

**Synaptic Crowd:
Vox Pop Experiments**

by

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ABSTRACT:

Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments consists of a series of performative investigations of the *vox populi* interview format using a collaborative tool that integrates browser and mobile interfaces, along with face-to-face interaction. The *Synaptic Crowd* platform enables online participants to conduct collaborative vox pop (a.k.a. “on the street”) interviews, without having to be co-present with their interview subject. The project aims to mediate these remote participants as collaborative agents in the here-and-now of a public interview interactions in order to understand: (1) how delegating the responsibility of question formation to an invisible collective body will transform the social dynamics of the interview, and (2) how interviewees adapt to the contextual instability of distributed audiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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Lola Elfman, Troy Allman, and Craig Hobbs. Finally, a great big thanks goes out to all the willing interview participants I encountered “on the street” who happily shared their time, energy, and opened minded spirit.

DEMONSTATION AND EXHIBITION HISTORY:

Performances of the *Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments* project took place at various times in April and May of 2009. One particularly key performance event was conducted at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk beach on May 9th, 2009. Documentation of the beach encounters were edited into a documentary short, which was exhibited at the interACTIVATE MFA Show from May 29th through June 24th, 2009. Live demonstrations of the project were presented at the HASTAC III conference (on April 20th, 2009) and at the Visible Evidence XVI Conference (on August 13th 2009).

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INTRODUCTION:

The *Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments* project is informed by the interventionist strategies of Jean Rouch, whose films provided a staging ground for the collisions between various subject positions. I will argue that the vox pop form itself mobilizes these kinds of tensions by calling upon interviewees to balance expectations of personal testimony against invocations of shared experience. This discussion will also situate the vox pop interview format in relation to Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) notion of 'The Interview Society,' a concept that provides a framework for understanding how a modernist capitalist society positions subjects as self-narrativizable objects. Then, shifting to consider the implications of current amateur video production and distribution practice, I will examine how the concept of the 'The Interview Society' might be rethought in light of the changing relationship between subjects and audiences in an era of online cultural production. Using this evolving landscape as a backdrop, I will argue that the *Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments* project takes advantage of a new public imaginary — an emergent zeitgeist tied to an increasing awareness of the multidimensionality of invisible audiences in online contexts.

I also borrow the ethnomethodological understanding of the interview as a joint cultural production — analyzable as such — rather than as a transparent or empirical rendering of experience.¹ Drawing on the ethnomethodological toolkit, I will examine some of the key features of interview structure, including: accounting strategies, membership categorization, and negotiated world-views.

By adapting this ethnomethodological framework to the concerns of my project, I will also consider the ways in which Rouch engineers collisions between opposing interactional assumptions (or different 'accounting' strategies) of various subject positions. Drawing a comparison between

¹ If the interview is a social encounter, then, logically, it must be analysed in the same way as any other social encounter. The products of an interview are the outcome of a socially situated activity where the responses are passed through the role-playing and impression management of both the interviewer and the respondent. This is not the technical problem that survey researchers assume, which might be resolved by better interview training, more elaborate scripts or whatever. The interview is an artefact, a joint accomplishment of interviewer and respondent. As such, its relationship to any 'real' experience is not merely unknown but in some sense quite unknowable. (Dingall 1997: 56-67)

Rouch's methods of provocation and the objectives of the *Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments* project, I will attempt to show how the *Synaptic Crowd* tool teases apart and then reassembles the various agencies mobilized by the interview format. In this restructured interview format, remote participants' questions often provoke interviewees to pivot between various subject positions — an agency that parallels Rouch's own interventionist strategies.

Such processes can serve as the driving force for a new aesthetic framework — insofar as experiences of contextual instability map onto new modes of artistic play. In my own practice, I will argue, performative instability serves as a kind of sculptural or compositional medium. Key for this particular discussion is the asymmetrical structure that the *Synaptic Crowd* tool offers, such that remote participants communicate to interview subjects solely through the channel of typing and selecting of text, while interviewees have a much richer (video) channel through which they communicate to remote participants. By comparison, then, the remote participants remain relatively shrouded and even their “voice” is made anonymous. This asymmetry of gaze provides an oddly imbalanced version of what Joseph Walther calls the ‘hyperpersonal effect’ — where communication across less rich media channels (such as text) paradoxically facilitates increased intimacy between interactional partners. While these “effects” are asymmetrical in *Synaptic Crowd* encounters, this imbalance is key for my project, because it positions remote participants as Rouch-like provocateurs, using questions (and other sorts of interjections) to bring new — and sometimes conflicting — subject-positions into play. The imbalance affords invisible audiences to take risks but also positions the profilmic subjects as having to fashion a smooth contextual wrapper to contain those very risks. With each new verbal gambit offered up the audience, the contextual wrapper must be refashioned and the profilmic subjects must reorient themselves accordingly. It is this jostling of subject-positions that I'm interested in exploring.

In particular, I am seduced by the kinds of ruptures that occur when voices of intimacy interject themselves into more public or professional spaces, and my work explores the way these sorts of ruptures can be manipulated through mediation of invisible audiences. *Synaptic Crowd* aims to reposition distributed audiences as collaborative agents in the interview. What happens, then, when a collectivity is positioned as a Rouchian provocateur? How does context get built on the fly in these sorts of interactions? Such questions complicate the camera operator's role as mediator in a vox pop interview and point to new possibilities for distributed audiences to intervene as collective agents in public space.

Chapter 1: REIMAGINING THE INVISIBLE AUDIENCE

I have always been fascinated by the vox pop interview as a kind of oddly evocative performance space. There is something bizarre about walking up to a stranger with a camera in hand. For me, the experience is an odd combination of artifice and exhilaration, a tension that seems to emerge out of the dance of solicitation, as the camera operator tries to persuade a potential interviewee to offer up the gift of testimonial. In this state of provocation, the potential interviewee will sometimes demand more context by asking the interviewer “what is this for?”

This question not only points (“in”) to the here-and-now of the interview context, but also points (“out”) to a there-and-then of future addressees — a mysterious audience which is both present and not-present at the same time. A camera-operator’s answer to this question is likely to be only half of the story. Potential interviewees must also resolve this question of context on their own by playing detective. How is the camera-operator dressed? Do I trust their face? How official does the equipment look? Seizing upon these clues, the interviewee orients themselves to their non-present audience. At stake here is the risk of recontextualization.

Technologies of documentation (the camera, the microphone, the researcher’s notebook, etc.) capture events in the here-and-now and reframe them in some unknown context of exhibition. The uncertain trajectory of this implied gesture of *re*contextualization then positions the interviewee as an *ad hoc* detective, scrutinizing the various signals provided by the interviewers and camera operators (dress, equipment, “voice,” and question format, etc.) for clues about how the interview will be framed for an invisible audience. While potentially fraught with risk, it is this promise of reframing that also licenses the interviewee to perform ‘self’ as a narrativizable object.

This idea of the ‘self’ as a reframable (narrativizable) entity is historically contingent. Paul Atkinson and David Silverman’s concept of ‘The Interview Society’ provides a framework for understanding how a modernist capitalist society positions subjects as self-narrativizable objects

(1997). Summarizing this position, Denzin argues that "[t]he interview society uses the machinery of the interview to methodically produce situated versions of the self" (2003: 838). Likewise, Holstein and Gubrium paraphrase Atkinson and Silverman's argument that the interview itself produces our understanding of subjectivity:

[W]e have become an "interview society" whose subjectivity comes to us in the form of stories elicited through interviewing. Inasmuch as the interview has become a ubiquitous method of inquiry, so far flung that it is virtually everybody's way of acquiring personal information, the self is becoming a widespread artifact of this form of narrative incitement.

While the interview may be a "ubiquitous method of inquiry," mainstream media presents the interview as a "machinery" that not everyone has equal access to. Along these lines, Denzin argues that Hollywood depictions of the interview present it as a tool of experts:

Journalists, detectives and social scientists were presented [in Hollywood films] as experts in the use of this conversational form. Hollywood led us to expect that such experts will use this form when interacting with members of society. Furthermore, it led us to expect that persons, if properly asked, will reveal their inner selves to such experts.

And thus the key assumptions of the interview society were soon secured. The media and Hollywood cinema helped solidify the following cluster of beliefs: Only skilled interviewers and therapists (and sometimes the person) have access to the deep, authentic self of the person; sociologists, journalists, and psychoanalysts know how to ask questions that will produce the disclosures, often discrediting, about the hidden self. (Denzin, 837)

And yet, in an era when large media conglomerates no longer exclusively control the channels of mainstream media production and distribution, our understanding of The Interview Society should likewise shift to consider the implications of pervasive online video. The interview as a confessional form of embodied storytelling is now supplemented by the similarly confessional videoblog. In the confessional videoblog (typically a monologue delivered in the privacy of one's bedroom) the interviewer is absent. There is no interlocutor to stand in as a metonym for audience — an absence that complicates the performance of 'self.'

Rethinking the relationship between self and context, media theorists have turned to notions like context collapse and context clash as a way of describing the contextual indeterminacy afforded by presentations of self in online scenarios. In confessional vlogs on Youtube for example, Michael

Wesch points out how performers often demonstrate a hyper-reflexive instability of ‘self’ — owing to the fact that they are communicating to both no one, and potentially everyone, at the same time. A multiplicity of contexts collapse upon one another as the performer searches for an “authentic” self suitable to all potential addressees (Wesch, forthcoming).

As public awareness of Youtube reached a saturation point in late 2005, one could argue that the meaning of a camera in public space also shifted. Likewise, our understanding of the concept of ‘audience’ has become more contingent. The vast majority of online videos are seen by only a handful of online users, and, as Michael Wesch argues, the videos themselves are oriented towards a highly specific audience of friends. That said, the potential audience for online videos is complicated by a number of factors. Audiences for online video seem highly contingent upon (1) design-specific algorithms that encourage users of Youtube (and other sites) to “stumble upon” videos with navigationally relevant tag associations, as well as (2) secondary exhibition frames (blogs, forums, aggregators, etc.) in which the video is embedded or linked. These factors of contextual contingency suggest that the notion of an audience as an “imagined community” (in Benedict Anderson’s parlance) is paradoxically both less recognizable (as a community of like-minded media consumers) and more explicit (via viewership statistics and comments from specific users). So for example, while mainstream media can afford to address ‘the audience’ as a more or less monolithic entity, online video performers (like bloggers) are often forced to adapt to multiple, multidimensional, and unpredictably evolving relationships to audience. Along these lines, danah boyd (2006) has developed the notion of a ‘super-public’ to capture the uncomfortable, and often unexpectedly intrusive spectatorship that bloggers sometimes have to contend with.

But let’s return for a moment to the interviewee’s plea for context: “What is this for?” I am interested in how the answer to this question has evolved with the emergence of new models for

distribution and appropriation, so that there is no longer a single straightforward answer to this question of exhibition context. For users of video sharing or social networking sites, questions about the nature of ‘address’ are increasingly complicated, as users struggle to account for fluid boundaries between multiple audiences and conflicting expectations about intimacy, professionalism, and exposure. In short, digital media tends to bleed from one context to another, complicating notions of audience and ‘self.’ “What is this for?” now seems like an inadequate framework to encapsulate the way that media objects travel, transform, and outlive their baptismal moments of exhibition.

Vox pop interviews provide interview subjects with a set of clues about how to negotiate the presence of mediating technology, however, in online scenarios, there are no equivalent clues about the context-of-recontextualization. Online, the agent of recontextualization need not be “present” during the initial moment of documentation. In fact, there doesn’t need to be an agent documenting anything at all. Furthermore, there is no negotiation between an intrusive camera operator and a strategically positioned interview subject, because *every* action online represents an instance of replication; *every* action implies a potentially reproducible performance and a potentially recontextualizable act of documentation.

And yet, the metaphors we use to describe our activities online presume a kind of spatialized context specificity—one which is entirely contradicted by the infrastructure of the internet itself. We tend to inadvertently frame online interactions as situationally specific (bounded) events and even use spatialized metaphors to describe particular online venues (website, chatroom, etc.). However, these metaphors fail to account for the permeability of online contextual boundaries and ignore the complex ways that online media producers grapple with the indeterminacy of distributed audiences. For users of video sharing or social networking sites, questions about the nature of ‘address’ are increasingly complicated, as users struggle to account for fluid boundaries between multiple

audiences and conflicting expectations about intimacy, professionalism, and exposure. In short, digital media tends to bleed from one context to another, complicating notions of audience and ‘self.’

However, these complications are tied to the *asynchronicity* of online media — i.e. the way that media objects are disjunctively framed and reframed over time. The *Synaptic Crowd* project attempts to manifest a similar sort of disjunctiveness, but in this case *synchronously*, insofar as the unstable relationship between interview interactants and audience plays out in the real-time jostling of subject positions (rather than over a series of asynchronous reframings).

Both vox pop and vlogging practices both mobilize awareness of invisible audiences and trigger anxieties about the risks of recontextualization. In the case of the vox pop interview format, however, the risk of recontextualization is not new. What is useful about this comparison, though, is considering different ways that the addressee role is positioned differently in these two practices (vox pop and vlogging). In prototypical vlog monologues, there is no physically present interlocutor, whereas in traditional interview practice, by contrast, contextual indeterminacy is resolved by having the interviewee metonymically positioned to vicariously give voice to the concerns of an imagined audience. In on camera interviews, then, the interviewer serves as an interactional proxy, stabilizing some of the contextual uncertainty that Wesch identified in videoblogs. In this sense the interview operates as both a physically present addressee, but also as a “stand-in” addressee. When interviews are recorded in front of a live studio audience, this co-present audience likewise “stands-in” for a live broadcast audience. These metonymic relationships stabilize the contextual parameters of traditional broadcast interviews. However, online media present challenges to this stability and represent a shift in the media landscape. It is this shift that has fueled my interest in exploring new technologies for mediating distributed audiences — technologies that enable new modes of “standing in.”

With the *Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments* project I'm interested in harnessing the kind of performative instability that confessional videoblogs mobilize, but I want to position this instability outside the proverbial vlogger's bedroom. I want to understand what happens to contextual cues when a remotely distributed audience is mediated in the real-time of a public interview encounter. What happens when the interviewer is no longer a stable interactional proxy for invisible audiences? How will interviewees adapt to the contextual uncertainty of distributed audiences? How does delegating the responsibility of question formation to a collective body transform the social dynamics of interview interactions? What happens when live audiences can "stand in" for themselves through mediating technologies? Will interviewees take the opportunity to turn the tables and pose questions to their collective interviewers? Such questions complicate the camera operator or interviewer's role as mediator in a vox pop interview and point to new possibilities for distributed audiences to intervene as collective agents in public space.

I have chosen the metaphor of the synapse as nod to Marshall McLuhan's description of electronic media as prosthetic extensions of the body — indexical linkages that extend the notion of corporeal presence. In this sense, the synapse extends from the body out into the world as a synchronous remote presence. The synapse also suggests a channeling of multiplicity — here, not an exclusively democratic process of consensus formation but rather a process of collective monitoring (through ambient awareness) not unlike the collective monitoring practices of schools of fish or flocks of birds.

Here, I am interested in how collaborative technologies facilitate latent — and potentially risky — forms of interactional resonance. To follow the metaphor, the synapse is not a single "vote" but rather a public entanglement, a co-mingling with other synapses and groupings of ganglia. The difference here is a prioritization of synchronization and sudden recognition over deliberation and aggregation of individual decisions. In this sense, *Synaptic Crowd* utilizes online voting as a process of

“looking over the shoulder” of one’s co-participants, so that group decisions (about what to say and when to say it) can gravitate towards an emergent experience of “voice.”

Chapter 2: VOX POP AND THE DANCE OF EXPECTATIONS

In the opening sequence of Jean Rouch's landmark film *Chronique d'un été* (1961), two young women accost pedestrians in the streets of Paris with a single question: "Are you happy?" By interjecting this probing intimate question into the professional space of a journalistic vox pop interview, Rouch invites his interviewees into an alternative performance space—one positioned precariously between modes of personal testimony and civic duty. The gulp-in-the-throat instability of these encounters is key for Rouch. He treats the encounter (between filmmaker and subject) as a kind of provocation and cherishes these "gulps" as an elusive form of dramatic energy.

In these vox pop interview encounters, Rouch invites several modalities of interaction to compete for contextual priority. The presence of a camera team—complete with clipboard and newly state-of-the-art, portable, nagra sound-recording equipment—licenses and invites a particular mode of "official" discourse. The "official looking" camera team, by their very presence, conjures up a social imaginary and concomitant discourse of the citizen-as-loyal-witness, happily obliging various institutionalized forms of knowledge production.

However, despite the "official" discourse that the camera team seems to invite, the intimacy of the question, "Are you happy?" charges this solicitation of citizen-as-witness with a particular intrusiveness. Rouch's choice of two young attractive spokeswomen as conduits for his "sociological study" also renders the question with a disarming flavor of market research (and Marceline, we find out later, actually works as a market researcher, and regularly conducts intimate lifestyle interviews with consumers). These details seem to suggest a more casually probing orientation to the interview—one that seems positioned to invite confessional testimony from interviewees.

While the vox pop interview, as an intervention into public space, seems to channel an institutionally sanctioned expectation of official speech; by contrast, the question itself (along with its young, attractive conduits) conjures up an invitation to intimacy. Taken as a whole, then, the interview encounter is neither official nor intimate. Instead, it represents a kind of verbal foreplay,

simultaneously open to competing role-inhabitations (or competing “footing” in Goffman’s parlance). Rouch maintains this openness by inviting competing modalities of introspection, exhibitionism, and civic — or *shared* — experience.

Importantly, Rouch leaves this tension (between different evocations of “voice”) for the interviewee to resolve on their own (with various multivalent and contradictory strategies). Indeed, Rouch’s interlocutors’ responses run the gamut from earnest personal testimony, to pretentious philosophizing, to aloof rejection, to frank sincerity, to playful retort. Each interview seems to open up a different “genre” of interaction and a different strategy for coping with the threat of recontextualization (implied by the presence of a camera).

While Rouch is masterful at catalyzing this kind of instability of subject position, one could argue that this instability is already present in the vox pop form itself. Analyzing the vox pop in relation to other sorts of broadcast interviews, Greg Myers suggests these competing expectations of personal testimony and shared experience are mobilized by the vox pop interview format. He points out that vox pop interviews are structurally quite different from other broadcast interviews and that these differences parallel a certain expectation: that interview subjects should draw upon their direct experience to ground their opinions rather than assume a position of distanced expertise.

[V]ox pop sequences differ [from other sorts of broadcast interviews] in several ways:

- in broadcast interviews with public figures the interviewee is introduced as having specific entitlement to talk on this issue, while in vox pops we don’t know whom we are listening to
- the interviewer and the questions may be omitted entirely in editing without loss of coherence
- the sequence is typically composed, not of a series of questions to one person, but of the same question(s) asked to a series of people
- there is no need for adversarial challenges as part of the display of neutrality

Looked at this way, vox pops are defined by what they may be lack: identification, questions, follow-ups and responses, and the possibility of challenge. But the interviewees generally seem to know what is expected of them.

....

Even non-experts can have first hand knowledge of some issues that concern them; for instance, a set of BBC vox pops in a Manchester coffee bar on people’s personal finances

assumes they know about their own pension plans.... Similarly, I have argued that survivors of the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center, interviewed on the street, were asked questions and gave responses in which experiences, not opinions were called for (Myers 2003). There was a clear distinction between the interviews with experts expected to *know*, and those with anonymous people expected to *see*. (Myers, 2004: 204-206)

According to Myers the vox pop interview calls for experiential or emotional grounding of personal testimony. Yet, the vox pop form also seems to invite a mingling of personal experience and opinion (insofar as the former often serves as a justification for the latter). Paradoxically, personal testimony, then, often serves as a backdrop for setting up identification with larger membership categories of shared experience through the performance of a shared 'public' opinion.

It is assumed that one already has an opinion... and the task now is to account for it, to explain why you hold it or how it came about. And this involves categorization; the question in a vox pop is not 'what do you say' but 'what does someone like you say' — and it is the interviewee's job to figure out what 'somewhat like you' means in this case. (Myers, 2004: 209)

This process of figuring out "what someone like you" means (for the interviewee) emerges from what ethnomethodologists describe as a "dance of expectations." Although, it should be noted that the interviewer has a much stronger hand in shaping the interviewee's subject position — and in this sense the interviewer leads the dance.

Social order is constituted through interaction by a dance of expectations. I produce my actions in the expectation that you will understand them in a particular way. Your understanding reflects your expectations of what would be a proper action for me in these particular circumstances which, in turn, become the basis of your response which, itself, reflects your expectations of how I will respond. And so on. At any point there may be a disjuncture between actions, responses, and expectations which requires that the parties engage in some sort of repair work

.....

The implications for the research interview are quite dramatic. The research interview is, above all, an occasion for the elicitation of *accounts*.

....

What the world *is* is the way we call it into existence through talk. But this is not just *any* talk. It is talk that shape a world that others will recognize and for which they will hold us responsible. 'Accounting' is how we build a stable social order in social encounters and society. (Dingwall 1997: 56-57)

For some ethnomethodologists this process of 'accounting' is restricted to excuses or justifications of one's actions. In this way, 'accounts' are framed explicitly as repairs. But others

criticize this restricted view arguing that the reasons for such interactional repair are often implied rather than explicitly stated as such. Either way, it should be noted that ‘accounts’ are most “readable” as such when role inhabitations are challenged or otherwise put under stress. Robert Dingwall points out that interview provide this kind of a staging ground when interviewees are required to ‘account’ for their claims and experiences.

Accounts are the way in which the fabric of order is restored at the points where it comes under stress.

....

An interview is a point at which order is deliberately put under stress. It is a situation in which respondents are required to demonstrate their competence in the role in which the interview casts them. (*Ibid*, 58)

Often this “role” invokes a particular membership category which the interviewee presents as “natural” — as potentially applicable to anyone.

[In vox pop interviews, T]he category of ‘public’ is constructed, not by enumerating the opinions of individual members of the population, but by packaging a series of interactions that can be seen as suggesting different categorization devices. They construct ‘opinion’ by showing the expression of a view on an issue as an activity bound to categories of people and actions. (Myers, 2004: 220)

In ‘accounting’ for their opinions, interviewees will draw upon testimonials of personal experience. Yet, the way in which this personal testimony is framed (i.e. the cultural assumptions underlying a particular accounting strategy) ironically aligns the interviewee with particular membership categorizations and world-views — in other words, they purport to describe *shared* experience.

Schegloff (1972) shows how conversational partners negotiate membership categories in relation to geographical cues. This negotiation manifests itself as a dance of adjacency pairs where each “turn” subtly repairs and repositions the interactional presuppositions of the previous turn, gradually bringing the interactional partners closer to a shared geographical language. One could imagine the overlapping geographical language of interactional partners as a Venn diagram, such

that each interactional turn deictically points to the region of overlap until the “pointing” becomes more and more precise. Such interactional convergence occurs over a whole host of membership categories (geographic language is just one example among many), and indeed these negotiations are a hallmark of what Silverstein (1997) has dubbed “getting to know you” genre of interaction. The nature of an interview creates an imbalance in this process of convergence, in part due to the weight of presumed audience alignment with the interviewer. Thus the interviewee is positioned as trying to fulfill the role inhabitation that the interviewer positions them in. Put simply, the interviewee converges towards the interviewer.

Perhaps ironically then, the journalistic stance of presumed neutrality, ensures that journalistic interviewers will try to stymie this process of convergence upon shared membership categories (and concomitant shared world-views), by supposedly refusing to “reveal their hand” — so to speak — by muting the “readability” of their adjacency pair responses as positive or negative assessments of the interviewee’s performance. As Holstein and Gubrium have demonstrated, in practice the necessities of conversational harmony make this stance of presumed neutrality impossible to pull off, because subtle contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) can always fill in as salient adjacency pairs signaling positive or negative assessment of the interviewee’s “performance.”

While the stories that might be triggered over the course of a conversation are always uncertain, the recipient of the story... pointedly invites the construction of select aspects of the storyteller’s life and self by virtue of how [the recipient] prompts and encourages elaborations in particular lines of talk. These prompts and encouragement, however, are necessary if conversation is to flow smoothly, and if topical continuity is to be maintained. Both speaker and recipient, as Sack and others (1974) remind us, must always display their attentiveness to what the other is doing conversationally if the talk is to proceed smoothly and meaningfully. If the interviewer were to remain completely silent or uninvolved, the speaker would likely seek some sort of signal that what he or she was saying was being understood or was of interest to the listener.

....

So, the demands of ongoing conversation require at least minimal participation by story recipients. Even simple tokens of understanding (e.g., “Uh huh”) have implications for the story line that will emerge, and the demand for co-participation often leads to more substantial influence over the storytelling process. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 130-131)

However subtly or unwittingly, these signals still operate by guiding the interviewee as they navigate through various accounting strategies.

In contrast to the classic journalistic stance of neutrality, Rouch very deliberately plays his role as interviewer to elicit various perlocutionary “effects” in his subjects. Along these lines, drawing on Mick Eaton’s argument in *Anthropology — Reality — Cinema*, William Rothman argues that...

Rouch, believing his subjects to be less likely to reveal themselves if they are comfortable with the camera, deliberately “shakes them up” so as to cause their comfortably fitting masks to slip, forces them out of their practiced routines of acting and lying so they will act and lie in unpracticed, more revealing, ways. But if it is the very presence of the camera that causes the “disjunction” [Eaton’s term] in which “people will act, will lie, be uncomfortable,” why need a filmmaker do anything to “shake up” his subjects, to provoke them into revealing themselves, other than simply filming them?

....

[T]o characterize the camera as a “provocateur” or a “catalyst,” as Rouch often does, is to envision its presence not as causing a “disjunction” — whatever exactly a “disjunction” is — but as provoking one to become manifest, to manifest itself. (If there were not already a “disjunction,” how could the presence of the camera cause one? If people were not already acting and lying, how could the camera’s presence cause them discomfort?) (Rothman 1997: 86-87)

These disjunctions operate by forcing his subjects to pivot between different subject positions and to take on conflicting accounting strategies from one moment to the next. Drawing a connection to the way that Reality Television similarly engineers conflict from the jostling of different subject positions, Brian Winston claims these tactics as part of Rouch’s legacy:

When, at another table, Marceline Loridan reveals her distaste at dancing with a black man during *Le Quartorze Juillet* (1953) it is Rouch who quickly intervenes in the conversation to ask Landry, the Ivorean who, for the film, is an explorer from Africa investigating ‘the strange tribe that lives in Paris’, if he has ever noticed the number tattooed on Marceline’s arm (in Morin 1985: 13). The seeming inconsequential query is not, of course, to change the subject, but to reveal that the racist Marceline has herself been the victim of extreme racism, a Jewish casualty of the Nazis who deported her as a child to a concentration camp during World War Two (as the tattoo indicates).

Such overt on-camera manipulations of the conversation in the direction he felt the film needed to go was entirely within Rouch’s expanded notion of legitimate documentary intervention, since his purpose was to make manifest the *mentalités* of his subjects for the camera. This interventionism, it can be argued, is one of the two formal outcomes of *Chronique d’un été*’s rich, albeit largely unacknowledged, legacy for the Anglophone documentary. It stands behind the interventionism of much of what we today call ‘reality TV’. (Winston, 293)

Winston goes on to point out that, though, that in contrast to Reality TV, Rouch makes his manipulations visible. He deliberately includes his verbal interventions — what Gumperz’s (1982) would call ‘contextualization cues’ — by performing them in front of the camera and leaving them in the final edit. Rouch wants us to see how these interventions call forth certain subject positions and mobilize categories of class, race, civic responsibility, support or opposition to war, etc.

It is these sorts of interviewer-produced contextualization cues that interviewees use to infer the membership categories of a particular audience. This is why filmmakers who make exposé documentaries sometimes feign allegiance to alternative membership categories. For example, in *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore repeatedly references his membership in the NRA as a way of reassuring his pro-gun subjects. Here, Moore presumes to metonymically stand in for an audience of NRA-allied viewers in order to gain the trust of his interviewees.

But the process of metonymically standing in for one’s audience is less transparent for Rouch. While the camera’s role as provocateur arises in part from the unstable relationship between a subject and the invisible audience they attempt to address, Rouch nevertheless avoids making direct reference to an external audience in his films. This is partly because his ethnographic films were made with his subjects in mind as his primary audience — a key component of what he refers to as “shared anthropology.” In this mode, Rouch screens his films for his subjects to solicit feedback and involve them as collaborators in knowledge production.

[F]ilm is the only method I have to show another just how I see him. In other words, for me, my prime audience is (after the pleasure of the “cine-trance” during the filming and editing) the other person, the one I am filming.

....

This *a posteriori* information on film is still only in its early stages, but it is already producing relationships between the anthropologist and the group he is studying. This is the start of what some of us are already calling “shared anthropology.” The observer is finally coming down from his ivory tower; his camera, his tape recorder, and his projector have led him — by way of a strange initiation path — to the very heart of knowledge and, for the first time, his work is not being judged by a thesis committee but by the very people he came to observe.

This extraordinary technique of “feedback” (which I translate as “audiovisual counter-gift”) has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities, but we can see already that, thanks to feedback, the anthropologist is no longer an entomologist observing his subject as if it were an

insect (putting it down) but rather as if it were a stimulant for mutual understanding (hence dignity). (Rouch 1995: 95-96)

But in part because of his focus on his subjects as his primary audience, Rouch seems to have avoided considering the ways his films traveled and were received by alternative audiences.

Sometimes these alternative audiences demonstrated misunderstanding, racism, or otherwise hostile reactions to his films — reactions which ultimately traveled back to the subjects.

Paul Stoller, Rouch's student, notes how some of Rouch's informants came to feel victimized by the uninvited judgement of western audiences. Years after Rouch's films had been completed, Stoller sought out some of Rouch's former collaborators and received strikingly negative feedback.

Encountering the grandson of Mossi Bana, Rouch's principal informant in the village of Wanzerbe, Stoller was told...

"We are tired of your damn films. And if you want to talk with my father [Halilu Bana], you will have to pay him at least 50,000 francs CFA"... This man was one of the people who felt Rouch's films did not portray Wanzerbe in a favorable light. (Six years later Kasey Sohanci told me: "We don't like films. We don't want strangers laughing at us.") (Stoller, 1992: 9)

These final remarks that "we don't want strangers laughing at us" suggest that Rouch's idealization of shared anthropology did not take into account the ways in which media objects travel beyond the negotiated context of researcher and dignified subject/collaborator.

Rouch's embrace of shared anthropology shapes *Chronique d'un été's* famously reflexive ending in which the subjects of his film have just finished watching each other on screen. They proceed to debate and critique each other's performances (as either indecent or inauthentic). Paradoxically, while Rouch is interested in having profilmic audiences remark reflexively on subjects, he isn't as interested in having his subjects remark on the invisible audiences that they purport to address. In the other words, the privilege of reflexivity is applied only backwards (projected from the moment of exhibition back onto the moment of filming) but not forwards (from the moment of filming out towards the invisible audiences watching in the future). Rouch never once asks his subjects to talk directly to these invisible audiences or to consider the impact of these invisible audiences on

profilmic interactions. Part of what I want to do with the *Synaptic Crowd* project, then is to provide interview subjects with the same sort of reflexive positioning that Rouch assigns to audiences.

Chapter 3: THE ARCHITECTURE OF A COLLABORATIVE INTERVIEW

The *Synaptic Crowd* platform enables online participants to conduct collaborative “on the street” interviews without actually having to be “on the street.” In other words, participants need not be co-present with their interview subject, nor with each other. Interview interactions do, however, require an intermediary wielding a camera and a mobile phone (in most cases this intermediary figure has been me).

The interview requires smooth integration of three separate interfaces: browser, mobile, and face-to-face interaction. Each of these interfaces has its own affordances and challenges, and I find it helpful to discuss each interface explicitly in turn.

The Browser Experience:

Using a flash-based browser interface, participants are able to nominate potential questions (or statements), which get distributed to other participants and added to a database. In a central text-field labeled “say something” participants can type potential questions or statements. Once submitted, these text items move to the pool where they are visible to other online participants. Next, each participant selects the item from the pool that they most want to hear posed to the interviewee. By selecting an item in the pool, the text item will (1) move to the top of the participant’s favorite list and (2) be counted in the vote-ranked popular selections column. Participants only have one vote per round (i.e. per interview prompt). At any given moment, whatever is at the top of a participant’s favorites list counts as their (single) vote. However, they can change that vote at any time by clicking ‘select’ on any item in the pool or in the popular selections column. Items which get posed to an interviewee are deleted from the database once they have been posed to an interviewee.

While nominating and selecting questions/statements, participants watch the remote camera operator's live video feed. An embedded video stream shows the interactions between the intermediary and an interviewee for whom the participants' questions are posed. Participants watch as the intermediary calls a designated number and then hear the most popular selections read aloud over speakerphone (via Text-to-Speech). Participants can start formulating new questions while they watch the interviewee's response.

(NB: In my initial conception, I imagined that calling the automated phone number would automatically trigger streaming audio of the interviewees' responses so that participants could listen online. While this technological hurdle remains unresolved, I have opted for a live video stream — a feature that in many ways underscores some of the performance related questions that I'm interested in exploring. The drawback of using a video stream is that this feature requires mobile broadband capabilities and thus limits the potential user-base of the *Synaptic Crowd* remote (phone) interface.

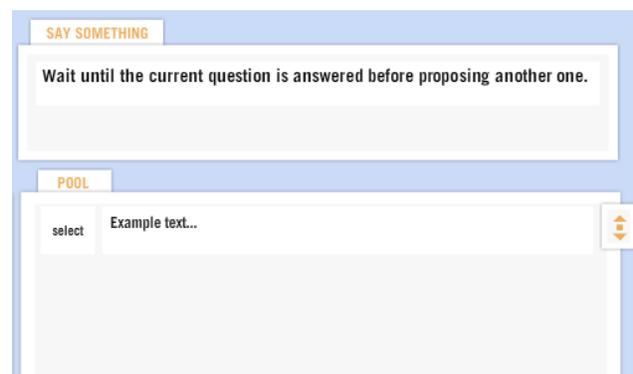
The Mobile Experience:

The intermediary calls a phone number which responds to keypad inputs by repeating or advancing through a series of popular selections determined in real-time on the website. Utilizing text-to-



The screenshot shows a user interface with a blue header. Below the header is a section titled 'SAY SOMETHING' in orange. It contains a text input field with the placeholder text 'Example text..'. To the right of the input field is a 'submit' button. Below this section is another section titled 'POOL' in orange, which is currently empty.

After submitting the example text it gets sent to the public pool where it is visible to all online users...



The screenshot shows the same user interface as above. The 'SAY SOMETHING' section now contains a message: 'Wait until the current question is answered before proposing another one.' Below this message is the 'POOL' section, which now contains a 'select' button and the text 'Example text..'. The 'submit' button is no longer visible.

speech (TTS) VXML script, the most popular question gets enunciated over speakerphone for the interviewee. Once a response is completed, the interviewer has the option to advance to a new question or repeat the current question (by pressing one of two buttons on the keypad). Each time the intermediary chooses to advance to a new TTS utterance, a new round is begun. With each new round, two changes are triggered: (1) the old text item is deleted from the database, and (2) participants are able to start typing and submitting new text items.

A Note on the Uncanniness of Text-to-Speech (TTS):

In several interview encounters, I observed responses of sudden surprise from interviewees when the contextual specificity of a follow-up question demonstrated that a live audience was indeed listening to the interviewee's responses. This level of surprise occurred even when I prefaced the encounter with an explanation of a live collaborative audience who was watching live and posing questions.

My sense here is that the synthetic affect of the TTS voice played a large role in creating a feeling of uncanniness for the interviewee. Most of us associate the TTS synthesized voice as an index of bureaucratic distance. It is the voice we try to escape when we are stuck in an endless phone-tree hoping to talk to an actual human being, and in this sense, it is a voice that speaks to us as an abstraction. So, the experience of having this sort of impersonal voice appear to "listen" (by respond accordingly) seems to trigger an experience of uncanniness for many interviewees.

Face-to-face Interaction:

The intermediary figure initiates contact with potential interview subjects and helps to "translate" the intentions of the distributed audience. The intermediary is also able to help rebuild

context on the fly when the communication between interview subject and audience starts to break down. In some sense, this layer of the interface is actually the most complicated and most deserving of in-depth explanation.

At issue here is the question of how mediating audiences alter the contextualizing process of the interview encounter. What becomes stabilized and what becomes *destabilized*? In such a scenario, distributed audience cannot lay claim to the interviewer's body as a metonymic "stand in" — at least not in the same way that they do in traditional interviews. Instead, an intermediary figure in *Synaptic Crowd* encounters is more aligned with the interviewee, while the audience, themselves, serve as agents who license certain kinds of talk and bring new frames into play. My role in this work, as the intermediary, is to mediate these responses *post facto*, repairing context when necessary and giving the remote participants' speech acts a contextual wrapper so that these acts makes sense as interactional moves.

It makes most sense to discuss the parameters of these face-to-face interactions in relation to particular experiences and particular affordances and strategies of interaction-in-context. Thus, I have allocate a longer discussion of the face-to-face encounters for the following chapter.

Chapter 4: SUBJECTS AND PIVOT POINTS

In many of the *Synaptic Crowd* encounters, an atmosphere of performative play seemed to be licensed by my admission to the interviewee that I was not the originator of the question but merely the conduit for a group. This atmosphere contrasts sharply with other vox pop interviews I have conducted where the first response I usually receive when approaching strangers with a camera is the question “what is this for?” — a response that underscores a pervasive and perhaps justified assumption that uninvited cameras carry with them an agenda and a threatening promise to reframe. However, by directly indexing an audience in the here-and-now, this threat seems to be destabilized and new modes of performative play are made possible.

As in traditional vox pop encounters, the accounting strategies of interviewees in *Synaptic Crowd* interviews seem to pit accounts of personal experience against accounts of shared knowledge. However, the structure of *Synaptic Crowd* encounters obstructs any smooth reconciliation between these subject positions. Instead, questions operate like pivot points that shift suddenly between one subject position and another. This rapid shifting contrast with the kinds of smoother negotiations that happen in traditional vox pop interviews. Take for example, a *Synaptic Crowd* interview that started out focusing on healthcare and then pivoted to ask questions about the interviewee’s boyfriend. The initial stage of the interview demonstrates a subtle negotiation of membership categories that followed a very typical pattern of gradual convergence common to the “getting to know you” genre of interaction — the same sort of convergence that journalists purport to avoid by maintaining a stance of neutrality. This initial stage of the interview was novel, though, because a convergence of membership categories (between the interviewee and the intermediary) contrasted with the interviewee’s uncertainty about the membership-allegiances of the audience:

Remote Participants: Do you believe in free universal health care? Why or why not? If so, what is the hold up?

Interviewee: I do believe in universal... in free universal health care, and the hold up is we had a bad administration for 8 years and now we have a good one with Barack Obama and Joe Biden. And the whole administration is going to do something about universal healthcare.

Me: [Knodding with a slight chuckle] Good answer!

Remote Participants: Generally speaking, what is the problem with Republicans?

Interviewee: Ah, many problems... too conservative, too right wing. I'm a staunch liberal Democrat. Uh... they don't know how to spend money... the right way, and our last administration for 8 years just really ruined this country.

Me: OK let's see if they have a response to that.

Interviewee: It's like, they'll go 'fuck you' [she says chuckling under her breath as she gestures in the air with her middle finger].

Me: I think it's mostly liberals participating 'cause it's like all my friends.

Here we can see that the interviewee and I (here serving as intermediary) converged upon membership categories aligned with support for universal healthcare. Throughout the initial question stage, I provided paralinguistic cues (nodding and smiling) that suggested I approved of her position on healthcare. However, despite this presumed alignment, she acknowledges that the audience might not share her opinions (i.e. in her final line when she gestures to the air and pretends that the audience is going to reject her). This reaction suggests that she interpreted the previous question “What is the problem with Republicans?” as a potentially misleading. The implied meaning could be read as either “What’s wrong with Republicans?” or, alternatively, “Why would you have a problem with Republicans?” Her doubts prompt my repair, “I think it’s [the audience] mostly liberals participating,” which I say hoping to put her at ease. These kinds of insecurities about audience perception seem triggered by a lack of paralinguistic — or otherwise affective — cues to indicate the audience’s approval or disapproval. Without such cues from the audience, I (as the intermediary) found myself filling in as a surrogate for the audience, testifying to their alignment with the interviewee.

The next question, however, invited the interviewee to assume a radically different subject position grounded in the here-and-now. This sudden shift seemed to trigger an unexpectedly confessional response from the interviewee:

Me: Can you take one more follow up?

Interviewee: OK.

Remote Participants: What are you doing at the beach?

Interviewee: Well—I was going to ride my bike with my boyfriend, but that seat’s too high and he abandoned me.

Remote Participants: Why would he do such a thing?

Interviewee: I don’t know, I think I’m on thin ice with him.

Me: Uh-oh.

Interviewee: I try to be good.

[later]

Remote Participants: Maybe he should be on thin ice with you.

If I were conducting a standard vox pop interview on my own, I probably wouldn’t have felt comfortable switching to this other line of questioning about her activities at the beach, especially not as a final follow-up to a healthcare interview. This sudden shift at the end might have signaled that I had had ulterior motives with the initial healthcare questions — or that I wasn’t taking her seriously. In essence, asking a question that sounds like an “opener” at the end of an interview might make the interviewee reevaluate what had come before, and might even be read as intrusive at this stage of the interview. The fact that remote participants asked the question, though, licensed her to assume this new subject position without inferring any ulterior motives.

Her answer to the question seems intent on accounting for the fact that she was alone at the beach. She explains that her boyfriend abandoned her — even though a request for this particular

information was not explicitly asked. Note, here, that she felt it was necessary to account for her aloneness, suggesting an assumption about normative practices of sociality in leisure contexts. This kind of account is what — from an ethnomethodological perspective — calls forth an implicit world view (an unspoken model of social life that needs to be accounted for when it is violated). Importantly, the violation was not invoked by the remote participants' question itself, but rather, by the way she interpreted their question (as requesting an explanation for her aloneness at the beach).

In response, the remote participants felt comfortable pressing her for an accounting of her boyfriend's absence, asking her: "Why would he do such a thing?" Here, echoing the interviewee's new frame (normative assumptions about leisure), the remote audience forms an in-group alliance with the interviewee by positioning the boyfriend as an inscrutable outsider. Note, here, how the remote audience positions the boyfriend as an outsider partly because, in this scenario, he would *choose* to bike alone rather than switch to a different leisure activity — thus reinforcing the accounting frame introduced by the interviewee and distinguishing between those who are at the beach by choice (non-normative subjects) vs. those who are abandoned (normative subjects who are victims of non-normative behavior).

However, the question "Why would he do that?" also sets two new frames into play: (1) a consoling frame in which the remote audience sympathizes with the interviewee and invites her to be vulnerable, and (2) a willingness to risk asking an intimate question — thus taking on a certain amount of vulnerability themselves (albeit mitigated by their lack of co-presence in the interview). The interviewee chooses to respond to these new frames in an interesting way. Rather than account for her boyfriend's non-normative leisure behavior, she instead feels compelled to account for the rupture in their relationship, replying: "I don't know; I think I'm on thin ice with him" — as if the rupture was *her* fault. The remote audience then, again taking sides with the interviewee against her boyfriend, reverses the assumption behind her accounting strategy, stating that: "Maybe he should be on thin ice with you."

Consider, for a moment, if I had stated the final follow up myself (“Maybe he should be on this ice with you”). I’m not sure the comment would have been interpreted as flirtation, but without the *Synaptic Crowd* format, taking sides with her against her boyfriend might have (at the very least) invited an intimacy that would have been at odds with the initial context of a vox pop about healthcare. Perhaps it would have been read by the interviewee that I had lured her into an issue-oriented interview with the intent of probing her with more intimate questions once I’d gained her trust.

This willingness to position a subject as victim so that they have to account for their victimhood (and be vulnerable) is a risky strategy. In some ways it mirrors the kind of risky intervention that Rouch demonstrated when he asked Marceline to reveal her past — i.e. both conveying sympathy but also putting a subject into a vulnerable, and potentially awkward, confessional position (where their victimhood is on display). This kind of vulnerability-as-spectacle will be explored in the following chapter by focusing on the relationship between intimacy, verbal risk-taking, and communication over less-rich media channels. In particular, Joseph Walther’s hyperpersonal effect will provide a lens for understanding the relationship between intimacy and social-risk.

Chapter 5: RISK, INTIMACY, AND THE REMOTE PARTICIPANT

In contrast to Rouch's position as profilmic provocateur, the *Synaptic Crowd's* remote participants are in some ways privileged by their distance, insofar as they can take risks without having to account for the consequences. Yet, such risk-taking at a distance may paradoxically generate a sense of intimacy. Specifically, the affective experience of communication over a text-only channel seems to harness what Joseph Walther describes as the 'hyperpersonal effect.'² Drawing in particular from a Chilcoat and DeWine (1985) study Walther argues that text-based communication (between interactants who do not know each other at first) fosters feelings of closeness more readily than Face-to-Face (FtF) interaction. Walther goes further to say that intimacy consistently increases as the richness of a mediation channel decreases — with FtF being the most rich form of mediation and text based communication being the one of the least rich (and thus most intimate). Walther's explanation for this effect proposes that intimacy is obscured in rich mediation environments (like FtF) because communicators are forced to attend to "competing processes." Without all this extra sensory input, intimacy is somehow more readily achieved. However, I find this explanation somewhat inadequate, because it treats intimacy as a default parameter of interaction rather than as an emergent achievement.

Instead, I would argue that it is the affordances of risk-taking in text-based communication that facilitate bonds of intimacy between interactants. Such an argument could build upon the studies of politeness and joking by Brown and Levinson (1987) and on later research that investigates how the flouting of politeness rules (through joking) reduces relational distance. Joking frames are always plausibly deniable ("I was just joking") thus making the flouting of politeness rules less risky, but it is the initial risk itself that provides the pretext for shared a pleasure of normative

² When is CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] hyperpersonal? When can users create impressions and manage relationships in ways more positively than they might be able to conduct FtF [face-to-face]? When users experience commonality and are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited-cues channel that allows them to selectively self-present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations of their partners and relations without the interference of environmental reality. Perhaps moreso when this communication is asynchronous and/or when the CMC link is the only link there is. (Walther 1996: 33)

rule violation. There is evidence for this kind of risk-taking-as-play in synchronous text-based communication environments. Research of dating oriented chatrooms has demonstrated the way that intimacy and distance is negotiated through the plausible deniability of playframes (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006). For interactants communicating over a text-only channel, risk-taking-as-play may be easier because there is more time to recover (pauses are less embarrassing) and paralinguistic cues that signal fear (involuntary gulps, stutters, and averted gazes, etc.) are masked.

In addition to using a less-rich channel of communication, the *Synaptic Crowd* interface seems to accommodate risk-taking by remote participants in other ways as well — for example, through the diffusion of responsibility for question formation and through the inherent multi-vocality of collaborative utterances. When no one single remote participant has to take full responsibility for the text selections of the group, the prospect of taking a risk has less consequence. Also, when the group itself is made up of different “voices,” then as each “voice,” in turn, “fills in” for the group, inevitably the differences in assumptions and interests will translate into different sorts of footing assigned to the group as a whole.

These various layers of anonymity and shrouding enable the remote participants to ask questions that test the boundaries of interviewer and interviewee comfort. For example, in an interview with a woman in the military, the questions became particularly risky in at least two senses: (1) questions were highly personal and probing, and (2) questions were also politically contentious. This second risk — perhaps the more dangerous of the two — turned out to be resolvable in part because the politically contentious issues could be reframed within an account of personal experience. The first question was particularly key, though, in setting up an experiential frame (into which an opinion-soliciting frame would later be inserted).

Remote Participants: Describe the best day of your life.

Interviewee: That would actually be when I got to see my boyfriend after his tour in Afghanistan.... He came back after 6 months... and we've been dating for 6 years.

Remote Participants: Is he still there?

Interviewee: No, he got back but in July he's going to Iraq for a whole year and that's after we're getting engaged too... So we'll get married after he comes back after that.

Remote Participants: Are you in favor of either of those wars?

Interviewee: Um... it's not that I'm in favor or not in favor... um, I don't think that war should be necessary but in a way it kind of is. No one in the military ever wants to be deployed and go fight and kill people. My boyfriend has nightmares over the stuff he has done ... he feels really bad, but when your commander in chief tells you what to do, it's what you signed up for. It's what you have to do. You made a promise and you have to stick to it.

The remote participants here asked for an opinion on a politically charged topic — as if to force the interviewee to choose sides. However, the interviewee very cleverly elides this frame by shifting to a different accounting strategy. When the remote participants asked for the interviewee to state a position “for” or “against” the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the interviewee was able to reframe the question in terms of the *experience* of being called to duty, a discursive frame in which questions of political approval or disapproval are treated as irrelevant.

Thus, the interviewee, took a question about being “in favor” of a particular war and reframed it as if the question was asking for an account of why a soldier feels compelled to go to war in the first place. She reframed the question by accounting for her personal experience, but at the same time answered as if she was speaking for all soldiers (thus positioning herself as outsider/informant vis-à-vis the audience). This tension, between personal vs. shared testimony, is a tension that Myers locates in the vox pop format itself. But how then does the design structure of the *Synaptic Crowd* tool interact with this more fundamental sort of tension?

For one thing, the *Synaptic Crowd* interface affords a level of interactivity that traditional vox pop never achieves. Vox pop interviewers usually ask the same question to multiple people and then edit a sequence to juxtapose those various responses. By contrast, this particular interview demonstrates just how quickly a somewhat vague prompt like “Describe the best day of your life” can actually

open up a remarkably rich set of experiential reference-points, out of which more specifically probing questions can be formed.

Furthermore, remote participants can calibrate their questions to test the normative limits of what an interviewee is willing to address. At this point in the interview, I had already become uncomfortable enough that I was offering up escape clauses as a way of repairing trust, but the remote participants continued to probe.

Me: These are getting pretty heavy, let me know. [Laughter from group.]

Remote Participants: How did the war change him?

Interviewee: Um... he just — he's become a little harder. Um...nightmares over things he's done. Uh... it's not pleasant things. Um, he's a forward observer which means he calls in heavy artillery to go bomb people. And, it's not something you want on your conscience... It just really isn't.

Interviewee: [After long pause... turns to her friends...] I bet I'm like the perfect interview! [Loud laughter from everyone.]

Here the interviewee broke the tension with a meta-level joke about her own role as an ideal interview subject. “I bet I'm like the perfect interview!” — here commenting implicitly on the idea of the self as narrativizable object-turned-spectacle

Her willingness to step outside the accounting frame of testimonial and to instead comment on her own interview is precisely the kind of jostling of subject positions that I'm interested in exploring. The laughter punctuates what has otherwise been a fairly serious interview, but her treatment of this comment as a humorous aside acknowledges the tension for which laughter is the reward. And yet, I am not sure if this shared recognition of self-as-spectacle should be thought of as a form of hyperpersonal intimacy. Perhaps Walther's notion of the hyperpersonal effect deserves to be complicated a bit in this context.

There seem to be major differences between the *Synaptic Crowd* encounters and the kinds of controlled environments that Walther describes. Firstly, if we imagine Walther's hyperpersonal effect as a matter of intimacy achieved through strategies of mutual risk-taking, then we could infer that an asymmetry of gaze disrupts the typical kinds of trust-formation processes that mutual risk-taking

implies. Instead, an audience provides the trigger for risk while the profilmic subjects' reaction becomes a kind of spectacle. The remote participants are able to take more risks while the co-present interactants have all the cumbersome freight of embodied self-performance (the involuntary gulps, hiccups, and the constraints of performing under the turn-taking mini-deadlines). However, as stated earlier, this asymmetry is key for me because it positions the remote participants as Rouch-like matadors, jostling subject positions against one another through the improvised choreography of questions.

Secondly, what happens to the hyperpersonal effect when one side of the interaction is governed by a group rather than by an individual? One way to address this question would be to consider other models that combine asymmetrical communication channels and group-to-individual interactions. The structure of Youtube comments might provide a useful comparison here. Youtube users perform via a video channel while audiences comment via a text channel. Youtube comments are notorious for their often vitriolic tone, and perhaps such negativity might be thought of as the flipside of the hyperpersonal effect — i.e. when risk is essentially eliminated through anonymity, users are more comfortable hurling insults.

By contrast, however, *Synaptic Crowd* employs systems of real-time nomination and ranking of questions and statements — features which distinguish the tool from the kinds of interactive experiences of Youtube in several ways: (1) The *Synaptic Crowd* remote participants ostensibly speaks with a single “voice,” while commenters on Youtube “speak” individually. Consequently, (2) if a large enough group of *Synaptic Crowd* participants converges upon particular kinds of questions and statements, then perhaps the kind of vitriole associated with more negative Youtube comments would be selected against. (3) Youtube is an asynchronous medium, and thus the kinds of iterative feedback associated with conversation happens over a much longer, asynchronous time period. While the *Synaptic Crowd* tool offers its own peculiar form of asynchronous delay, the interludes are much shorter, and something closer to a conversational flow seems to emerge.

It is this last factor of synchronicity which seems to be most crucial for thinking about the interview above. The pleasure of watching and participating remotely derives in part from a desire to intervene in social space (with impunity). It is as if these participants are engaged in a virtual simulation where the normative limits of sociality can be tested out, stretched, and understood anew. Remote participants can push the interview out of its comfort zone, however, they have an incentive to dial back their assertiveness, precisely because a question or statement that is too provocative or offensive will simply result in an aborted interview. In other words, if the risks taken are too severe, then the ability to test out new interactional moves evaporates — because the “simulation” in effect breaks down. Remote participants, thus, have an incentive to attend closely to the aftermath of the risks they are putting into play. Like a musician testing out the limits of contrapuntal tension, they aim to explore and stretch the boundaries of interactional harmony without foreclosing on the possibility of contextual resolution.

Conclusions:

In the context of an evolving media landscape, where the Interview Society has shifted to account for pervasive online video, the meaning of a camera in public space has changed. Now, not only are interviews grounded by the notion of subjecthood as a narrative object, but this form of experiential narration must also orient itself towards the changing nature of audience as a public imaginary. The proverbial question posed to a vox pop interviewer—“What is this for?”—no longer has such a straight forward implication. The notion of an ‘audience’ is now informed by our increasing awareness of the ways in which media objects get distributed, transformed, and reframed online. These technological shifts enable media objects to traverse partitions of social space (identity, race, class, etc.) in ways that complicate both localized assumptions of audience specificity and global assumptions of audience homogeneity.

Positioned within this emergent and evolving mediascape, the *Synaptic Crowd: Vox Pop Experiments* provides a staging ground where the multidimensionally contingent relationship between video subject and online audience can play out as a real-time, mediated, interactional encounter. As a synchronous interactive tool, the *Synaptic Crowd* sets itself apart from the kinds of asynchronous transformations and reframings that we typically associate with the circulation of online video. The gesture is decidedly Rouchian, here, in the sense that remote participants improvise collisions between various profilmic subject positions. In the ethnomethodological parlance, various strategies of accounting (brought to bear by the interview structure) are deliberately jostled, one up against another. However, an important distinction may be necessary here.

While appropriating a Rouchian sensibility, the *Synaptic Crowd* project breaks from Rouch by focusing on the relationship between a subject and audience in the here-and-now (rather than pushing this relationship aside until moments of reflexive exhibition). Moreover, while the

intermediary position in the *Synaptic Crowd* project does have certain alignments with a kind of Rouch-like ringleader — instigating collisions between subject and audience — what sets *Synaptic Crowd* apart from Rouch is that in my project, it is *remote participants* who take up a mode of Rouchian agency. It is the remote participants who ask probing questions that set up and then reroute or derail accounting strategies (or bid the interviewee to interact with the intermediary in novel ways — much Rouch does with the encounter between Landry and Angelo).

Furthermore, their agency here is mediated through asymmetric channels. Participants watch streaming video of the interview subject, type potential questions/statements, collaborate to select utterances, and then watch the interview subject's response. By contrast, the interview subject has only a final text-to-speech enunciation as an index of the remote participants' joint activity.

The risk taking strategies available to remote participants can be understood in terms of Walther's 'hyperpersonal effect,' where intimacy is achieved more readily over less-rich media channels. Thus, while remote participants' questions tend to derail the stability of interview accounting strategies, this instability also seems to lay the contextual groundwork for achievements of intimacy. My work treats this performative instability as a kind of sculptural or compositional medium that can be turned over to remote audiences as collaborative agents in an interview encounter. The tools that shape this medium can be thought of as indexical webs stretched between non-present actors and co-present actors. Invisible audiences are thus manifested in the here-and-now, wielding the triggers of social risk as Rouchian paintbrushes, while the vox pop interview becomes a staging ground for remote interventions in public space.

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