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**Event Synthesis:  
EdLab Seminar with Ulises Mejías**

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Overview***Re-approaching Nearness: Social Agency in a Digital World***

1. Virtuality, technology & relevancy
2. The social agency of code
3. Towards a pedagogy of nearness

Virtuality, technology & relevancy

Mejías wants to explore the myth of virtuality as an alternate form of reality and critique the idea that virtual reality is a separate form of reality. He has looked at the work of Deleuze, trying to frame virtuality not as a simulacrum, but as part of reality, along with actuality. Theorists have taken that to the next level, and applied Deleuze's arguments to new technology, arguing that there's no such thing as hyper-reality, so virtual communities are as real as any other community (mechanics are different, but there's no reason to talk about them as unreal).

The transposition of near and far refers to the idea that distance is not just physical, but epistemological as well, and he is looking at how are we able to experience things (how real they seem to us). Before modern technology, near was linked to being epistemologically relevant, and far was linked to being epistemologically irrelevant. Now, physically near and far are not necessarily relevant or real based on that distance. The idea of the "irrelevancy of the near" focuses on our ability to ignore what's happening around us because we're into the process of interacting with someone who's far away.

Discussion:

**UM:** I'm interested in hearing what you have to say with whether technology is to blame for the irrelevancy of the near.

**HO:** For example, I think it gives certain individuals in a community the possibility of finding a proximity of ideas beyond physical boundaries. The technology is allowing the individual to be in the proximity of ideas that are far from them. Although some people may blame technology, it allows that.

**JF:** Writing overcame the temporal, allowed people to communicate with people, so you'd have to contextualize the word technology into a very big...the interesting question is, is it more so?

**UM:** It depends how you look at it though, the act of reading might be done in isolation, but you're connecting to a broader community of ideas.

**RCO:** This makes me think of the book "Jihad vs. McWorld" by Benjamin Barber. I thought his dichotomy was so interesting because he breaks the world up into two parts, the groups that want to remain tribal and exceedingly local and the groups that are beyond borders and are in constant interrelationships. It's actually an enormous tension between these two groups, which is why there's so much war, because the tribal factions

want to maintain their cultures, and the global want to transcend borders and tolerate ambiguity and put yourself in the other's shoes. So I think something has happened partially due to technology, but also the way our economies are structured and politics.

**UM:** The irrelevancy of the near is also a political issue/problem, beyond technology, we see examples of that in class privilege. We can see gated communities that lose touch with the cities they're near, and they build connections to like-minded people all over the world. This phenomenon of virtuality being another version of reality, we can see the ideas in religion. Is heaven a virtual space? We're here but we aspire to this virtual space.

## 2. The social agency of code

### Presentation:

Humans are social beings and we build societies, and in a way we can say that societies are artificial constructs. By nature, we're social, but it takes work to build a society. Social agency refers to all of the actions, planning, lawmaking etc needed to put together a society, how invested we are, how much power we have as individuals to contribute to societies.

We delegate some of this work, for instance, creating a stop sign to take on the social function of organizing traffic, but what happens when we delegate social agency to computer code? Ulises is interested in looking at how the people who put together the tools that we use (social software, programs that allow social interaction to happen) delegate social agency to the programs.

He is taking a page from Lawrence Lessig in talking about the delegation of agency. Lessig writes about the relationship between code and law, so he's looking at how, through software, we can implement certain kinds of rules and laws. Suddenly, it's not just the state making laws, now programmers can apply their own version of the law, and they can implement certain laws that contradict what laws do. Ulises is trying to look at social agency, so the social rules needed to build society. For instance, Friendster has rules embedded in it for what the social groups should look like.

Ulises also makes the following distinctions:

### Types of involvement:

- immediacy*: distance, across time and space, bw social actors
- intensity*: strength with which actors perceive social phenomena to the exclusion of other phenomena
- intimacy*: the amount of personal info that is disclosed.

### Types of participants:

- consociates*: directly experienced
- contemporaries*: indirectly experienced (in networks, people connected through objects) (flkr users are contemporaries...they assume there are other people)

Types of action afforded:

-*online-oriented action*: acts which are intended to conclude online

-*offline-oriented action*: acts which are intended to conclude offline

Discussion:

**UM:** So we're talking about the delegation of social agency to code, is this a good thing or a bad thing? (The delegating of the process of creating social networks to computer code.)

**HC:** AC and I have talked in the past about the idea of loneliness, people in the West seem lonely, and Friendster and other social software are about helping people to stop being lonely. If you break down the barrier between the virtual and the real...does the friend you make on Friendster...I don't know. What counts? It's a different way of thinking about friendships and relationships.

**KP:** I think it's interesting that you said it's a Western distinction, because I'd strongly disagree with that. Anywhere that there's technology, there are communities that develop around this. There was a big deal in Singapore about young people never actually talking in person, and as a result, there was this concern about loneliness.

**HC:** That's what I'm trying to think about, is it the technology, but when people first started sending letters, they rued the idea that people wouldn't visit each other, they'd just write letters, and it seems like...

**GN:** I think the technology is the least of it...take the technology out of the equation, and there are a lot of ways in which people find ways to relate based on the venues they're in. There are relationships that are fundamentally based around a venue. They're relatively partial, so role theorists would say you're a different person in the workplace than at home, or church or a teaching environment. You put in the technology environments, and they're just one more added to the mix, and we're thinking that they're shortchanging the interaction, but then you think about the workplace.

**HC:** Is that the distinction you make between communities and networks?

**GN:** I was thinking that people have formal definitions of networks, so I'm imagining that a community could be a specific kind of network, with particular characteristics. It's hard to imagine a community that's not a network.

**UM:** It's tricky because there is a big...

**GN:** On social agency, it seems that we delegated that for a long time. The technology ones are more obvious, but we've delegated all kinds of decisions to social convention which we never give a second thought to. The good or bad decision is have we done it thoughtfully, or have we just kind of forgotten that we delegated it?

**AC:** The distinction between community and network is really important; on Friendster they added this feature out of the blue, when you look at someone's profile, it tells you who's been looking. For me, when I entered into the community that wasn't part of the equation, and if anyone was gonna know what I was looking at, it would be because I told them.

**GN:** What's interesting is there's a parallel, we provide an enormous amount of information to the government, and we assumed it was for a particular purpose, but we're realizing that it's used for other things.

**AC:** It's moved that from something that you expect of the bureaucracy, that friendships are negotiated by the software and the social medium.

**HO:** There's an erosion of ethical principles or moral values, that you start to put on the social code, it's like, what happens when...eBay users wanting the feedback, you can't just buy the object...expected behaviors are controlling.

**J:** That's interesting, one of the things Robert Putnam says is because our social codes have broken down, you can't take someone's word. Since we can't trust each other, we have software or lawsuits that do it, because we don't have a social contract that we can agree on. So that's saying to your question, it's a chicken and egg question. Is the software the result of something, so you can't answer if it's good or bad until you go to the anterior question.

**GN:** The thing that's striking is how many corporations would like to be intimate with me, they want to know all kinds of things about me and they want to have a relationship. I don't want them to know about me, but they really want to know that this is a lifetime commitment that I'm making to them, till death or bankruptcy do us part. I suspect when our relationships with sellers or retailers were more local, they'd have that naturally. Now it's very different, they want this relationship to make up for the fact that they're insecure.

**HO:** It's not a connection, you're controlling habits. It's expected behavior.

**UM:** In the case of eBay, it can only guarantee some sort of functionality if people rate and give feedback to sellers. That's their mechanism to make sure someone's not gonna scam you, so only through rating are you gonna build that trust. The trust is not managed by people, it's managed by code.

**HO:** It's taking out the human beings' responsibility.

**J:** It's the scale, if it were in person, you'd have word of mouth.

**UM:** The issue of scale is important to the distinction between community and network. Networks can be powerful, but we have to relegate control to them. With del.icio.us

basically the notion is that when you categorize a link you write your tags, and those tags are gonna let you remember where you put stuff, but those private goods become public and useful. The better your tags are, the network is gonna become more useful. What del.icio.us allows us to do couldn't be done in a community.

**HC:** You started off asking, how do people react to the programmers creating social norms. On the backchat, Lin was talking about corporations with money being able to shape the norms of the virtual world. I was reading a review of a digital camera online, and it got one star and I was not gonna buy it and the next day there were four more reviews that were better, and how do you trust them?

**KP:** The same with restaurant reviews, with one bad review, the whole thing will go that way, there's a normative thing going on, people are afraid to post something that goes against the trend.

**UM:** That's the advantage of networks, if I ask one person, I'll just have an opinion, but networks expose us to multiple reviews.

**HO:** My concern is I think it's not that I'm against, for educational purposes, we have to change a lot of things, if people are thinking different things about this. It's up to me, it's not up to the communities or networks, it's a sense of individuality in my opinion vanishes.

**AC:** When you were talking about eBay and the extra step of commenting on the buyer, it reminds me of Georg Simmel's book on the philosophy of money, when currency came along everything got abstracted. We can take that same thing that happened, and place it in the year 2005 and people are having the same kinds of discomfort because they're expected to do these extra things. The rise of money is the rise of these exchange things going on.

**LL:** I'm also thinking about this word "globalization" it's like the public space and the private space are so blurred because of this. Before when you lived in a small community you can do a lot, you are sufficient in your private space. Now you can not be sufficient in your private space. You have to reach out to people you don't know, so you have to extend your trust, expand your private space to a more public space. I don't know what is the alternative though. Once you have currency that's it, you're able to trade with other people, but then you couldn't survive anymore.

**HC:** If we switched the analogy from money to education, how does the virtuality affect the way schooling happens?

**HO:** For me, when the kids receive something, they're thinking in a completely different way, so there's a fracture in how we're building these new products and what the kids are really getting out of them, because they're thinking about different things in a different kind of way. Maybe you need the kid designing what he wants and we become observers and try to manage it, what they want to know. Their tricks of how to hide the cell

phones...they're there but they're not really there, and they don't really care. The concept of the actual and the virtual, the virtual is just a series of possibilities of what the actual can become. So in a sense, can we imagine the possibilities? Are we able to? You see how much money's being put into technology while the rest of the school is collapsing, so I don't think we even know how to use these, and I think the social code comes to help there, to control things that the teacher is not yet capable of.

**UM:** Obviously that's the \$20 million question, and that's what I try to address in my next part.

### 3. Towards a pedagogy of nearness

Ulises' thesis is that the same technologies that facilitate irrelevancy of the near can engender nearness. The answer lies in the disruption of the myth of virtuality as a separate form of reality, social agency as encompassing online and offline spheres of reality, so our educational model shouldn't just be focused on online learning as something that happens online and is trapped there. We need to figure out how to make what we learn online relevant to what we do offline.

Social software and nomadic learning brings in the notion of the nomad and how the exercise of displacing yourself, not tying yourself to something, always being open to different experiences can be useful. Some of you might have seen the book "The social life of information," and the difference between learning about (learning facts) and learning to be (applying info). Ulises takes this concept further to mean that learning to be is an ongoing process, and can only happen in a social context. How do we use technology to form our concept of who we are as individuals and who The Other is?

Philip Agre's concept of issue entrepreneurship focuses on the way democracy works as, we take up an issue or a cause and we become entrepreneurs, I try to convince you that this is a real issue, and we should change our behavior. He talks about these networks of entrepreneurship, and technology as facilitating new types of networks, so he's saying the act of picking up a cause that's important to you and using technology to make a contribution to the cause, that's the real power of technology, so using technology to make the world a better place (it doesn't just stay online). For example, in class, Ulises is asking students to do that, and to think about how they can use social software to make a contribution to that cause.

Just because we have access to technology doesn't mean it should benefit only us; how do we make participation in the networks available to those who don't have technology? The concept of the digital divide puts you into one or the other side. There are people who have access to it without owning it though.

Technology and everyday social practices: He has been thinking about the digital divide and what it means for a group to have access to the tools and for other people not to have access to them. Someone was talking about ubiquitous computing, we should be able to be wired anywhere anytime, so eventually technology is gonna be like this pair of glasses that when you have them on you can see all the connections and when you take them off,

the world is blurry and you can't see it as clearly. What happens to people who can't afford glasses? Or the blind? Well, we should work so everyone has access to technologiess, but that's not gonna happen for the whole world to have a computer at home and broadband connection. So it's important to think about how we teach, helping people develop methods for taking the benefits of tech and making sure they reach people who don't have access. Can a social software benefit those who don't have access to them and how? The goal is to achieve nearness (not just physical), but in terms of feeling that I have a connection.

Discussion:

**UM:** How do we incorporate these methods into the curriculum and the schools?

**HO:** Should we first diagnose where it's being misused, you're assuming that everyone that has it is getting a benefit, is that true?

**UM:** Statistics say that most people use the internet to access porn.

**HO:** A parallel in art education, there's this obsession that you can only benefit from the art experience if you go to a museum and see the masterpieces, that's the only way, and I have a different approach. The kids will even tell you it's ugly, and the teacher's trying to convince them, it's modern religion, an act of faith to believe in the masters. They're light years apart. So I'm wondering if these people are thinking, you only get the benefit in seeing it, what's the parallel in tech, when do you get the full benefit? And maybe that's our mistake thinking we should use it in a particular way instead of letting the kids tell us how to use it. I think we have to start there.

**HC:** That seems like a difficult thing for schools to do because schools all about having social norms, as soon as computers were put in, censorship came next. Your question made me think about what do schools offer in the way of technology that would improve the learning experience?

**GN:** And should that be a site for technology, it's unclear whether there's a place for it. There's almost no evidence that the form is changing in response to the rules.

**CH:** If you go back to oral traditions, there was always a scribe and people could go to them and get the info. It's the same thing, in India there's a person who has access, in villages, people make good decisions about using it even though they don't have it.

**KP:** On the other hand, because we live in a community that assumes that so many people have access, do we misuse it? The government put the Medicare information online, but it's mostly seniors who need it. Online is a great tool but it's not the only tool. Do we assume everyone has access?

**HO:** The discrepancy between the local and the global, I found it's easier for me to find local resources going to the yellow pages because it takes longer to browse, and so for me it's not that efficient, it takes me longer to find a local electrician, so what's the point?



**JF:** I want to go back to something CE said earlier, they feel like why go onto Friendster when I can have real friends, and I think there's a real distinction for most people. I think Plato's critique wasn't so much about reading not being real, and I think he'd recognize that the virtual place is real, but it takes you away from an experience that I think people hang onto innately, they believe there's some real relationship that can only be had with the self with another self. I think teachers are especially attuned to that type of relationship, but I'm not sure if making the issue, you have to press on the first theoretical distinction. There is something to that other experience of reality.

**KP:** You were talking about looking at masterpieces, I think about it from a traveling perspective, people have more knowledge of what's out there in the real world and they can go online and see all the places, but there's something about the actual experience, it'll never really be the experience of doing something or going somewhere yourself. I'm not sure that's what the internet should try to be.

**CH:** I think Jeff's point about having it face to face is important when we think about how we later use the internet to maintain those relationships. It allows us to expand and maintain those intimate relationships.

**J:** A generation of people is growing up with no distinction between online or offline, the two things are completely integrated. People who've grown up this way, it's seamless moving back and forth, so I'd say I can't predict how he will feel about this or whether his social use of this, what it will be.

**UM:** And that's why it's important because younger generations are acquiring a higher level of compatibility, does that mean they're able to conceptualize what life is like for someone who doesn't have access to that technology?

**J:** If they're really comfortable making social organizations, then there is a potential for social organizations or communities that might make up for communities that are disappearing offline.

**DM:** Maybe you mentioned this, of these kids we're talking about, how many of them maintain these relationships purely online? Because if not, the technology seems irrelevant, it's the telephone.

**GN:** I've been struck by how long these relationships do persist...my son just went to college last year, and part of going to college is networking with other people applying to college, so he went through a period where he couldn't decide where to go, and ended up staying in one group into the fall and he only revealed that he wasn't going to the school of the group when someone said something about meeting. He's still in that group.

**DM:** It sounds like you're not developing friends, you're developing information sources.

**GN:** Are you in a network are you in a community? They've never met.

**DM:** I think that's less unique than people talk about, there's evidence in anthropology that these going out and getting information are old ways, you go out and you seek information sources and the technology is different.

**GN:** Don't you think there's a romanticized vision of the near and real? Some of these teacher/kid relationships, these relationships are near and real, but they're not one that they want to persist.

**MG:** I wonder in recollection, how much do we compartmentalize the relationships that are primarily remote and "real" relationships? This is about reading, but a friend said recently about some place that she'd been, and somebody she'd met, and she said, "maybe I just read about it". She couldn't make a distinction at all...it was equally meaningful to her. Over time, do we compartmentalize so completely? And in terms of romanticizing near and real experiences, one of the things that email allows you to do is manage relationships that would be intolerable face-to-face. It's a lot more control than if the person is there.

**J:** That would apply to letter-writing.

**MG:** It's just that it allows for a more dynamic interchange.

**CH:** The downside is because you lose all the paraverbal cues that allow one to say what one really means. At the college, you see people trying to make decisions about emails.

**J:** I think that's the question behind what you're doing, is how much are we situated in our physical selves. How essential is that to our sense of social interaction? Teachers like face-to-face, and small children need face-to-face, but do we all in some way?

**GN:** A parallel question, is our ability to interact in real time and real space something we've learned over time, and could we have the same kind of learning in virtual space? Would we have sensitivities that we don't know about that would be totally different/

**MG:** I know of a friend whose 4 year old said to him, talk to me with your mouth.

**LL:** One thing I'm thinking about is we're using our current criteria to judge, maybe the relationship...before the relationship was tight, closed between parents and children, and there's a practical value there because children go to the parents, they know they can trust their parents. Now the relationship is more expanded where children don't go back to their parents to look for the trust, they go to different people for different kinds of things.

**GN:** You might argue that it's not the technology that's making that change, there are a lot of practices that force that change, and one of them is formal schooling.

**AC:** The problem with people who create these virtual environments is they establish themselves as the superpower. Can you create social software that adjusts to the needs of

the people who are using it? How can you change the power dynamic because in the online world it's difficult to have a democracy?

**DM:** Don't you forget the software, and say it's like the internet...no one controls the internet.

**AC:** It's debatable, because some foreign countries say the US has control over the internet and they want it to be more of an international body of control.

**GN:** To what extent can authorship be shared? If there were multiple choices, then you wouldn't have to go to eBay?

**UM:** That's why I think wiki's are interesting...literacies are changing.

**AC:** The thing with wiki's is, it says we're not gonna do anything with social norms, we're not gonna try to develop anything and keep it intact, it just says hands-off, which is nice, but it means the social norms develop outside the wiki. It doesn't embed it enough, it just pushes it outside of the wiki.

**UM:** That's a way to regain control of the social agency...we let people decide. Is that better than eBay deciding?

**HO:** Isn't that a reaction we're not living in a free culture, you have to reference everybody that you've read in your life. If I go to a link, and you're asking \$25/article, I don't want it. What becomes useful knowledge for people consulting on a regular basis? Accuracy in the long-term is overrated.

**J:** Some encyclopedias that are put out, they change the info for each country that is marketed to, so how accurate is that? Ultimately, you have to learn how to be a critical reader of information.

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