

## Chapter 5

# Niche and Community Online: Artists' Tactical Media Activities as Pedagogy

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter addresses ethical aspects of digital life by analyzing the idea of niche community from two approaches: through the lens of the inoperable community as theorized by Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 2000) and through artistic interventionist practices that dig deeply into normative assumptions of neoliberalism, which have been carried online. It considers the nature of digital citizenship by examining creative activities facilitated by DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture and tactical media intervention. These activities disrupt standard social conventions, and as forms of pedagogy, educators might engage with students about constructive social change within the global potential of digital communication. While stronger connections between formal learning environments and social networking activities are appropriate, the author critiques some of the underlying economic influences on the user/member so that the educational, psychological, and behavioral nature of niche online communities can be considered in light of disruptive artistic activities and subjectivity supported by Nancy's philosophy.*

### INTRODUCTION

The problem that I investigate surrounds digital citizenship and the underlying neoliberalism that structures online activities. The ubiquitous, yet sometimes subtle framework of financially domi-

nated relations makes social change difficult to enact for two reasons: not only does neoliberalism mask the issues of complacency within global inequity through affective, distracting designer capitalism, (Jagodzinski, 2010) but also, it becomes internalized through our online producer/consumer activities. Thus, digital citizenship, an ICT competency within education, does not reach

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its potential: a potential, I would argue, that could reshape the ways we relate to one another on local and global scales, if considered through the lens of Nancian ontology. For philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), the relation between two people is as important (or more so) as the identity of a community, where exclusionary practices are inherent in the notion of belonging to a group. I consider the digital citizen with respect to the online niche environment, using Nancy's notion of the inoperative or unworkable community, supported by his notion of the subject as always emergent in relation to another. To reiterate, global, digital citizenry that respects equality and neoliberal realities of present online/offline life are at odds. This is not news for readers of critical theory, digital art theory, critical art education, and/or contemporary continental philosophy, to name a few areas where scholars have identified this issue in various ways (Apple, 2013; Hickey-Moody, 2013; jagodzinski, 2010). I offer cases of creative artistic intervention as strategies that can serve to educate with respect to this difficulty of enacting a responsive, digital citizenry within the larger neoliberal context. However, I do not imply a rigid dichotomy that perpetuates the oppositional division of neoliberalism from its critics, something that jagodzinski (2010) claims does little to move to a greater potential for transformative change. Instead, I suggest that in the continuing quest for local and global equity, moments of poignant divergence from the business model, which can be found in conceptions of the niche community, are as important as they are elusively located at the ontological level of the subject.

In thinking about the complexities of digital citizenship, I structure this writing in four parts in relation to niche communities. Firstly, I offer an overview of online pedagogy, with its affordances and its limitations. Secondly, I identify the significance of a Nancian community as a potential theory of human relations in online learning contexts. Thirdly, I note some of the ways

that economic interests supersede other social considerations of digital citizenry. Fourthly, I follow this with cases of artists whose online work forms generative learning opportunities through disruptive, performative pedagogies. Finally, I link the potential of this disruptive creative work with the ethical significance of Nancy's project in order to consider educational realities and possibilities for digital citizenship.

## **PEDAGOGY AND NICHE ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

Niche, derived from the Latin word *nidus*, meaning nest, suggests a safe place to grow. Ideally, the nature of a niche online community is nurturing; in such relations, we, as members who have similar interests, feel confident and secure in our assumptions that we control who we are and what we do online. Niches are specific to the member's interests, and satisfaction comes from the educative relationship that develops from the local sharing of knowledge. This style of informal learning is motivationally powerful; therefore, educational institutions have much to benefit from this actor-driven arrangement. In order to foster a rich educational experience through online curricular designs, educators can learn from this model. By incorporating such activities into structured online learning environments, the gap between formal and informal learning can be reduced. This is desirable so that a more holistic platform is established for students who creatively produce their learning within social networking sites. It also opens opportunities for schools to be involved in significant ways in issues of digital citizenship and social change.

While much has been written about the move toward social media integration in education, the ethical gaps in our understanding of the nature and significance of online learning using social media can be inferred from a general online search using the terms, "niche" and "community." I do

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