

## **Disrupting Analogue spaces**

Christopher McLeod  
February 2025

*The physical and digital worlds have become increasingly complex over the past three decades. The internet is one of the biggest industry disrupters in recent memory. Industries, technologies, and ways of being that had existed for centuries shifted overnight. New technologies further heightened the transition from a manufacturing to a services-based economy almost overnight, harkening new employment opportunities whilst destroying existing industries.*

*There is nothing new in this notion. The emergence of the industrial revolution in the 1800s had a similar effect on work and the populace. Largely agrarian populations became industrialised overnight. What did shift was the emergence of a digital space where the human began to exist in two parallel spaces. The analogue world that has existed for all human history suddenly found itself disrupted in ways that had never existed before.*

### **From printed word to binary code**

The World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2020 predicted the blurring of physical and virtual spaces through an increased uptake in digital technologies (Yoon, 2020). The premise of the WEF was simple: we were increasingly reliant on a technological ecosystem during the biggest health crisis of the last century. It is nearly five years to the day that Australia began to order the first lockdowns that would continue for hundreds of days over a two-year period. Many at the time became increasingly involved in the virtual world. Their realities became increasingly lived out not in the physical realm but instead the virtual realm.

The use of third spaces for discourse became increasingly digital. Third spaces refer to the physical environs of discourse such as the public square. The concept has long been ingrained within our larger society. Traditionally, this was seen to be the coffee houses of Europe when viewed through contextual lens of Western and European histories. The newly minted bourgeoisies and emerging merchant and middle classes were no longer purely reliant on subsistence farming and could, therefore, discuss greater political and cultural issues of the day. In part, the adoption of the Gutenberg printing press fuelled the movement of the new third spaces.

For centuries the idea of third spaces as physical places remained constant only shifting and evolving with the widespread adoption of the internet. Forums and discussion boards became the first online third spaces. Places where relative anonymity and belief in the ability of free speech remaining uncensored became the prevailing view in certain circles. The Overton window would again shift when social media emerged. Initially, a platform like My Space gave users the ability to interact, listen, comment, and create in essence a walled garden.

The notion of creating a walled garden through the creation of online social media platforms in one sense is freedom through the use of individualised platform settings. That is, the creation of a profile that reflects not the genuine physical self but instead an idealised online persona. An avatar of sorts. Fast forward nearly two decades later and we begin to see the damage that the online world may have done to the physical realm it was envisaged to represent. The critical juncture of the physical and digital becomes more prescient as the two seek alignment.

## **Merging the world: the online self**

The obfuscating effect of the avatar persona can be viewed from two contextual lenses: the first is the sense of falsity of endless Instagram photos or Tik Tok videos showing perfection and an ever-increasing sense that online creators are contented and at peace the entire time. The human condition dictates that this is not the case. No human being is ever happy 100% of the time. At least not without some kind of mood-altering medication. The second lens therefore becomes more interesting.

The online self can therefore become an extension of the physical self. A move towards a carefully curated, but meaningful online existence that disrupts the barrier of the analogue and digital worlds. An avatar that represents the essence of the physical humanity of its creator. An easier proposition than first expected. It is important to note that the human condition in its centre orientation is still somewhat floored. An online representation is potentially open to being misused by either the creator (user) or by other online entities.

Allowing for interaction by other online entities is therefore an important secondary factor. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence has created both powerful tools and powerful headaches. The writing platform medium.com recently found itself at the mercy of an AI onslaught. Every second story became an AI odyssey with whimsical titles and ever-emerging subsets of information. The overall result was for medium.com to cancel many of the offending users from both the partner program and the platform (ILLUMINATION, 2024).

The merging of the online world and the physical environment is well and truly on its way. Kind of. The true answer is that it is more complex than simply moving all analogue activities to the digital sphere. For example: playing a musical instrument, and in particular a Brass or Woodwind instrument, is very much a kinaesthetic activity that requires the whole-body experience. Some activities lend themselves more to the avatar environment of digital realms. They are somewhat creatable in the digital environs.

## **01000010 01101100 01100101 01101110 01100100 (Blend)**

A more accurate look at the future will involve an understanding of the past. Humans are creatures of habit and tradition. We are all guilty of bad habits. To err is to be human after all. Part of where that future will land requires a look at the past and its technologies (Pullein, 2024). The emergence of digital technologies is relatively small in the timeline of human history where the paradigm of analogue has been the normative situation. The world according to the WEF prediction of 2020 would be blurred between the digital and physical. This prediction has only partially come true.

One miscalculation on the part of the WEF was to not include the re-emergence of analogue technologies that declined over the last 40 years. One prime example of this was the Vinyl revival amongst a younger demographic. This was fuelled in part from the want and need to touch the physical world. A secondary though more minor factor outside of the world of artists was the royalty deals that streaming platforms such as Spotify offer artists. A third factor was the Taylor Swift Effect.

Swifties as they are known within the Taylor Swift ecosystem have fully endorsed and embraced the release of Swift's albums on Vinyl. This has fuelled an increasing smorgasbord of Vinyl albums released in an era when Vinyl releases were rare or non-existent. An example of this was the release of the New Radicals album *Maybe You've Been Brainwashed Too*. The album was only released on CD during its 1990s release. A larger emerging nostalgia trend amongst Millennials would therefore account for the endless re-releases of *Transformers* and *Classic Ninja Turtles* action figures.

Therefore, it is possible to consider the remote possibility that our lives will become compartmentalised. It is possible that over the next five years that we will see a purely digital self and a purely analogue self. In this scenario, the online persona will not be an inaccurate emergence of the physical. It will become a compartmentalised version of the physical self that is detached from the everyday. The series *Severance* explores this notion through the emergence of the Innie and Outie personas within the show.

### **Prediction: One person, Two Personas**

It is dialectically possible to consider that in the next five years we will have two personas that represent a clear demarcation from each other. Who we are online will not be who we are in our everyday lives. It is possible to interchange this in a way that mimics the series, *Severance*. Life sometimes imitates art in the strangest of ways. These can at times seem absurdist or surrealist in their notional displacement of the status quo. Inherently, what is the reality facing the human populace?

The third space, discussed at the beginning of this article, can potentially exist in two places at once. A kind of parallel timeline where both worlds run concurrently but never meet. The crossing of the streams could potentially and philosophically lead to a kind of self-implosion for the person. Therefore, a digital self would in essence exist outside of the physical self. The essence and signature of the person's personality would exist. The traits and mannerisms would be present without the perceived floors affecting the perception of self in either third space.

Environmentally, this may lead societal networks to many different concluding outcomes. A large part of this may become redundant if the economy shifts to a completely digital paradigm. The recent reducing of Work from Home mandates set in precedence during the pandemic lockdowns has begun to wind back to pre-pandemic patterns. A clear sign that the blurring of lines is more complex than a simple binary equation of either or. The human factor of community and interaction in the physical third space therefore plays a larger role in the equation disrupting analogue spaces.

Ultimately, the crossroads that has emerged is a larger philosophical conversation constructed with a myriad of cultural social norms that has yet to fully materialise. The complexity of the scenario demonstrates no clear single solution. The online self and the physical self are still clearly two separate entities for a large part of the population. An increasing number of digital technologies further blur the implementation of a logical solution. Series like *Severance* attempt to examine the complexity of this kind of issues. The true solution as Robert Frost eloquently penned may be to find the road not taken. It's possible we reach the same destination through a slightly altered paradigm.

## References

ILLUMINATION. (2024, April 12). *POLICY: No More Monetization of AI-Generated Content on Medium*. ILLUMINATION. <https://medium.com/illumination/policy-no-more-monetization-of-ai-generated-content-on-medium-56925f5a7117>

Pullen, C. (2024, August 28). *Discover Why These 5 Items Shine In Analogue, Not Digital!* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPNr2CZ5Qis>

Yoon, S. (2020, June 23). *Future shocks: 17 technology predictions for 2025*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/06/17-predictions-for-our-world-in-2025/>

**Christopher McLeod** is an Associate Professor at the *Australian Guild of Education* (Melbourne)