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The Future of Poetry in the Digital Era - Instapoetry and Remediation

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Instapoetry.....	6
Instapoetry as Remediation.....	11
Instapoetry as Decline of a Cultural Elite.....	18
Social Value in Instapoetry.....	23
A. Accessibility.....	23
B. Effect.....	28
Conclusion.....	34
Works Cited.....	37

Abstract

In recent years, Instagram has become a popular platform for the publishing of poetry. While some have found a resurgence in poetry appreciation heartening, others have taken issue with this format. Critics of what has been termed “Instapoetry” argue that what is being published on the platform is not of cultural value. For some, it is not even deserving of the term poetry. This thesis makes two arguments. The first is that such judgements are no longer truly possible to make. The state of culture has changed dramatically in the last decades, and traditional hierarchies of culture no longer exist. The second is that Instapoetry, examined as a social phenomenon rather than a cultural one, can be seen to have a value to society as a separate entity from more traditional forms of poetry. The thesis will accomplish this by first laying out a framework for understanding Instapoetry not simply as poetry, but rather a remediated form of it. Literature from authors concerned with media and culture will be used, notably Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin and Marshall McLuhan. Other literature concerned with social media in particular will also be consulted. The paper concludes that while questions of value have become far more complex in the digital era, one can state with certainty that Instapoetry does have value, and that as a remediated form of poetry, this value is in part something that traditional poetry does not possess.

INTRODUCTION

“(…) you put that shit on the internet, and you’re not a writer you’re a blogger, or you’re an Insta-journalist, or you’re an Instapoet, or you’re a tweeter. And suddenly that diminishes all sense of form of what you’re doing. I think that if anyone had had the platform that we have now, they’d be doing exactly the same thing. I’m going to take pride in being an Instapoet, and if that’s what you want to do, fucking do it, because you can”.

- Charly Cox, transcribed from the documentary #poetry (2018) by Ariel Bissett

In 2018, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published a report that poetry reading in the U.S.A had “dramatically increased” in recent years (Iyengar). Sunil Iyengar, the NEA director of research and analysis, was hesitant to attribute this rise to poetry publication on social media but was equally hesitant to deny a correlation. The group which saw the highest increase, the 18-24 age group, had more than doubled in the five years since 2012. Book sales of poetry had also risen in 2017. Despite Iyengar’s reluctance to do so, some people have already attributed this to the phenomenon of Instapoetry - short, snappy poems largely about love, feminism, and mental health, that are shared on the social media platform Instagram. These poems are instantly recognisable to the familiar viewer. Instapoets garner followers in the millions, and those who have published poetry collections in print are topping bestseller lists worldwide (Forbes; Andrews McMeel). However, Instapoetry has received harsh criticism from poets and critics alike, who claim that, amongst other things, it lacks quality, and is even undeserving of the term poetry. This has resulted in Instapoetry becoming a charged term, often used to exclude those writing it from the literary world.

Many of its critics claim that Instapoetry is lacking in cultural value, especially when compared to more traditional forms of poetry.

While the current discussion surrounding Instapoetry is primarily concerned with whether or not it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ poetry (or even poetry at all), such questions do not yield much by way of academic interest. Here, the concern is with what particular processes are at play in the writing and publication of Instapoetry that differentiate it from poetry published in the past and through other media, notable in print. In order to accomplish this, this thesis will examine the particular processes that occur when there is a significant shift in the medium through which a work of art is published. An answer to the question “is there cultural value in Instapoetry?” will be formulated by examining both the process of remediation and what can be said to constitute culture in an era dominated by a multitude of new media. As a result of this examination, this thesis makes clear that this question is both more complex than it is being presented by those who oppose Instapoetry. This is primarily due to changes in the way that culture is hierarchised (or, more specifically, no longer hierarchised), in current times. Because of this change in hierarchies in culture, this question will later be simplified to “is there value in Instapoetry?”, with an examination of its value in a social sense as well as cultural sense taking place. As well as this, it is important to understand that there exists a fundamental difference between conventional poetry and Instapoetry. This difference is produced by the fact that, through the changing of the medium of publication, Instapoetry is remediated poetry, as opposed to simply poetry. They must therefore be examined as something that, while similar, are two separate entities. These two features will form the core theoretical framework for examining the relationship between the two art forms.

Plenty has been written about media and the effects that changes in media can have. In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan introduced the idea of the importance of media with his statement: “The Medium is the Message”, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

(1964). Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin greatly expanded upon this theory with their work *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), where they developed an entire theory of the process of what they termed remediation (the dynamic relationship between old and emerging media). Each one of these authors questioned the importance of the medium, and therefore their work proves invaluable in understanding the fundamental differences between poetry in print and poetry in social media.

Jay David Bolter expanded on his work with Richard Grusin earlier this year, in *The Digital Plenitude: The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of Digital Media* (2019). In this work, he examines two concurrent phenomena: the extent to which our lives are structured across networks of new media, and the disappearance of what he terms “culture with a capital C” (1). These three books, along with writing concerned specifically with social media, provide the framework through which it is possible to understand the change that occurs when poetry becomes entwined with social media. The third work provides a basis in understanding the precise way that understandings of cultural value have shifted over the course of the last fifty years.

With the understanding of the shift in cultural hierarchies in contemporary society explained, this thesis will examine what value (cultural, social or otherwise), can be found within Instapoetry. It will be examined for the way in which it differs from conventional poetry and what function it performs that conventional poetry might be unable to. This section considers not only the value of Instapoetry itself, but also sheds some light on the what some positive results social media may yield, at a time when it is often viewed for its negative effects on contemporary society.

It is beneficial to clarify what is intended by certain terms. Instapoet, Instapoem and Instapoetry are all terms that have recently emerged, and as a result have definitions that may still have fluctuating meanings. For the purpose of this thesis, Instapoet is used to refer to a

writer who primarily publishes their work on the social media platform Instagram. This individual may also publish their poetry conventionally in physical collections, and may also participate in spoken word poetry, but the primary platform through which their work is dispersed is Instagram. Instapoem and Instapoetry will refer to the work that they share on the platform but will also be used to describe work published by Instapoets through more conventional media such as orally or in print. The reason for this will become clearer throughout this paper but is still worth noting in advance. The phrase conventional poetry will also appear and is not used in this instance to refer to poems that follow particular conventions of form. It is rather used simply as a general term to refer to poetry that exists independently of social media. In particular, it will be used to refer work that predates the advent of social media poetry, although this is not intended to exclude contemporary poetry that has been published through other media.

INSTAPOETRY

The term Instapoetry is a portmanteau of the words Instagram and poetry. In simple terms, it can be defined as precisely what its name indicates - poetry that is shared on the social media platform Instagram. However, there are particular attributes in Instapoetry that make it immediately recognisable, even when it exists outside of the platform itself (such as in print).

The first and perhaps most widely noted attribute of Instapoetry is its length. Most pieces comprise of ten lines or less, and many are significantly shorter. Some of the most highly followed Instagram poets, such as Rupi Kaur, r.h. sin, and R. M. Drake have published poems with fewer than twenty words. Of course, brevity is no new feature of poetry - haikus, for example, which date back to the 17th century, consist of only seventeen syllables and therefore cannot be longer than as many words. There is an important distinction worth making here between the two however: namely that the seventeen-syllable structure of the haiku is a formal constraint imposed by the form, whereas in short Instapoetry, a shorter piece represents a stylistic decision made by the author. In terms of constraint, the only imposition on the Instapoet is what can fit into the 1080 by 1080-pixel square. It is also necessary that the font size be viewable on a smart phone screen. This however does not represent a formal constraint (there is no formal criteria on what constitutes an Instapoem), but rather a limitation that results from having been published on the platform.

Another feature of Instapoetry is that the majority of it is written in non-rhyming free verse. Of course, this is not to say that there are no sonnets published on Instagram, or poems employing any other rhyme scheme or structure. Such poems surely do exist. However, an examination of the poems of the five most followed Instapoets (Rupi Kaur, R.M. Drake, r.h. sin, Atticus and Lang Leave) reveals that none of their work deviates from the system of free

verse, and none of it follows a rhyme scheme. It is thus reasonable to state that free verse is one of the distinguishing features of what is here termed Instapoetry.

Instapoets often incorporate other media into their work. Rupi Kaur's poems are often accompanied by her simple line drawings, and other poets too have illustrations in their work, either their own or produced by others. Instapoets such as R. M. Drake superimpose their poems over photographs, which again can be either their own or another person's work. The inclusion of an artist's work within the poem is often accompanied by a link to the artist themselves (which more often than not is another Instagram account). Another way in which other media are incorporated into Instapoetry can be seen in the works of Instapoets who type up their work on vintage typewriters and photograph the page in order to publish the piece.

It is important to recognise that none of these distinguishing features of Instapoetry cannot also be found in conventional poetry. Despite the fact that many people would probably claim to recognise Instapoetry at a glance, it is hard to pinpoint the exact nature of what makes the form so recognisable. For the purpose of this thesis, Instapoetry is defined in the simplest terms as 'poetry shared on Instagram', but even this requires two points of clarification. Firstly, poetry of this description is not only shared on Instagram. Other platforms such as Facebook and Tumblr have also seen similar styles of poetry shared. Whilst the usage of other social media platforms for sharing poetry has decreased recently (admittedly a difficult statement to confirm), it is still worth noting that the phrase 'social media poetry' is perhaps a more inclusive term than Instapoetry. More importantly, it is worth noting that the term Instapoetry refers not to poetry shared on the platform, but to poetry written with the specific intent of being shared on the platform. A poem that has existed independent from the platform that has later been shared (either by the poet or by a third party) does not become Instapoetry *ex post facto*. This is an important distinction to be made, the importance of which will become clearer later.

A final note on Instapoetry, which while perhaps obvious to most, is still very much worth noting in advance, is that the platform is free to use. While users may pay for certain services from third parties (such as boosting the number of followers or ‘likes’ on a post), the platform is free to use both for sharing and viewing. Economic remuneration for the Instapoet occurs, in its core, outside of the platform, although of course publicity for such action often occurs within it.

Alongside the rising popularity of Instapoetry, increasing criticism of the form has also arisen. Articles with titles like “Instagram Poets Are Ruining Everything (I’m Looking At You R.M. Drake)” and “Those Instagram poets are ruining everything good in the world” (Saienni; Bakdash). Poet Rebecca Watts published an article in PN Review titled “The Cult of the Noble Amateur”, where she described Instapoetry as “the open denigration of intellectual engagement” (Watts).

While much time could be dedicated to breaking down and presenting all the critical responses to Instapoetry, it is perhaps more productive to summarise. The central issues of many of the critics of Instapoetry revolve around a similar statement: namely that there exists no cultural value in Instagram poetry. Whether due to claims of amateurship in writing, a general disdain for the usage of a social media platform for the purpose of publishing poetry, or criticism of a particular Instapoet’s work in general, the bottom line of all criticism can be understood as a rejection of any notion of cultural value within Instapoetry.

The response to Instapoetry hasn’t only been critical. Many articles have come to the defence of Instapoetry. Some have argued that Instapoetry is just a natural movement within the art form (Leszkiewicz). Others have argued that the resistance to Instapoets (many of whom are women or people of colour), is an example of gatekeeping by an art form that has long been dominated by white males (Morris). In 2018, Ariel Bissett of the University of Ottawa released a documentary called #poetry where a number of academics and poets share

their views on Instapoetry, why it has come under attack recently, and why there is cultural value in the art form. The documentary starts with a shot of a smart phone leaning up against books on a bookshelf. The phone is showing the Instagram story feature of Charly Cox and she says:

“(...) you put that shit on the internet, and you’re not a writer you’re a blogger, or you’re an Insta-journalist, or you’re an Instapoet, or you’re a tweeter. And suddenly that diminishes all sense of form of what you’re doing. I think that if anyone had had the platform that we have now, they’d be doing exactly the same thing. I’m going to take pride in being an Instapoet, and if that’s what you want to do, fucking do it, because you can”. (#poetry)

This quote has been included because it presents two points that are of interest.

Firstly, there is a resistance by people using these social media platforms to the names assigned to them. Bloggers want to be called writers, and Instapoets want to be called poets. New terms for similar creative practices as the medium change are interesting because they could be for one of two purposes. They arise either out of a sufficiently new role of the individual which justifies a new title, or they arise as a means to deny them the title that they would have wished to be awarded. Which of these is the case here remains to be seen.

Secondly, there is the statement “if anyone had had the platform that we have now, they’d be doing exactly the same thing”. This statement is interesting not because of what it addresses, but because of what it does not address. Asking whether or not William Shakespeare or Homer would have shared their work on Instagram had it been available is not the right question to be asking. There is little to be gained from speculating whether or not writers from the past would have used the platforms available to them were they alive in the present. One could go to great depths on this subject and ultimately any conclusion would be nearly impossible to prove and would reveal little by way of academic interest. The right question to

be asking would be what their work might have looked like had they been writing on and for a platform like Instagram. Had they used it, their work would have been influenced by the medium itself, and this would result in an entirely different corpus of work. The reason for this is that with the change in medium, the form of poetry itself changes. This is what Bolter and Grusin examine in their theory of remediation.

INSTAPOETRY AS REMEDIATION

To understand if there is cultural value in Instapoetry, and what this value might be, it is important to first understand the process that is occurring when Instagram is used as a platform for poetry publication. While the majority of conventional poetry has been published through the medium of print, Instapoetry is predominantly digital (there are of course exceptions to both halves of this statement - poetry forms like slam poetry exist outside of printed media, and there are Instapoets published in print media or who perform their poetry orally at events. But generally speaking, these are the two media that each form is predominantly published through). The movement from the printed medium to a digital medium is in itself an incredibly important one. It is the only perceivable and significant difference that one can state with absolute certainty between poetry and Instapoetry. Claims that Instapoets are just bad poetry writers are hard to substantiate. Statements about the amateur nature of Instapoets are either equally hard to substantiate or can be broken down into statements about the accessibility of social media to individuals of any talent. Changes in media have been written about extensively by writers like Marshall McLuhan, Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska.

Marshall McLuhan began exploring the importance of the role of the medium in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). He argued that the medium through which ideas are conveyed is as important as the ideas themselves, and from a social and personal perspective, it is the medium that carries power, not the content. Major changes can be seen as resulting not from the invention of new ideas, but rather as a result of the usage of new media. He gives as an example commercial train travel (20). The idea of getting from point A to point B was by no means a revolutionary idea that coincided with commercial train travel. Horses and cars had both already been concerned with precisely the

same notion. However, the scale of commercial air travel had massive economic and political consequences, not as the result of some new idea, but as the result of an acceleration brought about by the medium. Of the statement “the medium is the message”, he writes: “the “message” of any medium of technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” (19). The same kind of process is at play in the writing and sharing of Instapoetry. The idea behind writing poetry has not changed at all, but the scale, pace and pattern of poetry changes dramatically when the medium becomes a digital social media platform like Instagram. In writing “message”, he is referring to the “personal and social consequences” that a medium has (19). Another important aspect of McLuhan’s work is the point that media carry another media as their content:

(...) the “content” of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, “What is the content of speech?” it is necessary to say, “It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself non-verbal. (19)

This is perhaps easier to illustrate when looking at the example of Instagram and Instapoetry. Without another medium as its content, Instagram would be a hollow platform. Without content, the social media website, for all intents and purposes, does not exist. The images that fill the Instagram page of the producer and the Instagram feed of the user are the content, but they are themselves another medium, either photographic images, digital images, or a combination of the two. In the case of Instapoetry, these images carry the medium of print, and so return to McLuhan’s aforementioned chain of media. Instagram becomes just one more chain in the link of media, from thought to speech to writing to print, and now, to Instagram.

To better understand the process through which this chain of media functions, it is useful to jump a few decades forward, to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's theory of remediation. While certainly inspired by McLuhan's conception of the medium, Bolter and Grusin examined this concept in more depth, paying attention to specific examples as well as overarching theory. In *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), they examine not only the role of the medium, but also the interaction between different media. They are particularly interested in the interaction between older, traditional media and burgeoning new media (particularly digital media), as the process of remediation between these media currently operates at an unprecedentedly fast pace.

Media, they argue, function as tools that allow the sharing of experience between individuals (3). This is the process of mediation, the process of the transference of experience. The way that new media emerge, and reform or even replace older media, is what they term remediation. In their own words, remediation is "the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another. This belief in reform is particularly strong for those who are today repurposing earlier media into digital forms" (59). This is the reason that their theory of remediation is so important to consider when examining the phenomenon of Instapoetry. Instagram, or rather, social media in general, is a new medium with new and unforeseen effects on contemporary societies. However, the particular process that is being performed through Instapoetry represents a repurposing of earlier media (oral, writing, print) into new media (digital, photography, graphic design).

The process of remediation has what they refer to as a "double logic" (21). Firstly, remediation is concerned with the erasure of evidence that an experience is being transferred through a media at all, such as immersive virtual reality or the desktop of the personal computer, developed to mimic the layout of the desk of the user. They term this process immediacy, referring not to the speed of a process, but to the transparency of a process (22-

31). In terms of reform, new media are often heralded for their ability to provide an experience that is more transparent than its predecessor (60)

The second logic of remediation is that of hypermediacy, which could be described as the opposite of immediacy (31-44). Hypermediacy is the collective usage of many media, which in the twenty years since *Remediation: Understanding New Media* was published, has become a process more ingrained in society. The news screen that combined photographs; scrolling text; a live feed of the newsreader; footage of events and more, is an example of a saturation of media, that attempts to provide the viewer with an immediacy through bombardment (31). Instagram as a platform can be seen as an example of hypermediacy, where text, photograph, digital image and video are all presented, intertwined with adverts, to the user. Hypermediacy results in a repeated confrontation with the process of mediation, which in itself becomes a form of pure experiences (53).

Viewing Instapoetry as an act of remediation is important. One wouldn't look at cinema as an example of theatre, and those who did in the past would have found this approach not to be fruitful in the long run. There is a tendency to hierarchize old media and new media when they are concerned with carrying the same medium (here, poetry), and battle lines are drawn between defenders of the old and the exponents of the new. This is one of the driving forces in the conflict that surrounds the cultural value of Instapoetry.

As an act of remediation, Instapoetry challenges the function and socio-cultural position of poetry. There is not necessarily an intention to overthrow traditional forms of poetry, in terms of how it is published, how it is structured, or its role within society. Remediation results in a dynamic relationship between the two media, and conventional poetry will be as influenced by Instapoetry as Instapoetry has been influenced by conventional poetry.

One of the largest sources of conflict arises out of this idea. Namely, that Instapoetry will have (or already is having) a negative impact on conventional poetry. Whether it forces it into different forms, detracts from its role within society or erases it completely, advocates of conventional poetry fear for the future of the art form. However, in most cases, older media do not suffer at the hands of new media. The advent of cinema did not erase theatre from culture. The airplane did not erase the train or the car as a mode of transport. In some cases, it is true that a new medium erases an older one, like Betamax and VHS, or subsequently VHS and DVD. In these cases, however, the new medium can be seen as an improvement to the old medium in a complete. Nobody, even the Instapoets themselves, is claiming that Instapoetry is uniformly superior to conventional forms of poetry, and that the medium of Instagram should be the universal platform for poetry. And even when new media are marketed or considered to be an improvement over old media, old media survives if it has some inherent quality over the new. People still listen to vinyl records for their particular quality of sound in a time where CDs and digital music are considered by many to be a superior medium, mainly through convenience. Media settle into roles and while there is an initial moment of unrest between the media, vinyl lovers will still listen to vinyl at home, and rely on digital media to listen to their music while on the bus. Through the same process, it is most likely that in the future, certain poetry readers will still be reading conventional poetry, and some will be reading Instapoetry.

Some of the aspects that its critics have found fault with in Instapoetry can be seen as parts of the process of remediation. The frequent cliché of photographs of poems typed on vintage typewriters is an example of immediacy. Rather than use an image of digital text produced on a word processor, the hand-typed work seeks to reduce the viewer's awareness of the medium. The work appears more genuine because while it is being published digitally, it exists as an artefact outside of that digital world. In this way, the post on Instagram is not

the poem itself, but merely a representation of something more real, something less mediated. It is almost ironic to see that the nostalgic usage of the vintage typewriter provides an illusion of resistance to digital media when it is being used precisely as a tool within social media.

Instapoetry is also an example of hypermediacy. While the photographs of hand-typed poems seek to create a sense of immediacy, their inclusion in the social media feed and the producer's personal page serve as a constant reminder of the mediated nature of what is being viewed. The Instapoets who include personal posts such as photographs of themselves, or who frequently utilize the story feature of Instagram make it highly obvious that their work is being consumed as part of a conglomerate of experiences. These are the Instapoets more likely to favour not the hand-typed poems, but the poems superimposed over photography, or written digitally in a word processor with illustrations or other mixed-media applications. The realness of experience in these examples of Instapoetry comes not from a nostalgic simplicity but from an excess of experience offered.

There is of course the counterargument that this remediation of poetry into a digital medium is degenerative for culture, and that it should be resisted. However, as Bolter and Grusin have argued, remediation is a process that predates the digital era. Remediation has been occurring for longer than new media has existed and will in all likelihood continue with the introduction of new media in the future.

Understanding that Instapoetry is an example of remediation also allows us to examine the justification (or lack thereof) of the usage of the term Instapoet and Instapoetry. It is important to understand that, through the change in medium and thus changes in the work produced, Instapoetry is fundamentally different from conventional poetry. There is therefore perhaps justification in the coining of a term to describe what is a new form of poetry. However, this has historically gone both ways. Actors, for example, are described as such regardless of whether they ply their trade in the Hollywood movie or in the West End

theatre. Composers, on the other hand, is a term that would be far more likely used to describe a certain kind of music writer. Pop music artists are far more likely to be called musicians as opposed to composers. The term is currently at a crossroad as to what subtext it carries. In the years it will hopefully only refer to the preferred platform of the producer and shake free the subtext that in being called an Instapoet, one is being systematically denied the title of poet.

As stated previously, poetry readership is on the rise, and although it is too soon to attribute that to a specific reason, it is a positive development in and of itself. Poetry readership was on the decline for so long, and the fact that it is simultaneously experiencing a resurgence and a criticism of one of its forms by the very community that should be happiest to see an increased interest is, when stated like this, bizarre. It is perhaps then important to examine precisely why it is that the literary community is so opposed to a type of poetry that is only revitalising what was becoming a less and less popular art form. This segues conveniently to the next chapter: Instapoetry as decline of a cultural elite.

INSTAPOETRY AS DECLINE OF A CULTURAL ELITE

Jay David Bolter, working alone this time, continued his work concerning new media in the very recent *The Digital Plenitude: The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of Digital Media* (2019). He examines two concurrent phenomena that took place at the end of the twentieth century. The first of these is the decline of what he calls “culture with a capital C” (1). He examines this phenomenon in parallel to the rise of new media, although he accepts that correlation doesn’t necessarily indicate causation.

The decline of culture with a capital C is the expression that Bolter uses to describe the disappearance of hierarchies within culture that occurred in the late 20th Century. When once literature and the traditional arts were considered to be the highest of culture in society, there is now a multitude of cultural centres (13). For many, video games constitute cultural centres, and for others it is cinema, photography or YouTube videos. The result of the loss of the cultural centre, is that there no longer exists a universal “standard of quality that transcends the various communities of practice” (15). One of the major repercussions of this is the decline in what we would have once referred to as the cultural elite. The position of the museum curator or publisher is no longer as important in a time when arts and literature are not the cultural centre of a society. This lack of faith in an elite can be seen in other areas too, American politics being perhaps the most poignant example at this moment in time.

There are of course some cultural communities that still deny the disappearance of the cultural centre (16). It is of course a process of change, and processes of change can always expect to be met with some form a resistance. In the literary community there has perhaps already been a quiet acceptance that the majority of the public will no longer be interested in literary fiction. Such literature is now consumed by a community that is only one cultural community within many, and that their expertise in literature no longer affords them any sort

of cultural authority (14). For the adherents of conventional poetry, this quiet acceptance has perhaps not yet happened. They continue to reject the assertion that there is no longer a universal standard or quality by which poetry can be judged. That this decline in elite culture is one that has yet to fully manifest in the world of poetry, but has already occurred in other fiction writing, can be readily seen when consulting the best-selling books of the last decades. While there are still those who appreciate literary fiction, they no longer represent the cultural centre of the literary world. If anything, such people are now a minority in a time where the bestsellers list is no longer dominated even by genre fiction, like Harry Potter and Fifty Shades of Gray, but by autobiographies (Michelle Obama's was the best-selling book of 2018), self-help books (like Rachel Hollis and Jordan B. Peterson) and other works of non-fiction.

It is true that the decline in elite culture carries with it a decline in quality. With no gatekeepers of culture, and particularly with a platform like Instagram, anyone and everyone can call themselves an artist and publish their work freely. With no elite authority, how is the viewer to determine what is and what isn't "good" poetry? Unfortunately, there is no answer to this. The only means by which the poetry novice can come to decide whether or not a particular Instapoet is publishing poetry of a high quality is by the number of profile follows and the number of individual posts' likes. The problem with this is that understanding an Instapoet's quality through such figures represents a value attribution that is linked to more than just poetic ability. Correctly marketing oneself on social media can have a dramatic effect on these numbers, and as a result the Instapoet with a better understanding of hashtags, who to follow, and how to present their work will have more followers than an Instapoet producing better work but who has not marketed themselves adequately. There is also the unfortunate fact that followers and likes can also be bought from websites running thousands of fake profiles, and this too gives the impression that a particular page is more popular than

it actually is. This is perhaps one of the reasons that there is a perceived drop in quality of Instapoets compared to conventional poets, as a poet true to their craft might not engage in such mundane acts but will suffer a lower popularity as a result. Contemporary poets as well as writers have to engage with social media too, as it has become an important part of ensuring ones popularity. However, as social media is not their primary source of publication, 'likes' and followers are figures that are not as important when people attempt to judge whether or not they are good. As their work exists predominantly outside of social media, there is less of an apparent connection between the quality of their work and their social media popularity.

Another particular feature of Bolter's work that is worth noting here is the conception of what he terms "flow" (99-119). While traditional art has been concerned with generating an emotional response through catharsis, there is now, in parallel to catharsis, another process. This process, highly apparent in social media and video games, is a far more passive process than catharsis, where the viewer is concerned not with the pleasure of emotional release, but with "the pleasure of losing oneself (...) not only pleasure in the moment, but also the seductive possibility that the moment might go on indefinitely" (101).

The Hollywood movie and the Netflix series are two examples that best illustrate the difference between catharsis and flow. The Hollywood movie is still concerned with a structure of conflict and resolution, and with this resolution the viewer is awarded some form of cathartic relief. Netflix on the other hand offers a seemingly endless stream of content, and when one episode ends the viewer is not even obliged to perform an action to start the next episode. The viewer is encouraged to become fully immersed in their experience of the series. This continuous experience is a feature that does not exist in conventional poetry, as the conventional poem is concerned with a cathartic release through the experience of the

reading and finishing of the poem. The Instapoem offers what the conventional poem does not - a culture of flow.

There are two reasons that the Instapoem appeals to a culture of flow. Firstly, the length of the works facilitates the quick progression from one poem to the next, further facilitated by the ease of which one can scroll a social media feed with just one swipe of the finger. Secondly, the structure of the social media feed allows for the viewer to browse with ease the poems of any number of writers in quick succession. Outside of the digital platform, this would involve getting up, going to one's bookcase and selecting the next collection of poems. Instagram makes this process that much easier.

The social media feed is also interesting because it allows for a sort of poetry curation by the user of the platform. The user selects which Instapoets they wish to see the work of and 'follows' them. The result of this is that every time the feed is accessed, it consists of only those artists whose work the user wishes to see. Traditional curation, say of an art gallery or a collection of poetry, involves a selection that is performed by someone considered by the relevant cultural community as an authority in the field. It is their task to either collect a number of works by different writers or artists, or to decide which writer or artist is worthy of their own publishing deal or exhibition. This would be an example of cultural elitism, something that has already been noted as no longer a feature in contemporary culture. Instead, the viewer becomes the curator of their own Instapoetry feed, which is more often than not intertwined with other posts, be they cultural, social or other.

When there existed such a thing as a cultural elite, it was their responsibility to mediate the relationship between the viewer and the work of art. This allowed for a distinction to be made between what was considered high culture and low culture (Hinton & Hjorth, 81). This too can be considered a form of mediation, where the art gallery or poetry collection becomes not only a medium through which we experience art or poetry, but the

medium through which we are instructed to view said art or poetry is cultural valuable. The decision by a publishing house to publish a particular poet's work is no longer a part of the process. That for many this is not considered a problem is proof of the decentralisation of culture and the decline of a cultural elite.

Like fiction writing, poetry too is now experiencing the loss of a cultural centre, of an elite in whom we place our faith to determine what is and isn't of cultural value. However, in an age where Bolter can state that "Art and media are now the same thing" (15), how can we even attempt to answer the question "is there cultural value in Instapoetry?". If anything and everything can be considered to be of cultural value, from video games to recipe books, then surely it is impossible to answer this question with anything other than a yes. However, Instapoetry and conventional poetry have value for different reasons, and it is these differing values that have ignited the conflict. It is therefore worthwhile to examine what value there is in Instapoetry, and how this value differs from conventional poetry.

SOCIAL VALUE IN INSTAPOETRY

A. Accessibility

As there is a problem with trying to understand the value of Instapoetry in terms of cultural value, it is beneficial to instead look to what sort of value it can be said to be had in other senses. In terms of accessibility, Instapoetry surely trumps conventional poetry. It is free, it is short, and it is accessible to anyone with an internet connection and a device with which to access. In terms of social value, the speed with which Instapoetry spreads means that any social message carried by works of Instapoetry reaches a larger number of people at a faster rate. The aforementioned themes commonly found within Instapoetry are also prominent themes within conversations about our contemporary societies. It is impossible to ignore the impact that Instapoetry has had on the awareness that has been spread concerning these issues. In order to determine what sort of value there is within Instapoetry, this chapter examines Instapoetry in terms of accessibility, as well as a vehicle for social awareness and change.

The geographical location where Instagram can be experienced is a valuable aspect of the medium. Most people will have their smartphone with them at all times. One may access Instapoetry at any time that one may use their smartphone. While poetry aficionados might occasionally carry a book or two of poetry with them, everyone with a smartphone is carrying every Instapoem with them at all times. Traditional geographical locations that are occupied while reading, such as the home; the library; for some riding public transport, are expanded when that reading is performed on a smartphone. While most people might not open a book while standing and waiting for a bus or subway train, the smartphone provides easy access to a seemingly limitless variety of Instapoetry. The user is able to claim a far wider variety of

spaces as reading locations, and this gives a power to Instapoetry that conventional print media does not possess.

Geographical location is important because where we use media becomes itself a part of the media. Bolder and Grusin (2000) give the example of the cinema. While the experience of the film itself takes place in a specific locality, the space we occupy immediately afterwards also becomes a part of the experience.

(...) when the film ends, the lights come on, and we stroll back into the lobby of, say, a suburban mall theatre, we recognize that the process of remediation is not over. We are confronted with all sorts of images (posters, computer games, and video screens), as well as social and economic artefacts (the choice of films offered and the pricing strategy for tickets and refreshments)". (67)

Because the geographical location where Instapoetry can be consumed is so wide, this confrontation becomes the world around the reader. When the smartphone is put away, the reader is confronted with their immediate surroundings, and these surroundings are almost limitless. Whether it is the bathroom; the bus; the place where one spends their lunchbreak, these geographical locations become an intrinsic part of the Instapoetry experience. This means that Instapoetry becomes part of a daily experience, unlike the reading of books, which occupies but a limited location.

It is true that owning a smart phone or computer is expensive, and this in turn represents an economic constraint on the accessibility to Instapoetry. A poetry collection costs a fraction of what a smartphone costs, before even considering the upkeep costs of mobile data and possible insurance. However, like many media before it, the smartphone has become an essential part of the networks across which human life is organised. It was once inessential to have an e-mail address, and before that a landline phone, but these technologies have now become an integral part of daily life. Being outside of the network that they provide

is no longer a choice one is offered, as exclusion from them is exclusion from society itself. While it could be argued that the smartphone has not yet become essential, it has become an incredibly important part of one's network, both professional and social. Being without internet-based messaging applications like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger results in a lack of participation in networks that are becoming a more and more dominant aspect of daily life. Being unreachable by friends and family through internet communication or being unable to participate in online group conversation with colleagues presents more and more of a problem to the individual who does not have access to such channels. As a result of this, even people on limited budgets find themselves compelled to own smartphones with internet access. Smartphone aid programmes such as American Assistance Lifeline in The United States attempt to provide smartphones to those who cannot afford them and are an indication of the importance of smartphone ownership in current society ("American Assistance"). As a result, it can be seen that poetry accessibly by smartphone is still far more accessible than poetry accessed through print, as smartphone ownership has become a necessary factor to participate in contemporary society.

Barring the costs of smartphone ownership, Instagram is a completely free platform, both for user and for producer. Along with the aforementioned decline in elitism, there is a new way that people want to pay for things. In *Free: The Future of a Radical Price* (2009), Chris Anderson explores a new trend in economics whereby products are offered at zero cost. This is particularly predominant in digital media, where products like phone applications, music and of course Instapoetry are offered to the individual at no economic cost.

This is an important aspect of Instapoetry, as poetry has until recently been an area of publishing that does not make publishing houses a lot of money. In *Merchants of Culture* (2012), John B. Thompson notes that most publishers only expect to sell a few thousand copies of poetry collections that they publish (Thompson, 135). However, in providing their

poetry entirely free of charge, Instapoetry is able to bypass this problem. Making money from writing is of course still a part of the Instapoet's life, however this is always done outside of the platform, although Instagram is where they will advertise these products. Some poets like Rupi Kaur and R. M. Drake have had their work published in print format, and despite having a lot of their work available online for free, they sell well. Other Instapoets find other more enterprising ways of making money from their work. The Instapoet Atticus, for example, has his own line of wines with short poetry like "Thinking of you is a poison I drink often" printed on the label (Peters). Rupi Kaur also makes money selling tickets to (often sold out) events where she reads out her poetry on stage and signs copies of her books. Some Instapoets may also use the fact that they have a large number of followers to make money in the way that social media influencers do, by promoting a third party's products or services and using their Instagram page as a platform for advertising.

Of course, writers (and poets in particular) have often had to find ways of making money aside from the publication of their work. T.S Eliot famously worked as a bank clerk. Whether from day-jobs, patrons or teaching literature or writing, many poets and writers have made money outside of publishing. The Internet provides Instapoets with new entrepreneurial possibilities, but the idea itself is not an entirely new one.

Building a brand by providing free good and services is an economic strategy that Anderson explains in his book. It is no new strategy - examples of it can be seen in the business models of well-known brands like Gillette and Jell-O. By offering a free product that builds brand appreciation or desire for more, companies are able to encourage future purchase by offering initial products for free (30-41). In the case of Instapoetry, this is often the promise of work that have not been shared on the Instapoets page. It is also true that a fan base that has been enjoying work for free will wish to spend more money as a means of thanking the artist. There is finally of course the fact that for many people, as Thompson

states: “The book is an aesthetically pleasing form, a work of art in its own right. It is also exceptionally user friendly (...) A book, moreover, is a social object: it can be shared with others, borrowed and returned, added to a collection, displayed on a shelf” (316). While Instapoetry is inherently digital, for many book lovers or collectors, there is still a nostalgic charm in the printed word, even if the form of poetry has been heavily guided by the initial medium that it has been published on.

The lendability of books is an aspect that Thompson has perhaps gotten wrong. While there is something to be said about the act of lending a physical copy of a book to a friend, Instagram offers the user the same act, but at an instant speed. With but a click of a screen, Instapoetry can be liked, saved and shared within seconds of being read. This represents a massive change from the traditional, print publication of poetry. Rather than lending a book to someone, or encouraging them to buy their own copy, Instapoetry spreads at the high speed of the Internet. Not only is this a factor amongst friends and family, but in a global sense too. Websites and social media pages that specialise in showcasing poetry have immediate access to an Instapoets latest work. The brevity that is so typical of Instapoetry plays a role here too, in that the reader need not take hours or even minutes out of their day to read an Instapoem. Almost always limited to well under a hundred words, Instapoetry takes mere seconds to read, and combined with the ease of accessibility, results in the proliferation of themes and ideas at a faster rate than any medium has accomplished before. It is these themes and ideas, and the speed with which they can proliferate, that makes Instapoetry perhaps valuable after all, if not in a cultural sense, but a social one.

B. Effect

The effect of the aforementioned speed and ease of proliferation is where the value in Instapoetry can be found. Its value in a cultural sense is intangible, as traditional hierarchies of cultural value are being eroded and this erosion has finally caught up to poetry. That is not to say that, in terms of poetic quality, Instapoetry is on par with conventional poetry. While this thesis has not been concerned with such attributions of value, it has hopefully become clear that there is of course a tendency for Instapoetry to fall short in terms of quality. However, this no longer matters. In a time where cultural centres are numerous and no value is no longer attributed by a small cultural elite, arguing this becomes a moot point. Quality and value, in this sense, can only exist within a particular cultural community, and other communities will have their own judgements of value and quality. The traditional poets can make judgements about Instapoetry, but their authority is limited to their specific community. If its value cannot be examined in any cultural sense, then it is necessary to consider what value it may have in another sense. The argument here is that Instapoetry can be seen to have a social value.

Return to McLuhan. There is a new level of scale, pace or pattern that is introduced with the introduction of a new medium (19). While all three of these attributes can be observed within social media, it is pace that is most important. The new pace of information that has accompanied social media is unprecedented in other technological developments. The process that have been previously examined all converge on the fact that Instapoetry is a new form of poetry that reaches people in ways and on a scale that has never before been seen. The decline of elite authority means that this spreads with an accessibility that allows social groups historically uninterested in poetry to engage with it. The geographical locations that this poetry is now being read means that it has become integrated into readers' daily lives in a way that poetry published through conventional channels was unable to. While it is

certainly a remediation of the conventional poem, and with this are certain changes to content and form that are difficult to refrain from criticising, the social impact of Instapoetry is impossible to ignore.

Manuel Castells in *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* also draws on McLuhan's conception of the medium and its importance, to the extent that the introduction to the work is titled "The Network is the Message" (1). The importance of networks and inclusion within them has been briefly noted earlier. Castells' work predates the advent of social media, although his studies of networks within the Internet are comprehensive to the point that they almost seem to predict patterns that emerged along with social media. It is important not to get too side-tracked by an analysis of the functioning and structure of networks within social media, as the interest here is with social media poetry, not solely with social media itself. However, the way these networks feature in the participatory nature of Instapoetry is important to note here, in terms of the social contribution that Instapoetry is capable of providing.

Castells states that as a communicative tool, the Internet is an obvious tool to be used as a vehicle for social change (137). However, the networks provided (here: social media) do more than just provide a tool through which to proliferate ideas about social change. Internet networks reshape the entire structure through which these events occur (this returns again to McLuhan's new patterns that emerge with a new medium). Castells compares this to the intertwined nature of the factory and the labour movement in the Industrial era (139). The factories provided the organisational network for the movement to occur, and provided the communication medium. The Internet, however, constitutes both an organisational network and a communication medium. Because of this, the Internet becomes "the indispensable component of the kind of social movement emerging in the network society" (139).

The prominent themes in Instapoetry, such as feminism, racism, mental health awareness and war, are all themes that are of importance at the current time. In the same way that it has been stated that it is impossible to yet attribute the rising popularity of poetry to Instapoetry, it is too early to claim any connections between Instapoetry and any increased participation in such movements. However, it can be argued with conviction that Instapoetry has played some important role in this process.

In 2015, as part of a visual rhetoric course in her final year at university, Rupi Kaur uploaded a photograph to Instagram in which some of her menstruation blood was vaguely visible through a pair of jogging pants she was wearing. The goal of the photo series was “to challenge a taboo, tell a story without the use of words.” (“period.”). The photograph was promptly removed for breaching Instagram’s community guidelines, despite no one specific rule having been breached. Soon after, Rupi Kaur reuploaded the photograph to the platform, accompanied with the caption:

“thank you @Instagram for providing me with the exact response my work was created to critique. you deleted a photo of a woman who is fully covered and menstruating stating that it goes against community guidelines when your guidelines outline that it is nothing but acceptable. the girl is fully clothed. the photo is mine. it is not attacking a certain group. nor is it spam. and because it does not break those guidelines i will repost it again. i will not apologize for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in an underwear but not be okay with a small leak. when your pages are filled with countless photos/accounts where women (so many who are underage) are objectified. pornified. and treated less than human. thank you. (...)” (“self-portrait”)

Rupi Kaur had already been publishing poetry on Instagram about femininity, race and heartbreak, and her first poetry collection had already topped Amazon best-sellers charts.

However, the media pushback to the censorship of the original post was enormous (and quite possibly played a role in the reuploaded picture not being removed). The story was covered by news outlets from The Guardian to the Washington Post to India Today (Valenti; Dewey; Bakshi). The event has also featured in a number of works of feminist literature.

Castells argues the importance of such movements, and the pivotal role on the Internet in their proliferation:

“Emotional movements, often triggered by a media event, or by a major crisis, seem often to be more important sources of social change than the day-to-day routine of dutiful NGOs. The Internet becomes an essential medium of expression and organization for these kinds of manifestation, which coincide in a given time and space, make their impact through the media world, and act upon institutions and organizations (business, for instance) by the repercussions of their impact on public opinion. These are movements to seize the power of the mind, not state power.” (141)

It is true that this particular event was the result of a photograph not poetry. However, the primary reason for the popularity of her Instagram page beforehand was at least in part due to the followers she had garnered as a result of the Instapoetry she had already been publishing on the platform.

The story of Rupi Kaur’s censorship and the ensuing outcry is included not only as a standalone point, but as evidence of the scale of impact that can be had. Other poets’ work may not be garnering as much of a reaction, or a reaction that is as easy to visualise. However, that does not mean that their work is not having some impact on the proliferation of certain social values, even if those impacts are not as clearly recognisable as this one event in particular.

There are however downsides to this kind of online activism. In *Understanding Social Media* (2013), Hinton and Hjorth remind us of the Kony 2012 campaign (73). The campaign

was problematic not only because of questions about the financial transparency of the charity itself, but about inaccuracies in the facts they presented, as well as its neo-colonial depiction of the Ugandan people. As Hinton and Hjorth write: “The problems facing central Africa are significant, and cannot be easily reduced to a 24-minute YouTube video, or a trite one line campaign message. Support for the video is not the same thing as support for a movement” (74). This too could be said about Instapoetry, in that the important themes that it covers cannot be reduced to short, snappy poems published on social media. However, what can be said about them, is that they introduce the notion of these things into popular culture and raise awareness about certain social issues.

David Bolter too is interested in the social impact that social media has. He argues against the notion that platforms like Facebook isolates people, he argues that the process is actually far more complex (167). While it is true that social media can give a false impression of social connections, it is also a tool that allows for people to “extend their social life into times and places where they cannot be with their friends” (168). This does result in a new concept of the self; however this is not a necessarily a negative progression. As Bolter himself writes on the digital companion to *The Digital Plenitude* (2019), these state of affairs we can observe in society and culture today are “not a “problem” to be solved. [They are] simply the condition of our culture today” (“Digital Plenitude Online”).

Instapoetry, viewed as a social phenomenon as opposed to a cultural one, plays an integral role in the new ways that the self and interpersonal relationships are comprised. The values that are encouraged through the many works that concern particular social themes play an important role in notions of identity and relationship building. The sharing of Instapoetry with ones friends, or even just the simple act of ‘liking’ a particular post and seeing that you are on of tens if not hundreds of thousands doing the same allows for the user to realise that the values they hold are shared with other people, even if they are people they do not know.

This is an example of what can be considered the democratising nature of the Internet in general, but that it is concealed in a way within creative work allows for it to function in a far more passive way. Whereas in the past people may have connected with similar individuals on platforms like message forums, Instapoetry allows for a similar phenomenon to occur in a more organic way. In this sense, Instapoetry functions accelerates the more traditional ways that social change occurs through society's engagement with the arts.

Returning to the idea of geographical location and the consumption of poetry is important here. Certain values are more dominant in particular geographic communities. Sentiment about other races, genders, or political view can be hard to hold in places where opposing views are more dominant. The Internet in general has a shortening effect on geographical distance, and Instapoetry too has this effect. That people are reading Instapoetry all over the world and using it as a tool to share their values is an important aspect of it.

CONCLUSION

The notion of value within Instapoetry can be seen as one that is more complex than might have originally occurred to its advocates and critics alike. A distinction has to be made between what can be considered Instapoetry and the poetry that predates it. Instagram, as a new medium through which poetry is published, remediates poetry (as well as other art forms), and as a result, Instapoetry has to be seen as remediated poetry. As remediated poetry, it is distinctly different from conventional poetry. The change of scale, pace and pattern, as defined by Marshall McLuhan, means that Instapoetry functions differently from conventional poetry, as a result of changes to these three areas.

Evaluating Instapoetry in the same way one might evaluate conventional poetry is thus always going to be problematic - similar in ways to comparing theatre and cinema. They are certainly adjacent; but they cannot be considered as being the same. It is therefore important not to consider one as the other when making judgements as to their value.

Questions of cultural value are already problematic questions at this time, as the decline of a cultural elite has resulted in multiple centres of culture, as opposed to traditional hierarchies. It is thus difficult to make judgements about Instapoetry when there are decentralised communities who place value based on different criteria. In the same way that there are those who would judge theatre to be in some way culturally superior to cinema, there are those who will continue to judge conventional poetry as culturally superior to Instapoetry. However, for both cinema and Instapoetry, there will be communities who regard them as more culturally significant.

An argument can be made from the standpoint of a particular poetry community that Instapoetry is, in terms of poetic quality, not as good as conventional poetry. However, this community's standing as an elite authority on poetry is no longer what it once was, as can be

seen in the literary world when examining bestseller trends in recent years. It is thus not beneficial to consider what cultural value may be held by Instapoetry from an artistic perspective.

Value can be attributed to Instapoetry for its role in the proliferation of certain social values, particularly concerning themes of feminism, violence, race and mental health awareness. While it is of course too early to examine or even predict the extent of Instapoetry's role in these processes, it can be stated that its role is at the very least significant. The media outrage that followed from Rupi Kaur's censored photograph shows the level of influence that an Instapoet of her standing has. That Instapoetry is often concerned with these particular themes is an indication of the potential that it has a vehicle of social change.

The future of poetry outside of new media, in print and spoken word, is not as bleak as some of the critics might claim. Instapoetry does not pose a threat to the future of other poetry, in the same way that the television has proven not to pose a threat to theatre. In early days, new media like Instagram often position themselves as superior to the media that came before. Instagram will eventually settle into its position within cultural communities, and conventional poetry will maintain a certain standing within a community that might once have been considered the poetic elite.

Instapoetry is not a threat to a future market of traditional forms of poetry, as it is itself something different. As remediated poetry, it has not taken a portion of the traditional poetry market, but rather it has created a new market for a new kind of poetry. Adhering to the contemporary economy of free, its proliferation is concerned with popular culture (or what some might have once called low-culture). As result it does not demean the position of traditional poetry. Any shift in the cultural position of traditional poetry is rather due to the shifting hierarchies of culture, a process which began long before Instapoetry. It is either an

unavoidable part of that process, or a pure coincidence that Instapoetry has arisen alongside the cultural shift of the position of traditional poetry. Like the vinyl and the CD, poetry lovers will continue to use the traditional medium and read conventional poetry while a more popular kind of poetry will be read by the masses

What will be interesting to observe as the phenomenon of Instapoetry unfolds is the extent to which more traditional poets will engage with the medium. If a low level of quality is one of the current concerns that the traditional poets have with Instapoetry, then perhaps the responsibility should fall to them to engage with the medium themselves and raise that quality. A future form of Instapoetry that include poets who might have previously considered themselves part of a poetic elite would be an interesting development. The way that they engage with limitations on the platform will also be interesting to note, as will be the manner in which they approach the audience engagement aspect of Instagram.

In the same way that it is not yet possible to attribute the rise in poetry readership to the advent of social media poetry, we can't yet say that recent movements in feminism, mental health awareness and other social issues are a result of Instapoetry. That said, it is also not possible to ignore their involvement in these movements. Rupi Kaur is currently followed by 3.7 million users on Instagram ("Kaur"). These people follow her because they agree with some aspect of the social message that she is trying to convey. This is in itself a noteworthy number because it creates in a sense a community of people that share certain social values that they recognise in Kaur's writing.

It is unlikely that the famous Instapoets of 2019 will produce work as timeless as those of William Blake or of Walt Whitman. However, Instapoets are reaching audiences that exceed the limited communities that enjoyed these poets work while they were writing. If the work itself doesn't survive as an artefact in itself, let us hope that the message they attempt to convey can do so instead.

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