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## A silent voice across the MEdiaverse: *The Next Day* as identities prosumed

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I'd like to make it clear that I am a David Bowie addict. Not in recovery, not in denial, but an addict through and through. I can't ignore him. I have to obtain everything he does, in every format available. I have to find a way to like *everything* he produces. I make no apologies. Quite simply, David Bowie is a hugely important part of my own biography (Stevenson 2006, p. 3).

An aspect of this obsession is the constant search for Bowie news. Like so many Bowie obsessives, I was stunned by his unexpected return in March 2013. After a 10-year hiatus, the promise of new music may have excited me, but what really *interested* me was the self-imposed media silence that defined the nature of this return. Bowie's work has, since the success of *Ziggy Stardust*, been accompanied by an unmistakable and brilliantly loud concept. Whether the death of Ziggy or the birth of the Thin White Duke, the stock-market bondsman or the new-media alchemist, Bowie's each and every move has been channelled through a look, a style, a quote, an image, a sound, a geography, a character . . . a *noise*.

The noise that surrounded *The Next Day*, however, didn't come from Bowie himself. Only his producer Tony Visconti spoke publicly about the new music. The David Bowie website ([www.davidbowie.com](http://www.davidbowie.com)) was redesigned to remove pages through which Bowie himself occasionally communicated, thus underlining the notion that Bowie was the subject of the community's gaze and not a part of the participating community. The site instead focused on news, artist biography and fan communities. The newly launched fan-organised Facebook and Twitter pages largely celebrated Bowie's past through the regularly shared YouTube clips, classic photos and general fan ephemera. His histories became the focus of 'David Bowie is . . .', a V&A exhibition. However, Bowie, one of art's great communicators, said nothing. He seemed absent from the discourse that surrounded his comeback. Indeed, increasingly those closest to him talked of the man they know as David Jones. David Bowie, we're increasingly reminded, is actually a performance.

Although the entire project appears to challenge Bowie-the-mythmaker (Stevenson 2006, Trynka 2012), the myths addressed by *The Next Day* aren't just the numerous versions of Bowie, but also the romantic illusion that all information is free, or in the process of inevitably becoming freed. We expect the 'intercommunicative self' (Marshall 2010) of our celebrities to become a noise variant in our streamed media experience. *The next*

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day may challenge these notions, but it could only have worked in the 24/7-wired-for-info environment of Web 2.0 social media.

Social networking sites have situated us as always-on ‘prosumers’ (Toffler 1980, p. 267) of streamed content, conducting a media universe that evolves around our online profiles and placing us at the centre of their own ‘imagined egocentric communities’ (Anderson 1983, boyd 2006). By employing the term ‘ego’, I adopt a position that a central human motivator is the drive to relate to others and be recognised. The self, as a wider concept, can be viewed as a range of fluid states, while the ego represents the most conscious aspect of self in that it identifies as ‘I’ or ‘me’. While the self seeks recognition from others, the ego wants recognition that links to its own expectations and desires. In the case of social networking, ego recognition can be observed in the number of friends, followers, likes, re-tweets and comments (Balick 2012). It can also be seen in the inclusion into groups, shares and tags. In this model, the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) is focused around ‘ego’ recognition as an intrinsic aspect of fluid self. We simultaneously produce and consume (Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson 2012) through the focus of our regularly updated online profiles that reflect a representation of self, which is both incomplete and in a permanent state of becoming (Storey 1999, p. 135).

At the core of our ‘MEdiaverse’ is the constant representation and reinvention of our personal past and present biographies. Live discussions follow their own trajectories, oblivious to the original comment, but connected through tenuous links and/or the need to add to the commentary (Marshall 2010). Our comments become shared with friendship communities that we have invited, or accepted, and which are subsequently managed through layers of personal access. The footprint of our media habits enables others to locate us in our own MEdiaverse and interconnect with our ‘imagined egocentric communities’ (Anderson 1983, boyd 2006). We choose to connect, or not.

This connection choice is linked to the notion of the individual becoming complicit in the construction of their own experience economy. By drawing on and producing numerous media sources to support an ever-shifting online self (Marshall 2010), we ‘prosume’ an ‘experience culture’ where each individual sits at the centre of its own ‘imagined ego community’ (Anderson 1983, boyd 2006), interacting and experiencing each member of the community through the shifting frame of their own personal profile. So, when we ‘like’ the Bowie News page on Facebook, its new postings appear on the front page of our newsfeed. This process satisfies our ego while revealing an aspect of our self to our ‘communities’. We selectively share certain stories distributed by Bowie News with our general communities, or specific people within the community. These gate-kept stories are subsequently read by others through the meanings provided by the shifting frameworks of our social-media selves.

The cover art for *The Next Day* features the iconic ‘*Heroes*’ album image with a white square placed over Bowie’s face. It’s an artwork that challenged the fans’ collective ‘memory, nostalgia and contemplation’ (Sturken 1999, p. 178) of Bowie by blanking out a representation of one of the artist’s most mythologised eras, the Berlin period (1977–79). The square also draws parallels with one of social media’s key ‘imagined ego community’ (Anderson 1983, boyd 2006) enablers, the use of photo ‘tagging’, whereby the user is able to identify people in an uploaded photo by hovering a box over their faces and identifying, or tagging, their friends. This has the effect of placing the identified as extensions of the individual profiler’s own fluid biography, existing to supplement, support and endorse the ego at the core of the community. The blank square hovering over Bowie’s face on *The Next Day*’s artwork invites the user to identify and tag him. This action places the users’ own experience of Bowie and their own personal biographies of that experience

on to the artwork. The album's meaning, and in extension Bowie's latest 'character' thus being prosumed through the multi-nuanced conversations occurring throughout a network of imagined ego communities. The press adverts for *The Next Day* only underlined this notion by placing the words 'Your idea of David Bowie here' in the album artwork's blank square.

In a process that seems almost oppositional to the marketing route associated with celebrity, *The Next Day* suffocated the flames of gossip by denying the fuel of information until, at the optimum moment, the information was introduced like a status update or a Tweet. When the message emerged, it mimicked the social-media process without actually engaging with it. Observed as 'celebrity spectacle' (Redmond 2010), it is notable that *The Next Day* featured none of the promotional activities usually associated with celebrity economy and the 'intercommunicative self' (Marshall 2010). Despite his early promotion of the Internet (BowieNet ISP, 1998), *The Next Day* can be viewed as dis-intercommunication as spectacle.

Jenny Sundén (2003) argues that, in order to exist online, we must write ourselves into being. With *The Next Day*, David Bowie effectively wrote himself out of being, and in a variation of the 'demotic turn' (Turner 2010), became David Jones, the ordinary man. Bowie 'now' is all of the identities with which we, the fans, tag him.

### Notes on contributor

Dr. Martin James is Professor of Music Industries and course leader of BA(hons) Popular Music Journalism at Southampton Solent University. Martin has worked as a music journalist on the editorial teams of a number of music publications and has regularly contributed to numerous UK music and lifestyle magazines, and daily broadsheet newspapers. He has also written several books about music including *State of Bass: Jungle – the story so far* (1997, Boxtree) and *French Connections: from discotheque to discovery* (2004, Sanctuary), as well as a number of biographies of musicians. In 2013 Martin co-authored *Understanding the Music Industries* (Sage) with Dr. Chris Anderton and Prof. Andrew Dubber.

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