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Refresh:
On the Temporalities of
Digital Media ‘Re’s

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Abstract

This paper explores the often unremarkable and unremarked upon activity of the refreshing of digital media streams and feeds, paying particular attention to its temporalities. It draws on original empirical research with UK based digital media professionals, mindfulness practitioners and school students to highlight the ways in which the temporalities of refreshing are embodied and experienced. To do this, it considers what theorisations of the prefix ‘re’ might offer, arguing that the ‘re’ indicates a non-linear temporality that is, at once, creating anew, going back, being behind or after, as well as repeating, again and again. Building on these explanations of ‘the re’, the paper argues that the refresh be understood in terms of a present temporality, which is both now and ongoing, and that can be constantly moving, stuck or stilled, and skipped or reset. The paper seeks to understand these specific embodied experiences of the refresh in terms of what Raymond Williams calls a structure of feeling: a ‘temporal present’ that ‘gives the sense of a generation or period’. Taking up Williams’ explication of a structure of feeling in the 1970s through the relatively new experience of the medium of broadcast television, the paper posits that the present temporality of refreshing might be key to the composition of a contemporary structure of feeling.

Keywords

Digital media, time, temporality, the present, refresh, structure of feeling

they have all these multiple data sets coming in, they’re trying to make decisions based on the latest data and it needs constant refreshing (Melissa).

I just feel like I'll skip and refresh just to see if there's anything interesting that comes up, because what came up, I'm not really interested in (Jade).

you can't control what's happening, but you also can't make it unfold faster just be refreshing, so you end up not being able to move on from anything else (John).

Refreshing – of social media streams, webpages, email accounts – is a common activity in today's digital media cultures. Indeed, as the extracts above, taken from interviews I conducted with Melissa, Jade and John indicate, refreshing is an integral aspect of spending time with digital media. In this paper, I explore the often unremarkable and unremarked upon activity of refreshing, paying particular attention to its temporalities. My aim in doing so is to contribute to a plethora of recent work that emphasises the significance of time and temporality to contemporary mediated cultures. The specific contribution that this paper seeks to make is to highlight how the refresh is both embodied and experienced, and is involved in the constitution and organisation of particular kinds of temporalities that are emerging in contemporary digital cultures.

In thinking across the differing scales of embodiment, experience and culture, I attend to what Raymond Williams designates as a 'structure of feeling'; 'a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period' (1977: 131). Williams' understanding of a structure of feeling is, at least in part, temporal, in that he emphasises the importance of what is emerging or pre-emerging at a given historical moment and proposes the concept as a means to grasp and account for what he calls the 'active', 'flexible', 'temporal present' (1977: 128). The concept is productive not only for its concern with temporality, but also for how it sees media (and art) as central ways in which to both identify and comprehend pre/emergent culture. In the 1970s, Williams considered 'the television experience' to indicate a structure of feeling ([1974] 2003); drawing on how he explains the relationships between broadcast television as a relatively new medium and the subjective, embodied, cultural, political and economic processes and practices that gather around and shape it,

I examine how the refreshing of digital media may suggest a new structure of feeling today.

To examine the refresh in these terms, I focus on a discussion of the prefix ‘re’, examining how it refers to processes concerned with creating anew, going back, being behind or after, as well as repeating, again and again. These definitions of ‘re’ point to a plethora of potential temporal processes that are oriented to both the future and past. They thus bring multiplicity and diversity to an understanding of temporality. I situate this discussion within broader interdisciplinary work on ‘re’s, and especially on the ‘re’s of the terms reset, repeat and restrain, drawing out their temporalities which, again, emphasise multiplicity, intensity and the non-chronology of time. Considering what these terms might offer to an understanding of refreshing, I argue that what is distinctive about the temporalities of refreshing is not only multiplicity, intensity and non-chronology but also presentness – a temporality that, as Melissa, Jade and John note above, is (or has the potential of being) constant (Melissa), stuck or stilled (John) and skipped or reset (Jade). I argue that refreshing can be productively understood in terms of a present temporality – that is, a temporality that is both ‘now’ and ongoing. The understanding that I work with in this paper then, sees the present as both inherently supple and flexible – where it is difficult to draw firm boundaries around ‘this’ as the present – and yet also as distinctive – as neither, quite, the past or future. I suggest that this kind of present temporality might be key to the composition of a contemporary structure of feeling.

Structures of feeling: Mediation, the temporal present and the television experience

While Williams’ concept of structures of feeling is well-known, two inter-related points regarding how he comes to define a structure of feeling are important for a concern with the temporalities of refreshing. The first point is that Williams argues that culture is always changing. In this sense, culture is to be understood as emergent in that ‘new meanings and values, new practices,

new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created' (1977: 123). What comes to designate a structure of feeling is that which is 'active and pressing but not yet fully articulated' (1977: 126) – what he terms pre-emergence. That is, while culture is emergent, he argues that we need to 'understand more closely this condition of pre-emergence [...] to explore the concept of structures of feeling' (1977: 126-127). This 'condition of pre-emergence' is temporal. Williams critiques humanities and social science approaches for separating out culture and society and the subjective, personal and embodied. A consequence of this separation is that the subjective, personal and embodied are framed and understood in terms of 'this, here, now, alive, active' (1977: 128), while culture and society are made into 'fixed forms' (1977: 129) and expressed in a 'habitual past tense' (1977: 128). Williams proposes the concept of structures of feeling as a means to grasp and account for what he calls the 'active', 'flexible', 'temporal present' (1977: 128). A structure of feeling therefore, as 'a particular quality [...] which gives the sense of a generation or of a period', is, at least in part, to be defined temporally.

Second, in defining a structure of feeling Williams looks to developments in art and media, seeing them not as determining technologies but as emerging out of as well as establishing social, cultural, political and economic relations and needs. A discussion of his analysis of television in the 1970s (Williams, [1974] 2003) is instructive in both explicating how he does this, and in examining what might be distinctive about the contribution of the present temporality of refreshing to the emergence of a particular structure of feeling today. Williams examines television as part of everyday life, and importantly, he argues that what characterises broadcast television is not only the content of the programmes made and shown but, more significantly, their sequencing as flow. Williams' starting point is with the discrete character of pre-broadcast communications; books, plays, concerts, matches, meetings were 'specific and isolated, temporary, forms of attention' (2003: 87). Broadcasting systems programme these discrete units as 'a sequence or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events, which are then available in a single dimension and in a single operation' (2003: 87). This single dimensionality and operationality remain important, but Williams also identifies 'a significant shift

from the concept of sequence as programming to the concept of sequence as flow' (2003: 89). Flow is, for Williams, a means of accounting both for how intervals or interruptions – such as advertisements – become part of the experience of broadcasting (watching television or listening to the radio) and how 'broadcast planners' sequence units so as to 'retain viewers – or as they put it, to "capture them" – for a whole evening's sequence' (2003: 91).

Understood temporally, flow is a moving on – or, as Williams puts it, a "moving along", to sustain what is thought of as a kind of brand-loyalty to the channel being watched' (2003: 94). This moving along involves the sequencing of discrete units and intervals so as to create a seamless, yet differentiated, stream of content. Explicating this flow, Williams describes 'the television experience':

most of us say, in describing the experience, that we have been 'watching television', rather than that we have watched 'the news' or 'a play' or 'the football' 'on television'. Certainly we sometimes say both, but the fact that we say the former at all is already significant. Then again it is a widely if often ruefully admitted experience that many of us find television very difficult to switch off; that again and again even when we have switched on for a particular 'programme', we find ourselves watching the one after it and the one after that. The way in which the flow is now organised, without definite intervals, in any case encourages this. We can be 'into' something else before we have summoned the energy to get out of the chair, and many programmes are made with this situation in mind: the grabbing of attention in the early moments; the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay (2003: 94).

The flow is made possible by the single dimensionality and operability whereby the differentiated, discrete units – a play, a football match, a newscast – are engaged with – broadcast and watched – on one medium; the television. Indeed, Williams notes that, "an evening's viewing" is in some ways planned, by providers and then by viewers, as a whole' (2003: 93). This 'whole'

designates the flow of broadcasting beyond or over and above the discrete units; and it also indicates that this flow is in some way bounded.

Williams also draws attention to how the television experience is difficult to express and analyse. Describing his experience of watching American television whilst jetlagged after a week on an Atlantic liner, he comments:

There is in any case enough similarity between certain kinds of films, and between several kinds of film and the ‘situation’ commercials which often consciously imitate them, to make a sequence of this kind a very difficult experience to interpret. I can still not be sure what I took from that whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem – for all the occasional bizarre disparities – a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings (2003: 92).

Televisual flow, then, is the moving along of the audience through the placing of multiple, distinct and diverse units of content on the same plane, within the boundaries of the medium of television. It is involved in the creation of a whole – a whole evening’s viewing, for example, and of the whole, bounded medium of broadcast television. This may be a disorienting experience both while it is happening and in the difficulty found in trying to interpret it afterwards.

In analysing the television experience, Williams argues that flow may be configured differently nationally (he analyses US and UK television) and according to the principles of the television companies (he analyses public and commercial television channels). He details ways in which the subjective and embodied experience of broadcast television flow (for example, his own disorienting example of watching US television) connect with social, cultural, political and economic processes. In these ways, televisual flow combines, arranges and shapes ‘the meanings and values of a specific culture’ (2003: 120): the television experience composes a particular structure of feeling (2003: 113).

Although he was writing in the mid-1970s about broadcast television and the specifics of his argument may no longer hold, the attention paid by Williams to the ways in which subjective and embodied experiences of a relatively new form of media/ation can indicate the qualities that characterise a particular historical moment, remains germane. Taking digital media as our focus, a number of questions follow, which animate the remainder of this article. What kinds of subjective and embodied experiences are prevalent, and how might these come to compose a contemporary structure of feeling? More specifically, what subjective and embodied experiences both shape and structure and are shaped and structured through the refresh? Does the flow that characterises the television experience also characterise the ‘refresh experience’? Does the refresh constitute a whole? Of what significance is time, temporality, and the present?

Media, time and temporality

Lohmeirer, Kaun and Penzold (2020b) argue that ‘complex interrelations’ between time and media ‘have been true for all kinds of media but are even further complicated in times of digital media and datafication’ (2020b: 1522): ‘the plurality of mediated and media-related social temporalities’ (2020b: 1522) thus require attention¹. Recent work has highlighted the role of digital media in changing regulations, patternings and experiences of time and the temporal (Lohmeirer, Kaun and Pentzold, 2020a). These include, although are not restricted to, arguments about the prevalence of 24/7 lifestyles (Crary, 2014), to how it functions to set and synchronise global labour (Sarah Sharma, 2014; Wacjman, 2019a; 2019b), its involvement in monitoring and enforcing mobility and borders (Amoore, 2013), in the emergence of online racialised identities (Sanjay Sharma, 2013), and human embodiment and the unconscious (Clough, 2000; 2018). Digital media are examined in terms of their anticipation or pre-mediation of future events (Grusin, 2010; Hanson, 2015; Amoore, 2020), their role in creating and archiving memory (Niemeyer and Keightley, 2020), and their ‘liveness’ and ‘real-time’ operation (Virilio, 1997; Hassan, 2003; Weltevrede et al, 2014; Coleman, 2020a). They are also seen to produce, shift or augment particular temporal conditions, including ‘updating to remain the

same' (Chun, 2016), waiting (Farman, 2018), and connection (Lupinacci, 2020) and disconnection (Karppi, 2018). Digital media are also argued to establish and provide instances to refuse or create alternatives to dominant temporal orders. Amit Rai (2019), for example, analyses practices of *jugaad* (hacks or workarounds to solve problems) in contemporary Indian digital cultures, highlighting how these can act to 'momentarily suspend[...] the solidity of social and economic relations and of intellectual and manual labour', creating 'an interstitial time of material and affective flux (suspension \neq stasis), a time lived against the tables of measures, regimes of signs, and infrastructures of control of Indian neoliberalism' (2019: 153). A further set of work conducts an archaeology or geology of media, drawing attention to what Jussi Parikka et al refer to as 'a deep time of the media' (2015).

There has also been some focus specifically on the refresh in histories of the computer screen. In his examination of the ecology between humans, computational instruments and the environment through which interactive computer screens emerged, Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan (2019) notes that refreshing emerged as a significant aspect of the United States' military air defense systems in the 1950s. 'Every 2.62 seconds', he writes, 'the screen refreshed to deliver a moment-by-moment "graphic display of the changing air situation, with correct geographical relations between fixed points and moving targets"' (2019: 81-82). Jacob Gaboury (2018) also notes the problem of the speed of refreshing in 'accomplish[ing] complex, fully shaded, three-dimensional images' in his history of the hardware required to produce computer generated images (2018: 32). Emphasising a somewhat different set of concerns in relation to refreshing and gaming, T. L. Taylor (2012) focuses on the material, technological and embodied relations of first-person-shooter games (FPS). Discussing the importance of the specific monitors in gaming situations she notes, '[o]lder style cathode ray tube (CRT) monitors, while bulky, provide much better performance for FPS games than do the newer flat liquid crystal display (LCD) monitors dominating the market right now' (2012: 45). This is in part due to their refresh rates and how '[g]un recoils feel slightly different on different refresh rates' (2012: 45), which can therefore change how the game is experienced and played.²

Where this work on media and refreshing accounts for time, it does so in relation to the speed at which things appear on the screen: between the aircraft in the sky and what is shown on the computer screen in Geoghegan's example, between the object or environment and the image of it for Gaboury, and between what the gamers see on screen and feel in their bodies for Taylor³. What these approaches emphasise, then – implicitly or explicitly and to greater or lesser extents – is the significance of a real-time, immediate or synchronous temporality to the refresh. While such an understanding of the temporalities of the refresh are appropriate for the tasks set by these authors, real-time, immediate and synchronous temporalities do not seem to capture how Melissa, Jade and John (and other research participants) explain their understandings and experiences of refreshing. The presentness of refreshing that they point to seems to involve multiple temporalities; of staying still, constantly moving and of skipping, for example. Williams' designation of 'flow' as central to the television experience does not seem to capture the refresh either. While there may be a sense of 'moving along', this does not involve a seamless (if potentially disorientating) transition from a designated start point to an end point (the start of an evening's viewing to the end of the programming). Rather, the temporality of the refresh may involve a search for new data as well as feeling stuck.

Refresh

The interview extracts with which the paper opens are part of a larger project on digital media presents in which I have interviewed 44 people regarding their understandings and experiences of the temporalities of digital media. Participants in the research include industry professionals (social media managers, digital marketers, directors of digital teams) (20 participants), school students (16 participants) and mindfulness practitioners (8 participants). All of the interviews were, with the participants' permission, audio-recorded and transcribed. Some of the industry professionals worked in large commercial organisations, others in the arts, charity and third sectors, while some were self-employed or worked on a variety of small self-directed projects. The majority of participants were based in London or the south east of England; I

conducted semi-structured individual interviews with these participants at their workplaces, in cafes, pubs and bars, at their homes and in my work office. As part of the interview, I asked participants to explain their understandings and experiences of some of the terms that frequently describe the temporalities of digital and social media – ‘live’, ‘real time’, ‘instantaneous’ and ‘always on’ – and noted some of their responses on post-it notes that we arranged to make word clouds. Writing these terms and explanations down and re-arranging them to make patterns of association led to the participant/s and me identifying and discussing further some of their key understandings and experiences of the temporalities of digital media and allowed me to document the interviews visually as well as through the audio recordings and transcripts. The participants who practised mindfulness ranged from those who taught, wrote and gave talks on it, to those who practiced it daily, to those who sporadically returned to a mindfulness app on their phone. I conducted semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews, as well as interviews over Skype and email, depending on the participant’s location and availability. These interviews were mainly focused around a series of questions asking participants to explain and elaborate on their understandings and experiences of digital media and time. The school students were based in a girls’ secondary school in south east London, and were aged 13-14 or 16-17 years old. These interviews were organised as group art-making sessions where we discussed, watched art videos and created various visualisations of temporality, digital media – and especially social media – and the feelings that they generated. The visualisations included word clouds, drawings and collages, and the students worked on them individually or in pairs or small groups. The sessions were held in the students’ usual art classes and in their art classroom. While in some ways it was therefore a pragmatic decision to ask the students to make art around the themes of digital media, temporality and feelings, I was also keen to work with visual and sensory methods as a means to explore the affective and embodied aspects of the topic (see as examples Lyon, 2016; Lyon and Carabelli, 2015; Coleman, 2016; Gunaratnam et al, 2017).

Across the interviews, refreshing emerged as a significant way in which digital media and time were discussed. Iris, for example, who is General Manager at a

large international cosmetics brand and who described her expertise as turning around the marketing and branding strategies for large organisations in the digital age, said:

there's just too much content on the internet already.

There is the thing of things being there forever. So you're doing a brand refresh or you want to change your appearance. That's really difficult to tidy up the internet (Iris).

While 'refresh' for Iris refers to an updated or new identity for a brand, and is therefore different to the kind of refreshing of content on digital and social media streams, there are similarities with how Melissa, above, talks about the constant flow of data that the press office needs to analyse and make decisions on – there is a lot, too much. Similar sentiments were expressed by Giles, co-founder of a creative collective who had previously worked in marketing for an environmental charity, who said:

I think, conceptually, you're sitting in the current moment but you're anxious to get to the next thing, so you scroll up to see what's happened. [...] I mean, [...], I think FOMO is so crucial (Giles).

The feeling of Fear Of Missing Out that Giles discusses is generated by the refreshing of content, which he sets up in terms of the 'current moment' and 'the next'.

The extract above regarding 'skip[ping] and refresh[ing]' comes from a group interview with 13 and 14 year girls where they discussed Snapchat and Instagram as apps that they would often refresh. They explain that skipping and refreshing enable them to focus on what's interesting to them, which may be what the feed shows them or may be produced through the refresh. In this case, refreshing is associated with finding that which is of interest – 'people that I want to see', as they put it. Adam, a digital director in the education sector, discussed how effort was put into 'keeping our [social media] accounts vibrant, so there are things happening'. He noted the importance of this effort because of 'the big difference between I'm just looking for something, anything, and these are the sorts of things which pique my interest, or I'm just

looking for this particular thing'. This association between refreshing and interest was not shared by all participants. The extract from John, above, comes from a broader discussion in which he linked refreshing with what he calls 'mindless scrolling'. For John, this refers not quite to what Jade and Adam describe as searching for a 'particular thing', nor 'just looking' for things that 'pique my interest' but rather a sense of getting lost in a seemingly endless sinkhole:

It's almost like it depletes your capacity to focus on anything else, so it becomes a solution to the fact that you can't focus. The more you are using it, the more it stops you from focusing, and you just fall into this kind of mindless scroll, which is of course something that very smart people have sat around trying to design as an intended outcome.

[...] because if I get sucked into something like that, that's when it does feel oppressively real time, because you can't control what's happening, but you also can't make it unfold faster just be refreshing, so you end up not being able to move on from anything else.

There's a kind of repression of the present. When that has happened to me I've found it so incredibly unpleasant that I think I spend a lot of time thinking reflexively about how to avoid that (John).

Here, John, who worked on social media accounts in the publishing sector, talks about becoming 'sucked into' a 'real time' present where scrolling creates a 'repression of the present'. This present cannot unfold into something else: it can't be made to 'unfold'; it doesn't 'move on'. Suvi, an academic, linked refreshing with a lack of focus, talking about the capacity of digital media to always be refreshed and losing the capacity to read 'two or three articles in a row':

I think I developed this constant reflex of constantly checking emails. Then I feel I probably didn't do anything substantive or dig my teeth into anything serious.

Then that's when you get into the cycle, 'I'm going to check the news. I'm going to check the opinion leader. I'm going to check Twitter', and cycle through it that way, do a few emails, do a few small things, mark a few papers but never do anything serious. Time during the working day suddenly felt fragmented and small

and bitty and quite stressful. Then time after the working day was not work but that felt much calmer (Suvi).

Refreshing, here, is in some ways similar to the ‘mindless scrolling’ described by John: it is a ‘cycle’ where nothing ‘serious’ can be achieved. However, while John discussed a present that seems to have the potential to go on and on, for Suvi, the ‘cycle’ of refreshing made time feel ‘fragmented and small and bitty and quite stressful’. Refreshing involves not so much getting sucked into the present as the fragmentation of constantly moving across different digital platforms – email, news, Twitter, other ‘small things’ – and not achieving anything ‘substantive’.

As is indicated in these interview extracts, refreshing might involve scrolling and cycling, ‘skipping’, the influx of constant data, and somehow being perched between ‘the current moment’ and ‘the next’. It is also capable of generating various intensities and affects, including interest, FOMO and stress. While it may be an ordinary and even banal activity, refreshing can be involved in the creation and organisation of multiple and diverse temporal dimensions. It thus can be understood as one way in which digital media produce and pattern contemporary everyday life.

The multiple temporalities of the ‘re’

As I have noted above, one way in which media refreshing has been theorised is in terms of the aim of reducing a temporal lag between what appears on the computer screen and what is being imaged. However, to understand the temporalities and their affectivity discussed by the research participants in more detail, it is productive to consider what ‘the re’ of refresh refers to and signals. Conducting an etymology – or perhaps more accurately, an exploration of some of the different definitions – of ‘the re’ focuses attention on the specificities of the temporalities of digital media that I have begun to draw out. Indeed, an examination of ‘the re’ may shed light on how the specific temporalities of digital media come to produce and calibrate distinctive individual and collective experiences, or structures of feeling.

A first point to note in this project of unpacking ‘the re’ is that the re functions, grammatically, as a prefix. A prefix refers to something that precedes something else – for example, the preface that prefixes the book – or is an element of a word that begins that word and in so doing, changes the meaning of that word. According to dictionary definitions, the prefix ‘re’ refers to:

1. Once more; afresh; anew
‘reaccustom’
‘reactivate’
 - 1.1 with return to previous state
‘revert’
2. In return; mutually
‘react’
‘resemble’
 - 2.1 in opposition
‘repel’
‘resistance’
3. Behind or after
‘relic’
‘remain’
 - 3.1 in a withdrawn state
‘recluse’
‘reticent’
 - 3.2 back and away; down.
‘recede’
‘relegation’
4. With frequentative or intensive force.
‘refine’
‘resound’
5. With negative force.
‘recant’

Origin: From Latin re-, red- ‘again, back’
English Oxford Living Dictionaries
(<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/re->)

What is evident from this definition is that the ‘re’ may involve, potentially, many different temporalities. For example, it might involve ‘afresh’ or ‘anew’ as well as a reversion or ‘return to [a] previous state’. It may signal remaining, receding and reacting. It may also highlight an ‘intensifying force’.

The many temporalities of the ‘re’ have been examined in a recent ‘errant glossary’ of ‘the re-’ (Holzhey and Wedemeyer, 2019). In their preface to the collection, Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer note the ‘complex temporality’ and ‘plurivectorial tension’ of some of the prefixes that are prevalent in contemporary critical theory, including ‘post’, ‘de’ and ‘re’ (2019: x)⁴. Indeed, in her analysis of the ‘re’ of ‘recherche’ (or ‘research’) as it functions in Marcel Proust’s *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* ([1913-1922] 1988-90), Julie Gaillard (2019) draws attention to the problem of an ‘understanding of time as infinite succession from past to future’ (2019: 2). Gaillard notes that in French, ‘temps perdu’ refers both to ‘time lost but also time wasted: while lost time is a metaphor of the past, time can be wasted in past, present, or future’ (2019: 2-3). She argues that this ambiguous, double meaning of the term sees ‘the prefix “re”, [as] now divided into two co-existing yet contradictory meanings and directions, at the same time intensive and iterative, forward and backward’ (2019: 3).

In another essay, Daniel Reeve (2019) explores ‘the curious relation to time’ (2019: 91) of the animated sitcom, *The Simpsons*, which he conceives in terms of repetition. On the one hand, he notes how despite the ‘remarkable sequence of events [that] takes place’ in an episode of the programme,

the consequences of these life-changing happenings do not survive beyond the end of the episode in which they take place: the credits roll, the reset button is pushed, and the family returns to their sofa. At the beginning of each new episode, we are invited to forget the years of accreted narrative that precedes it, except when these accretions are played for laughs. Episode breaks thus function as a way of regenerating a state of near-endless potential for new stories, unencumbered by the need for continuity (2019: 91-92).

On the other hand, Reeve asserts that this situation of ‘near-endless potential’ is ‘maintained equally by another strange temporality’ (2019: 92). This temporality is a ‘present-day time in which the show takes place’, whereby an episode takes place approximately within the timeframe in which it is produced and aired (1989, 1999, 2009, 2019...) but where the characters do not age – Bart is always ten, Lisa eight, and Maggie, a dummy-sucking baby. ‘[T]he overall effect of this presentness’, Reeve argues, ‘is to sharpen further this sense of stasis. We should not understand *The Simpsons* as existing within historical time; instead, the show’s situatedness in a roughly present time should be taken as a guarantee that it is not historically placed. The show exists inside historical time, but isolated from its flow’ (2019: 93)⁵.

Reeve understands these ‘strange’ temporalities of *The Simpsons* in terms of a response to the demands and requirements of ‘serially extended texts’, such as television series:

to maximise the possibility of continued commercial success, a serially extended text must stay the same – stay recognisably itself, true to the core of its own original appeal – as its run continues through time. At the same time it must change, because of the demand for new stories within the established formulas, and because of an expectation that each iteration produce a sense of closure. Such texts must therefore change as little as possible; they must satisfy a need for new stories while remaining, in quite a strong sense, themselves (2019: 93-94).

That *The Simpsons* has been running for over thirty years demonstrates, Reeve suggests, that ‘[t]he show’s attitude to time solves, perhaps more successfully than any other work of television, the contradictory demands of serial textuality’ (2019: 93). Central to Reeve’s analysis of repetition, then, is the relationship between continuity and change, or sameness and newness. As a serially extended text, *The Simpsons* both resets (becomes new, different) and remains (stays the same); the calibration of this relationship is key to its endurance and success.

Also discussing the relationship between two seemingly opposed or contradictory processes or movements, Christine Frey (2019) focuses on the verb ‘restrain’, noting the word originates from the Latin, ‘restringere’, meaning ‘first and foremost, “to hold back”, “to withhold”’; it can also mean to “bind back”, to “put in chains” or figuratively to “put in limits” or simply “to limit”’ (2019: 141). Analysing the function that the ‘re’ has in this word, Frey observes that both stringere and restringere ‘denote the action of “binding”’ (2019: 141); hence, ‘the re’ ‘does not connote a repetition or a restitution – this is not an iterative “re”. An act of restringere does not stringere something again, nor does it take it back to its original status’ (2019: 142). Frey’s analysis here highlights that the ‘re’ of restringere has a function other than repeating a stringere or returning it to its original state. In the case of this word, the ‘re’ functions ‘as an intensifier, adding emphasis to the meaning already expressed in the base’ (‘stringere’). Frey argues:

Like many Latin prefixes, such as ‘ad’, ‘ex’, or ‘cum’, ‘re’ can have the function of an aspect marker, signifying ‘thoroughness’. ‘Resplendent’, for example, means not to shine (splendere) again or to shine back, but to shine brightly. Similarly, ‘to restrain’ would thus mean to bind, but to do so thoroughly or fully: perhaps with great intensity, force or effect (2019: 142).

While Frey’s comments here develop the definition of the ‘re’ as a force or intensity, she goes on to argue that ‘the intensifying “re-” [of restrain (and restringere)] does not simply strengthen the root meaning while leaving it unchanged; rather, it carries additional connotations, connotations that add to or even alter the meaning of the base’ (2019: 142). Frey understands the ‘re’ of restringere as indicating both that whatever is being bound in some way ‘calls for the intensification of the binding signified by the “re-” – otherwise the word stringere would be sufficient – and ‘to the restraint of something that would otherwise, were it not restrained, be in flow, in movement, that is: ongoing’ (2019: 142). Thus, the force to which the ‘re-’ of restraint and restringere refers is one that is both exerted and countered. ‘In every restraint’, Frey writes, ‘there are two forces at work: one that aims, obviously, at

continuing its course, or to say the least, aims at not being arrested; and one that arrests, one that suspends – even if intermittently or provisionally – an action or motion. The very “re-” in “restrain” implies by necessity two different dynamics, or two opposed forces’ (2019: 143).

In conceptualising restrain in terms of two competing forces of movement, Frey problematises a chronological understanding of time, arguing that restraint refers not to a temporary halting or delaying of the movement of that which is restrained. This is a misguided understanding of restraint as it assumes that the movement of that which is restrained and the restraint itself are of ‘the very same time’ (2019: 144). Instead, she argues that the times of the restraint and that which is restrained are ‘of an entirely different order’ (2019: 144):

A restraint is more than a simple delay, a postponement is one and the same time as that occupied by what it postpones. Rather, a restraint interrupts not just a movement but the very time of that movement, in order to institute another kind of time: the indefinite, non-teleological, open-ended time of the restraint. The restraint does not just arrest a movement, but suspends the very time of that movement and imposes its own, essentially different regime of time. Since its duration is indeterminate (the act of restraining could stop after a few seconds or go on for ages), the act of restraining, in other words, gains a certain autarchy (2019: 144, my emphasis).

In unpacking the temporalities involved in *restringere*, and in particular examining the tensions involved in the temporalities of a movement and that which restrains the movement, Frey’s argument points not only to a multiplicity of temporalities but also to the ways in which these temporalities might function as ‘essentially different regime[s] of time’. For Frey, the temporality of *restringere* operates not only to halt movement but to instigate an alternative regime of time. This new regime of time is autocratic in that it is both separate to the temporality of the movement it halts and determinative of how long the movement is halted. While Frey’s work highlights the struggle via which a certain kind of time might become dominant, or imposed over other

kinds of time, Reeve's discussion of repetition examines how such different regimes of time may function together to create a temporality specific to serially extended texts. In the case of *The Simpsons*, neither resetting (the new) nor remaining (the same) become dominant but rather the tensions between them become another 'strange temporality'.

Refresh, again and again...

The discussion of the multiple and potentially different regimes of the temporalities of the 're' that Reeve and Frey point to help to develop an appreciation of the temporalities of digital media refreshing. For example, they aid an understanding of how the refreshing of streams and feeds create, at once, a situation in which there is always the potential for new stories, and for a 'resetting' of those stories – 'sitting in the current moment but you're anxious to get to the next thing, so you scroll up to see what's happened' as Giles puts it. There is also, at once, the potential for a sense of stasis, or as little change as possible – getting sucked in to or endlessly cycling digital media platforms and apps.

Moreover, Frey's argument draws attention to how the 're' of refresh intensifies and also changes the meaning of 'fresh'. As noted above, refresh involves not so much a more forceful or concentrated freshness as a distinct temporality that is capable of moving forwards, backwards and staying still or stuck. However, Frey's and Reeve's analyses focus on the temporalities of restrain and repeat respectively; while they are helpful and can be taken up in understanding the temporalities of refresh, they are not intended to address its distinctive qualities.

My suggestion is that the multiple and diverse temporalities of refreshing be understood in terms of a present temporality; that is, in terms of a temporality that is located somewhere in between the past and present but where the boundaries that demarcate it from these other temporalities are porous and in continual movement and readjustment. The present is both 'now' and 'immediate', and on-going and open-ended. Refreshing brings forth the next

moment from the current moment, and this current moment can also be subsumed within the next. It may, then, be (experienced as) contracted and expanded so that it is, at the same time, new, continuing, and stilled or paused.

Indeed, returning to the discussion of the prefix 're', at first glance, it would appear that the first definition of 'the re' – 'Once more; afresh; anew' – is of primary interest to an understanding of digital media refreshing. Indeed, the Word Thesaurus offers up 'enliven', 'rejuvenate' and 'revitalise' as synonyms for 'refresh', and a range of platforms and apps highlight their ability to continually present new stories, messages and images. Taking this definition in isolation, refreshing would seem to imply a constantly changing stream, feed or page of information, where the temporality is forward-moving, inclined towards newness. However, for the participants discussed above, this linear, progressive temporality is only one aspect of refreshing. The other definitions of 'the re' are also implicated. For example, the first definition is accompanied with a 'return' or 'reversion' to a 'previous state'; 'afresh' and 'anew' are not 'fresh' and 'new' but are a reinvigorated freshness or newness. Here, the 'once more' indicates a starting again, or a situation in which 'the re' is continually in process. In this sense, the 'cycle' or 'repressed present' that Suvi and John note is of significance. Refreshing conjures new material but this new material is never-ending. There is always more content and so the 'latest' data is always being refreshed, as Melissa and Iris say.

In addition to 'starting again', the cycle of refreshing also involves, as the second and third definitions of 'the re' specify, returning, remaining and receding, and being 'behind or after'. With the possibility of constant refreshing, there is a sense not only of returning, once more, but also of never being on top of or ahead of the content. Such a situation might involve, as the third definition also highlights, being in a 'withdrawn state' – 'recluse', 'reticent' – as John's explanations of the feeling of being sucked into the mindless scroll as 'incredibly unpleasant' seems to suggest – and/or a receding from it. John was one of many participants who discussed ways in which they were trying to control their digital media use by limiting it and/or by expanding their engagement with other non-digital activities. During our interview, for

instance, Giles noted how he had placed his phone face down on the table with the sound turned up as part of a strategy to cope with its potential to ‘keep bugging me’, while Bea talked about how they had become more mindful of how long they spent on their phone and what they did whilst on it to try to maintain mental good health. The withdrawn or potentially stressful or upsetting states described by John, Giles and Bea serve to indicate the affectivity of ‘the re’; the ‘frequentive or intensive’ or ‘negative’ force of definitions four and five.

Here, the ongoing refinement or renunciation (‘recant’) of people’s engagements with digital media is of note. As many participants explained, there were both positive and negative affects associated with digital media, and a continual assessment and reassessment of how these were experienced and might be managed had become embedded in their lives. In one of the group interviews, for example, the girls discussed a ‘spectrum’ of positive and negative aspects of social media, and talked about how they might recognise and balance them. What these various definitions and examples of ‘the re’ indicate is a complication of a linear temporality – a straightforward ‘going forward’ – by insisting on how a range of temporalities might be important. These include how in a ‘going forward’ there may also be a ‘going back’, or a ‘being behind’ and a sense of the continual looping of temporality; a perpetual starting again.

On this point, it is worth noting its origin from Latin as ‘again, back’. While ‘back’ is a feature of other ‘re’ words – including repeat and restrain – ‘again’ might be understood as more specific to refresh. The Microsoft Word Dictionary defines ‘again’ in these ways:

a·gain (adverb)

1. at another time
2. as before
3. differently
4. in addition
5. moreover
6. these days
7. after all

8. more
again and again
repeatedly

All of these definitions are of interest to an understanding of refreshing, for they all indicate its dynamism and multiplicities. Refreshing provides ‘another time’ that is ‘different’, ‘in addition’, ‘more’ and ‘moreover’ and that can yet also, ‘after all’, appear or feel ‘as before’. Moreover, it is also a temporality that is done ‘repeatedly’, incessantly: ‘again and again’.

It is this aspect of refresh that helps to make sense of the present, as a temporality that is both distinctive and with porous boundaries, that is both immediate and capable of going on, and on. Understanding refreshing in terms of the again and again, for example, captures how it is explained by Adam as ‘looking to see if there’s anything interesting that comes up’. Flicking, scrolling or pressing to increase the chances of content that ‘pique’ the interest can introduce the most recent posts into the feed as well as re-order content so that posts not seen before appear. In both of these cases, ‘freshness and relevance’ are delivered by digital devices (Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz, 2014: 135). Adam contrasts searching web content with ‘just looking’, noting that they are differing processes; the former is aimed at finding specific content that is defined in advance of the search (a place or time, information about something in particular), the latter involves an openness to what might be(come) interesting. Whereas the former is more focused on content, so that the search is a means to an end, with the latter the search might be understood as that which folds together the process by which content is found and engaged with and the content itself. That is, the search is as important as the content that is found. Gaillard’s argument about Proust and ‘recherche’, where she argues that the ‘temps perdu’ involves ‘time lost’ and ‘time wasted’ captures an aspect of this search; it is pointed to in how Suvi and John discuss the presents of being sucked into and cycling across social media platforms. However, understood in terms of the ‘re’ of refreshing, searching might also involve refreshing content to deliberately waste or lose time; whilst waiting for a bus or a kettle to boil, whilst taking or making a break from paid or informal care work. In these senses, the search may be more aimless than the ones

directed towards finding specific content, but no less significant. That content may be refreshed again and again, then, designates a present temporality in its capacity to both move on and be still, be of interest and be dull, flattened, or oppressive.

The againness of refreshing also signals the situation of the present as being an in between temporality. This is indicated by the explanations of refreshing as a temporality that is a cycling or scrolling or ‘just looking’; a temporality where linearity is suspended, paused, or scrambled. In one of the group art workshops conducted at the school with a group of 16-17 year old young women, we explored ways to visualise the times of social media. As I noted above, one small group of three of the students made a diagram using ‘an acronym to explain social media but in an unexpected way. So we talked about generations and we thought about positive words that we could use to describe it. So then we did “growth, engulfed, neglect, evolution, restart again, trance, inspiration, options, never-ending and separation”” (Rima). They go on to explain how the acronym represents a spectrum of affects and emotions that social media can generate:

we wanted to use positive sides of the spectrum as well as negative sides and then we put restart in the middle because it can be looked at as a bad thing and a good thing. So we thought it was just interesting to see the type of things that social media can evoke as well as the type of things that it makes you strive towards being. So it inspires you as well as it also separating you. So we found that quite interesting, the different sides of the spectrum.

Notable here is where ‘restart’ is placed in the spectrum. The students explain this placing in terms of ‘restart’ being potentially both a positive and negative ‘thing’ – it thus sits ‘in the middle’ of the spectrum of ‘the types of things that social media can evoke’. What is also notable is how this is described as ‘restart again’, which seems to indicate the possibility of changing the affects and emotions that social media evoke, away from the negative ones and towards those that are more positive, for example. ‘Restart’ in this sense is ‘in the middle’ because it offers the possibility of beginning anew, or differently.

It is important to recognise that the students select a specific ‘re’ word – restart, defined as ‘a new start or beginning’, and also as ‘to start again’. While the specificities of this ‘re’ word must be taken into account, the ‘re’ of ‘restart’ functions in a similar way to the ‘re’ of ‘refresh’ in designating again; a new start that may, at the same time also refer to ‘as before’. This is a new start that might be repeated – again and again – and where the newness may involve stasis, suspension and a going ‘back’. Understood temporally, the ‘re’ of ‘restart’ and of ‘refresh’ indicates a present temporality of both inertia and movement, continuity and change, the same and the new, difference and repetition (Deleuze, [1968] 1994). This is a present temporality because it is in the middle. In the middle of a plethora of affects and emotions, and in the middle in composing a temporality that, in moving on and going back, somehow stays where it is, again.

The refreshing experience

I asked above about how the refresh experience – and specifically its temporalities – might be coming to compose a contemporary structure of feeling. Returning to Williams’ elucidation of the television experience as constituting a structure of feeling in the 1970s, it is notable that the digital media experience shares some aspects with it. These include the ‘ruefully admitted experience’ that it is ‘very difficult to switch off’ either television or digital media – as with television, the refreshing of digital media suggests ‘the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay’ – and that both may facilitate ‘a very difficult experience to interpret’ – as Williams describes of television, digital media may also involve ‘bizarre disparities’ within ‘a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings’. In these senses, the concept of flow, developed to understand broadcast television, is also a feature of digital media. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) argue, life with and after new media is ‘the incessant flow of mediation’ (2012: xvi)⁶.

However, Williams defines televisual flow as the uninterrupted sequencing of units (adverts and trailers as well as programmes) so as to ‘move along’ the audience seamlessly. This implies that the temporality of televisual flow is

linear and progressive; the ideal experience (from the point of view of programmers if not the audience) is one where intervals, interruptions and 'bizarre disparities' are smoothed into 'a single' flow that moves the audience from the beginning of the evening to its intended end. Furthermore, Williams argues, televisual flow is possible and desirable because television as a technology enables the sequencing of different units 'in a single dimension and in a single operation', which he describes as a whole.

What becomes apparent from concentrating on refreshing as an integral and mundane aspect of digital media culture is that a temporality that does not so much move along from past to present to future but both moves and stays still, seems more characteristic of experience today. In this sense, then, the digital media experience is also in many ways distinct from broadcast media. That is, as I've suggested, a present temporality seems to distinguish the refreshing experience. Indeed, while the television experience involves a whole, the refreshing experience is a temporality that is in between; it involves the middle.

Celia Lury (2012) explains the middle as 'no longer defined with respect to determinable end points; rather it is an infinite and infinitely divisible space' (2012: 190)⁷. She argues that this understanding or fantasy of the 'pure middle' is 'the work of a medium, or, in media res' (2012: 190); that is, in the middle, in the midst. The present of refreshing can be understood in these terms; as a temporality that is defined not in terms of external beginning or end points but in relation to its own contraction and/or expansion through the ways in which it continues and/or is subject to restarts and/or repetitions; the 'againness' of the present. This is a middle not only in terms of its location within a spectrum or between the past and future but also because it is always in the midst. While Williams defines the television experience as a flow of moving along, the refreshing experience is the production of and dwelling within the midst of the flow of mediation. This middle may be expanded or contracted in terms of how long it lasts – from a quick refresh of content on a webpage or app to the endless cycling within one or across many different platforms – and in terms of affective intensity – from bitty to endless, from stressful to mindless to

inspiring. This refreshing experience is then, in Williams' terms, an 'active', 'flexible', 'temporal present' (1977: 128) and part of what constitutes a particular structure of feeling today. That is, refreshing is, as Lury argues of the middle, 'one of the animating dynamics of contemporary mediation' (2012: 190), providing the sense of a collective, yet differentiated, contemporary, everyday and unexceptional experience.

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Notes

- ¹ On the relationships between time and temporality, see Coleman (2020a), which also discusses interviews from this research project.
- ² On another 're' word – this time 'reload' – and gaming, see Juul, 2004.
- ³ On buffering as a further practice through which temporality is made, see Geoghegan (2019).
- ⁴ Holzhey and Wedemeyer's discussion pays particular attention to Rita Felski's (2015) discussion of – and challenge to – the prefix 'de', which interestingly for this paper, compares unfavourably to the 're'. Felski's discussion is based on the predominance of 'de' to critique. She argues, 'We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the "de" prefix (its power to demystify, destabilise, denaturalise) at the expense of the "re" prefix; its ability to recontextualise, reconfigure, or recharge perception' (2015: 17; see Holzhey and Wedemeyer, 2019: viii).
- ⁵ Reeve's point here about the flow of historical time might be re-formulated to address the flow that Williams' identifies as key to the television experience. That is, *The Simpsons* as a specific programme or unit may contribute to the flow of broadcast television, but its temporality is not of this flow.
- ⁶ For Kember and Zylinska, mediation is a series of flows into or out of which media are cut; media are temporary stabilisations of mediation. While Kember and Zylinska don't explicitly discuss Williams' concept of flow and its relationship with 'units', there may be further productive connections to make here.
- ⁷ Lury's point here is drawn from the work of Peter Fenves (2001) who is discussing Walter Benjamin, and is in the context of understanding the significance of the middle to 'live methods' in sociology and other social research.

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