

Interrupt Event Reporta

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How does an event, unfolding, demonstrate the principle that, not only are all media social, but that the social itself is a medium? From its initial occurrence, the event described here was mediated through the complexities of social exchange. Only some of these mediations leave a trace—in communications, records, documents. The rest are merely traced in exchanges—glances, looks, reactions, words and body language that vanish from view immediately, but constitute the initial field of the event-space.

It is a Friday afternoon in March in Providence, Rhode Island, and a digital literary studies conference is underway at Brown University. The first morning has that deep hush feeling that comes into an auditorium before sufficient social exchange has created a web of understanding. The individuals in the room are somewhat atomized in spite of a reception the night before, in the gallery, the cast of morning characters has not yet organized into clusters, nodes, eddies of conversational exchange or sympathies. This will come, as the tone of the conference begins to become apparent in the comments and presentations alliances will form, predictable and unexpected lines of tension and antagonism, support and empathy. This is the social. A medium so complicated in its energies and dynamics that it is always in play, always moving, shifting, changing. Imagine mapping it as a heat map, in which the thermal temperature of the scene can be analyzed at every level from the nanoscale to the macro, across any number of constantly shifting differentials (the perceived and the actual, the imagined and the intended, the incidental and the deliberate, and so on—any filter applicable to human behavior and perception can be used to generate an analytic vector, a metric of critical study, and yet, these will always be, as in any conditional circumstance, both an element of and an intervention in the very system they examine). So, the novelist says, an air of latent expectancy, still unstirred by any particular acts or individuals, lies like a morning fog in and among the ranged rows of chairs in the auditorium. As the participants filter in, the dull sounds of upholstered seats dropping, bags and coats being shifted about, laptops opening with their wake up sounds, all populate the lower regions of the space, like air bubbles popping on the surface of a lazy pond in a vast cavern,

having little or no effect on the upper atmosphere. The auditorium is large enough to need more energy to fill it than is present, and the small sounds of preparation on the stage, the messing with connections, cables, and wires that is still the stuff of such events, barely reach the ceiling overhead, and when they do, they hang there, echoing slightly, thin wraiths of sound too insubstantial to be deciphered from a distance.

Where is the medium? No material substrate holds a trace, no record or document is being made—or is it and simply not being seen, not quite perceptible, the individual and collective inscriptions of memory and experience, ephemeral or imprinted, neural patterns and synapse firings, but also, the space of shared experience, not contained in any individual, but made in the very actions of exchange and common space in coincident temporality. Human clock speeds are as varied as those of our electronics, each runs according to its pace, slower or faster as occasion demands, but for some moments, hours, days, an external framework defines the program through which we move and by which we measure where we are in the event and events which unfold.

The day has its pace. The slow swell of activity, little by little, changes the room. The mood is fuller, brighter, more connected. Conversations begin at the breaks and this carries over into the auditorium. Connections hum above the single seats and some reconfigurations create small nodes of contact, heat spots in the still cool space. The tide comes in slowly, and ebbs at moments. After the first presenters, the audience feels some warmth, the social field gets a bit of a buzz, overflows to the lobby for coffee/pastry and back for discussion. A pause for lunch. The subgroups network and generate their own feedback loops, eddies of conversation that come back after lunch even if the groups disperse somewhat into their seats, finding the spot already familiar by habit from the morning.

Consensus and dissent, the contrasting currents, pull and push against each other. Agreement and disagreement begin to surface. A set of questions posed in an interruption breaks the mood of conviviality, confrontational, pressing issues of race, war, struggle into the fore. The speaker is known, his rants a long-standing feature of such events, but also, his remarks are generic, the standard liberal guilt statements that break into aesthetic venues as if to claim some higher moral ground. This will come back later, when the main event of the day explodes the decorum of the assembly. For now, the we should be talking about x and how can we be talking about y is the all too usual version of protest against the inadequacy of poetics to register in the political domain. What is at stake in this?

Agenda setting. A fundamental feature of the social as a medium, agenda setting works through the social, making use of the flows of energy that come and go from consensus streams. Where are we in this? Pulling against each other, this one turning to that one in disagreement, or registering a protest through a shift in direction. Look here, at this, this is the most important thing, or a qualified thing, or a reservation. Think again, think about this point of reference in the conversation, in the mix, in the mood, in the fluid dynamics of the atmosphere of the room. So the shape of the discourse is made in contributions that dispel or disperse, some hanging long enough to be referenced again, brought back into a thread that develops or else, simply, vanish. What holds attention, what remains?

The final event of the day comes after coffee, after the slumping energies and slight ennui of too much staring at screens and space. Through the day, Kenny Goldsmith has been present, a lurking figure, never participating. He wears a wool watch cap pulled over his head, sits low in a chair, does not interact. He is playing the part of a lone wolf visitor to this scene, on its outskirts, never commenting and never interacting.

When Kenny gets up, he searches through a browser, clicking visibly, publically, until he finds a picture of Michael Brown, the recently killed teenager from Ferguson, Missouri. After moving through a few images, he picks the high school graduation photo, with Brown in a cap and gown. The image settles onto the screen. Kenny is ready.

The performance has long begun, started through the day by his studied absence in the group from which he holds himself apart. The apartness is part of what he wears. He is not of us, just among us. He says something that cites a remark earlier in the day about the quantified self, stating he is about to contribute an instance of this phenomenon.

He reads. His voice inflects. His body nods and sways. This is a performance in the manner of a performance of a poetic text. The text is the autopsy report of Michael Brown. The description of the wounds is explicit, of the condition of the flesh, of the internal organs, of the abdomen, of the developed and as yet undeveloped features of the anatomy, of every physical detail of a young body destroyed by bullet wounds. We listen. The audience does not move. Focus is complete. He occupies the stage, in the light, in the center of the light. The audience has been attentive all day. Its attention has been honed, practiced, brought into an alignment that can be used. He is the provocateur, that is his slot in the program, so-named. There will be another the next day, but no one will

listen to what she says. The audience will still be reeling from this performance and its repercussions.

In the space of the room, in the complicatedly aimed attention, cell phone recordings, photos, tweets, are already penetrating the shell of the auditorium. The early tweeting of the day is mere amusement, distraction, the report of an event of interest to a few. Now the event is of interest to many. Kenny is a celebrity, a figure, a public figure at a level that surpasses that of anyone else in the room by a factor of something—5, 10? No one else has been on Colbert, invited to the White House, had dinner with Yoko Ono. These are serious credentials. They speak volumes about visibility, about the scale of networks to which he belongs and in which he is a player. Publicity, more than poetics, is his medium, and this is hardly news to any of us present. The fact that aesthetic activity bears no other price, requires no other entry beyond daring, creative practice, and whatever is reaped in return, makes it the ideal arena for celebrity work, for the work of making and being a celebrity. The world consumes him, through its media, and he has created a media life, image, persona. Does he care what he does beyond the publicity effect? Hard to say. But in this instance, the immediate effect is complex. The piece ends with the repetition of a phrase “not remarkable” that has been applied to various anatomical features of the corpse, only, in this case, it is to the genitals. The remark is a technical one, meant to say nothing needs to be remarked on in the report. A lay person might say normal, but that assumes normativity, while “not remarkable” says no information relevant to the matters at hand can be derived from observation. The language of the report is becoming familiar. We are immersed in it. The experience is chilling, off-putting, annoying, upsetting, intense. Chilling because of the clinical distance of the language, off-putting because it is not clear this is a text to be appropriated in this way, annoying because it feels like a publicity stunt, upsetting because of what it tells us about the world in which we live, now, intense because the emotional response in the room is palpable.

Something has happened. Much has happened. Each individual processing the reading has been forced to decide how they feel. No ignoring the content, the form, the gesture, the performance, the appropriation, and also the manipulation. The text has been changed, altered, turned into a poetic text even as it is meant to stand as an unmanipulated text, to be the thing in itself that is so starkly challenging to the crafted works and conceits of literature.

The text is not a media text, it is an official, medical, document. The fact that it is available, a matter of public record, but obtainable within a few clicks through a search engine has to do with the state of current media, and these facts are inseparable from the event that is occurring. Even as Kenny is reading the document, members of the immediately present audience are checking the text, tracking its source, trying to figure out which of several documents it is. The pedigree and lineage of the text are under examination during the time of its production and consumption as a performed work, through the use of rapid refresh media cycles. This telescopes the fact-checking and source document authentication that are scholarly and editorial techniques, inserting them into the lifecycle of consumption in tandem with the presentation. We do this as a matter of habit now, checking information as we receive it, since the access points are the multiple and ever-present devices always with us. The shift in mediation cycles is a matter of degree, not kind, but the response to the event is filtered through the skepticism that whiffs through the air of the auditorium, even as the raptness with which the room attends to the speaker begins to be riddled with small bore holes of doubt, question, or other response that introduces distance between the speaker and audience. They/we are starting to come and go from the performance and the text, with awareness of the performance dimensions coming into play.

The conditions of cognition, individual and aggregate, depend upon circumstances, are codependent, each act is defined by expectations and the met and unmet conditions of reception. How to read the situation? How to know what is being done? The room fills with response, questions, the tense but redolent waves of intellection and emotion intermingling, cancelling, quarreling, struggling with each other in ways that are expressed and articulated once the commentary and discussion begin.

Kenny stops, having reached that punctuation point he structured into the editorial work, the genitalia, and he sits down in the front of the auditorium, back to the audience, and waits.

Many things are happening simultaneously. Everyone present is processing what has been read, revisiting the frames and criteria by which an aesthetic experience is assessed. Have the frames been challenged, or can the event be judged within existing criteria? These are questions each individual poses different, or answers according to their own experience and values, but within the social space of the event, the assembled auditorium participates in the

debriefing and analysis as a complexly multicellular but group space. An identity, not singular and not exhaustively definitive, still arises from the whole. We are thinking, and each thought expressed aloud creates its own ripples of reaction. At the same time, and very much across a widely distributed network of connections and communications, the communications in and out of the space create a permeable sphere. What has just happened? Kenny's profile, his celebrity status, means that the arena in which the event takes place is highly mediated. The event has repercussions within seconds, and the he did or didn't read an actual report, he edited, he changed, he shaped, he forged the text aspects of the event become one strain of debate, even though he never asserted the unaltered condition of his text, something in the presentation made his audience assume that. Assumptions live where? What social medium records or inscribes these? They were largely shared, or, at the very least, a shared space was part of how these assumptions play out, even get assumed.

The verbalized reactions range in 360 degrees. A weeping woman, overwrought, says this is the most powerful and important thing he could have done, that by calling attention to this text he is making the strongest possible statement about what is wrong in America and what has to happen to change it. Another, also highly emotional, says she could not stop thinking about her own son, who is close to this age, and whose body she might have been hearing described. Another is angry, furious, attacking the performance as a repetition of the very acts of violence perpetrated by the Ferguson Police Force, but now, made into spectacle for consumption. Wrong, says the tone of the voice, very very wrong. Another asks what we should read if not this? And so it goes, around and around the many responses. No easy answers, no single or simple solutions, are put forth. Kenny sits without moving reacting, just letting the responses come. This seems at first like the best move, to let the effect of events simply be, and let his own place in them simply stand, without any commentary, without any defense. But the intensity of the experience continues to gather momentum as it moves through the audience's conversation among itself, and, with him.

As the room's energy fragments, turning into angry eddies of reaction, small pockets of support, or of rejection, or of engagement, the moods shift with volatility and speed. The instability of the atmosphere is true in its average, as well as in individual locations, and no single metric can obtain. All is erratic, unpredictable, spinning and spiking, and the rate of exchanges moving out into the networked social world is escalating rapidly.

As the group begins to break up, moving down from high seats towards the exits, the conversation takes other forms, with contradictory evidence beginning to come forward. The text's identity and lineage are already being questioned, its manipulations are being exposed, the sense of the shock effect and opportunism of the event are beginning to outweigh the substantive contribution. Contradictory evidence cross-cuts the air, with currents of negativity slicing through any stable place from which to assess what has occurred. We are looking at each other, comparing thoughts, scrambling as if washed by a tidal wave, confused, bewildered, trying to find footing but finding only a missing shore, no base, nothing below.

We disperse, but our physical collectivity has now become a set of nodes in a rapidly expanding twitterverse. The analytics would be fascinating to watch, especially to see the sentiment analysis. Within an hour of the end of the conference day, the mood in the online community is becoming hostile. Anger directed at Kenny is surfacing in the tone and direct address of the response across social media. The event takes on a new form, as the attack is personalized, pointed, and based on the versions of the event that are circulating. What has happened? What happened in the auditorium? Exploitation? Sincere engagement with the terms of current culture? How to tell? As the inside of the auditorium and the temporal frame delimiting the original performance both move outside their original boundaries, in fraying lines of increasing distance from the moment of occurrence, the conversations inside and outside social media proliferate and reinscribe themselves in the feedback loops of conversation threads, then blogposts, and facebook postings. The event takes on new dimensions. Much latent anger, waiting like dry tinder, explodes into full-fledged fury. Accusations of hate speech, many of them verging on acts of hate speech themselves, surface with incredible speed. Who has heard what, or wants to, or believes what? Within a couple more hours, the remediating effect is escalating, and with it, the tempers, moods, and vitriole. The system feels self-perpetuating, and the angers seem to fuel each other, with defenses falling and reasoned voices, as in any crowd or flash mob, drowned.

This does not burn itself out. The force of mediation seems to gain momentum and consume the fuel of human effort. Every exchange triggers another. The epidemic proportions of the anger allow it to take new directions and vectors of mediated fury shoot through the communities that are part of the extended networks of poetics, race relations, cultural studies, and identity politics.

The point is not what is said, though that is its own study in the ways networking produces content as an effect across a broad spectrum of rapid and rabid exchange. The point is that the systems here are living ones, human ecologies and media ecologies intertwined so that the two cannot be separated. Each tweet, post, or communication has the status of a living statement, part of a dynamic and stochastic process that could not have been determined from the outset. The delicacy of the start conditions, and the complexity of the original event, become collapsed in the process. Whatever occurred in that auditorium becomes reduced to a point of reference, as a singular event, a single reference, which allows no nuance or discussion. The reification of the event occurs at the same time that the proliferation of vectors of sentiment, opinion, forcefields of response are all being generated. The event in total is an ongoing-ness of major proportions, and continues.

In the mediating and remediated processes of exchange, complexities become flattened, reified, collapsed. Because Kenny's celebrity range operates at such a high level and huge scale, his visibility within networks is so conspicuous, the arena of reaction is correspondingly high. An explosive detonated in a shoebox with a tiny bit of powder only echoes so far. This is a high level, high impact, explosive event and its echoes are generative, not dispersive. Within a few days nothing else can be talked of in the poetry circles that are concerned with conceptual work, and the social media sites are laid waste by the strife and battles, flame wars. Within two weeks, like an epidemic of any kind, the anger has laid waste to other events, conferences, readings, and appearances. The force of attack seems to draw on the mediating energies, using them as fuel and as fan to the flames. The system burns.

The medium of the social continues to seep into social media and the two zones of influence make their impact on each other felt without clear boundaries between or any sense of how one might be distinguished from the other in any constructive way. The violence of this epidemic will play out, as the momentum exhausts itself. But small outbreaks, and larger, continue to erupt, as if the host organism of sociality were infiltrated with a viral organism that simply waits for a trigger to be released into active fury. Two months later, the fires still rage. Kenny reaps much cultural capital--high profile interviews, a public apology, a stance of hiding for self-protection, the object of many ongoing campaigns, opportunities, reviews, and a massive boost in publicity. Reprehensible? Or not? This study is not about judgment, but about the complexity of process, of the generative (even

negatively generative) nature of the dynamic ecology through which this event unfolded.

It would be too simplistic and mechanistic to suggest that this is an event enacted in or as a result of social media. Media systems play their role, but the social, the realm and arena of sociality as a mediating system, is an essential part of what drives the event, which gains purchase in individual and collective psyches, and thus, returns to these single and distributed nodes of engagement through the media of networked exchange. But the exchanges are processed through the social, refracted, reflected, remade in the process, not merely transferred or exchanged. Digestion is taking place, and peristalsis, the processes of breaking down, absorbing, eliminating, and reprocessing are all at work and the “event” that was the original incident has been remade repeatedly, reconstituted, become a whole set of generative events. No longer possible to ask what happened, for the what of that question has ceased to have an original referent, and, instead, has become a living process, unbounded by systems or reason, unleashed from constraint or restraint, non-negotiable by virtue of the hydra-headed polyvalent complexity of its ongoingness and unfoldings.

I take this incident as exemplary of the constitutive paradigm, a stochastic system whose workings change, shift, and evolve as the events occur. The system changes, it is, in that sense, an ecology. The interpretative field may be probabilistic and generative in relation to a diagrammatic format, but the emergent forces of a non-linear system have their own energy, and in thinking of the metaphors and tropes by which we might conceive mediating behaviors and activities, that of the stochastic ecology seems, at least for the moment, useful for the complexity of what it accommodates in its accounts.

Here is where the novelist has to break off and wish for data, for a tracking of the series of tweets and retweets, for a way to see social media at work, not merely the medium of the social. Within the observable space of the auditorium, the break up of attention is fraught. Other interrupters, meant to be part of that day’s final panel, find themselves impotent in the face of the event. One tries and delivers a prepared piece, but the effect is profoundly ineffectual. Nothing can register. The response wave to Kenny’s performance has escalated so quickly in scale that no speech or statement in the room can gain purchase. Amazing to

watch this, and the social physics of it, and to sense the impossibility of action or conclusion, judgment or containment.