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Résumé de l'article

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Digital Media as a Form of Electronic Graffiti (e-Graffiti): From Walls to Social Media

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Abstract: We will explore the thesis that social media are used to achieve many of the same objectives of traditional wall-based graffiti and as such are forms of electronic graffiti that can reach a much larger audience than traditional graffiti scratched or painted on walls, buildings, monuments and other public surfaces. The parallel of graffiti and e-graffiti is that both provide a medium of communication and expression to those without access to the traditional mass media channels of society controlled by the owners (private or governmental) of commercial media outlets. We will focus in this study on the uses of social media that parallel wall-based graffiti such as personal aggrandizement, boasting of achievements, protesting, expressing woke culture, political propaganda and protest, hatred, love, and rebellion. We also identify similarities and differences between wall-based traditional graffiti and e-graffiti.

Keywords: graffiti, electronic graffiti, e-graffiti, social media, tagging, hate messaging, hate radio, graffiti art

1. Introduction/Background

Graffiti, defined as the unauthorized affixing of messages or artwork on private property, was the medium of choice for those that did not have access to the standard channels of communication in their societies. The appearance of graffiti dates back to ancient times. In fact, the cave paintings of hominids might even be considered as graffiti except for the fact that they were not unauthorized or posted on private property. Adorning surfaces with messages, images or art work is only considered graffiti when it is done without the permission of the owner of the surface on which the messages or art work are affixed. Our interest in this study is to compare the use of traditional graffiti and social media posts for protest, self-promotion, artistic expression and activism. We pay special attention for hate messaging where we also consider mass media.

Before the emergence of social media through email, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, to name a few popular apps, graffiti was one of the few channels of communication for those without access to standard main stream mass media such as newspapers, magazines, journals, radio and TV for self-promotion, tagging, protesting, promoting political causes or religious points of view, the public display of art works and, sadly, hate messaging. While street-based graffiti still exist social media have taken over, for the most part, all of these forms of social messaging updated to electronic formats so that we suggest that social media operate or act as electronic graffiti and social media have replaced walls for messaging for those without access to main stream media.

Some differences between wall-based traditional graffiti and e-graffiti are:

1. the scale and scope of e-graffiti is much greater than that of traditional graffiti;
2. the authors of traditional graffiti are often anonymous whereas, in almost all cases, the authors of social media posts are identified as well as those that share or repost those messages;
3. e-graffiti have an easily accessed feedback loop that easily facilitates feedback from its recipients to its creator(s) whereas the feedback loop for traditional graffiti is the posting of another message on the same wall. Feedback in these cases include compliments and recognition or in some instances hateful comments.

4. e-graffiti tend to create community because of scale as pointed out in 1 and because of the ease of creating feedback to posts as pointed out in 3. Traditional graffiti do not create community but merely signify the existence of a legal or illegal community.
5. The feedback from an undesirable e-graffiti can include a warning or a request to delete the offending post.
6. e-graffiti is legal but wall-based graffiti without the consent of the property owner is illegal.
7. Wall-based graffiti fosters an environment of competition, rivalry and a great deal of adrenaline whereas for the most part e-graffiti does not.
8. e-graffiti can be expressed by a long and detailed text, whereas wall-based graffiti must be synthetic and express its message in a symbol, a single word or a short phrase.

A remarkable difference between traditional wall-based and electronic graffiti is that the latter has feedback loops that leads to creation of community and is non-local and in certain instances is actually global. Social media as the electronic wall for e-graffiti is the graffiti of the global village whereas wall-based graffiti is the graffiti of the neighborhood and is limited to urban spaces.

Another difference is that for the most part wall-based graffiti is considered a form of vandalism which is not the case for e-graffiti in social media. However, the spams and scams of social media are a form of electronic vandalism and are just as invasive as traditional graffiti and even more damaging in the case of scams.

The aim of this study is to show the parallels of street-based graffiti and e-graffiti as well as the differences of these two media of communication. This is not to suggest that all social media operate like electronic walls (e-walls) for e-graffiti but it is certainly the case that many uses of social media are graffiti-like. One area of particular interest to us in this probe is the parallel of the use of graffiti and social media for hate messaging which in the case of social media is even more pernicious than that of traditional graffiti because of its scale and the ease with which it can be duplicated.

2. Traditional Graffiti: A Survey

The word “graffiti” is derived from the Italian verb “graffito,” which means “to scratch.” It generally means markings that are etched, painted, drawn or scratched onto a surface such as a wall or any surface that can be viewed by the public. Although the name graffiti was derived originally from the word for scratching, graffiti can be made by a number of means besides scratching such as using chalk or paints and especially in recent times the use of spray painting. Graffiti operate as a public form and forum of communication with a variety of objectives or purposes. Graffiti are found in many different surfaces and locations and they are associated with a variety of purposes, including:

- tagging, which consists of writing a signature on a public surface;
- boasting of achievements;
- marking out turf or territory;
- gang graffiti to convey threats of violence and/or to mark out the gang’s territory;
- protest and/or ideological graffiti, which convey political, racial, religious or ethnic messages;
- artistic graffiti used for self-expression and/or decoration
- hate graffiti to express and encourage hatred towards some targeted group, religion, nationality or even towards an idea or a single individual.
- deviance, crime, illegalities or rebellion.

Just as there are many different motivations for the posting of graffiti there are many different attitudes towards the different forms of graffiti. For the most part graffiti are considered a nuisance and a defacing of public spaces. In the case of hate graffiti it is considered an anathema and in many jurisdictions a crime. There are those, however, who are supporters of graffiti when it comes to graffiti-based artworks.

For the most part conventional graffiti is a form of self-expression and is in many instances associated with boredom, despair, resentment, failure, frustration and/or the need for self-expression. Its motivation may include anger, hostility and hatred toward a specific group of people, a political or religious point of view and/or the actual promotion of a political or religious point of view and the need for artistic expression. Ideological graffiti express hostility or grievances and are easily identified by their content, which reflects a bias of a political, religious, ethnic, or sexual orientation.

3. Social Uses of Social Media as a Form of e-Graffiti

We are expanding the definition of graffiti to include electronic graffiti (e-graffiti), which is the use of social media to achieve some of the same objectives of traditional graffiti scrawled on walls or other public spaces that update this traditional form of expression. The parallel of graffiti scrawled on walls and the electronic walls (e-walls) of social media is that both media are used to publicize one's or a group's messages, ideas, art, thoughts to a public and as such are used for tagging, conveying and promoting ideologies and political protests, expressing grievances and woke culture, showing off or self-aggrandisement and, unfortunately, a medium for expressing hatred (see Aronis 2022). The other parallel is that both traditional graffiti and e-graffiti are used by and large by those without access to commercial mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV. Like wall-based graffiti e-graffiti provide a channel to those without access to the traditional mass media of communication for self-expression. It should also be noted that those with access to commercial media still make use of social media to promote their main stream media.

One distinct difference between traditional graffiti and social media posts is that traditional graffiti are unauthorized and appear in unexpected places or where they do not obviously belong whereas social media posts with the exception of spam do not appear in unexpected places. They are sent to folks with whom the person posting the message are in communication or they are posted in social media forums they are authorized to use. Just as wall-based graffiti are a form of vandalism and a nuisance, spam is also a nuisance and a form of vandalism in one's electronic mail box or on the social media apps one chooses to visit.

e-Graffiti, for the most part, do not have a hostile orientation as the mediation for excellence on social media is friendship, evidenced by the invitation to participate in phrases like what are you up to? On social media you make 'friends,' that you "like," with no options to 'dislike.' However, still some posts do entail grievances, hostility and some express out and out hatred. What makes e-graffiti more dangerous than traditional graffiti is that it facilitates the spread of hatred because of the ease with which its messages of hatred can be so easily spread.

Based on this contextualization, the aim of this paper is to discuss how some uses of social media is a form of e-wall for e-graffiti given the fact that a medium is an environment in which a culture grows. Following McLuhan's theory about media as extensions of our body and psyches (McLuhan 2003), we argue that electronic media are extensions of our thought, speech and other forms of expression which create new cognitive and artistic environments.

We have used the term e-graffiti to avoid confusion with the notion of digital graffiti, which is the use of digital technology to create graffiti art electronically instead of posting them on walls (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_graffiti). We will not treat digital graffiti in this probe.

4. Comparing Traditional Graffiti to e-Graffiti

As shown by Keegan (2011), there was a significant number of categories of written graffiti in Pompeii, including single names, greetings or salutations, erotic inscriptions, commemorative dedications, insults, curses, protests, promotions, hate messages and so on. Although the main purpose of social media is that of making and reinforcing social contacts some of its goals are also the same as those of traditional wall-based graffiti, but, of course their graffiti-like posts have much more detailed narratives because of the ease with which text and images can be sent digitally. However, it should be noted that now a days there is lots of criticism and even hate messaging. There is also a greater variety of different kinds of posts because of the use of the Internet and the ability to insert extended texts, and images that are photographic, drawn or videoed. Traditional graffiti, on the other hand, are restricted to basically texts that are one-liners and images that are drawn or painted. Examples of e-graffiti that are not possible with wall-based graffiti include detailed observations, breaking news, essays and detailed narratives of one's activities, as well as announcements of events and meetings, fund raising campaigns, video clips and photos.

One important difference between wall-based graffiti and e-graffiti is that the former is usually anonymous whereas the authors of Internet posts for the most part are identified. Also, it is much easier to respond to Internet-based posts as a response to graffiti requires drawing or scratching a message on a wall. There are no "like" posts on wall-based graffiti but sometimes one graffiti

will inspire another wall-based post close by to support the original graffiti and sometimes a message of disagreement.

Graffiti, electronic or wall-based, are an inescapable part of our lives that sometimes are easy to ignore and sometimes are not. It is simple to turn our gaze away from a graffiti message on the street or to scroll down the social media feed when the content of a message is not of interest to us nor when we are not its target. But for part the audience for e-graffiti actively seek out the posts to their social media channels and their access to these posts are never far from them as most users are quite attached to their computers and/or smart phones.

Regardless of one's social status or economic condition, the main requirement for writing text as graffiti was and still is today to be functionally literate, or at least to be able to copy from someone else's written text (Keegan, 2011). Copying someone's text is more a replication of content rather than self-expression. Nowadays, something similar happens especially on social media. People tend to replicate social media posts, i.e. re-post content that reinforces their personal ideas, which ends up generating a vicious cycle of empty messages with no effective critical judgment, but an enormous number of hashtags without any significant outcomes.

Another curious similarity between ancient graffiti and the messages on social media is the expressions concerning disappointment or disagreement about what has been disseminated by others through their messages on that medium. McDonald (2013, 38) provides an example of a piece that resonates: "O walls, you have held up so much tedious graffiti that I am amazed that you have not already collapsed in ruin." The situation with social media information overload is even more severe than that of wall-based graffiti judging by the hundreds of articles that deal with this problem that a google search easily reveals.

Because of the ease of posting pictures or photographs social media posts are frequently illustrated with images, emojis or stickers. In literate societies, expressing emotions beyond words is something that has gone on through the ages. During the nineteenth century, hearts, for example, were a very popular kind of visual element in graffiti and integrated many pieces (McDonald, 2013). This "modern" way of expression, which is very similar to what we call emoji and sticker in the ambience of social media, was once very popular in the Victorian times. In

other words, emojis or stickers are not really something new, but an updated version of earlier communication practices, that are easier to post.

5. Graffiti Art and Social Media's Use of Graphics and Images

One of the common elements of wall-based graffiti and e-graffiti is the part that graphics and images play in these two parallel media. In the case of graffiti, images play an important part of the postings with some being quite sophisticated paintings. Even when graffiti is text only much use is often made of decorative calligraphy. On the other hand, e-graffiti on social media often makes use of photographs, videos and other graphic images especially in apps like YouTube and Instagram.

Of all the forms of wall-based graffiti the one form that is appreciated by some is that of graffiti-based art. There is a segment of society that are supporters of this art form with some going so far as to advocate the actual preservation of some forms of graffiti which they label as street art and/or cultural artifacts (<https://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/special-contributor/2019/05/30/art-or-awful-the-conservation-of-graffiti> and <https://fineart-restoration.co.uk/news/protection-and-preservation-of-street-art/>, both accessed Dec. 17, 2022). Many contemporary artists have obtained fame in the art world through graffiti, such as Jean Michel Basquait, Andy Warhol, Banksy, Kobra, and Os Gêmeos, among others. In fact in the city of Toronto, McLuhan's hometown, there is a large number of graffiti-based art installations, 21 in number, that are not only tolerated by city officials but they are protected and according to the city's Graffiti Bylaw are designated as "art murals." The only restriction on them according to the bylaw is that "in order to maintain the status of 'graffiti art', the murals must be kept in a state of good repair as approved (<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/public-notices-bylaws/bylaw-enforcement/graffiti-postering-signs/graffiti-art-in-the-city/>)." Only those designated as "art murals" are tolerated. All other forms of graffiti must be removed by owners of the property on which the offending graffiti is affixed. According to the city's bylaw if the owner of a property wants to have the graffiti affixed to his or her property designated as an art mural that property owner must apply to the Executive Director of the city's Graffiti Panel to determine if that graffiti can be designated as an Art Mural. If it is designated as an art mural it may remain

on the owner's property otherwise it must be removed by the owner or by the city at the owner's cost.

In Brazil, according to its bylaws, there is no need for a committee to decide if a graffiti is art or not: graffiti art is legal, if the owner of the property agrees with it. However, graffiti or tagging is considered a criminal act, considered as damage to property. The practice of graffiti art in Brazil is nowadays an appreciated activity that is practiced by affluent kids used to illustrate their bedrooms, schools and birthday parties.

Other places where graffiti art is legal include: Hosier Lane, Melbourne, Australia; Warsaw, Poland; Tesnov, Prague; Queens, New York; Paris France; Taipei, Taiwan; Zürich, Switzerland; Sydhavnen, Copenhagen, Denmark; Burghausen, Germany and Venice, California (<https://matadornetwork.com/trips/10-places-where-graffiti-is-legal/>, accessed March 22, 2023). There are many cities across the globe where one can find graffiti that are tolerated but do not have the designation of being legal.

6. Hate Messaging: Graffiti and the Mass Media of Newspapers, Radio and TV

In this section we examine the hate messaging found in wall-based graffiti and the mass media of newspapers, radio, and television. Hate messaging no matter what the medium that is used can incite hatred in others because its messages are public statements. There are a number of instances where hate messaging has led to genocide and is now considered a crime against humanity. The person who creates hate messaging is aiming not only at self-expression, but also to influence others to also express or act on the same hateful sentiment. Hate messaging is a cool medium according to Marshall McLuhan's classification of hot versus cool media because it encourages the recipients of the hate messaging to act out their hateful feelings and thereby fill in the details of the missing information that is not explicitly contained in the hateful message.

Wall-based graffiti was the principal way to get out hate messaging for those without access to mass media. Most media in democracies were controlled to a great extent by responsible corporate and government entities but, as we will document, was not always the case. It certainly was and is not the case in dictatorships like those of the Fascists, Nazis, where the dictator and

his government control the media and uses it for propaganda targeting its enemies with hateful content.

But even in democracies many mainstream media outlets pandered to their readership, listenership or viewership with hateful messaging in their editorials and their stories.

"Yellow journalism" with its use photography and illustrations in newspapers and its sensational content dates back to the turn of the twentieth century. Its sensational content was used to attract readers. Its roots are connected to the first wave of penny press sensationalism, in the 1830s and 40s, which was based on combining low price newspapers with sensational news and mass market appeal. This second wave of sensationalism, approximately fifty years after the penny press, presented elements like violence and sex. Joseph Pulitzer with the *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst with the *New York Journal* and *Cosmopolitan* were successful using this strategy.

The "yellow journalism" of newspaper publishers featured sensationalism and also was a source of hateful messaging. One example was Hearst's newspapers' campaign against the Spanish and his exaggerations of their misdeeds in Cuba which fueled hatred towards the Spanish and garnered support for the Spanish American War of 1898.

A recent study by the University of Maryland's Howard Center for Investigative Journalism revealed in a study entitled "Printing Hate" that hateful messaging was quite prominent in many other American newspapers.

From the end of Reconstruction to 1940, newspapers were the most powerful news medium in America. Those run by white supremacist publishers and editors printed headlines and stories that fueled racial hate, inciting massacres and lynchings of Black citizens (<https://merrill.umd.edu/articles/umd-howard-center-begins-publishing-printing-hate-project-historic-role-newspapers-fueling>).

In the same study Prof. DeNeen Brown noted that, "Some of the newspapers advertised upcoming lynchings, often printing the time, date and place where mobs would gather," (<https://www.axios.com/2021/10/18/newspapers-lynchings-racist-violence-journalism>).

Radio broadcasts were another mainstream medium that in many instances featured hateful messaging: The use of radio in Germany in the 1930's by Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. He ordered the manufacture of millions of low-cost radio which could only receive the broadcasts of the government's propaganda station. Hitler's hate filled speeches reached millions of German homes by that means (Meier 2018).

In the USA the most infamous example of radio hate messaging were the shows of the American priest, Father Charles Coughlin, broadcast throughout the 1930's out of Detroit in which he combined his criticism of the banking system with virulent anti-Semitism. During the 1930s, when the U.S. population was about 120 million, an estimated 30 million listeners tuned into his weekly broadcasts (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Coughlin, accessed March 23, 2023). Once World War II began, he was forced off the air by President Franklin D. Roosevelt because of his pro-fascist views (ibid.).

Hate radio continues to fill the airwaves in the USA and other parts of the so-called free world:

Ever since the anti-Semitic diatribes of Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s, the radical American right has used radio as a powerful tool in its propaganda arsenal. But it has only been in the 1990s, with the mushrooming of the antigovernment "Patriot" movement, that extreme-right activists have come to fully utilize radio as a crucial medium.

In recent years, their programming — on AM, FM, shortwave and low-power "micro-radio" stations — has burgeoned. Since the mid-1990s, shows by both the Patriot movement and a wide array of hate groups have aired on at least 366 AM stations, 40 FM stations and seven shortwave stations. Almost anywhere in America, the message can be heard (<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/1998/far-right-radio-hate-speech-booming>).

Fox TV news with the way they attack liberal politicians in a hateful manner accusing them of being communists or socialists and the way they promote Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement which includes racial bigots and white supremacists is another example of a mainstream medium outlet with hateful content that happens to be more often implicit rather than explicit. Rupert Murdoch with Fox news and the other media that he took control of tilted the editorial bias of his publications and broadcast outlets to the far right as a way of capturing a segment of the market that were predisposed to those views and were not being served by the main stream media. By doing so he was able to capture a significant segment of the news market that was not served by the mainstream media that did not traffic in extreme views, lies, distortions and often outright hateful messaging. Whether Murdoch did this purely for profit or shared the views of his media outlets is impossible to determine. But for sure he enjoyed great financial success by appealing to this segment of the population with far-right sympathies.

In Brazil, the same happened, as giant media companies (CNN, Rede Globo, Jovem Pan Group, Band News and many others) were involved both in the coup that sacked Dilma Rousseff of the Presidency as well as the notorious 2018 election of Bolsonaro.

7. Hate Messaging and e-Graffiti

Most of the content of e-graffiti seems to be more benign and inoffensive than graffiti scrawled on walls and other public surfaces. However, we have witnessed a considerable flow of hate speech on e-graffiti recently. This hate messaging is actually more dangerous and impactful than the hate messaging of traditional graffiti because the reach of these hateful messages is far greater and because of the ease in which they can be duplicated. Hate messaging is extremely offensive especially for the groups that are the target of the hate messaging as these people become targets for hate crimes, justified by the hate messaging as well as being a form of terrorism. There is a strong correlation between the appearance of hate messaging and acts of violence against the minority groups targeted in the hate messaging as well as increased discrimination these targeted groups face as documented in the following four references all accessed on December 14, 2022:

<https://www.cfr.org/background/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>;
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/30/how-online-hate-speech-is-fueling-real-life-violence/>;
<https://www.comparitech.com/blog/information-security/online-hate-crime-statistics/>;
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/09/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence/>.

What differentiates the two forms of hate messaging, graffiti and e-graffiti and what makes the latter more dangerous is that cyber hating, due to the characteristic of its medium, has the possibility of bringing together a community of supporters of that particular thought much larger and faster than hate messages by traditional graffiti. E-graffiti are more dynamic and easily propagated.

8. Conclusion

New forms of media and communication are updated versions of obsolete older technologies and media practices. These new forms do replace the older forms but they do retrieve, complement, supplement and/or update them. As stated by Plato in his dialogue Phaedrus at the beginning of the implementation of a technology we really do not know what kind of uses people make of the new invention. Users will explore and find ways to use it for their own interests and benefits (Braga & Logan 2015).

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