The Second Coming: Google and Internet Infrastructure

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In September of 2014, the story broke into national newscasts and the international press. Google would build its largest data center in Western Europe at the Eemshaven (the Eemsdelta port), located in one of the most remote corners of the country. Central to the story of Google's proposed Eur$600 million investment was the region that would be poised to become the Netherlands' next 'Silicon Valley' (NOS news, 2014). As the news cycle turned to other topics, the regional press would continue to cover Google's progress in a region poised for high tech greatness.

By the summer of 2016, Google seemed to be the story on locals' lips when, introducing myself as a visitor, I asked what should I know about Groningen. 'Google is coming', was a typical response, from the person at the bus stop to the couple sitting next to me in the bar. Frequently expressions about the eponymous data center came in unsolicited and vague sightings to show 'Google is in town'. I learned, for example, that people from the company drive every morning on the N46. They drink at the same bar in the city. They sing karaoke on occasion. Whether (or not) the rumors were true, what struck me was the combination of publicity and celebrity that seemed to signify as much as it served to verify the news accounts. Google indeed was here.

Or was it? Indeed, there was a large box of a fortress you could drive to. Until 2017 you could not find it on a map, not on the physical map of the industrial port area and not on my Google maps app. I found it the first time through the trial and error of simply driving the entire area until I found a construction site the size of a massive convention complex. It was surrounded with an electric fence, a car gate, and a deep ditch that hinders the passerby from stopping to gawk with awe. Google was coming, and now it is here; but what did it mean to be here, in this place?

This essay moves towards the ephemeral, the ethereal, and the sacred as sources of media power. It arrives just in time for

scholarship that forefronts media materialities and downplays the role of hearsay and orphan texts as merely propaganda. These latter elements floated through the first three weeks of fieldwork I conducted in 2016, until I decided to collect them as part of a second field campaign in 2017 and 2018. This treasure chest of comments overheard, missing photos, opaque job ads, and videos that cannot be found in Google search form the immaterial infrastructure of the Google cloud hypercenter. They are blocks for a form of power that runs horizontally through a place and its people, creating absences to be filled with everyday rumor and corporate innuendos. Ultimately, the immaterial aura that Google co-creates with the community provides the superstructure for material and labor exploitation at the data center's base.

Google is here and not here.

Try finding Google's data center. Unlike media industries, the cloud avoids material visages as counterweight to the immateriality of their products. In the early twentieth century, the newspaper barons remade downtown hubs with skyscrapers as tributes to their authority (Wallace, 2012). Even today, these physical manifestations of power carry the names of a bygone media era: The News building and Herald Square in New York, the Inquirer building in Philadelphia, the Times Building in Seattle. Founded with iron and ornately decorated in stone, the buildings utter Harold Innis' (1978) lessons of longevity for time-biased media over space-biased paper media. Whereas the media moguls of the past century reached for the heavens, the hyperdata centers of today sprawl, the obelisks knocked onto their sides like a park of failed props from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Seen from the road, Google's collection of server houses instead impose power with their collective volume – 40 football fields – set on farming flatlands. They are giant, black boxes, literally and figuratively (Fig. 1).

None of the people I've talked to over these months has gone much inside the boxes. Even the opening ceremony, which included the top brass of Groningen's professional class, kept everyone confined to the vestibule entryway. Google mediates their ghosts in the server machines through YouTube clips and promotional photos, but several people have wondered to me: What does it look like? I explain an image of thousands of servers and wires, but that's not what they crave. They want to wander in. They want to see the components. They want to hear the droning buzz. They want to feel the cold air flowing over skin. Some want to witness what exactly Google is doing in Groningen. Some just want to marvel.

Google denies the physical place where people expect to contact media power. The facility rejects facility. It lacks even the guided tour that has become socialized as part of our lives with media infrastructures. Even before the studio system, Hollywood took tourists 'behind the scenes' to show how movie magic was made through human techne and assembled properties. The seeming transparency of the tour space 'promised to enhance the spectacle by making the studio itself – "cinema's dream factory" – just as worthy of celebration as the performances of the performers hidden behind its walls' (Jacobsen, 2015: 200). Media power since the age of television has been reproduced through ritual pilgrimages to filming sets and locations (Couldry, 1999). The tour reproduces consumers as fans by operationalizing positive memories of corporate interactions into a physical space of production. Users' otherwise-virtual interactions through a screen are more real when they can see and talk to fellow tourists. Cult fans share these experiences through other alternative sites, online and off (e.g. Booth, 2015). Google's cult status relies on its inability to be realized as part of an interactive experience with an actual place in Groningen.

Google is just "here".

A series of promotional videos dedicated to the 'people we love to call our neighbours' delivers four workers who embody the company's local presence. Of them, only one is directly employed by the company. 'Annemieke' ponders that 'I would have never thought a company like Google would have a location in the Netherlands where people with my expertise could have work and that was already special'. She works on a laptop in the foreground plastered with Google stickers related to her work in environmental, health and safety. From there, we visit an elementary school computing project where we learn from two teachers that Google wants to show young people they don't have to move to the Western part of the country [the Randstad] to work. A hardhat worker from nearby Friesland points to five Eneco windmill turbines dedicated to Google's operations. The stories are interspersed with drone-like long-shots of isolated landscapes showcasing silent turbines and sleepy farms, but no data center. Instead we are shown that Google indexes other values. Annamieke's interview about local unemployment is set in a conspicuously middle-class home, complete with a bookcase, mid-century furniture, houseplants, and decorative candling. Shots of blonde girls staring and pointing to blank coding screens on laptops are overlaid with a pedagogical narrative that they are learning to

be creative, and what they can do with programming. Windmills are framed from an angle in which the RWE coal-firing plant next door is unrecognizable. In all the vignettes, Google has a God-like presence through the hearts and souls of its devotees who represent the region as white, hard-working, rural. Against the negative signifiers of joblessness, population decline, docile young drones, and dirty energy, the Aryan engineer stands against a blindingly white sky with a single spinning windmill: 'Google has created an enormous positive vibe for the region. If it can attract such a well-known company, what else is in store?'

[EMBED VIDEO ON SITE]

I translate the final words of the video somewhat differently than Google does, in that the subtitles ask what future Google will bring. Yet to ask what is in store points to the company's core business. To store data and then reveal it in carefully orchestrated rituals with selected apostles preserves its media aura. Google's curation of aura hearkens back to early eras of Western sacred art, during which priests gave sacred objects their magical value by keeping them 'invisible to the spectator' (Benjamin, 2015: 224). The meaning of any object could positive or negative; Venus could be the 'venerated statue' for the Greeks or the 'ominous idol' for the medieval clerics. What mattered more was the social order based on the privileged few who could access sacred objects and testify 'what mattered was their existence, not their being on view'. Google's cult value derives from its ability to control the mediated contact we have with these data apostles, themselves proof that what makes otherwise unremarkable and reproducible data unique and magical is 'its being embedded in the fabric of tradition' (Ibid.: 223).

Google's data center is precious because it is nowhere else and shared with no other people. It is not in the global city of Amsterdam. It is not in the industrialized core of Rotterdam nor the high-tech triangle around Eindhoven. Closer to the home base, it is not in the cosmopolitan and diverse city located next to Annemieke's bedroom community. It is not in the local elite university, which markets business degrees to foreign students, nor the technical college, which trains legions of local ICT workers who then move to the fashionable Western metropoles. It is not shared with an older generation of unemployed farm and factory workers who make up 10 percent of the workforce, the highest in the Netherlands. It is not shared with the 2000 or so asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, and Eritrea who wait in detention centers isolated from middle-class neighborhoods. It

is not shared with the migrant construction workers who built the data center before returning to Poland. It is not shared with the thousands of people who over the past five years have marched on government buildings from the municipality to The Hague in protest of more energy exploration, including wind power, without citizen input. The value of Google vibe can only be assessed in an exclusive blockchain, owned by the company, but distributed through the cultural networks of interconnected rural regions whose distinct identities are capital.

This seemingly closed circuit of ledgers and calculated publicity makes the phenomenon of siting Google workers all the more interesting. When Groningers say 'Google is here' they are not referring to the bits of data flowing through their phones, nor the browser they consult for information, nor the platform they trust with their own libraries and memories. They are referring to real people, the ones they might not even know are among them. In casual settings and interactions, the most common form of contact with Google workers has been narrated to me as a siting, nary an interaction, and never a close relationship. Google workers simply drove their cars, ate their burgers, or went to happy hour on Friday night. In the typical siting comments, the workers – always characterized as a group of young dudes – performed identities that fit the conventional scripts of a reality show about high tech workers:

> "They are from all over Europe and the U.S."
> "They work all the time".
> "They are cool and have fun".
> "They keep to themselves".
> "They harassed the cocktail waitress".

Much like a rumor, the ephemeral siting of the "Google guys", as they sometimes were called, traveled alongside other official narratives of the company's presence.

While the sitings challenged Google's promotional packaging of gender and age diversity, they could hardly be called subversive. The performance of "work hard, play hard" no doubt fits the brand Google, as workers are known to skip off to Burning Man to perform the "sacred" ritual of art creation (Turner, 2009). Company workers mediated across our visual fields are examples of what Laura Grindstaff (2012) calls ordinary celebrities in that the performative is no longer separated from life. In the reality show I am calling Groningen Goes Google, there's no beginning or end to the mediational possibilities when guys getting a drink is subject to narrative

and we intuit Google's presence through unremarkable human bodies in action. The projection of Google as living is even further orchestrated by the ordinary celebrities, who just like actors, have signed extensive employee nondisclosure statements. A 2016 lawsuit alleges the company mandates near total secrecy around their workers' lives, including 'disclosing all of the skills, knowledge, acquaintances, and overall experience at Google' (Joe Doe v. Google, para 28, cited in Statt, 2016). The suit quotes the Google Confidentiality Agreement to define all information about Google or its business that is 'generally not known' (Ibid.: para 29). These legal means control data aura by simply limiting workers' conditions of possibility every time they are spotted outside of the data center. They replicate data aura by adding to the mystique of cult membership and the cultural exceptionalism ascribed to cult members.

These are the moments we can point: "There is Google!"

To be part of the data aura cult is thus to hold as true the opposing views that Google is both ubiquitous and scarce. Google's data center is everywhere in Groningen. It is in the home, the school, and the worksite. It is part of the fabric of daily life, for which the specificity of local culture is articulated in the empty landscapes and the plainly dressed folks connected to the land. It appears in the browser with modifications for the Dutch market and an advertising stream customized to increasingly small demographic clusters. In these ways, Google lays its claim to the regional structure of feeling (as in Williams, 2011). Speaking in the future tense, people in the video wax prophetically. Aura is projected as an 'enormous vibe' brought onto them.

In this omnipresence, the spontaneous appearances or flowing displays of people that connect the company and the region seem like continuities from the medieval cults of sacred art in one more sense. Aura needs administration. Ancient relics had to be plundered and transported. Complex financial policies, known long ago through the administration of indulgences and usury, paid for the faraway labor of plunder. The mobility of the higher management to semi-autonomous parishes and dioceses around Europe 'facilitated the flow of funds from decentralized, downstream firms to the centralized, upstream bureaucracy in Rome' (Ekelund, Hébert & Tollison, 2011: 307). The regional variations in the cults of saints helped the Church unify better than any government by keeping 'a monopoly on the supernatural belief system' (Ibid.: 306). Invisible labor and infrastructures maintain aura's vitality.

Google aspires globally to become the network controller for a data aura which is not infrastructure, but depends on infrastructural dominance. Historically, infrastructures dominate through invisibility, its webs of underground cables (Starosielski, 2015), hidden cell phone towers (Parks, 2010), and ethereal frequency flows (Mukherjee 2016). Each infrastructure remediates what Imar de Vries (2012: 111) calls 'the memes of a technological project' to create unity through connectedness and bringing people together. The messianic and the material were joined by Alexander Graham Bell in a marketing campaign to connect telephone users without the mediation of experts and the freedom from paying the maintenance and repair staff (Ibid.: 108). As infrastructure, data centers belong in a genre of container technologies which, along with the storage unit and the shopping bag, are forgotten in a world in which technologies are supposed to actively transform it. Zöe Sofia (2000) speculates that their superpower is rather in gathering and holding their goods, allowing those to grow and mutate in their womb-like spaces, until they are distributed out again. Such a feminized technology must be hidden if Google is to appear omnipotent.

And so is also the case with the vast majority of its workers: the ones who cook, clean, and do the domestic monitoring of the data's physical safety. These are the workers who not appear in promo videos or can be pointed out in public. Called 'indirect hires' in the language of regional development economics, those working to sustain the data centers' operations are not directly employed by the company because they are not part of the company's 'core business' (Copenhagen Economics, 2018). They are listed in the online job ads as the caterers, the air conditioning duct workers, the installers with welding knowledge, and security guards. All of them will be paid via an outsourcing agency geared to short-term contracts. Since Dutch law requires a permanent contract and benefits after 23 months, applicants know that their time working for the 'the datacenter of a big international client' (Indeed.nl ad posted for a security guard, January 2, 2018) will be likely limited. Despite the anonymity of the jobs, one ad taps into the data aura controlled by 'world leader in digital mapping and search engines' (Indeed.nl ad posted for warehouse employee, March 20, 2018). Another promises that a security guard 'can sniff a healthy sea breeze' while working in 'dynamic surroundings with cool colleagues' (Indeed.nl ad posted for a security guard, January 2, 2018). In return, workers must be confident, flexible, able to work nights, weekends and holidays, be self-insured, bilingual in Dutch and English, and live no further than 40 km

away from the private data center compound. In the ads, the boundaries between being having an anonymous, low-wage contract gig (based on self-reports on glassdoor.nl, March 29, 2018) and exclusive entry into the cult of global high-tech seems preciously thin, even co-dependent (Figs. 2 and 3).

In reflecting on the meaning of Google's coming in fall 2017 and spring 2018, the messages are the data medium, but without any of Marshall McLuhan's tangible massage. The meanings float through ordinary celebrity workers set in a regional structure of feeling. The line between human and media seem indistinguishable, as Sarah Kember and Johana Zylinka (2012: 18) remind us: 'We have always been mediated'. Meanwhile the immaterial never satisfies that desire for material contact with Google in Groningen. In the present political economy, the standing reserve of data center workers will rotate and the fortressed center will remain off-limits, and excluded from the managed public presence of the company. The company has invested in regional projects to make bees and butterflies more visible while workers remain in their hive. In the beginning of March 2018, Google announced, once again, it is coming to Groningen. News and trade reports announced HQ will invest in expanding the data center complex, assuring more local employment for the projected high-tech region. The new mediation now taps the memory of previous mediations and the loss of mediations never to be actualized (Ibid.: 21). All the while, we can be assured that Google's media works among us, with us, on us.

Figures

Fig. 1: Google Data Center in Eeemshaven. Note the coal, gas, and wind electricity providers in the background.

Fig. 2: Banner promoting the benefits of being a self-contracting manager, at the Groningen Promotion Days Event, Martinihal Convention Center, November, 2017.

Figure 3: The 'enormous vibe' as translated by the municipal governments for the Eemsdelta region, at the Groningen Promotion Days Event, Martinihal Convention Center, November, 2017.

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