

## CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING AND THE MEDIA ECOLOGIES OF NEOLIBERAL BRITAIN.

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how references to media in a series of twenty-first century novels by contemporary British women writers place them as 'active agents' within the media ecologies of neoliberal, globalised Britain. It considers how three novels, *Hotel World* (2001) by Ali Smith, *NW* (2012) by Zadie Smith, and *Started Early, Took my Dog* (2010) by Kate Atkinson, use references to technology, print media, television, and corporate communication in ways that enable critical commentaries of this very specific time and place.

By critically discussing these forms of media and the way in which people engage with them, use them, and are impacted by them, the writers in question help to define the media environment in which they are writing. As media landscapes can evolve and change so quickly with the advent of new technologies, trends and events, these acts of recording accounts of the contemporary media ecology translates these novels into historic artefacts, allowing these environments to be remembered.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Novels set in the contemporary world inevitably contain references to media and technology. Characters communicate with each other via phone, text, and email, they watch TV and go to the cinema, read magazines and newspapers, they surf the Internet and listen to music. Many references to media in contemporary literature are natural reflections of the experience of living in the present, but some references do more than this. Novels' use of media can become an intrinsic part of the narrative or character development, such as the references to music in the YA novel *Nick and Nora's Infinite Playlist* (Cohn and Levithan 2006) or to *film noir* classics in *The Woman in the Window* (Finn 2018). In both of these examples it is not only the intertextual relationship of the songs and films to the main story that is important, but also the way in which these media direct the characters through the narrative: Nick and Nora chase around New York to attend a secret gig; Anna repeatedly watches DVDs of her favourite films to escape her haunting memories.

In his discussion of media in the contemporary American novel, Daniel Punday posits that while references to television, music and the Internet 'spill' from some texts, it is hard to shake the impression that 'contemporary writers are doing more than simply adding media to

their stories as part of the narrative furniture of contemporary life' (2012: 1). Punday argues that 'media novels' can link 'practical narrative uses of media to larger concerns about [American] culture' (77), while also positioning writing within a wider media ecology (p80).

However, references to media and technology in literature are not a new occurrence; Friedrich Kittler has discussed how writers of the nineteenth century dealt with 'the first technological media' such as gramophones, films, and typewriters (1999: xl), while Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz have explored the conflicted relationship between literature and media in examples of modernist literature which present the written narrative as 'displaced' from its historical position as 'humanity's primary serial storage technology', thereby competing with newer technologies in the changing media ecology of the early and mid-twentieth century (1997: 4). Punday observes that most discussions of the novel's relationship with other media have focused on these types of adversarial relationships, referencing Kathleen Fitzpatrick's analysis of the 'crisis' of the novel in the age of television and John Johnston's suggestion that novels have become 'media assemblages' in a period of generalized 'multimedia' (2012: 4). Punday's work moves away from this 'life-and-death battle', instead treating the novel 'as an active agent within the media environment—not merely free to respond to its circumstances but able to help define the environment itself' (4-5).

This chapter continues the discussion begun by Punday but moves the focus away from the American 'media' novel onto the novels of a selection of contemporary British women writers. I will not attempt to claim that the novels discussed here are 'media' novels, because their reference to media is just one aspect of a larger critique of how we live in the contemporary, but their use of media is significant in that it undoubtedly places them as 'active agents' within the media ecologies of neoliberal, globalised Britain. Specifically, this chapter will explore how three novels, *Hotel World* (2001) by Ali Smith, *NW* (2012) by Zadie Smith, and *Started Early, Took my Dog* (2010) by Kate Atkinson, use references to technology, print media, television, and corporate communication in a way which locates them in this very specific temporality, and makes them part of that ecology. Themes of truth versus fiction and the erasure of the past to create the sense of a never-ending present crop up in each of these novels, presenting worlds which creep towards the issues of fake news, such as misleading information, fake advertisements, rumours and fake political statements, which have become embedded in Western culture a decade after their publications (Zhang and Ghorbani, 2020: 2). Peter Childs et al. note in their discussion of post 9/11 women's fiction that the novels which they explore often present indirect narratives which pinpoint 'a new climate of uncertainty and fragility' in an 'early twenty-first century world which is profoundly unstable and uncertain' (2014: x), a description which resonates strongly with the novels explored in this chapter.

By describing these authors as contemporary British women writers, this chapter is not trying to define them as a homogenous group. Rather, they are writers whose novels, while varying in genre and narrative style, present critiques of the contemporary condition which question how much the media and information structures in place in neoliberal Britain truly allow people to flourish. They also borrow from the vocabulary found in media, corporate, and political communication of the day to explore the way that neoliberal attitudes of consumerism have leaked into our everyday discourse, and in doing so they echo Doreen Massey's concern that while the 'so-called truth' underpinning neoliberal language is that we all benefit from the championing of individual interests (which tend to be purely monetary),

'this privileging of self interest, market relations and choice in each sphere of economic and social life leads inexorably to increased inequality' (2013: 10). This chapter will begin by discussing how the media ecology metaphor has evolved, and will then explore how each novel engages with and responds to the wider ecology surrounding it.

## **MEDIA ECOLOGIES**

The Media Ecology Association's constitution defines media ecology as 'the study of the complex set of relationships or interrelationships among symbols, media and culture' (2002: 73). Inspired by Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman introduced the metaphor of media ecology in 1968 and defined it as the study of media as 'environments'. As Carlos Scolari explains:

Media environments specify what we can do and what we cannot. In the case of media environments such as books, radio, film, and television, the technological specifications are more often implicit and informal, and therefore, the objective of media ecology—according to Postman—is to make them explicit. Media ecology tries to find out what roles media force us to play, how media structure what we are seeing or thinking, and why media make us feel and act as we do. (2012: 205)

The earlier concept of media ecologies as used by McLuhan, Postman, and Kittler among others focuses on technology and the physicality of media itself; as McLuhan's famous statement 'the media is the message' indicates, the media form takes priority (2001: 7) but use of the metaphor has evolved with time. Matthew Fuller uses pirate radio as a case study of a media ecology: for him, the pirate radio ecosystem is composed of multiple elements, from the transmitter and antennae through to records and record shops, mobile phones, drugs, clubs, parties, flyers and posters (2005: 15). Eugenia Siapera observes that these parts 'are bound together, acting upon one another, enabling and constraining certain actions and outcomes' becoming a 'constantly moving and dynamic assemblage' (2018: 10). The evolution of the media ecology metaphor makes it difficult to define the term unequivocally; as Emiliano Treré and Emily Mattoni observe, each approach and perspective 'brings with it a set of different reflections coming from sometimes contrasting traditions' (2016: 295).

The ecology metaphor has also been used in fields which overlap that of the media – David L. Altheide discusses ecologies of communication, where social interaction and context are stressed, to explore how 'social meanings are derived through a process of symbolic interaction' between the source and the receiver, such as TV ads and viewers (1995: 3). Nardi and O'Day develop the concept of information ecologies, multiple small environments (such as work and home) which are scaled to individuals and which change as new technology develops and 'new ideas, tools, activities and forms of expertise arise' (1999: 50-2.). Lance Strate argues that the term 'media' can encompass modes of communication and information systems as well as 'what is commonly thought of as media' (2004: 4), so in this chapter, all of these interpretations of the metaphor are considered as relevant in the discussion of how these novels engage with the media ecologies around them.

## **HOTEL WORLD**

The narrative of *Hotel World* moves in and around a chain hotel called the Global Hotel, a building situated in the centre of an unnamed town in Northern England which hides behind a veneer of respectable millennial consumerism while it thrives parasitically on the tourist trade drawn by the town's historic landmarks.

The novel charts the experiences of five women whose lives intersect through the hotel: Sara, the spirit of a girl who died in a freak accident involving the hotel's dumb waiter; Else, a homeless woman who sleeps outside the hotel; Lise, an employee of the hotel who suffers with an undiagnosed chronic illness; Penny, an unlikeable journalist who stays at the hotel in order to write promotional material about it; and finally Clare, Sara's younger sister who struggles to come to terms with her sister's death. Each chapter of the novel follows a different character, and in turn adopts a different authorial voice and style of narration. There are several themes in this novel, but significant ones include grief, class, and coming to terms with one's sexuality.

Smith's references to print media and corporate language in this novel present an environment which both engenders inequality and sells inaccuracies, glossing over the dirt and pain of everyday life. The novel contrasts homeless Else, who uses papers practically as she 'likes to wrap relevant things around her feet' ('BRITAIN MASSIVELY MORE UNEQUAL THAN 20 YEARS AGO. ONE IN FIVE PEOPLE LIVES BELOW BREADLINE. These subheadings are cushioning her heel' (45)) with Penny, a journalist for a paper called '*World on Sunday*' who promotes the hotel through the clichés of consumerism, describing the hotel as 'Classic', 'Ideal', 'Superior' and 'Transcendent' while admitting that in reality, 'everything had pretended luxury and had been slightly shabby', with scrape marks on the wall and a buzzing noise coming from the TV (125-31). Smith also juxtaposes wording used in corporate hotel literature with governmental paperwork for incapacity benefits that Lise, an employee of the hotel who is on long-term sick leave, must complete. Lise's chapter begins abstractly as if it is halfway through a document, creating a disjoint between the narrative prose of the previous chapter and this one:

*About you – continued.*

*If you need help filling in this form, or any part of it, phone 0800 88 22 00.*

*Tell us about yourself. (81)*

The writing style of the claims form resembles the Global Hotel quality manual and branding; in each case an anonymous 'we' communicates to Lise both as employee ('*The way we measure quality is to find out just how much money we spend sorting things out*' (117); '*Global Hotels, We Think The World Of You*' (73)), and as an unwell member of the state ('*We need to know if you have any difficulties sitting comfortably in a chair*' (99)). Smith jumps between Lise 'the employee' and Lise 'the invalid' (at once ill and worthless), echoing David Harvey's observation that 'under capitalism sickness is defined broadly as the inability to work' (2000: 106), and Massey's suggestion that the vocabulary of neoliberalism, which has reclassified our roles as agents of market exchange, 'moulds both our conception of ourselves and our understanding of and relationship to the world' (11). To be successful in her role as 'Receptionist', Lise must be 'emptied of self', a replica with 'subtly made-up face above her Name Badge' (112). Lise the invalid is also emptied of self by the illness which makes her lose her memory, but these cognisant gaps are filled with meaningless commercial jingles for Mazola cooking oil, Kellogg's Country Store (82-5) and Matey bubble bath (98), which haunt and confuse Lise. Altheide suggests that social meaning is derived

through symbolic interaction between the source and the receiver (1995: 3), but in this case the interaction between Lise (the receiver) and the companies advertising their products (the source) is uncomfortable, fragmented, and removed from context. As Lise's sickness grows, and the world around her loses meaning, the only thing she can remember is the vacuous language of consumerism.

The penultimate chapter of *Hotel World* is narrated by Clare, a teenager grieving the death of her sister, and is written as a stream of consciousness with unpunctuated prose which tumbles over itself in an imitation of the way that teenagers write on message apps. Clare uses different media as metaphors to explore the concept of death: she speaks of her sister's death as getting halfway through a book and finding 'it just goes blank' (190), and ponders what would happen if programmes like *ER* and *Casualty* 'just stopped every time someone that got brought in died' (208). She also uses TV as a tool for memorial by watching Sara's favourite shows while her mum and dad sit 'on stupid chairs staring at the off TV' (200): she keeps up with *Brookside*, and finds it funny that Sara would be 'pretty pissed off' about the rumour that 'Carol will soon leave ER' (208-9). Through these descriptions, Smith aligns Clare's concept of living with celebrity culture and serial television and equates Sara's death and her parents' mourning with a lack of engagement in the media ecology surrounding them.

While media is a tangible way for Clare to remember her sister, the novel still plays with the idea that there is a disconnect between the fleeting and insubstantial nature of media and the enduring events of real life (and death). For Smith, the contemporary media ecology is built on mistruths which erase the past and make the mundane appealing. If, as Nardi and O'Day state, a healthy information ecology requires the different people and different tools to work together in a complementary way' (51), then the media ecology that Smith presents is not healthy, rather it is disjointed, overwhelming, and inherently false in nature.

## **NW**

*NW* follows four characters, Leah, Natalie (born Keisha), Nathan and Felix, who were all born on the fictional Caldwell Estate in North West London. Through varying levels of social mobility they have moved to different areas of the NW postcode; Leah still lives near her childhood home, while her friend Natalie who became a lawyer and married a rich investment banker lives in a more affluent area. Felix is a former drug addict who is trying to start a new life with his girlfriend Grace, while Nathan is a criminal and drug addict who operates his business from a house in Leah's street. Two themes which are prevalent throughout the novel are class and identity; we see each character negotiate the class system and move through it in different ways, and their sense of self definition and the way they perform 'roles' in order to fit into society is a fundamental part of each of their narratives.

Both Zadie Smith and Ali Smith adopt experimental writing techniques in their novels, including stream of consciousness narratives, vignettes, disordered chronologies, music lyrics and the incorporation of governmental documents (Ali Smith) and Google map directions (Zadie Smith). Wendy Knepper suggests that Zadie Smith has modelled *NW* on James Joyce's *Ulysses* in her use of these narrative techniques (113), and notes that Smith's Google directions (38) 'do not make sense' if attempted in the real world, showing how she plays 'with the tensions between lived, virtual and imagined spaces' (117). Punday

argues that this type of 'discourse-level' use of media 'directly positions writing within a media ecology' by not just telling a story but commenting on how a story should be told (56).

There is a moment in *NW* when Zadie Smith addresses the issue of technology and media directly, practically stating the novel's position on the subject. Through the third person subjective narration of one of the primary characters, Natalie, she notes that there 'is an image system at work in the world', that at 'an earlier point of time' 'the images that give shape and meaning to a life' are 'drawn from the natural world' which produces a sense of beautiful alignment, while Natalie's experience of pregnancy in the contemporary brings 'broken images from the great mass of cultural detritus she took in every day on a number of different devices', causing a mixture of boredom and anxiety (269). The way that this novel presents events out of chronological order and through a variety of writing styles replicates this disjointed and confusing truth, and thus becomes a self-aware element of the media ecology which it engages with.

This sense of a split with the natural world, and a disconnect with the truth, is echoed in a number of references to media in *NW*. At one point Natalie watches a reality show about a council estate with her mother which 'was fractionally worse than the council estate in which she sat watching the show about a council estate' (265) and they comment on the people on the show and judge them, barely noticing the irony of their actions. While Felix is someone who grew up on the same estate as Leah and Natalie, and is killed down the road from where they live, it takes his death being reported in the local newspaper, the *Kilburn Times* (327), and a television news report (92) for them to be aware of it happening. The disjointed chronology of the novel also means that Leah (and we) learn of the murder before it happens in the following chapter, almost like a 'spoiler' of a TV show.

Smith uses media to explore how those who climb the socioeconomic ladder hide elements of their personality, as if socially mobile characters must put on a performance to fit in. Leah, the character who most embraces her working-class roots, notes the hypocrisy when at a dinner party hosted by her upwardly-mobile childhood friend Natalie, everyone 'comes together for a moment to complain about the evils of technology, what a disaster, especially for teenagers' while their phones lie next to their dinner plates (86). This insincerity occurs again when Smith states that Natalie, 'who told people she abhorred expensive gadgets and detested the Internet, adored her phone and was helplessly, compulsively, adverbly addicted to the Internet' (255). While Natalie reads the 'Woman' section of the Sunday supplements, she notices that her brunch friends still buy tabloids ('Now everyone came to brunch with their 'quality' paper and a side order of trash. Tits and vicars and slebs and murder' (251)) but again act as if they are still better than this element of culture ('one elevated oneself above an interest in 'celebrity gossip' simply by commenting ironically on it' (251)).

Leah and Felix, two characters who are lower on the socioeconomic scale but seemingly happier with who they are, cut through the insincerity. Leah refuses to provide anecdotes to entertain at Natalie's dinner parties when she's invited to them to provide 'local colour' (85), while Felix listens to the business jargon used by a man he meets ('media-related creative industry'; 'brand consolidation'; 'target receptivity'; 'the integration of luxury brands into your everyday consciousness') and clarifies a couple of times that he simply means 'advertising' (121).

Smith does not hide her contempt for the 'great mass of cultural detritus' in *NW*, but she allows Natalie redemption at the end of the novel through technology. Natalie uses her mobile phone to call the police and anonymously report the name of Felix's killer, 'disguising her voice with her voice' (333) by re-adopting the abandoned idiolect of Keisha. This embrace of her true identity, and use of technology for something positive and factual, ends the novel with a sense of hope.

### **STARTED EARLY, TOOK MY DOG**

*Started Early, Took My Dog* is the fourth in the series of Atkinson's Jackson Brodie's detective novels, which sees Jackson return to his childhood home of Yorkshire in search of answers for a client who was adopted under mysterious circumstances in the 1970s. This investigation allows the narrative to jump between the past and the present, drawing comparisons between the Leeds of the 1970s, haunted by the Yorkshire Ripper and general police corruption, and the post-recession Leeds of 2010 with its dichotomous split of poverty and gentrification. We follow other characters through the novel alongside the main narrative, including Tracy, a retired policewoman who buys a child from a prostitute and goes on the run, and an aging actress called Tilly who is in the early stages of dementia. Themes of the novel include the contrast between truth/reality and lies/fiction, issues of class, and the way that the present echoes events of the past.

The novel plays with media in a variety of ways, using it to date the time frames but also to comment on the apparent obsession with dead women in crime fiction. When Atkinson presents the two timeframes that the novel is set in, she reminds us that 1975 was the year that Bill Gates founded what would become Microsoft, opening a new world of possibilities (17), but the technological advances which have happened over the decades are juxtaposed with an image of sociological stagnation. Retired detective Tracy states that a lack of technology was one of the issues in the Ripper case: 'that was in the days before computers, when the sheer weight of paperwork was enough to swamp the investigation' (30), and yet the advance of technology does not seem to have fixed things: murders still happen and go unsolved, and now media forms part of the problem, with Tracy feeling 'soiled' by what she has witnessed in her job, such as 'hardcore DVDs of people doing repugnant things to each other' (142). In some cases, technology is shown as inspiring, such as when Brodie reflects on the 'unbelievable technological advances' he has seen over his lifetime while he uses his phone to take photographic evidence of a man abusing a dog, but even then, Atkinson refers to this advancement as 'a tick on the Doomsday clock', reminding us of the danger technology holds over our very survival (62).

The TV references made in *Started Early* are presented as part of a tapestry of 'true' and 'fictional' crime: the procedural *Collier* (a parody of shows like *Midsomer Murders*) is watched by Brodie, who considers it a 'neat sanitized narrative' which clashes with the reality of real murder which is 'disgusting' and 'messy' (259); the actor who played the pathologist in *Collier* is written out due to being imprisoned for having child pornography on his computer (256); the investigation of a 'mutilated prostitute' in the sanitized drama echoes the murders in the novel, as well as those of the real-life Yorkshire Ripper. As Brodie observes, victims are often prostitutes, 'dispensable as tissues, both in reality and fiction' (259). Crime fiction also appears in the form of 'True Noir' novels by ex-reporter Marilyn Nettles, such as *The Slaughtered Seamstress* which has a 'lurid cover' depicting a half-naked woman trying to escape from a shadowy male figure (356). Marilyn notes the popularity of stories of 'women in jeopardy' to Jackson, adding the aside that 'you have to wonder', to which Brodie

responds, 'you do' (356). Atkinson's use of self-referential irony here places her novel firmly within the media ecology that it is mocking; it is not clear if she is suggesting that her novel is 'crap' like *Collier* and *Seamstress*, but it is certainly raising an existential question of why she chose to write the novel, why we are choosing to read it, and why we live in a society where the murder of women is still relatively commonplace.

Atkinson's reference to print media in *Started Early* raises a wider discussion point on how society sees women. At the end of the novel, a security guard gawks 'openly at the good-as-naked Page 3 girl on offer' while discussing the unsolved murders of the women. While his female colleague sees that the headline refers to a 'new ripper' and notes that 'it never stops', he states: 'Slappers, what do you expect?' (480). The language and attitude here replicates the same used by the police in the 1970s flashback sections of the novel, and indicates that even after 40 years of social growth, everyday misogyny still exists alongside the more extreme violence against women.

## CONCLUSION

The way that these authors present media and technology in these novels varies, but the themes tend to fall under two categories: one of memory and history, in the way that experiences are recorded and allow us to remember or forget our past, and one of how much media reflects a true representation of the world back to us. In each novel the presentation of technology and media is complex, displayed as a phenomenon inextricably tangled with our everyday lives, but often in a way that controls rather than aids us. Technology can be useful if used for the point it is designed for (as Brodie in *Started Early* notes, the iPhone is 'a lovely bit of kit' (62)), but the suggestion made by each author is that too much time engaging with media warps our sense of reality, and can make us act in unhealthy ways.

Some of the media events mentioned in the novels place them in a very specific time period as a deliberate act on the part of the authors, for example the unnamed reference to Stephen Lawrence in *NW* (the 'poor defenceless boy' stabbed at an Eltham bus stop (195)). Others unintentionally place them in a precise media ecology by mentioning elements that are no longer relevant, such as references to 'Page 3' in *NW* and *Started Early*, as the use of topless pictures in tabloids has thankfully dwindled out in the years since the publication of these novels. In this regard, these novels work as cultural objects which record, both intentionally and unintentionally, media snapshots of an ever-evolving cultural normality.

These novels explicitly reference British culture and everyday life, often with a particular interest in the area of Britain in which the novels are set. While *Hotel World's* setting is an unnamed British town, the importance of *NW's* geographical location is clear from the title of the novel and chapter titles which use postcodes and place names, and while Yorkshire is not mentioned in the title of *Started Early*, specific elements of its history and culture are mentioned throughout the novel, from the Yorkshire Ripper to Betty's Tea Rooms. Many of the media references that appear within these narratives are just as particular to British culture, from the infamous British tabloids and reality television, soaps and crime dramas referenced by all of the novels, to the music which floats in the air in *NW* (The Kinks) and *Hotel World* (Dusty Springfield).

What is also important however is the global nature of much of the media included in these novels, such as the reference to American television and film, corporate speak, and international interactions made possible through email and online chats. These prove that the 'social meaning' derived through symbolic interaction between the sources and receivers (Altheide, 1995: 3) in these ecologies is an amalgam of British history and culture, and that of the broader world transmitted in real time. This in itself is integral in understanding these novels as texts within the neoliberal context: these novels have been written and set in a time described by Paul Hopper as the contemporary age of globalisation, in which cultural forms have a global reach through the advent of technology such as satellites and the internet, and therefore cultural consumption is no longer purely between the 'elites of different societies' but rather is experienced 'at the popular level' (2007: 29) by the masses. The characters within these novels all operate at the popular level, and while literature may be considered an example of high culture, none of these writers are afraid to use their work to trace the ordinary, common experiences of ordinary, common people. In many ways, the recording of everyday British culture, geography and experience in these novels challenges the homogenised quality of a 'global' media ecology, but the fact that both local and global media are referenced to such an extent confirms Siapera's observation that all elements of a media ecology are 'bound together, acting upon one another', becoming a 'constantly moving and dynamic assemblage' (2018: 10).

References to music, TV, books and computers spill from each of these novels to such an extent that I have not been able to mention every example. The cases I *have* discussed indicate that these writers have engaged with media in a deliberate way, critically commenting on the ecology which surrounds their novels, and in doing so placing their novels as active agents within that ecology. The fact that there are so many thematic crossovers, from references to neoliberal language to the 'dumbing down' of TV, shows that there are common concerns. The intersections of literature and media in these novels enable them to shape and sustain their media ecologies. As the media evolves and changes so quickly, these novels act as a way of recording the ecologies (and inherent issues) of their time, and in doing so embed these as historic artefacts within the novels which have a longer lifespan than the fleeting media they present.

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