invisible to us as we move through it routinely, we are as it were not necessarily aware of crossing legal thresholds when the physical landscape stays the same. It is only in the advent of disruption that the full realisation that we exist in a regulatory space sets in. This for example was the realisation of the residents of the town of Washington in the North of England when their protest in the town square against a green field development was declared unlawful because in fact they were protesting on private property as the square was now longer owned by the local council but by a multinational corporation. It is situations like this that make clear that there is a vital and useful distinction to be made between public space and public place. The latter being a legally binding term while the former is a powerful subjective notion.

Despite this regulatory reality, the fantasy of public space persists. This is even more the case in the digital sphere. Downloading and uploading are essential to the fantasy and vice versa. These are activities which underlie the very notion of public space, the need we have to interact and share. Yet they too unfold with in a regulatory framework. Without the idea that there is a space in which exchange can occur uninhibitedly the web would not have evolved as it did. Equally, without the characters of downloaders and uploaders no such space, illusionary or otherwise, would exist. Avid downloaders and uploaders will always seek ways to circumvent regulation and in so doing continuously shape the relation between a fictitious space and its material correspondent. There is an ongoing negotiation between a notion that is subjectively generated and one that is being formulated in practical terms. The relation between fiction and material is continuously evolving.

Fundamental to the activities of downloading and uploading is becoming part of a public and the possibility to imagine a public. With the act of
downloading one is transformed almost instantaneously into a member of a public, an active participant in a web that is larger than ourselves alone, even if this participation never exceeds mere attention. Inherent to uploading, on the other hand, is the capacity to imagine that downloaders exist; that the sphere is inhabited by givers and takers. Downloaders exist at first as ‘raw material’, a fragmented web of ‘takers and users’ which might have nothing in common. But once there is a shared experience this raw material forms into something that we can call a public. What this digital interaction highlights is that a public is not the same as an audience insofar as it does not need to be copresent in time and space, neither is there a minimum number of individuals for there to be a public only just so many that contradistinguishes them from a few. Ultimately, a public is not an actual aggregate that exists a priori and there is no exclusive criteria for belonging to it, access is governed by the principle that ‘anyone can’.

If there was a way to make visible and audible downloading and uploading, in such a way that these interdependent activities might affect or shape a physical space, we might come closer to being able to make material the immaterial concepts of ‘public space’ and ‘a public’. If it were possible to construct a sculptural object that would do just that, it might just be possible to decompress experiences, to restore mechanical and physical traces to otherwise intangible processes.