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"The "Virtual" Beat: Journalistic Perspectives on Reporting Second Life, a Massive Online World"

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide background, descriptions, and scholarly basis for exploring the journalism of Second Life, a massive online world. At present, there has been little scholarly attention paid to Second Life journalism, whether examining "virtual" publications that exclusively report Second Life, or traditional publications that have reported on Second Life from a completely external perspective. As a result, the literature on this topic is scattered and severely lacking.

This review will synthesize existing knowledge and perspectives concerning Second Life journalism, describe unique conventions of the "virtual" reporting process, and provide profiles of three "virtual" Second Life news publications: *The Second Life Herald, The Metaverse Messenger* and *SL-Newspaper.com*.

Ultimately, this review finds that it is worth questioning the correlations and divergences between "virtual" journalism – which evidently treats Second Life from the perspective of a separate social "place" – and preexisting, traditional journalism – which evidently treats Second Life from the perspective of its correlations to the material world.

KEYWORDS

Second Life, virtual worlds, journalism, "virtual" journalism, virtual communities

INTRODUCTION

Before there can be a discussion of what this paper will call "virtual" journalism, it is imperative to establish that there have been two broad, scholarly definitions of – and consequently, two major approaches to – massive virtual worlds like Second Life.

On one hand, *the first approach implies a massive virtual world may be treated as a separate social "place,"* complete with its own culture, its own time and space, values, artifacts and "in-world" personas. The emphasis here is on "avatar-as-agent," and this approach concurrently posits an avatar's relatively anonymous controller – the real life "user" – as subordinate to the "person" being represented on the screen, inside the world of Second Life itself. On the other hand, *the second approach suggests a massive virtual world like Second Life may be seen primarily as a complex and unique "extension" of the material world*, a fascinating online location which real life users access via their computers, do business with, educate themselves, communicate and play.

While it is the current author's belief that both approaches to Second Life are completely valid, the author also finds it notable that the second approach – that being, Second life as an "extension" – is by far the more commonly employed method of inquiry in this field. In fact, over the past several years numerous scholars and laypersons alike have commented on the incredible economic, educational and communications potentials that Second Life provides to individuals all over the globe by acting as an "extension" of our objective reality (Au, 2008; Balkin, 2006; Bennett & Beith, 2007; Castronova, 2005; Castronova, 2006). However, still others have treated Second Life, not only as a unique and significant "extension" of the material world, but as a separate social "place"; a type of "place" that is partially concrete, in which the boundaries between the "virtual" and the "real" don't necessarily matter, and in which participant discourse and interaction are valid within the world's own context (Boellstorff, 2008; Ludlow & Wallace, 2007).

In terms of this review, the current author will argue that an understanding of both approaches to Second Life is crucial to the topic of "virtual" journalism, because so-called "virtual" journalists have spent years reporting the happenings of Second Life as if they were a part of a separate, but all-inclusive reality – as if Second Life were its own "place." Alternatively, traditional journalists, writing about Second Life for publications ranging from *The New York Times* to *Newsweek*, have tended to report the virtual world from an outsider's perspective – as if Second Life were a unique and exciting "extension" of our material existence. Therefore, it is the current author's contention that the type of journalism being produced on Second Life depends upon how one views the ontological essence of the virtual world – that is, as a "place" in its own right, or as an "extension."

Adding to – and supporting – this principal dichotomy, the following review will examine the type of journalistic conventions that distinguish "in-world" journalism from traditional journalism, as well provide a discussion on the quality and production value of "virtual" journalism content compared to that of its real world counterpart. Moreover, journalistic accountability – in terms of Second Life "virtual" journalism – will be analyzed in the current paper. After providing three brief profiles of Second Life "virtual" publications, the author will finally suggest a classification system based on Entman (2005) that will help future scholars better understand and organize the type of journalism being produced exclusively on Second Life.

TWO PHASES OF SECOND LIFE JOURNALISM

While there have been no major studies performed on the subject at hand, a brief article published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Totilo, 2008) has suggested that Second Life-related journalism has already undergone two major phases, and, as I will demonstrate, each of these phases roughly corresponds to one of the abovementioned ontological perspectives concerning Second Life.

According to Totilo, (2008) the first phase of Second Life journalism was dominated by "virtual" journalists – or, simply, individuals who reported the happenings of Second Life for their intrinsic value, using their own "in-world" avatar to interview other avatars, and to experience events within the virtual world itself. Subsequently, the human-based directors of these "virtual" journalists would print their findings in the form online newspapers, blogs, and other types of Internet periodicals (always under the name of their avatars, never using their real life identities to express authorship). As Totilo (2008) suggests, these initial, "virtual" journalists began covering Second Life about the same time it went online – 2003 – during an era of great experimentation and innovation. The reporters of these first "virtual" news publications – and here I refer mainly to Peter Ludlow of the *Second Life Herald* and Wagner Au of *New World Notes* – were immediately viewed as "stars of an experimental online culture, the Web-based town criers of a place where every innovation – the first gun, the first hug, the first recreation of Hiroshima as it was minutes after the bomb – was worth writing about" (Totilo, 2008, p. 38).

Like traditional reporters, these newly minted "virtual" journalists set out to cover both the common fair and the extraordinary. They set out to cover the daily goings-on of Second Life, as well as events that shook the virtual community to its core (Au, 2008; Ludlow & Wallace, 2007). Armed with the power of instant Web-based publication and a willingness to venture into unchartered journalistic territory, these new "virtual" reporters were dedicated to covering the shocking, the amusing, the enlightening – any significant event that transpired within the virtual world they chose to inhabit when they weren't taking part in the material world. As Totilo (2008) suggests, "[These early] journalists wrote mostly for digital newspapers and blogs created specifically to cover Second Life, and although some also wrote for mainstream publications, they bought into the experimental and evolving nature of this virtual world and attempted to cover Second Life as a distinct, self-contained place" (p.38).

Nevertheless, it was only a matter of time until this first "frontier" phase of Second Life journalism – in which the virtual world was largely reported as a separate social "place" – gave way to a second phase of Second Life journalism. During this second phase – which began as early as 2006 – Second Life-related journalism became increasingly dominated by a steady stream of traditional journalists writing about the virtual world for big-name publications like *Newsweek*, *Wired, and The New York* and *London Times* (Totilo, 2008). Not surprisingly, these "second-phase" traditional journalists were intrigued by the virtual world's correlations to – and implications for – the real world. Accordingly, preoccupied with the idea of Second Life as only an "extension" of our material reality, it is no wonder these traditional journalists tended to focus on the "wow factor" of Second Life more so than "the liberating possibilities of building a world from scratch" (p. 38).

As Totilo (2008) suggests, this incoming horde of traditional journalists simply wanted to know the significance of Second Life in terms of their first life, and reported on it as such. Instead of, for example, focusing exclusively on "in-world" phenomena such as "in-world" wars, violence and corruption, overwhelming artistic or educational creation, intellectual property and copyright disputes, or even the Freedom of Speech debates that belonged almost exclusively within the socio-technological arena of Second Life itself – and which were previously a regular part of a "virtual" journalist's "virtual" beat (Au, 2008; Ludlow & Wallace, 2007) – these "second-phase" mainstream journalists reported on the arrival of real world businesses in Second Life, such as American Apparel and General Motors (Bennett & Beith, 2007; Boss, 2007; Itzkoff, 2007;

Ritson, 2007). They reported on the ways in which Second Life's stock market mimicked our own, and how amazing it was that Second Life's economy rivaled certain real world economies (Jeffries, 2006). They also wrote about the horrifying implications of virtual sex crimes, ("Real crimes," 2007) about terrorists moving "in-world" (Gourlay & Taher, 2007) and about people making real money by selling virtual clothes and virtual land (Boss, 2007; Kugel, 2007).

While it all seemed fascinating to the outside world – and perhaps even to Second Life participants themselves – the orientation of these mainstream media articles were hardly like that of the majority of articles being produced by so-called "virtual" journalists, who had tended to treat their news subjects with a specific "in-world" bent. That is to say, to a "virtual" journalist reporting the virtual world of Second Life, stories about events – and the agents responsible for causing those events – often possessed genuine value within the context of Second Life itself. Traditional journalists writing about Second Life from an outsiders perspective, on the other hand, were concentrated on those fleeting moments when the real world and the virtual world overlapped, not on the communications and events taking place exclusively *within* the virtual world (Totilo, 2008). Consequently, by neglecting to treat it as a separate "place" in its own right, the mainstream journalists looking in at Second Life from the outside had – and may still have – very little idea about what makes Second Life and its journalism tick.

CONVENTIONS OF SECOND LIFE "VIRTUAL" JOURNALISM

For one thing, many traditional journalists have yet to realize that, in terms of Second Life "virtual" journalism, real world verification of news sources does not necessarily matter to any given story. In the case of source verification, what matters – as one Second Life "virtual" journalist told Totilo, (2008) – is "in-world" verification (p. 43). In other words, that the user-created characters – referred to in tech. lingo as "avatars" – are being identified properly within the context of the news story. To a "virtual" journalist conducting journalistic activities within Second Life, the real world individual behind his or her avatar does not particularly matter. What matters is that the "people," or agents, involved – in this case the avatars – have their names spelled correctly, their quotes used appropriately, and their "in-world" identities properly confirmed. As Totilo (2008) suggests,

> Second Life reporters ignore the artificiality of the artifice on their computer screens. Without noting their subjects' real-life names, they confidently report on residents who are at war with each other, on residents who have flooded an area with virtual water to make a statement about global warming, on residents who have built virtual pot plants, and so many other activities that just seem interesting on their own merits. This is a new society forming here in Second Life, they argue. Can't incoming reporters just focus on what's being done in this new world? (p. 43).

Put simply: in the virtual world of Second Life there is no particular need for the real world journalistic convention of flesh-and-blood source verification when the "people" a "virtual" journalist deals with are not flesh-and-blood. What matters in the virtual world is that a journalist's sources – which happen in this case to be the virtual representations of real life individuals – are treated independent of their physical counterparts, because, on the whole, whatever is occurring in the world of Second Life is in many ways as much a product of the avatar as it is the avatar's earth-based, human director.

Occasionally, the real people a "virtual" journalist deals with in Second Life – that is, the people behind their on-screen avatars – tend to matter when doing investigative reporting that may have real life significance. In these cases – as Pixeleen Mistral, a "virtual" journalist and editor at *The Second Life Herald* explained to the current author in a personal interview – confirming a real life identity in a story may take a "virtual journalist," "outside SL on various resident blogs and flickr photo collections for instance" (P. Mistral, personal communication, November 28, 2008). Thus, while it doesn't happen all the time, by using some of the same standard investigative procedures a traditional journalist may employ, a "virtual" journalist is able to perform real world investigative functions, should the story call for it.

Of course, as was stated many times previously, a great deal of Second Life "virtual news articles" do not concern the real world whatsoever; their content deals primarily with the goings-on – the inherent social phenomena – taking place within Second Life itself. It is true that occasionally a "virtual" journalist may write a story that demands a real world connection, but it bears repeating: to a "virtual" journalist covering the virtual world, what often matters is that the on-screen identities they are dealing with – the avatars – are being represented in a fashion that is as fair and truthful as a traditional journalist would represent his or her own news subjects.

"VIRTUAL" NEWS ACCOUNTABILITY

Interestingly enough, Second Life "virtual" journalists may find it *easier* to fairly represent a "virtual news subject" than a real world reporter would a real life subject. That is to say, for example, in Second Life almost every conversation that

takes place between users is text-based, allowing a "virtual" journalist to gain an instant, savable transcript of every interview they conduct (P. Mistral, personal communication, November 28, 2008). As Totilo (2008) suggests, this leaves a virtual journalist "little room to misquote [his or her subjects]" (p. 44).

What's more, while in the objective world the public must rely upon the accuracy of reports filed by journalists who may be embedded in remote, isolated locations around the globe, in Second Life one is able to instantly "teleport" to any given location in order to confirm the facts of a story for him or herself (Totilo, 2008). If a Second Life "virtual" journalist conducts an "in-world" interview, it is possible, then, for any Second Life user to easily "teleport" to the location where that interview took place and ask questions of the interviewee him or herself, or "teleport" to a location and observe any of the details of a "virtual" news story first-hand.

This, of course, is not possible in the material world. When real life events occur the public is often at the mercy of the reporter and the reporter's own subjective view of those real world events. For instance, when the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 took place, the public was forced to rely upon second-hand and third-hand reports being filed on the ground nearest the scene of the event. He or she could not – or, understandably may not have wanted to – physically move to the scene in order to personally witness the affair.

On the other hand, in Second Life, without the fear of death, and with the ability to instantly double-check any "virtual" journalist's news story, no Second Life user is completely dependent upon the media for his or her information. Each virtual "resident" can go anywhere in the world at any time to check the validity of a story, which is part of a process that Totilo (2008) describes as Second Life's journalistic "laboratory for an unusual form of accountability" (p.44).

DISADVANTAGES TO REPORTING THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Improved accountability is one obvious benefit that both Second Life users and "virtual" journalists who cover Second Life enjoy. However, traditional journalists still have the upper hand when it comes to the regulatory circumstances under which they write and report the news.

Indeed, real world reporters operate under an entirely different set of laws, rules and regulations that govern how they conduct their trade. For instance, whereas in the real world the United States' Bill of Rights may guarantee – however imperfectly – that a traditional journalist is free to write and publish any acceptable news coverage that he or she wants, "virtual" journalists have thus far not been subject to the same guarantees (Balkin, 2006; Goldman, 2005; Zack, 2007). Furthermore, while no "virtual" journalist interviewed for the current paper mentioned any particular instances of direct journalistic control by the powers that be, it is still argued that because a *private company* owns Second Life – in this case, San Francisco-based Linden Lab – the virtual world and the "people" that reside within it may be unfairly exposed to potentially unequal treatment, such as unwarranted banning or outright censorship (P. Mistral, personal communication, November 26, 2008).

As a result, this lack of democratic, "in-world" protection has been a major source of friction, not only for users who feel they have been banned from a virtual community without proper cause – Second Life's "Terms of Service Agreement" in fact allows Linden Lab to terminate one's account "at any time for any reason" ("Terms of Service," 6) – but also for the "virtual press" and its reporters, who conduct their trade almost totally within what many of them treat as a separate social "place" (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007; Totilo, 2008).

Meanwhile, scholars of the Internet and virtual communities have taken up the debate, with some arguing that Freedom of Speech laws and other laws that apply to a United States citizen should apply to a "citizen" of a virtual community housed within servers that are located on United States soil (Balkin, 2006; Zack, 2007). Opposing these scholars are those who see virtual communities like Second Life as no different than other privately owned virtual spaces of the Internet, and thus not privy to extraordinary governmental protections (Goldman, 2005).

In any event, as it stands now, no particular U.S. governmental protections or private-party protections are offered to users or to "virtual" journalists who venture into privately owned worlds like Second Life to report on "in-world" happenings. As was previously mentioned, though there have been no direct instances of Linden Lab censoring a "virtual" journalist's story, it bears repeating that, according to Second Life's Terms of Service (TOS) agreement which all Second Life users must sign before entering the virtual world, Linden Lab can easily delete a user's account – and their virtual "life" – for any reason they see fit. It should also be noted that, though discriminatory termination of one's account is not entirely common, it is said to have already happened to "virtual" journalist, Peter Ludlow, in another virtual community called The Sims Online, due to – as Ludlow implies – too much socio-political "muckraking," especially concerning the "governmental" shortcomings of The Sims Online owner, EA Games (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007; Totilo, 2008).

THE "WATCHDOG" PRESS IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Consequently, one of the outcomes of the aforementioned friction between the owners of virtual worlds and "virtual" journalists who inhabit and report on virtual worlds, has been a tendency for the "virtual" press – especially those "virtual" presses based out of democratic countries like the United States – to occasionally take on the role of the traditional "watchdog" press, "documenting the activities of government, business, and other public institutions in ways that expose little-publicized or hidden activities to public scrutiny," (Bennett & Serrin, 2005).

Of course, while it is true that much "virtual" journalism content delves into the lighter and more entertaining sides of virtual communities – which provide, by virtue of their own creative and whimsical nature, often very quirky and eccentric areas of news – the majority of ground-breaking virtual world news articles have thus far centered on serious "in-world" social phenomena, social phenomena ranging from the creation of virtual educational and artistic content, to virtual violence and armed conflict, and the "corruption" of virtual users (Au, 2008; Ludlow & Wallace, 2007).

Accordingly, it is safe to say that while both real world journalism and so-called "virtual" journalism often differ in the way they treat Second Life news subjects – one as if it were all an interesting "extension" of the material world, and one as if it all were part of a separate "place" – they are also both intimately related, intersecting in key journalistic methodologies and conventions. That is to say, moreover, both traditional journalism and Second Life journalism occasionally parallel each other on the type of role they play in their respective societies: while "virtual" and traditional journalism may both function as sources of entertainment to their respective audiences, they may both also play a part in maintaining an informed, democratic citizenship, whether a citizenship of a brick and mortar nation or a virtual one.

THE NATURE OF SECOND LIFE "VIRTUAL" JOURNALISM CONTENT

One of the key findings of the following investigation of Second Life "virtual" news publications is that the journalistic content under examination is repeatedly discovered to be not entirely different from that of the small town presses that dot the American Midwest. Although arguably none of "virtual" news publications examined in this informal review reach the level of content quality or journalistic integrity of a real life newspaper such as, for instance, *The New York Times*, each functions in a manner similar to a real world press – informing, entertaining, exposing and reviewing any significant news items taking place within the world of Second Life.

Currently, there is a wide array of "virtual" news publications that cover Second Life – from Wagner James Au's *New World Notes* blog, to *Second Life Update*, and *The Second Life News Network (SLNN)*. For brevity's sake, the author has randomly chosen the following three publications, which, the author believes, fairly depicts the scope and variety of most – if not all – preexisting Second Life "virtual" news publications. We will start by examining perhaps the earliest of these publications.

The Second Life Herald

Anyone with an Internet connection can access *The Second Life Herald's* content by logging on to its Web site: *www.secondlifeherald.com*. There, one is greeted by a "virtual" news publication that was started in 2003, and is laid out in a fashion not unlike a traditional online news publication. For example, on the *Herald's* Web site there are news articles, "in-world" and sometimes real world photographs – depending on the nature of the story – captions for photographs, bylines, quotations, and many other typical stylistic conventions one might find in a traditional news publication. The only noticeable difference in *The Second Life Herald* and a small online press is that *The Herald* engages in a "snarky," "tabloid" style of commentary, (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007, p. 221) and, again, the fact that the subjects of this publication are predominately "virtual" instead of "real."

In terms of content, this "virtual" news publication – alternately referred to as a "tabloid" or a "newspaper" by its creators (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007) – mimics that of a small town online newspaper. It has sections, a masthead and advertisements on its homepage, and according to one of its editors, an avatar named "Pixeleen Mistral": "the content [of *The Second Life Herald*] runs the gamut - from straight news, news from the various communities such as the militia guys, fashion/avatar portraits, Op/Ed pieces, skeptical coverage of the actions of the game gods [Linden Lab], and of course satire" (P. Mistral, personal communication, November 26, 2008).

Some of this publication's more recent "watchdog" or "hard" news coverage involves an August 22, 2008 story about a struggle between Second Life users and Linden Lab over "avatar naming rights," (Mistral, "Linden Lab Governance," 2008) and a story on the return of "in-world" casino gambling after an infamous Linden Lab ban (Mistral, "Casino Gambling," 2008). Still other *Herald* news stories discussed the creation of "in-world" art (Miles, 2008) and even a controversial "in-world" "abortion clinic" (Mistral, "One-Hour Abortion Clinic," 2008).

It should also be noted that, in terms of *The Herald's* organizational structure, there are only a handful of defined staff position, and – like all of those "virtual" publications discussed in this review – *The Herald* does accept *some* user-submitted "citizen journalism" (i.e., average users of Second Life submitting their own reports about the virtual world to be

edited and reviewed by *Herald* staffers).

As far as readership is concerned, editor Pixeleen Mistral informed the current author that *The Herald's* Web site currently receives "between about 4,000 and 7,500 page views per day" (P. Mistral, personal communication, November 26, 2008).

The Metaverse Messenger

According to one of its editors, Kristan Hall, (a.k.a., avatar Katt Kongo) the "virtual" publication called *The Metaverse Messenger* tries to report on all the "hard," or significant, "in-world" news that it can find (K. Hall, personal communication, September 26, 2008). For instance, a recent article by avatar journalists named Dulcie Mills and Verde Otaared, discussed the "in-world" creation and opening of a Second Life opera house (Mills & Otaared, 2008). Still other articles discussed their subjects primarily in terms of "in-world"s consequences, but occasionally with a real world connection, such as a two-page September 16, 2008 feature story on the death of Dr. Robert Hippen – named Champion Valiant in Second Life – who was responsible for the creation of the San Diego simulation ("Second Life mourns," September 16, 2008). Thus, in many ways, like other "virtual" news publications mentioned in this review, the content of *The Messenger* may mimic – or parallel – traditional news publication content, only with an "in-world" orientation that's focused on the goings-on taking place within Second Life itself.

In terms of its organizational structure, *The Messenger* is much like that of a real world newspaper, with a "Publisher, Associate Publisher, News Manager, Section Editors, [and] Staff writers (senior, junior and intern)" (K. Hall, personal communication, September 26, 2008). For funding its production, *The Messenger* receives advertising revenues from many strictly Second Life-based companies, but has also received revenues from real world companies like Dell and The Weather Channel (K. Hall, personal communication, September 26, 2008).

Additionally, another unique feature that distinguishes *The Messenger* – as well as other exclusively "virtual" Second Life publications from traditional publications –is that online content can be reached from within Second Life itself. For example, visiting the "Dublin" simulation and clicking on *The Messenger's* "in-world" newsstand (Figure 1) will automatically open a new browser window directly linked to *The Messenger's* homepage (*www.metaversemessenger.com*). Once on *The Messenger's* homepage, readers are able to view, download and print a full PDF version of *The Messenger's* content, which is quite a rare feature in terms of all reviewed Second Life "virtual" news publications.

Figure 1

SL-Newspaper

The content of *SL-Newspaper* (short for "Second Life Newspaper") is written in a similar "tabloid" style that *The Herald* is written in, and the editor of this two-year-old publication – an avatar named Dana Vanmoer – explained to me that the main purpose of this production is to "have fun" (D. Vanmoer, personal communication, September 26, 2008). As Vanmoer explained, "the newspaper [is] meant as a fun way to show others the potential in SL – a way to show what [is] there and what can be achieved. Even now 2 years later this is our mantra – if it is not fun, don't do it" (D. Vanmoer, personal communication, September 26, 2008).

Accordingly, the majority of *SL-Newspaper's* content is entertaining "in-world" stories and commentary. There are individual sections that are linked to the main page, advertisements and many other hallmarks of a traditional news publication to be found. Vanmoer also informed me that her publication accepts some "citizen journalism," and that the publication's Web site, *www.sl-newspaper.com*, receives up to 10- to 12,000 page views per day (D. Vanmoer, personal communication, September 30, 2008).

Some recent articles published by *SL-Newspaper* include a financial report on the failure of an exclusively "in-world" real estate firm (Luminos, 2008) and an informative article on Second Life's upcoming "Winterfaire": an "in-world" holiday celebration in which Second Life residents compete to build a virtual snowman and hold a virtual snowball fight with the avatars of Linden Lab staffers (Vanmoer, 2008). *SL-Newspaper* also recently published an entertaining and provocative profile of an "in-world" resident without so much as mentioning her real life identity, (Babii, 2008) which is yet another pertinent example of "in-world" orientation taking precedence over the "real."

TOWARD AN ORGANIZATIONAL TYPOLOGY

One limitation of this review is that it, of course, cannot take into consideration all preexisting Second Life "virtual" journalism publications. However, the three previously mentioned publications provide excellent examples of the range of "virtual" journalism currently being produced on Second Life. Clearly, each aforementioned publication has a slightly different journalistic orientation within the context of Second Life – from the "watchdog" nature of *The Second Life Herald* to the "softer, "fun" news presented by *SL-Newspaper.com* – but it is also clear that the common thread running through each publication is that the majority of production content deals directly with "in-world" Second Life happenings (or at least discusses real world events in terms of their impact on Second Life and not the other way around, as traditional journalists have previously discussed Second Life).

Unfortunately, because there are so many "virtual" news publications that currently cover Second Life, even if it were possible to consider them all in this brief paper, it would still be very difficult to explain each publication's various types of content, each publication's journalistic style, funding sources, adherence to – or avoidance of – traditional journalistic conventions, etc. Therefore, it is in this investigations best interest, and in the best interests of future researchers of this subject, to recommend a simple typological organization of all current Second Life "virtual" news publications – from Wagsner James Au's *New World Notes*, to *Second Life Update* and all of the publications mentioned and not mentioned in this review – similar to that of Entman's, (2005) but perhaps with typological categories based on conventions specific to Second Life-related journalism.

For example, it would be possible to arrange a typology in which Second Life "virtual" news publications are categorized by the degree to which they deliver exclusively "in-world" or "real world-related" news content. More classification possibilities might include the diversity of news content offered by the "virtual" news publications, the level of informative or entertainment value of news content, or the level to which Second Life "virtual" news publications adhere or diverge from traditional news publications in terms of design, writing style and layout. It's also worth noting that Hallin & Giles (2005) differentiate the traditional press based on each publication's historical and nationalistic origins. A similar differentiation should be made among Second Life "virtual" news publications in the future, as it is foreseeable that each "virtual publication's" real world offices will be based out of various countries with differing laws and historical approaches to reporting the news.

CONCLUSION

The way in which Second Life is reported is evidently based on whether or not the journalist reporting it views the world as an exciting and provocative "extension" of our material reality, or a highly complex, separate social sphere – a type of separate, reified "place" (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007, p. 201). In the recent past, traditional journalists have entered Second Life in order to report on the virtual world for various real life publications – from *The London Times* to *The New York Times* – but because many of them treated Second Life as only an interesting "extension" of the material world – albeit an "extension" that quite clearly has significant real world consequences – they did not see the value in reporting the virtual

world and its "inhabitants" as a separate "place" unto itself. Still other journalists not discussed in the current review have been hired by big-name media companies such as *Reuters* and *CNN* to cover the virtual world from the inside out, (Shields, 2007) but they too, have overwhelmingly missed the mark: Second Life can be, and is, reported as a separate social "place."

This conclusion may be easily reached based on the type of news articles considered in this review, of which the primary actors are the avatars, and not the directors of the avatars sitting at home on a personal computer. It is the avatars themselves – their human-based directors acting through them completely anonymously – that are presumed to be the builders of the cities, the titans of Second Life business, the "corrupt," the "violent," the "sexy" and the ones receiving "in-world" "abortions." More and more, the emphasis of Second Life communication, and Second Life communication in the form of "virtual" news publications, is based on the premise of "avatars-as-agents," with the avatars front and center, not the human being that controls the avatar. In this way, Second Life "virtual" journalism helps to construct and define virtual identity, and even the virtual world itself.

As Totilo (2008) suggests, "Second Life reporters ignore the artificiality of the artifice on their computer screens" (p. 43). They report on the events and experiences in Second Life as if they were actually happening, just in a different, but clearly defined, social "place." It does not matter to a "virtual" journalist if he or she cannot verify the identity of the individual behind the avatar-subject, because it is not the individual's identity that is important: it is the avatar's. Critically, this implies that the "self" on the screen, represented within Second Life, is somewhat differentiated from the self who directs the persona; that there is some degree of separation between the two, even though they may still be very much intimately related.

In summary, this paper has attempts to illustrate that Second Life reporters have certain advantages over real life reporters in terms of accountability, but it is worth reiterating that Second Life reporters are at a major disadvantage to their traditional counterparts when it comes to the lack of existing "in-world" "laws" that may prohibit a company like Linden Lab from censoring Second Life "virtual" news publications, or somehow limiting free speech of "virtual" journalists. So far, no Second Life "virtual" journalist has witnessed any instances of direct journalistic censorship by Linden Lab. However, the potential for censorship – and previous accusations by Peter Ludlow against EA Games – has clearly stimulated a certain level of anxiety among some Second Life "virtual" journalists interviewed for the current paper (P. Mistral, personal communication, November 26, 2008; D. Vanmoer, personal communication, September 30, 2008). Thus, it is perceived that this will be an issue in the future, with scholars, users and owners forced to debate and determine the appropriate Terms of Service agreement regulations, and whether or not it is reasonable to be able to terminate one's Second Life account, "at any time for any reason" ("Terms of Service," 6). The potential for abuses – "virtual" journalists and Second Life users seem to feel – is too great, the risks too high, and the consequences of account / "life" termination unthinkable.

In light of these findings, the current author recommends that any future research on this subject – including the creation of an Second Life journalism organizational typology – should take into consideration this lack of "in-world" "governmental" protection, as well as other disadvantages to reporting on a virtual, but vast and constantly changing virtual world (whether it be reporting Second Life or another online world).

Clearly – according to the readership (or "click-rate") statistics gathered by numerous "virtual" journalists and reported here by the current author – participants of virtual worlds are still visiting the Web sites of exclusively "virtual" newspapers in large numbers, which creates demand for content, and for "virtual" reporters to be protected from those who regulate their online environment (i.e., Linden Lab). Yet, the question overwhelmingly remains: will Linden Lab or the U.S. government ensure "virtual" journalists and other users some type of protection?

The answer to this question, the current author believes, will ultimately depend on whether Linden Lab or the U.S. government treats Second Life as a "place" in which avatars are the primary agents – like "virtual" journalists have, and continue to regard Second Life and its "inhabitants" – or as a unique "extension" of the material world that emphasizes the human behind the on-screen personas – which has been the view expressed by many traditional journalists. Of course, if Linden Lab or the U.S. government views Second Life avatars as social beings, "residing" within their own social context, it is presumed that Linden Lab or the U.S. government must grant them certain rights. On the other hand, if avatars are merely "extensions" of our human agency, then perhaps they should not receive any inalienable rights at all.

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