Queering Media Suggestion from Mass Hysteria to AI Deception: inventing imaginaries for more just and equitable media futures.

**Introduction**

This chapter will reflect on some of the competing and colliding media imaginaries that structured my own entry into the disciplines of media, communications, and cultural studies in the 1990’s. As this edited book explores, media imaginaries are never just about different media forms and practices, but they are also about the myths, assumptions, stories, structures of feeling, histories, and socialized ways of imagining that frame how we understand the power of media and communication technologies in different conjunctures. In this chapter I explore the overlaps between my personal imaginaries and those normalized media imaginaries which have been the subject of my research over many decades, including the challenges of contagious communication. Contagious communication is a broad umbrella term for forms of communication, such as trends, fads, fashions, emotions, ideas, beliefs, and forms of storytelling which seem to spread throughout populations with a speed and rapidity that is taken to defy the actions of logic and rationality (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001; Blackman, 2012, 2019). I have been particularly interested in the imaginaries which have structured the investigation, description and framing of the challenges of contagious communication that are associated with the mass mediation of affect and emotion, including the phenomenon of mass hysteria.

In different ways, media suggestion has had a bad press historically. It carries and attracts imaginaries which align suggestion to the concept of *susceptibility*, understood through frames which assume there is a lack or deficit, a personality characteristic, a moment of madness, or something about group processes or crowd psychology, which will explain what motivated particular people to act or feel in certain ways. Questions (and answers) of who is more suggestible, rational, irrational, stupid, or able to see through the deception have a long history in media studies. These imaginaries are almost always racialized, classed, gendered, and sexed in ways which reproduce and perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. Even when there is careful attention to the apparatuses of suggestion and the arrangement of forces that can produce suggestive effects and affects (and there are many), there is a longstanding assumption that suggestion is something to be avoided or guarded against and is a problem for those who are seen to be ‘other’ to rationality and civilisation and are “sick” with contagion. Using storytelling as a mode of inquiry, one of the aims of the chapter is to imagine otherwise, and explore some of the work that normative imaginaries do in misrecognising the power of the media.

The reflections in this chapter specifically explore how we might make better use of the concept of 'imaginary' in the struggle for more just and equitable media futures, which foreground and decentre the whiteness, ableism, and heteronormativity of imaginaries that have shaped the problem of media suggestion. I offer the concept of grey media as a social imaginary that can do some of this work with its commitment to staging the social pathologies of reason and its close relationship to disorder and deception. The chapter is organised through three examples which approach imaginaries in and through media, or even *as* media to stage some of the paradoxes, challenges, and problems of deceptive communication. In a contemporary conjuncture, some of these challenges have been increasingly placed at the centre of contemporary debates about power, networks, information, truth, reason, and what is constituted as social pathology. This includes in the context of so-called AI Deception and with how apparatuses of deceit and deception (disinformation) induce and produce processes of attachment and refusal, as they move and circulate within convoluted media environments.

The first example includes my experiences of taking part in a children’s television quiz show in the 1970’s described as a “devious” show based on trying to deceive and influence the decisions of the other competitors. I explore how this imaginary became entangled with a sociotechnical imaginary shaping what became known as “portable media”, with my own imaginaries as a queer child looking towards an elsewhere and elsewhen to the provincial town I grew up. The second example focuses on another example of media suggestion, and the normative imaginaries, which have structured the investigation, explanation and framing of the phenomenon of mass hysteria. Media suggestion or the suggestive power of mediation has a long history, from the pejorative framing of media events seen to defy expectation, such as the orchestration of mass panic within the context of the infamous 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio drama broadcast by Orson Welles, through to the attribution of mass hysteria associated with expressions of mass grief following the death of Princess Diana in 1997 (see Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001).

The third example reflects on my experience of being subjected to an abusive apparatus of deceit and deception during the pandemic lockdown, which led to safeguarding concerns being raised on my behalf. It included being targeted by a range of malicious communications and audacious narratives, forms of harassment and coercive control that were facilitated through digital practices and forms of storytelling designed to induce my commitment to certain forms of sense and nonsense. This experience became one of the entry-points to research and develop the concept of grey media as a social imaginary fit for the complex political-communication environments and abuses of power that are a routine and ordinary part of contemporary geopolitics (Blackman, 2025). In different ways the three examples stage the way in which sociotechnical and sociopsychological imaginaries are part of how the power to suggest and influence takes form and can be refused and resisted. I return to these issues at the end of the chapter, encouraging the cultivation of perplexity and unlearning as an important route towards a dishabituation of the colonial rationalities and “democratic delusions” (Fenton, 2024) that are proving so difficult to vanquish, and which have persisted throughout histories of media suggestion.

**Runaround**

As a young teenager in the late 1970’s I used to lie in bed listening to Radio Luxembourg on a PYE portable transistor radio, also commonly known as a “tranny”. I listened to my tranny with a mono earpiece, as they were called at the time, a hard plastic device for one ear only. The quality of the earpiece matched the quality of the signals as they came in and out of focus, crackling, and waxing and waning as the signal strength increased and decreased. At the time I thought Radio Luxembourg was a pirate radio station, broadcasting from a ship in a location somewhere in the North Sea. It felt illicit, and was my secret, bringing music into my bedroom from its unknown cross-border setting. Its grainy quality with its sense of both proximity and distance allowed me to imagine someplace elsewhere and elsewhen to my turbulent homelife. I loved its spectral quality, and the sense it conjured of other places to the small provincial town I lived in. I had won the PYE transistor radio on a British children’s television show called *Runaround*, hosted by the comedian and actor, Mike Reid, who went on to play Frank Butcher, the “disappointed second-hand car dealer” in the long running British soap opera *Eastenders.*

I was ten years old when I participated in the show in 1976 and was convinced that I was chosen by the production team because I had a visible disability. I remember them coming to the school and talking to our class. I was singled out along with a group of other children and then told at the end of the meeting that I had been chosen to participate in the show. I asked them if it was because I had “one leg longer” and a built-up shoe (perhaps they felt sorry for me I had thought), but they laughed and told me it was because I had a lovely smile. My training for the show didn’t take into account my built-up shoe, and its disabling effects, but only the need to smile and look directly at the camera when the red light came on. I didn’t manage that, and the shoe was to haunt me. It led to me winning the PYE radio, a runner-up prize to the top tier award put aside only for the winner, advertised each week as the “star prize.” That week it was a red Chopper bike popular in the 1970’s, announced through the oohs and ahs, and frenzied cheers of the screaming hyped up children in the live audience.

The show always started with an overview of the prizes, which were very of the time, offering the kids a chance to change their domestic viewing often dictated by patriarchal gendered practices, embodied in the idea of “family viewing” (see Morley, 1986). The prizes offered a new imaginary for a young child, showcasing media devices which would allow consumption practices in the more mobile yet individualized self-contained imaginary associated with the Sony Walkman (Bull, 2000; Du Gay et al, 2013). The prizes reflected this move towards the mobile and portable, and the beginnings of what we might now call the fiction of the autonomous self. This included portable black and white televisions, portable radio cassette players and recorders, and portable radios, with the media devices supplemented by a range of lower tier prizes. These were more obviously gendered, and much less appealing to a queer child, and included cheap calculators, gym bags, and manicure sets.

Runaround required participants to jump between three circles, which had three different answers. The show embodied its own imaginary, normalising the deceit and deception that has become a popular format for reality TV shows, such as *The Traitors.*  There is a long history of these imaginaries, which include the use of cover-stories, props and pranks, traps, confederates, and forms of deception that animate the dramaturgy and stagecraft of reality TV. The socio-technical devices of these shows have overlaps with the devices of the experimental apparatuses associated with the social psychology of (malevolent) influence (see for example, McCarthy 2008; Brown 2012; Blackman, 2019). The format central to *Runaround* was a riff on the dictionary definition of runaround, with its connotations of delaying or evading action until the right moment. The “right moment” hung on a dramatic turn, where the tension would build to see who could influence others to make the wrong answer. The idea was to try to deceive your opponents, and go to a wrong answer, and then when the klaxon sounded, quickly jump to the right one in the short window you were given to “change your mind”.

This was called the *runaround,* which presented challenges for a kid wearing a built-up shoe to correct a marked leg length discrepancy on one side. On the first question we all jumped on the right answer, but due to my clumsiness my ankle gave way, and I ended up on the adjacent circle, with the obviously wrong answer. I was the only one, by design and not desire, who got the question wrong, and I spent most of the show in what was known as the pit. The pit was the punishment, and a shaming device, with frequent shots of me on my own trying not to look upset and disappointed. As the show progressed, I relaxed into my fate as I was joined by many of my competitors who had finally started to get the answers wrong. I had already resolved during my long wait that I would never win the bike. I spent the time scanning the prizes that were all displayed on a circular shelving system depicting an assumed hierarchy of value and status. I had my eye on the portable transistor radio on the third shelf, quite small and inconspicuous, overshadowed by the larger objects. At the end of the show, we were allowed to run towards the prize we wanted and pick it up. This was the ending beloved of the audiences, imagining themselves entering the fray and competing for what was left.

Although this scene was filmed for the audience, at the end we were all told to return the prizes, which would be decided and allocated by one of the show’s producers. This gap between actuality and the fantasy of the competition created a disjuncture with my experience of participating in the show, and the characterisation and editing of the broadcast version.

Thankfully nobody else wanted the radio, and it was mine to covet. It was to open my ears to the power of radio to assemble publics across space who were different to me, allowing me to imagine a different future to the image of the bland conformity represented in the satirical lyrics of the 1962 song *Little Boxes* that we sang in morning assembly at my 1970’s comprehensive school. This school was shaped by the imaginaries of many of the left-leaning liberal teachers who taught there and experiments with the curriculum with its focus on creativity and criticality that was outlawed by Thatcher’s conservative government with the introduction of a national curriculum in 1988.

I have a clear image now as I write this chapter of turning the radio on in the car as I was driven home after the show proudly wearing my *Runaround* T-shirt, as I pushed the earpiece into my ear until it hurt. All it needed was batteries or I could plug it in to a socket, transforming and multiplying my sense of place and possibility. This new magical object allowed me to transport myself to another world and travel with others outside of the confines of what I experienced as a suffocating and controlling home environment. This was to be one of the beginnings of my interest in media imaginaries and in imagining otherwise to the social norms of heteronormativity, ableism, and whiteness that an innocuous media object could put into motion. It sat alongside the power of “event television” of the 1980’s and the ritual of watching Top of the Pops. Top of the Pops became a focus for the queering of popular culture represented in the confluence of style, lyrics, attitude, and politics of the nascent normalisation of LBTQ+ subcultures that entered the living room with a regular parade of non-normative genders and sexualities.

**Mass Hysteria**

Fast forward to 2024 and I have just delivered a lecture exploring the phenomenon of mass hysteria to an international group of MA Media and Communications students in a university setting. Mass hysteria is a term that has recurred throughout histories of media research and was a pejorative term used to describe the mass orchestration of panic that was an unanticipated afterlife of the War of the Worlds media broadcast, which is the subject of the lecture. The lecture is structured through some of the entrenched myths and imaginaries associated with the suggestive and contagious power of media and communication technologies (see Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001, Blackman, 2012, Blackman, 2019, Blackman 2025, for example). I explore how the phenomenon of mass hysteria is overlaid by many media imaginaries that persist, despite their challenges and critiques. I start the lecture with a DIY recording of the War of the Worlds radio broadcast that I have made using archive footage from the original transmission in1938, adapted by Orson Welles. The radio broadcast has become infamous for using the technique of the live rolling news broadcast, or what we might now call the “ideology of liveness” (Kavka, 2012) as part of its suggestive technology. Although arguably contemporary audiences are now more habituated to this ideology, audiences at the time were perhaps less sure about the hybrid object that was being presented to them. The broadcast combined the affordances of radio drama and documentary, journalism, telephony, and the imagination of audiences attuned to the threat of invasion by adversaries in the context of the rise of fascism and Nazism that was being played out in the second world war, a war at that time which America hadn’t yet joined.

The drama used techniques and devices associated with live breaking news, interrupting the story with what was presented as an ongoing case of aliens from Mars invading Earth, and more specifically New Jersey in the USA. Even now it sounds more like an unfolding reportage of events that are actually happening, with the play being interrupted at regular intervals by a series of news bulletins delivered in the format of “breaking news” – a live at the scene series of reports describing Martians landing in cylindrical objects falling from the skies. There are reports given by a journalist who is clearly in a state of panic giving graphic descriptions from a New York rooftop of what is unfolding. There is talk of poisonous gases being released, of the military trying to stop the Alien invasion, and citizens of New Jersey just outside of New York trying to flee the attack. At the end of the first part of the play the reporter falls silent. I ask the students if they could imagine how this event might have caused what was described as “mass panic”? Some of them laugh, they are nervous, we discuss how it is quite commonplace to say other people are affected by the media, but not us. We are knowing, we can see through the mediation, through the mass delusion, we are not irrational or stupid. Those populations who were supposedly “sick with contagion” are different, but we are not sure what the difference is without sounding elitist, racist, and sexist, judging them from the vantage of our superior position.

We begin to discuss the origins of Halloween, perhaps significant for the drama as it was broadcast on the eve of Halloween. We try to imagine together a context and atmosphere -; that it is 8pm in the evening and the eve of Halloween – that you have had your evening meal and are in a slightly heightened state as you are reflecting on Halloween tomorrow night, and how terrified you were last year, where you were interrupted throughout the evening and particularly as it got dark by groups of children, usually with an adult, knocking on your door, dressed in Halloween costumes. We discuss the practice of trick or treating, as it became known, a new past-time to mark Halloween that became popular in the USA in the 1930’s, a practice introduced to America by Scottish and Irish migrants at the end of the nineteenth century. We look at images of the costumes of the time, which we agree can be really terrifying. Some of the costumes were clearly racialized and drew on a catalogue of images associated with degeneracy in 19th/early 20th century discourse – where certain groups were considered more inferior, lowly, and closer to the animal, marking them as “other” to certain constructions of normality and civilization.

We start to explore how, perhaps, (for many of us require the hesitation that *perhaps* allows), it has become possible to imagine experiencing the show through a state of panic, of feeling that it might be true. We start to think more counterfactually, imagining more of the *what if* conditional mode of thinking that AI machines have now normalised with the instantiation of their anticipatory and pre-emptive forms of power (see Bucher, 2018, for example). Is it possible to imagine, perhaps, that some listeners do not like the time around Halloween, and to start to imagine that it might be true under certain conditions – that Martians have chosen the eve of Halloween to invade Earth and particularly the USA? That you might experience a range of emotions where you don’t feel like you can think straight – where you feel an accompanying sense of nervousness, adrenalin, you are sweating, and you start to anticipate the worst. You don’t know what to do but you decide you must alert your neighbours to the unfolding catastrophe. The adrenalin carries you at speed to knock on doors and breathlessly warn everybody of the war and threat that is taking place just outside New York. The panic spreads becoming a collective shared phenomena that would later be described as mass hysteria. You return to your house and like your neighbours you decide to ring the police, but the phone lines are jammed.

In one of my first books, I explored the long history of pathologizing mass audiences that recurs throughout media research analysing media contagions (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). This includes Hadley Cantril’s research into the phenomenon of mass hysteria as part of the Princeton radio project, which was written up as a book, *The Invasion of Mars: A Study of the Psychology of Panic* (1940). The research was groundbreaking, with its mixed-methodology, that combined interviews (130 people), and content analysis of some 12,000 newspaper articles, with an astute analysis of the conjuncture, including the structures of feeling expressed by populations recovering from the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Despite this, perhaps captured by the subtitle of the book, he was keen to measure and isolate the personality characteristic of susceptibility in those audiences who did feel and act upon their panic in particular ways, believing perhaps that it might be true. As he stated on page 137 of the book,

We must infer that some predisposition has operated as a selective force so that some persons are consistently impressed by experiences which leave others unaffected. This particular pattern of sensitivity and the characteristic behaviour it determines is a general personality trait (Cantril 1940, 137).

On the one hand his research was funded and commissioned to understand the mass panic, a subject of interest to governments and the military in the context of attempts to orchestrate morale, propaganda, and shape public opinion. However, his research also put into motion a discourse about vulnerability and the mass-mediated vulnerable mind that has many social lives and afterlives. This discourse is notably sexed, classed, gendered, and racialized through colonial evolutionary discourses which posit certain groups- women, children, people with different sexualities and genders, the working classes, and colonial subjects - as more susceptible to suggestion (see Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). The cultural studies theorist Jackie Orr (2009) draws out the contradictions and tensions in this framing, in her book *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder.* Writing from the position of an academic who lives in and through a diagnosis of panic disorder, she cogently explores how the concept of disorder carries her own ambivalence about the medicalization of feelings that she argues cannot be divorced from the cultures of panic which produce anxious feelings.

The book itself is a genealogy of suggestion in the context of PSYCHOpower, a term that she uses to capture an imaginary, where suggestive techniques and methods of deception are an ordinary part of “technologies of power and techniques of knowledge developed by normalizing society to regulate the psychological life of individuals and groups” (p.11). Orr maps the myriad of apparatuses of suggestion through which it is possible to explore and analyze the common links between the military, governments, media and communication technologies, propaganda, and public relations, whilst she writes up her own experiences of taking a pharmaceutical drug designed to help her manage her panic, and perform social norms associated with being an academic (also see Martin, 2006). My current research takes these links as an *a priori* for exploring the complexities of media suggestion within different apparatuses of power, communication and feeling (Blackman, 2025). Rather than pathologize audiences or participants who are framed as more or even overly suggestible, I analyse and foreground the production of affects and emotions of convolution as a central part of the operations of technologies of PSYCHOpower (see Blackman, 2023 a and b).

Affects and emotions of convolution challenge distinctions between the rational and the irrational, the normal and the pathological, the social and the psychological, and the sane and insane. They are confusing, disorienting, upending, and disorganizing feelings that breach and unsettle normative horizons of expectation and morality. They are part and parcel of our experience of events which breach social norms and confront us with the limits of normative scripts and horizons of expectation, and the imaginaries that carry and actualize them. They are an important part of the operations of gray media, a term that I use to refer to modes of power that operate through forms of storytelling that play with indeterminacies of sense, feeling and perception. Grey media are socio-medial-technical apparatuses of deceit and deception, which exploit and weaponize indeterminacies through specific structures of communication and feeling. Rather than distort the social production of truth or facts, they convolute – that is they proliferate and multiply versions of reality based on counterfactual forms of reasoning – what I call *media abductions*. They are primarily forms of information warfare that are part of “battles for the control of narrative” within contexts of abuse, war, entertainment, the courts, and politics, that are now commonplace within the public sphere.

**Gray Media**

This section will consolidate this argument and relate it to an experience of harassment and abuse that I was subjected to over a period of two years, which became one of the entry-points in developing an analysis of grey media and a social imaginary that does justice to its operations and workings. Grey media are a genre of media that work through *media abductions*, that is primarily by attempting to lead the target and others astray, or away, from the implied “facts of the matter” through the construction of counterfactual scenarios of both sense and nonsense. These counterfactual narratives multiply and proliferate depending on the demands of the present moment. In this formulation, grey media regularly incorporate routine, and habitual lies, errors, fabrications, fallacies, inconsistencies, biases, nudges, prompts, traps, and pre-emptive forms of reasoning based on false information, and conditional modes of *what if* thinking. They primarily appeal to social norms based on inequalities and oppression and to *historialities,* that is to forms of storytelling, narratives and imaginaries that persist, despite their contestation and even rejection at specific historical moments, including those that are racist, sexist, and homophobic, for example (see Blackman, 2019).

Gray media refers specifically to these forms of storytelling that are identifiable through their use of specific structures of communication and feeling that operate through semiotic combat and communicative control. They are actualized through practices, such as circular causality, hijacked victimhood, baiting, charm offensives, smear campaigns, trolling, blame-shifting, boundary violations, plausible deniability, future-faking, false claims, triangulation, righteous indignation, and strategic perfidy. The practices of deceit and deception can be found in genres of disinformation and misinformation as well as in practices associated with coercive control and what is more commonly referred to as gaslighting in the context of emotional and psychological abuse (see Blackman, 2022, for example). Gaslighting is a term that has taken on more popular currency in the context of new forms of deception and deceit related to the affordances of AI and software media and their capacities to make things up. As many have argued, the confabulations of AI, challenge the rationality and even sanity of the intelligences expressed by AI machine-thinking, showing how error, bias, failure, and fallacy are an important expression of the pre-emptive modes of power that are part of its conditional modes of reasoning (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018, Madianou, 2025). Alongside a potent and much-hyped socio-technical imaginary that AI will change everything (see for example, Zylinska 2022), there exist a range of contrasting imaginaries that can also be found in histories and analyses of earlier media practices, such as Virtual and Simulated Realities (see Wood, 1998).

In John Wood’s (1998) edited collection, *The Virtual Embodied* for example, the book explores the capriciousness of imaginaries surrounding understandings of the virtual, in terms of the new media technologies of the time, and their ethical, moral, embodied, and aesthetic promises and limitations. The contrasting imaginaries included both utopian and dystopian discourses, none of which adequately captured the hopes and fears as they became realised over time. Similarly, the public narratives that communicate and project forms of “AI anxiety” for example (see Wang et al, 2023), including so-called “AI evil” (Krishna, 2024) and AI failure (see for example Barassi, 2024), foreground and question some of the myths surrounding what kind of intelligences, cognitive, social, technical, and embodied, are being modelled and manifested through the problem of AI Deception, and AI failure, including the phenomenon of so-called AI Hallucinations. Using the lens of grey media allows an analysis that explores more of the continuities and histories between the imaginaries structuring AI Deception, and those which have structured mediated forms of suggestion, as they are lived and experienced in contexts of power, coercion, and abuse.

***Vignette.***

It is 2020 and we are in lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. I am experiencing a prolonged and intense period of gaslighting and psychological abuse. At the same time, there is a lot of talk of the effects of isolation and screen fatigue in the discipline of media and communication studies, as well as the necessity and importance of polymedia (Madianou, 2014), different media and communication practices, including screen-based communications, to connect with others. Whilst these discussions take place in different fora, I am having my own experiences of an apparatus of communication and power associated with what I now call “gaslighting-as-media” where I am targeted through a range of malicious communication practices (see Blackman, 2025). The abuse is expressed through a suggestive apparatus of communication and power that is largely taking place through different forms of mediated communication confusing the one-to-many and many-to-many characterizations of mediated interaction (see Thompson, 2020). This includes emails to and about me that multiply and proliferate. The malicious messages are also communicated to me through telephone calls from third parties, and letters that are shared with me. The letters are written by the perpetrator making false allegations and absurd fallacious claims about me. Sometimes the messages are sent to me directly, blind copying me into emails, that are written about me but not to me, commonly known as a form of triangulation.

At other times I am directly sent doctored materials with hidden messages, with the audacious content becoming more convoluted over time. The narratives form and reform, changing shape with many angles and expressions. They shift and change depending on the exigencies and agendas of the perpetrator at different moments. The content circulates and is expressed across multiple objects, devices, and media. I am always positioned as the one driving the action and the adversary despite my silence and non-responsiveness. I feel safer because I at least have the boundary of my physical home away from those perpetrating the abuse. This sense of enclosure brings some sense of solace. My story of being subjected to a suggestive apparatus of deceit and deception with long histories, is an example of what Berlant (1998) called the non-personal. This is a term that recognises the publicness of the personal, and how our private intimacies are bound up with public norms, that reveal the non-sovereign, unstable, ambivalent, messy, disruptive, and complicated forms of attachment that shape and reshape what is considered intelligible and unintelligible.

Through no wish or desire on my part, I had been led into a disturbing upside-down world, which felt more like a scene of abjection. It was unbelievable yet actuality and started my own quest to try to understand some of what I was being forced to experience, despite my non-participation and silence. The scene of abjection was made up of people who say one thing and mean another, of pathological lying, of fabricated evidence, of patient confidentiality, of fantastical stories that made no sense, of hidden clues and doctored materials that hinted at the glee and satisfaction the protagonist was experiencing, a series of prompts and triggers that arrived in my inbox and through the post with great speed and regularity. Many of the communications told me who I was and what the problem was, staging encounters that I am sure never happened, and assessments that attributed faux psychological armchair diagnoses to me, made by specific individuals, real or imagined. It was as if I was reading about myself through a third person or indeed, a multitude of different people who I suspect were the same person, the protagonist.

At the same time an event that was presented as a fact, and a criminal act, was transformed into a series of mistaken identities, wrong turns, false claims, motivated crusades, ad hominem attacks, organisational vendettas, hateful figures, and unstable and unreliable narrators. The fact very soon became overlaid and even overloaded by multiple audacious narratives which shifted and changed depending on the demands of the present moment. The narratives were contradictory, inconsistent, and clearly made-up. My experiences were bizarre, disturbing, weird, and profoundly shocking. There were strange associations to people who were active in networks that forged alliances between wellness cultures (particularly alkaline ionized water and turmeric), and controversial groups linked to the Far Right, aligned to the anti-vax movement, and conspiracies such as QANON. I had come to live and experience this commitment to not follow rules, as the key marker of the combat situation I had been forced into.

**Media abductions**

In this context I began to think about the writings of the philosopher Isabelle Stengers and her investigations of suggestive technologies and apparatuses in the context of hypnosis and magic. I have always taken seriously her provocations to think about what we would need to *unlearn* to take seriously the puzzle of suggestive communication. Unlearning is a different sensibility shaped through becoming dishabituated to normative imaginaries, and particularly the idea that suggestion is not ordinary, but aligned to extreme or exceptional modes of communication. These are usually associated with events that breach what has settled as common sense, truth, or has achieved the status of fictions that function in truth (see Blackman, 2023a). Motives must and will be found to explain their exceptional nature so that the affective ideologies of common sense prevail. The phenomenon of mass hysteria is a good example of long histories of attempts to understand just what this suggestion is that we are supposed to avoid, to paraphrase Stengers. It makes visible a horizon of normative assumptions that has persisted throughout media research.

Stengers proposes the need to refuse explanation or knowingness, particularly towards the long history of scientific and other forms of knowledge that have attempted to settle debates. It is an interesting argument and one that has many resonances. The translation of her book *Hypnosis: Between Magic and Science* (2024) into English, provides an important and urgent contribution to the genealogies of influence that appear, disappear, and reappear across the histories of ideas, and in those psychological and philosophical knowledge practices that have shaped how media suggestion has been produced as a particular kind of object. Despite astute analyses of their methods of duplicity and dissimulation, there is still an assumption that a knowing subject can reflexively understand and return to sense (see Honig, 2021). This leaves behind a borderland of “unknowing subjects”, the supposed mad, irrational, stupid and unstable, who primarily exist in and through the deception (see Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001).

This social distinction operates as a pathologising and shaming act that does not do justice to the production and experience of affects and emotions of convolution. Affects and emotions of convolution normalise the *feeling* of apparatuses which primarily operate through convolution (multiplying realities) whilst creating “fictional stop-gaps” (confabulations) that shift and change depending on the demands of the present moment (also see Blackman, 2023 a and b). They are part of speculative modes of power that are manifest in many different contexts and settings, including synthetic and software media, and are part of the framing of a range of fears associated with AI deception as I have already signalled. They are routine and ordinary and part and parcel of expressions of PSYCHOpower as they have been developed and honed within different contexts of power and abuse.

My use of the term media abductions is an attempt to queer the imaginaries associated with media suggestion, moving the analysis of suggestive apparatuses of deceit and deception into their contexts of production and reception. Rather than pathologize targets or those who get caught up in the deception, my focus is on the common links between suggestive communication and media technologies with those found in information warfare and the gaslighting of psychological abuse. As a genre of grey media, they challenge and unsettle liberal moral norms, weaponize the dilemmatic nature of affective and social life, and circulate within relations of distrust, disbelief, uncertainty, and confusion, creating zones of indescribability, opacity, and discordance. They are modes of deceptive and suggestive storytelling that have common structures of communication and unfeeling, whilst staging and performing some of the strange and illogical couplings of feeling-rules and actions, which are part of their operations. They are deceptive scenes that require actors and agents who revel in their own sense of calculative rationality (one of reason’s social pathologies), and targets who reveal what we can both know and not know about these operations at the same time.

Media abductions involve and provide a setting for confabulations - so-called emotional forms of reasoning that have been excised from colonial rationality, whilst showing us just how weird and strange colonial rationalities are. In the psychological sciences confabulation is associated with both creativity and disorder, unsettling distinctions between the sane and insane, rational, and emotional, moral, and immoral. Media abductions provide a lens for exploring important questions about what we are willing to include or accept under the sign of the human, consciousness, cognition, suggestion, sanity, and rationality (also see Hayles, 2017; Sampson, 2012). The analysis of these common structures of communication and feeling also have much to contribute to debates about the nature and limits of the forms of reasoning and intelligence that are manifest in the errors and failures associated with generative AI (see Barassi, 2024). Disinformation and AI Deception are two of the contexts shaped by normative imaginaries through which deceptive communication has become an acceptable object of study. These two contexts exist alongside their spectral other – non-physical abuse, which is more likely to be individualised, psychologised, and surrounded by shame, secrecy, and silence, more popularly associated with “losing one’s mind” or being gaslit (see Blackman, 2025).

**Conclusion**

The critical reflections offered in this chapter are designed to open up issues that queer the problem of media suggestion, paving the way for a discussion of the concept of *media abductions*. The concept of media abductions normalises the ordinariness of suggestion, turning our attention to the communicative and affective operations of apparatuses of suggestion and their routine structures of feeling and power. My current research explores the common storytelling structures which link AI Deception, information warfare and the mediality of abuse (Blackman, 2025). The concept of media abductions is offered as the basis of a queer imaginary for challenging some of the habituated and normalised imaginaries which have shaped the problem of media suggestion across these three contexts. In the current conjuncture, the subject of media suggestion has become an object of study in the context of conspiracy theories, post-truth, and disinformation, and more broadly with how apparatuses of deceit and deception induce and produce processes of attachment and refusal, as they move and circulate within convoluted media environments.

Mark Fisher (2017) cogently argued in his book, *The Weird and the Eerie,* that slowing down, pausing, and looking around for new concepts, and unlearning those that have taken on a ubiquitous status is necessary to effect social change. Some of the issues explored and staged in the scenes throughout this chapter I hope make more visible the need to create new imaginaries for more just and equitable media futures. This has been a longstanding commitment of my research, some of which I bring together in this chapter, moving backwards and forwards between the past, present and futures of suggestion, with its refusals to settle as a stable knowable object and its invitation to consider its weird and strange potentialities. Queering suggestion encourages a sensitivity and commitment to create the conditions to imagine with and through the weirdness and strangeness of suggestive apparatuses of communication and power in modes of communal support, care, and solidarities.

Bibliography

Barassi, V (2024) Toward a Theory of AI Errors: Making Sense of Hallucinations, Catastrophic Failures, and the Fallacy of Generative AI. *Harvard Data Science Review*, (Special Issue 5). https://doi.org/10.1162/99608f92.ad8ebbd4

Blackman, L (2025) *Grey Media: Gaslighting, Post Truth, AI Deception.* Goleta, California: Punctum Books.

Blackman, L (2023 a)  **[Emotions and Affects of Convolution](https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/31295/).** In: Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 326-346.

Blackman, L (2023 b)  **[Cover stories and the Counterfactual: Berlant’s parenthetical voice](https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/34059/).** *Media Theory*, 7(2), pp. 245-266.

Blackman, L (2022) **[Future-Faking, Post-Truth and Affective Media](https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/30584/)**. In: Joanna Zylinkska, ed. *The Future of Media*. London: Goldsmiths Press, pp. 59-78.

Blackman, L (2019)  ***[Haunted Data: Affect, Transmedia, Weird Science](https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/21971/).*** London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Blackman, L (2012)  ***[Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation](https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/5981/).*** London and New York: Sage.

Blackman, L and Walkerdine, V (2001) *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies. Basingstoke and New York:* Palgrave.

Brown, S (2012) Experiment: Abstract experimentalism. In: C. Lury and N. Wakeford (eds.) *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bucher, T (2018) *If…Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bull, M (2000) *Sounding out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*. Oxford; New York: Berg.

Cantril, H (1940) *The Invasion from Mars*: *A Study on the Psychology of Panic.* 1st edn. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L.,Mackay, H and Negus, K (2013) *Doing Cultural Studies: the story of the Sony Walkman.* London: Sage.

Fisher, M (2017) *The Weird and the Eerie,* London: Repeater Books.

Fenton, N (2024) *Democratic Delusions. How the Media Hollows out Democracy and what we can do about it.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hayles, K (2017) *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Unconscious.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Honig, B (2021) *Feminist Criticism After Trump.* New York: Fordham University.

Kavka, M (2012) *Reality TV*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Krishna, V (2024) AI and contemporary challenges: The good, bad and the scary. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market and Complexity*. Volume 10, Issue 1. [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joitmc.2023.100178](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joitmc.2023.100178" \t "_blank" \o "Persistent link using digital object identifier)

Madianou, M (2025) *Technocolonialism : When Technology for Good Is Harmful*. Cambridge: Polity.

Madianou, M (2014) Smartphones as Polymedia. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19.3 (2014), 667–80 <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12069>

Martin, E (2006) The Pharmaceutical Person. *Biosocieties. 1, 273-287.*

McCarthy, A (2008) Stanley Milgram, Allan Funt and me: Post-war Social Science and the First Wave of Reality TV in S. Murray and L. Ouellete (eds), *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture.* New York: New York University Press.

Morley, D (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure.* London and New York: Routledge.

Noble, S (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* New York: NYU Press.

Orr, J (2009) *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sampson, T (2012) *Virality: Contagion in the Age of the Network.* Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.

Stengers, I (2024) *Hypnosis: Between Magic and Science. London: Bloomsbury Academic*

Thompson, J (2020) Mediated Interaction in the Digital Age. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *37*(1), 3-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418808592>

Wang, W., Downey, J., & Yang, F. (2023). AI anxiety? Comparing the sociotechnical imaginaries of artificial intelligence in UK, Chinese and Indian newspapers. *Global Media and China*, *0*(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364231196547>

Wood, J (1998) *The Virtual Embodied: Practice, Presence, Technology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Zylinska, J (2022) (eds) *The Future of Media.* London: Goldsmiths Press.