AFFECT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Emotion, Mediation, Anxiety and Contagion

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Introduction

On Affect, Social Media and Criticality

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T HE NOW NOTORIOUS 2014 publication of the research paper 'Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks' provided the initial inspiration for the first Affect and Social Media (A&SM) conference.[1] This controversial corporate-academic study, a collaboration between Facebook and Cornell University, represented to many of us working in digital media cultures just the tip of an assumed iceberg of manipulative incursions into the mostly nonconscious felt experiences of social media use. The experiment made use of over 600,000 user accounts in order to test the extent to which the manipulation of positive and negative news feeds could activate emotional contagion on Facebook. It was indeed striking to see how these efforts to emotionally trigger mass contagion related so closely to theoretical work already carried out in the areas of political affect and critical social psychology concerned with the manipulation of moods, affective atmospheres and virality.[2] The experiment also stood out as an example of a wider corporate social media strategy that could be aligned to what has since been referred to as *affective capitalism*.[3]

The validity of the perhaps overly vaunted claims to have actually triggered massive scales of emotional contagion seemed of less importance than the disquieting disclosure that corporate social media and Cornell academics were so readily engaged with unethical experiments of this kind. The notion that academic researchers can be insulated from ethical guidelines on the protection for human research subjects because they are working with a social media business that has 'no obligation to conform' to the principle of 'obtaining informed consent and allowing participants to opt out' is of course alarming in itself.[4] Indeed, although the research is of obvious sociological, psychological and computational interest, given that it reproduces similar responses to those already known to occur in face-to-face examples of emotional contagion, it is the political and ethical ramifications of the study, and others like it, which we felt warranted the critical attention of an academic conference.

In spite of these ethical concerns, the publication of the study provided a much needed wake up call. As follows, the negative publicity surrounding the study managed to momentarily divert attention from a prevalent and popular discursive formation, which has mostly grasped social media as a potentially problematic, yet generally rosy global village. Certainly, for a while, Facebook's superficial mantra of 'bringing the world closer together' rolled back a little to reveal a more dystopic and paradoxical underbelly. The experiment exposed a corporate social media culture that does patently *bring the world together*, but does so in order to furtively and unethically gather consumer data, and evidently, make money from carrying out large scale manipulations of this kind. If nothing else then, the brief controversy prompted by the paper's publication managed to fleetingly disrupt the celebratory zeal for a model of social media that brings people together for the seemingly good causes of democracy. It certainly clouded the self-congratulant role of a benevolent social media model implicated in the apparent revolutionary contagions of the Arab Spring and the spreading of Obama love, for example.

As we have since discovered, this sociable and benign model of social media needs to be grasped alongside new and widespread anxieties concerning the role it has played in recent populist contagions. The Brexit and Trump wins suggest that the dystopic underbelly of social media persuasion is further exploited by enigmatic behavioural data companies, like Cambridge Analytica, who are able to—it has been recently shown—dishonestly purchase and tap into social media derived consumer datasets from Facebook so as to undertake psychographic profiling and micro-targeting of large constituencies of voters in potentially marginal constituencies. The accusation is that these data analytics firms are able to excavate behavioural datasets in order to construct massive scale appeals to voter emotions that may influence election outcomes.[5] While the evidence to prove the effects of such appeals is yet to be convincingly established, at the time of writing, Cambridge Analytica are under investigation in the UK by the ICO (Information Commissioner's Office) and the Electoral Commission. Indeed, Facebook's complicity with the exploitation of datasets by companies like Cambridge Analytica has become an emerging international scandal.

To critically grasp the implications of these affective, emotional and feely encounters with social media we suggest that a considerable plural disciplinarity is required. For example, there is a need to draw attention to social media design strategies wherein there has been a gradual creep from ideas informed by cognitive psychology in interaction design to a seemingly universal turn toward affect, emotion and feeling. A decade before the Facebook study, influential design guru and user experience consultant, Don Norman, used his book *Emotional Design* to argue that the felt viscera of affect experienced online could override conscious cognitive decision-making processes.[6] It is significant to note that Norman was keen to stress the role positive emotions could play in influencing online consumer behaviour, brand loyalty, and as a result, drive purchase intent. In contrast, the current *modus operandi* of social media design and marketing is, it would seem, resolutely focused on negative emotions that can "hook" users by way of habit-forming interactions

and the addictive checking of notifications alongside relentless anxious desires to "like" and "be liked" in return.[7]

Approaching Affect and Social Media

The first A&SM conference, and those that followed, proved that we were not alone in linking together the rise of these kinds of affective strategies to a far broader critical interest in social media. Indeed, we were initially surprised by the breadth of responses to our call for papers from across disciplinary boundaries; so much so that we found ourselves with a multifaceted series of conference programmes that were serendipitously plural in character. On one hand, this plurality clearly relates to one of the strengths of affect; that is to say, it has provided an ever expanding theoretical frame that traverses psychology, social and cultural theory, media studies, design, journalism, education, film, philosophy and fine art, to name but a few. Of course, this is not to claim that we were the first to realise the plural nature of affect. There have been much bigger and far reaching interdisciplinary conferences that have covered similar themes, such as the 2015 Affect Theory Conference hosted by Millersville University in the US.[8] On the other hand though, the inclusion of social media in the conference mix seems to have ignited a considerable spark of interest. We note here other conferences that have since gone on to specifically engage with this growing interest in affect, politics and social media.[9]

We also acknowledge other books and journals that have drawn important critical attention to social media from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, and others that have directly related affect to various kinds of digital technology.[10] However, the aim of this book is not simply to demarcate a territory for a new field of study nor, indeed, endeavour to bring disparate disciplines together to produce a kind of rapprochement. As such, A&SM follows two guiding principles intended to set it apart from that kind of territorializing approach. Firstly, the book endeavours to traverse the

many intersections in which affect theories arise and follow various lines of flight, and subsequent refrains, that become manifest in these new multi-faceted relations we experience with social media. This means that instead of staking a claim for a harmonious theoretical territory, or indeed drawing out defined battle lines that must not be crossed, our intention is to deterritorialize the various debates. The reader will encounter, as such, a variety of voices in each section that might not always fit together like a perfect jigsaw. Secondly, we want to allow for a mode of critical theory and radical thinking that can exist in the often negotiated relations and gaps between the jagged edges of these plural disciplinary voices. Consequently, the point is not to expect every contributor to sing from the same song sheet. We want the reader to embrace a variety of succinctly expressed viewpoints that will go on to inform their critical understanding of affect and social media in novel ways.

The Plural Disciplinarity and Politics of Affect

Affect and Social Media (A&SM) Conferences attempt to secure a commitment to disciplinary plurality: a quality of collision and creativity that has defined the experience of the conferences on which this book draws. We acknowledge significant approaches to affect that have characterised it as about movement, even free fall, in the yet-ness of our bodily capacities,[11] and we also recognise here other critical-philosophical investigations that have ranged the theoretical and disciplinary spectrum of the neuro-, health and social sciences approaches, as well as humanities and media and cultural studies. Indeed, we suggest that this commitment to disciplinary plurality is crucial to the project of apprehending the "multifaceted assemblage" that constitutes social media.[12] As follows, we grasp the importance of Susanna Paasonen's assertion, in her study of affect and online pornography, that there is a need to consider assemblages of 'labor, technological innovations, monetary exchange . . . acts and sensations, regulatory practices, verbal definitions, and interpretations' as a way to move beyond certain "simplified

dualisms" that characterised some early declarations of the affective turn.[13]

A&SM manifests the maturity of contemporary affect studies, with chapters that explore multiple intersections between the complex assemblages of social media and the motion of affectivity. Here we note Seigworth and Gregg's assertion of a familiar articulation of this sense of motion as the capacity 'to act and be acted upon', a 'passage . . . of forces or intensities' which 'drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension'.[14] Similarly, we note Clough's sense of motion in her remarks on Deleuze's reading of Francis Bacon, whereby it is not bodies or characters that define Bacon's work, but the rhythm of his canvasses.[15] Clough further suggests that this notion of rhythm is a 'logic of sensation' that defines affect as 'time in matter', enabling a 'reformulation of methodology and presentation' appropriate to meeting the intellectual challenges of the political conjuncture. This sense of motion, which we might understand as a rhythm of time in matter, powerfully characterises the approach taken by all the authors in the book to their subjects, from questions about the potential of social media to impact on language and communication in the context of neuro-diversity, to the tensions between individuality and collectivity, or our very sense of present-ness. A&SM articulates multiple localities of flux, change and dispute, informed by intersecting refrains of affect theory, and opening up new lines of inquiry that respond to the urgent dynamics of the times. Moreover, the plurality of disciplinary approaches in A&SM reflects not only a range of social media contexts, from teen peer cultures by way of wearables, emoticons, users, selfies, supertrolls, vloggers, activists, sex parties, Ebola, newsrooms and citizen journalists, but crucially discloses a plurality of politics. If the enquiry represented by the A&SM conferences, and this book, is rhythmic, that rhythm is political, as well as being polyrhythmic, cross-rhythmic and syncopated. But more than anything else, these enquiries, in their jagged edges and pluralities, are inherently social. As Jeremy Gilbert has said, 'to think affect is to think the social, and nothing is more important right now'.[16]

Challenges Ahead

We nonetheless concede that by following our two guiding principles the book will present some readers with various challenges. To begin with, although not all of the chapters in this collection make explicit references to a particular affect theory, many are derived from some familiar and much debated plot markers, such as: Aristotle's *entelechy*; Stoic *propatheia*, Spinoza's *conatus*, Freud's *affekt*, Whitehead's "prehension", and Bergson's "virtuality", to name but a few. Indeed, whether or not these references are explicitly or implicitly made, each chapter nonetheless signals a familiar flight away from the so called "turn to language", wherein anything beyond the text might be considered unempirical, and for all intents and purposes, nonexistent. This is a line of flight that certainly moves us towards a variety of disciplines that radically transcend their own often methodological and theoretical determinants. Along these lines, every chapter in the book invites, to some extent, thinking beyond the perceived, the discrete, the formulised, to offer the potential to feel, to relate, and to move. But this will be no easy task for the uninitiated or indeed the sceptical humanities reader, as affective activity is often said to occur "outside", on the jagged edges of human awareness, in a number of sometimes challenging ways.

Firstly, affect can be grasped as moving through the hardly noticed sensations, indexed in bodily rhythms that are disrupted and excited, like those considered to occur in, for example, eccrine gland secretion and cardiac ectopy. Secondly, affective activity is said to penetrate bodies fully outside of awareness through the trillions of neutrinos that pierce through us, every second, unannounced and unnoticed. Thirdly, and as the particular inspiration behind A&SM sets out, affect is also said to occur in the nonconscious manipulations of sentiment through Facebook news feeds. These various processes or movements are for many affect theorists the hidden realities of being, distorted by perception, culture and so-called consciousness. Consciousness itself is sometimes regarded as a particularised momentary assemblage, one that we attempt to actualise and stabilise to locate a "me", a "you", an "it". Affect theories encourage a thinking and

feeling beyond such discursive constructs, rousing what may be termed a flirtatious dance between disciplines or what Sampson denotes as disciplinary mixtures or "interferences" between philosophy, science, art and politics.[17] This allows for a large degree of freedom of thought; a movement away from disciplinary specificity, opening creative flows and rhythms that are relatively unencumbered by too much definition. As can be seen throughout each section, it is sometimes the "ungraspability" of affect that opens up enquiry to new and radical ways of thinking.

A further challenge that some readers might face in approaching this text is that although each chapter is, as previously pointed out, "social", affectivity is often that which is unscathed by social determination. Thus, the book is caught up in the relatively impossible task of drawing attention to the multitude of processes that are constantly defying social regulation, representation and actualisation. Furthermore, some may even argue that by calling the book "Affect and Social Media" we are being somewhat misleading. It is not as if the two can be easily separated—as if affect was something that circulates and penetrates social media, rather than constituting its very being. As may be argued, the subject of the book gives way to and emerges from the affective atmospheres through which social media breathes. It is this atmosphere that infuses the user machine through contagious flows, viscerally engaging our souls, as we become social media workers, content, capital.

The Four Parts of Affect and Social Media

In order to drill down to the detail of each part of this book we have incorporated four short introductory pieces, two of which include specially invited contributions from respected colleagues Helen Powell and Jussi Parikka. So before we invite you to read on, we only need to briefly conclude our editorial introduction by setting out the general aims of these four parts.

The intention of the first part ("Digital Emotion") is to question how emotion, affect and feeling find expression in the digital. Here

we find differing psychological and philosophically orientated contemplations on trigger warnings, psychophysiological measures of affect, processes and prehensions, individuation and visceral data. For example, there is a version of affect presented in this section that is theorised as existing on two psychophysiolocial dimensions: valence and arousal, while others have considered affect as constitutive of multiple dimensions.

Part II ("Mediated Connectivities, Immediacies and Intensities") draws on broadly sociological accounts of social media that connect to affective experiences of solidarity, somatic education and the temporality of feeling. In this section we encounter what Parikka calls, in his Introduction, the "affective transformations" of hashtag activism, wearable technologies and the time of affect.

Part III ("Insecurity and Anxiety") and Part IV ("Contagion: Image, Work, Politics and Control") both engage with the aforementioned dystopic under-belly of the social and cultural component of the digital. In part III, this underbelly is explored through mediated antagonistic relations with technology, anxiety branding, pornified interactions, panic and trolling. In part IV, we return to the contagion theory that inspired the first A&SM conference by way of exploring affecting violence in the work of young journalists, the emotional political chains experienced in the media during an election, the spreading of infectious images about infection and, finally, we encounter an older dystopic vision of behavioural control that seems in many ways to parallel our current social media experiences.

Notes

1. Adam D., I. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory and Jeffrey T. Hancock, 'Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 111(24) (2014): 8788–90, http://www.pnas.org/content/111/24/8788.full.

2. See for example, Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

Press, 2012); and Darren Ellis and Ian Tucker, *The Social Psychology of Emotion* (London: Sage, 2015).

3. Tero Karppi, Lotta Kähkönen, Mona Mannevuo, Mari Pajala and Tanja Sihvonen, 'Affective Capitalism: Investments and investigations', *Ephemera* 16(4), November 2016.

4. As the full statement from the publisher of the emotional contagion research, PNAS, makes clear: 'Adherence to the Common Rule [following US Federal policy on protection for human research subjects] is PNAS policy, but as a private company Facebook was under no obligation to conform to the provisions of the Common Rule when it collected the data used by the authors, and the Common Rule does not preclude their use of the data. Based on the information provided by the authors, PNAS editors deemed it appropriate to publish the paper. It is nevertheless a matter of concern that collection of the data by Facebook may have involved practices that were not fully consistent with the principles of obtaining informed consent and allowing participants to opt out.' In Adam et al. 'Experimental Evidence'.

5. Carole Cadwalladr, 'The great British Brexit robbery: how our democracy was hijacked' in *The Observer*, Sunday, May 7, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy.

6. Don Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

7. See Nir Eyal, *Hooked: How to Build Habit Forming Products* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014).

8. Affect Theory Conference, 'Worldings, Tensions, Futures', Millersville University's Ware Center, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, October 14–17, 2015. http://wtfaffect.com/conference/about-the-2015-conference/.

9. For example, Affective Politics of Social Media Conference, University of Turku, October 12–13, 2017, https://affectivesome.wordpress.com/.

10. See for example, in the area of political economy, Christen Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2014). See also the *Fibreculture Journal* Special Issue 25 on 'Apps and Affect' published in 2015, and Ganaele Langlois and Greg Elmer, 'The Research Politics of Social Media Platforms', *Culture Machine*, 14 (2013).

11. Gregory J. Seigworth, and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3–4.

12. Paasonen, Susanna, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

13. See also Clare Hemmings, 'Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn', *Cultural Studies* 19(5) 2005; and Sara Ahmed, 'Imaginary

Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gesture of "New Materialism"', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15(1), 2008.

14. Seigworth and Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers'.

15. Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'Afterword: The Future of Affect Studies', *Body & Society* 16(2010): 227–29.

16. Jeremy Gilbert, 'Signifying Nothing: "Culture," "Discourse" and the Sociality of Affect', *Culture Machine* 6, 2004, https://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/8/7.

17. Tony D. Sampson, *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016).