Platforms for the new:
Simondon and media studies

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Since its inception, the mission of *Platform: Journal of Media and Communication* has been to provide graduate students and scholars in the early stages of their careers with an outlet for writing and research within the fields of media studies and communication studies. This issue of the journal is guided by these aims, but it also marks a departure from those that precede it. For us, the media gathered under the rubric of "new media" have lost the sheen and the novelty that justified this phrase's exceptionalism and consistency as an organizing framework. In our contemporary media situation, this sheen has faded to grey (Fuller and Goffrey, 2012). This begs the question: what are media today if these media are not – or are no longer – new? What meaning can this reference to the "new" have, at a time when the production of technological novelty is a constant? (see Wark 2013; Sutherland 2014). We think that this disseverment of media from the new generates a gap in media and communications studies, separating the latter from their working, vernacular conceptions of their eponymous terms.

Such a disjunction requires a range of responses: some that are empirical in nature and that investigate contemporary developments, and some that probe and reconfigure the critical and analytical leverage that present methodologies provide. But we also think that *Platform*'s commitment to emergent research in the fields of media and communications studies makes it the perfect (excuse the pun) platform for investigations that take neither *media* nor *communication* for granted as terms and as objects of research. A platform is a mediator, but it is also a *position*. Our argument obviously reflects the ongoing interests of us, its editors. In an idiosyncratic way, it reflects the wider interests of the broad group of emerging researchers – past and present – that circulate through and around the University of Melbourne's School of Culture and Communication. Most importantly, it makes manifest what we perceive to be a need for a journal that is committed to probing media and communication with the kind of focus and rigour that our contemporary media situation demands.

Of course, media and communications studies encompasses theoretically-inflected work that is, at its best, nuanced, incisive and revealing. But the theories that are put to use in media and communications studies don't always engage media – or processes of mediation – on their own terms. The fields of media and communications encroach upon numerous other disciplines that are organized around singular media (film), communicational processes (literature), or perceptual modes (visual studies). These intersections tempt media and communications research with serendipitous, readymade theories that are applicable to *some* of their areas, producing an often disjointed and critically unformed mélange of theoretical propositions, postulates, and presumptions (a veritable "theory soup").

If *Platform* is to concern itself with the new and the emergent, we take the position that this word, *new*, must signify the burgeoning corpus of theory that attempts to grapple in divergent manners the banal and often opaque media environment within which we reside. Through the medium of this special issue and others to come, we hope to inaugurate a shift in *Platform*'s emphasis: from a broad journal that is open to an array of focused approaches to media and communications studies to a journal that is focused on broad theoretical questions of what media and communication *are*. This is particularly crucial, we would contend, both in the wake of the new media rubric's passing and because a host of new – new materialist, realist, speculative, non-standard, media archaeological and object-oriented – theories have generated positions that hold great promise for media and communications studies today (Bennett, 2010; De Landa, 2006; Galloway et al., 2013; Parikka, 2012). Our aim is to create a node for research that reconfigures such material for the study of media and communication: by asking how media and communication studies can *use* theory, rather than assuming that it is a readymade toolbox awaiting its inevitable application to things in the world.

A special issue on the relation between the work of the French philosopher of technology, Gilbert Simondon, and the fields of media and communications studies constellates these issues. The question – "why an issue on Simondon?" – would elicit, we think, an obvious answer: because of his nuanced philosophical treatment of technology. But surely this answer is not enough in itself. Several journal issues and collections dedicated to Simondon's work have been released in English in the last half-decade or more in anticipation of the perpetually imminent and perpetually delayed arrival of his major works in English translation (Boucher and Harrop, 2012; De Boever et al., 2012; Hayward and Geoghegan, 2012; Gracieuse and Tissandier, 2012). These collections have been accompanied by a few major monographs translated from the French and at least one guide to one of his major works written and released in English (Chabot, 2013; Combes, 2013; Scott, 2014). For us, each of these collections and works has proven to be, on the whole, interesting, provocative, useful – and above all, tantalizing, in the true sense of the word. But they have also been inadequate, because they have yet to fully articulate the suggestive potential of Simondon's philosophy *for* media and communications studies.

We think that Simondon's work holds great promise precisely because of the relevance that his conception of technology holds for our engagement with processes that are *specific to* media and communications. His work seems able to guide research that asks questions about, for instance, what media and processes of mediation are; how network topologies or human-machine ecologies should be understood;[1] or how media and communication should be conceptualized in light of the recent resurgence of theories that engage with the materiality of the real (James, 2012). Simondon's philosophy, as the editors of one of the collections of and about his work notes, also comes equipped with a "fully fledged ontology" (De Boever et. al., 2012, p. vii) – in the sense, that is, that this ontology must be understood in "ontogenetic" terms (Barthélémy in Stiegler, 2009, footnote 2, page 14). His ontogenetic philosophy emphasizes relationality and the transformative force of invention: its assimilation into media and communications studies necessitates the transformation of the ontological predicates and assumptions that subtend theoretical work.

Simondon's philosophy draws some of its catalysing power from its wide-ranging approach to philosophy's raw material. As Joe Hughes (2014) notes in his recent, concise essay on books about Simondon – and, by proxy, Simondon's body of work – his philosophy "is a sophisticated assemblage of discourses which are often thought of as mutually exclusive", moving from fields such as "cybernetics and phenomenology" to "theories of identity and the social" to a "frank reconsideration of the spiritual". But at its base, as Graeme Kirkpatrick (2013, p. viii) argues, the power of Simondon's "thought" lies in how it "brings together a sophisticated theory of technology and an equally compelling account of human becoming". Its premise is a reconfiguration of how human *or* technical individuals are understood by arguing that major theories of how the individual comes to be are contradictory, because these theories understand the *becoming* of the individual, or its individuation, through the *already-constituted individual*: by positing a transcendental term that precedes the individual's becoming (Simondon, 1992).

For Simondon (2009b, p. 4), no principle can produce the process of individuation itself, because that principle would necessarily be of a different mode of being to the being whose individuation it describes; instead, we must "*know the individual through individuation*" – within an ontogenetic framework. Becoming occurs, for Simondon, because the individual supposes a "preindividual reality", a reality that precedes the individual's emergence and whose potentialities guarantee the individual's becoming.[2] Modelled on the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander's *apeiron* – that which is unlimited, indefinite, or undefined – this preindividual reality is, simply, what pre-exists individuation (Del Lucchese, p. 185). In

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[1] Simondon's theories offer an alternative to Latour's theorisations of actor-networks, because they assert the integrity - or "metastability" - of relational networked individuals. See: Simondon, 1992; Latour, 1988, 1993. On ecologies, see e.g. Parikka, 2010.

[2] *Ibid.* 5. Thomas Lamarre argues that this preindividual reality is explicitly *not* a kind of "material determinism" but is, rather, an abstract means of grasping the "underlying energetics of concrete entities" (Lamarre, 2012, pp. 33-4). With Muriel Combes, Fillipo Del Lucchese argues that the concept of the "preindividual" is what distinguishes Simondon from Henri Bergson's vitalism, with which this point resonates: *contra* Bergson's concept of *elan vital*, Del Lucchese argues that Simondon recognizes "the possibility of fractures and, ultimately, of transformations within Being". (cont'd)

Simondon's philosophy, the ontogenetic becoming of this individual is powered by what he calls the "disparity" between its pre individual *milieu* – or fields (Toscano, 2006, p. 265) – and itself. This becoming is motivated by its tensions with its environment and its relations to the collectives of which it is a part. So, Simondon's concept of the individual is relational and processual in a basic sense. The relation between the individual and their preindividual *milieu* that he sketches is particularly powerful for media and communications studies, because it is the element that he uses to relate technology to the human – and, thus, to its individuations.

Simondon deals with the "mode of being" of technology in an earlier work (Simondon, 1980), to develop a conception of technology as what Bernard Stiegler (1998, p. 85) calls "organized inorganic matter". For Simondon (1980), the technical being is not a hybrid of the human and inorganic matter, but rather manifests a specific "mode of existence" proper to it and it alone. This mode emerges in the moment that the technical being makes the immanent, materially conditioned leap from inactive collection of parts to active technical individual (Simondon, 1980; see also Massumi, 2009). Simondon (1980, p. 62) develops a concept of the self-defining unity of technical entities by identifying what he calls an "associated milieu" in his treatment of their mode of existence. For Simondon (1980, p. 67), the technical entity is marked off from the "utensil or tool", and gains its internal consistency, because of its relation to its immediate environment. The technical individual's associated *milieu* is thus its "condition of existence"; without it, this individual is simply not "viable" and cannot be said to have been "invented", or to have crossed the threshold from non-functioning to functioning (Simondon, 1980, p. 67).

This discussion does not quite take place in the same register as that concerning human individuals. Humans individuate, but technical objects "concretize": they belong to a technical lineage that they instantiate and that they tend to perfect asymptotically, because they are beholden to logics that are specific to their mode of being (Simondon, 1980, pp. 62-67). But his conception of the becoming of individuals and technical objects respectively provides us with the framework for thinking each of these processes individually – and for thinking their imbrication. Both Marie Combes and Stiegler, in slightly different ways, argue that the technical becomes a *real* element of the preindividual *milieu* that conditions and shapes collective human becoming: Combes (2013, p. 68) by arguing that the technical has come to be articulated as a *network* that conditions human becoming, and Stiegler (2009; 2014) by arguing that technical objects are memory supports, or what he calls "tertiary retentions", that come to constitute the preindividual *milieu* for humans that are, originally, inscribed by technology.

The articles collected within reflect the broad interests that Simondon's writing betrays, swerving between topics, positions and scales, varying from technical instances and television shows to networks, Big Data, and financial markets – and even alchemical practice. Through these articles, we can see how Simondon's work can be brought in to relation with other philosophers with contemporary purchase, like Alfred North Whitehead, François Laruelle, or Gilles Deleuze. Not all of these articles praise Simondon's approach: as some of his critics and some of the articles in this issue note, Simondon's major flaw lies in his politics of technology, and its treatment – or lack thereof – of questions of capital and labour (Hughes, 2014; Toscano, 2012). But the articles that critique his politics also try to work though this problem by finding a solution either immanently, in his philosophy, or by drawing on other material. With this issue, we hope to demonstrate that Simondon's thinking of technology's mode of being, and the suggestive way that his thought can be used to engage with the imbrications between human collectives and network *milieus,* can generate new, thoughtful engagements with media and communication. For Simondon (2009b, p. 8), the "individual" is never a hypostatization, but is, rather, a mediate *resolution* in a process of becoming that is motivated by tensions and inseparable from its relations. So to answer the question – "why an issue on Simondon?" – we might say: because Simondon's philosophy is also, implicitly, a philosophy of mediation. Whilst the articles in this issue are varied in their objects of study, each of them

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As Del Lucchese also points out Simondon can only do this by recourse to a kind of transcendence, meaning that we must think Simondon "beyond Simondon" if we are to re-deploy his concepts today (Del Lucchese, 2009, p. 184). Alberto Toscano provides us with one way of doing this, however, by arguing that this pre-individual reality should be seen not as a continuum, or *apeiron*, but as a series of "pre-individual fields" that must be considered in *real* terms (Toscano, 2006, p. 264). This approach makes sense in the context of contemporary technology's role as the preindividual.

necessarily incorporates some aspect of Simondon's philosophy into their theoretical approach – and necessarily questions, reconfigures, or critiques some aspect of how media and communication are understood.

Jon Hackett's article on Simondon's potential contribution to debates around the invention of early cinema demonstrates how Simondon's nuanced consideration of the being of technology can contribute to the study of a specific media technology, whilst reflecting the broad swathe of interests that can be found in Simondon's philosophy. Using the recent integration of Simondonian concepts into debates around early cinema as his point of departure, Hackett uses a journey back through formative debates between "idealist" and "materialist" cinema studies scholars to both situate a Simondonian approach and to tease out its implications. As Hackett notes, Simondon's philosophy approach offers a contrasting, ontogenetic approach to the technical cinematic object that takes its becoming as a point of departure. As Hackett demonstrates, Simondon's notion of "transduction" provides us with a way to explain how a medium like cinema might operate as a "method of thought". Yet by comparing Simondon's technical approach to Marx's, which emphasizes the primacy of labour to technical development, Hackett's analysis identifies what he calls "the most contentious" aspect of Simondon's peculiar conception of the technical: the latent "utopianism" of its vision of a technical society, which chimes with Toscano's and Hughes' reservations about Simondon's lack of engagement with capitalist processes (Hughes, 2014; Toscano, 2012). But Hackett makes a slight departure from the strong criticisms that these scholars draw from this problem. In Simondon's picture of such a society, Hackett detects a way of imagining how a post-capitalist future – a future that Marx did little to sketch – might be.

If Hackett's discussion of Simondon's politics works *from* a specific technical object *to* what he and others identify as its major weakness, its lack of engagement with capitalism, Laura Lotti's article plunges straight in to its problematic lack of engagement with the "socioeconomic conditions" that afford technical development. Like Hackett, Lotti is able to extract something productive – and ambitious – out of Simondon's normative conception of technology: not just an image of a post-capitalist future, but a proposal that the political economic theory of value can be grounded in transduction and invention. In response to the increasing technical financialization of capitalist economies, Lotti combines a reading of Simondon with an inventive engagement with the work of François Laruelle to place the inhuman at the heart of political economic processes. Gesturing towards algorithmic modes of circulation, like Bitcoin, her startling and compelling conclusion is that "a close reading of Simondon's theory offers transindividuation as a form of radical xenocommunication, a mode of communication that always already implies an alien component". For Diego Viana, Simondon's relevance for analyses of digital technologies – encompassing what Viana calls algorithms, gadgets and the internet – is so strong that it is almost as though his theory had been, until now, "waiting for its time". Viana draws on Simondon to describe the contemporary, networked world as a series of conjoined, "reticulated" clusters of natural, technical and human. Viana argues that it is through and within these clusters that digital convergence occurs – and the contemporary individual is transduced as s/he is *aff*ected by algorithmic, and other, technical processes that co-opt the human to the technical as material. In this situation, Viana concludes, it is incumbent upon us to try to determine how an individual might find agency within massively distributed networks.

Melanie Swan's article in this special issue uses a thorough engagement with Simondon's philosophy to rethink the relation between distributed networks, which she calls "Contemporary Media Environments", and individual and collective development, or individuation. Swan's article begins with the notion that the ubiquity of our media environments and their increasing imbrication with all facets of our lives increasingly positions technology as the human's "other". But rather than seeing this relation as negative, Swan abjures the critical-theoretical perspective and, drawing on Simondon's notion of individuation, argues that the increased exposure to incompatibilities between subjects through network "multiplicities" is a positive force. Her article argues that the "alterity" of the technical "provides a new means for humans to see themselves via exteriority" by exposing them – and their collectives – to moments of subjective anxiety. Swan uses Simondonian concepts to argue that technology's contemporary manifestations are not deleterious, or "infantilizing", but that the disparations they generate have the potential to invent new modes of individuation.

Simon Mills' article demonstrates the critical leverage that Simondon's philosophy might provide media studies by focusing on a key, if often under appreciated, facet of his thought, the modified concept of information that permeates his work. Mills uses this concept to criticize two informational approaches to modelling and managing the world that rely heavily on cybernetics: the contemporary "social physics" application of Big Data exemplified by the work of Alex Pentland and the "Viable Systems Model" developed by Stafford Beer, which both use information as the basis for models of the world. For Mills, the cyberneticist approach that Pentland and Beer take is amenable to critique because it fails to take in to account problems like the complexity and openness that would otherwise drive the systems it describes or these systems' links to their natural environments; the distinction Simondon makes between secondary, or quantitative, information as opposed to primary information, which emerges with the resolution of a phase of individuation; or the limited applicability of analogy to social phenomena. Mills uses this critical gloss of Simondon's concepts to conclude his article by posing the critical question: "instead of touting Big Data as a means to regulate social homeostasis", how might Big Data "construct new orientations of social development?"

In Glen Fuller's hands, Simondon's theories of individuation and the metastable provide the means, as part of a deftly woven tapestry of other theory, for thinking through questions of value in contemporary pop culture by using *True Detective* as its lens. For Fuller, this show is not a text that is amenable to hermeneutic criticism, but an assemblage that inaugurates a "post-broadcast media event". To engage with this show, he argues, we have to probe the questions of value that arise transversally as this event unfolds. To do so, Fuller proposes a "minor aesthetic category" in the mode of Sianne Ngai's work (Ngai, 2012), the "meta", to encapsulate less its referentiality than the evental aesthetics that emerge both as the show proceeds and that transect the show through its extension into other media. Simondon's concept of "metastability" is crucial here: Fuller uses this notion to grasp the evolving and inventive states that evental experience passes through. Fuller uses the category of the "meta", finally, to analyse *True Dectective* through a nihilist lens: by using nihilism to narrate the "analogical relation" of the "detective work" carried out by both *True Detective* and its audiences. Through the "meta" and its nihilistic instantiation in *True Detective*, we can see how a show "dramatises the value of cultural value" – presenting its audience with the potentiality of a transvaluation.

In a later essay, Simondon introduces a concept that brings his work on the technical and on individuation into a new relation: what he calls the "technical mentality". He describes this as a "cognitive schema" that "founds itself on the discovery of common modes of functioning--or of regime of operation--in otherwise different orders of reality that are chosen just as well from the living or the inert as from the human or the non-human" (Simondon, 2009a, p. 17). But as he also notes, this mentality has yet to fully emerge in the time that he was writing. Whilst modes of what he calls "transcategorial" knowledge had led to the production of technical objects like the oft-cited example of the GUIMBAL turbine (Simondon, 2009a, p. 19), – one of the two examples (as well as planar transistors in contemporary information and communication technologies) that Andrew Iliadis uses in his contribution to the issue, illustrating the concept of concretization as it is developed in Simondon's body of work – we have yet to extend the kind of *affective* generosity to technology that would allow more orders of reality to conjoin. Tyler Fox's essay uses this deficiency as his essay's productive point of departure. As Fox notes, Simondon also claimed that an "extend[ed]" technical mentality "begins to manifest itself in the domain of the fine arts in particular" (Simondon, 2009a, p. 13). This cue leads Fox into a consideration of technical aisthēsis – alongside media arts examples, but also by using Alfred North Whitehead's processual philosophy to extend a Simondonian conception of sensation. Fox argues that the work he analyses, *Biopoesis,* provides is with a compelling, non-computational example of a complex system that produces aesthetic effects. In this work, we come to see how the materiality of technical objects is central to how *they* produce sensation *for* us —and, we see how this work and others like it "may even extend our sensorial register into new domains".

If this issue of *Platform* constitutes a platform for a series of essays on the relation between Simondon and media and communications studies, the novelty of this newly rediscovered work for Anglophone readers also generates another, suitably inventive effect: the confrontation between Simondon's suite of concepts and media and communication's reconfiguration of these fields. It is only fitting, then, that this

collection should end at the scene of a kind of origination or beginning: with Dan Mellamphy's character-istically aberrant explication of the influence of, and similarities between, what Isabelle Stengers calls the "ancient aesthetic of alchemy" – which is also known as transmutation – and Simondon's concept of trans-duction. Mellamphy notes that a little-emphasized feature of Simondon's theory of technology is its extensive treatment of magic. With this frame in mind, Mellamphy's point of departure in this essay is our discipline's admittedly unspecific but nevertheless central term, *mediation*, and the corollary conceit that alchemy might be mediation's originary source. Like technology (as conventionally understood), alchemy "conceptually conjoins and technically entwines what would otherwise be distinguished as the "natural" and the "artificial"" – and also, more strikingly, "the living and the nonliving". With this in mind, the seemingly-arbitrary relation that Mellamphy makes between alchemy and mediation creates an *allagmatic* moment of exchange that transmutates both: alchemy, as a mode of carrying forward, becoming media-tion; and technical media, as an artificial construct, being exposed as a mode of *cunning trickery*. His prestidigitatory routine concludes by arguing both that a massively distributed apparatus, like Google, might display a "cunning *world-wide-web*-weaving" craftiness – and that if this is the case, "'alchemical operations' would incontestably be 'machinic technics'".

For Simondon, knowledge is not distinct from the processes in which it is caught. Something like *theo-ry*, he argues, can only emerge *transductively*, through an individuation or as individuation. This provides us with a model of theorization that connects its theories, which are still pejoratively held to be non-worldly abstractions, to the processes that it theorizes. Or, that sees theories themselves as composites of the real that do not *necessarily* have effects, but are always the residue of a real practice of theorization. In this sense, the "new media" rubric was the residue of a particular practice of engaging with media and communications, whilst theory – in the sense that we want to explore in *Platform* – is always *in* and *of* mediation. A platform is always the platform for the circulation of theory as that which has real effects as a real element in the world. For us, grappling with media and communication theory doesn't occur in the mode of reflection – *theōria* – but as a kind of practice that works with and through the media that de-termine our contemporary situation. If *Platform* is a platform for the new, this new can unashamedly in-corporate theory – as, itself, one mediator amongst many.

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