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The Mediality of Affect in Encounters of Frustration, Fear, and Trauma

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Abstract
Affect has been widely discussed in terms of how it is defined, applied, and studied in media studies. In their accounts of affective politics in online spaces, Boler and Davis contest the most prominent understanding of affect in media studies, where affect generally referred to as "the force and potential of the various intensities of embodiment" leaves much to be desired as a means of navigating affective relations in social media platforms. The interaction between humans and technology, as well as between other humans through technology, is an essential component to the affective turn in new media studies. In this essay, I articulate the resonant intensities of affect in relation to media and technology as it modulates into reverb within existing discourses on affect theory. I identify affective publics and their movements within social media platforms as politically charged, and draw comparisons between the popular understanding of affect as visceral sensations against a critical perspective of affect as mechanisms of networked publics. Lastly, I ruminate deeper into the operationalization of affect within bodies of technology and its potential feedback loop for manifest spaces of dissonance such as fear, frustration, and trauma.

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"Our point is not to equate or 'reduce' affect to emotion, feeling, or sensation, but rather to use each term in expanded ways that enable us to describe and account for the interconnections, interstices and metonymies of feeling, affect, emotion, sensation, and cognition, while foregrounding their sociality." (Boler and Davis 2018, 80)

"Affect all too often becomes a mystified idea akin to force or energy and intimates an abstract celebration of the uncontainable" (82)

1 Introduction

Affect has been widely discussed in terms of how it is defined, applied, and studied in media studies. In their accounts of affective politics in online spaces, Boler and Davis (2018) contest the most prominent understanding of affect in media studies, where affect generally referred to as "the force and potential of the various intensities of embodiment" (79), leaves much to be desired as a means of navigating affective relations in social media platforms. The interaction between humans and technology, as well as between other humans through technology, is an essential component to the affective turn in new media studies. As Paasonen (2015) puts it in her article *As Networks Fail: Affect, technology, and the notion of the user*, "...Through and within encounters with the bodies of technology, our life forces and capacities to act may increase or diminish, slow down, or speed up (Deleuze 1988, 125). Consequently, networks, devices, and applications modify our everyday routines and embodied potentialities for action" (703). Technology in this context serves as "agential" rather than instrumental, suggesting that technology and network devices too are "bodies that affect and are affected by human bodies" (703).

Referring to Lievrouw (2014)'s framework in the evolving field of new media studies, "communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements and formations as inseparable and mutually determining" (23). The extent of the embodiment of affect as it permeates through human experiences enmeshed with technological infrastructure, is mapped as a constant process of mediation. It is through structures of feeling and materialized sentiment of affective publics that "shapes the texture of these publics and affect becomes the drive that keeps them going" (Papacharissi 2016, 308).

In this essay, I articulate the resonant intensities of affect in relation to media and technology as it modulates into reverb within existing discourses on affect theory. I identify affective publics and their movements within social media platforms as politically charged, and draw comparisons between the popular understanding of affect as visceral sensations against a critical perspective of affect as mechanisms of networked publics. Lastly, I ruminate deeper into the operationalization of affect within bodies of technology and its potential feedback loop for manifest spaces of dissonance such as fear, frustration, and trauma. I account for these recollections as a path to engage in more discourse about the affectual encounters of dissonant spaces with future bodies of technology and new media.

2 Affective Exchanges in Networked Publics

In order to provide a full spectrum of the conversations surrounding the conceptualization of affect in media studies, I include some definitions from relevant scholars and works that supplement and provide contrasting thoughts on the topic. As mentioned above, many scholars consider affect to be a force or intensity that acts as foreground to "emotion, feeling, cognition, sensation and subjectivity" (Boler and Davis 2018, 80). Affect is a moment of "suspense, a shift, an attunement between entities" (Cho 2015, 44), it is an "unstructured non-conscious experience transmitted between bodies, which has the capacity to create affective resonances

below the threshold of articulated meaning" (Paasonen 2015, 702). It is worth noting that these excerpts from Paasonen (2015) and Cho (2015) also refer to a widely received definition of affect by Massumi, whose works prove to be highly influential within the discourses of affect in media theory. Cho (2015), for example, refers to "Massumi's equation (1995, 2002) of affect with intensity and emergence, a plane of the virtual, the generative potential of the event not yet determined" (45). However, I aim to emphasize the mechanism of affect within affective publics as more than just an autonomous or elusive force, which we will discuss further in this essay.

Cho (2015) accounts for the "overwhelming sensation of strangeness" (47) he experienced while scrolling down the bottomless depths of Tumblr, illustrating a visceral reaction while on the platform as he navigates through expressions of queerness on social media. He explains this experience as reverb, "how intensity interacts with refrain over time and as a function of repetition. . . in my conception, reverb is refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain; in this sense, it can be modulated to serve a purpose" (53). This correlates to Paasonen (2019)'s understanding of resonance in *Resonant Networks: On affect and social media*, as "circulation of social media content evokes specific kinds of networked resonance that contribute to its affective stickiness, the intensities of which grow, linger, and fade away at varying speeds as user attention and interest perpetually circulates, moves, shifts, and relocates. . . Instances of resonance render things interesting, desirable, and important while their reverberation affords them with temporal extension" (60). While resonance attaches stickiness to affective publics, refrain is the durability of resonance repeated over time through reverb.

Paasonen (2019) and Cho (2015) construct the notion of stickiness in affective publics through the resonance and reverb of affect within networked devices and platforms. Following previously laid definitions of affect, I would then like to pose the question: if affect is simply a sensation or force, how does it initiate or drive embodied movement in online spaces?

Papacharissi (2016) connects the affective exchanges of bodies and bodies of technology using examples of collectively-produced news about historical moments like the Occupy movement and the resignation of Hosni Mubarak uploaded on social media platforms, in this case Twitter, to explain affective publics as "networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (311). Here Papacharissi (2016) provides an explanation of how the affordances of Twitter, through its storytelling structures of "texture, tonality, discursivity, and narrative modality" (320) are able to drive discourses that are spread to create the feeling of community within networked publics. The instantaneous updates surrounding momentous events relevant to those feelings of community are inherently affective and sustain those structures of feeling.

Papacharissi (2016) suggests affect as "pre-emotive intensity subjectively experienced and connected to, in this context, to processes of pre-mediation or anticipation of events prior to their occurrence" (311). The idea that pre-mediation is filled with affect allows us to acknowledge its intangible quality whilst also relating its eventual appearance and re-appearance as the events continue to occur. These examples of important political events allow us to explore and dissect Papacharissi (2016)'s proposition in understanding the materiality of affective publics, and is further explained by Paasonen (2019) in her excerpt from *Resonant Networks*, "A possibility for contact, communication, and exchange does not, however, automatically result in, or fuel, a sense of togetherness or belonging: community building, whether online or offline, involves acts of exclusion, and even those of policing, given that there can be no 'us' without 'them' and no inside without an outside (Joseph, 2002)" (52).

Paasonen (2015)'s work in *As Networks Fail* consists of a collection of forty-five student essays, where she reveals "retrospective reflections of sensation after the fact" (702) in her students' experiences of their struggles with technology and devices. As the students' express

negative emotions and feelings of incompetence when faced with failure to succeed in using networks and devices, Paasonen (2015) points out that lack of control felt by her students lead to the notion of devices as having affect over their everyday existence as "human and nonhuman agency is fundamentally entangled" (712). For Paasonen (2015), the accumulation of sensation grows along with its intensity, and thus "human–technology relations gain a sticky affective charge in the negative register" (705).

Similar to other scholars, Paasonen (2015) indicates that affect exists as a precursor, a transformative process of sensation into a state of emotion. Paasonen (2015) also asserts that although fleeting sensations and testimonies of affect could be difficult to capture through recollections of these failed encounters, it supports the enmeshment of affect and emotion. The entanglement of affect and emotion is a significant and recurring theme in the discourse of affect, which I will later discuss in this paper leaning towards a political lens.

3 Affect as "Emotions on the Move"

"The qualitative descriptions of 'affect' in social media are conceptually overshadowed by the language of emotion — and yet emotions are presented as simply what people 'express', not a web of intersubjectively produced sociality... Affect understood as 'intensity' all too often gestures at something it does not explain, while using rhetorical strategies that further mystify the term." (Boler and Davis 2018, 82)

"We suggest, alternatively, conceptualizing affect as emotions on the move. Affect may be understood as emotions that are collectively or intersubjectively manifested, experienced, and mobilized, out of the 'private', individual realm and into shared, even public spaces, which may then be channeled into movement(s)." (81)

In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned Massumi's seminal influence in affect theory for media studies. In fact, many of the authors discussed in this paper have referenced Massumi to bolster, or in contrast, to criticize Massumi's body of work within the field of affect. After elaborating on Cho (2015), Paasonen (2015), and Papacharissi (2016)'s central concepts pertaining to affective networks, resonance, and reverb, in this section I lean towards Boler and Davis (2018)'s approach to better examine affect within networked publics, and their support of affect theory as rooted in feminist critique studies.

Boler and Davis (2018)'s iteration of affect as "emotions on the move" is strongly distinct from affect as the "elusive" or autonomous force characteristic of Massumi's influential studies. In their work, Boler and Davis (2018) note the pertinence of acknowledging emotions as a key factor in politics and media as technology is inseparable in society. They highlight their aim to integrate affect theory with feminist and digital media studies, specifically leaning toward feminist critical studies of emotion that associate affect as relational and inherently political.

Boler and Davis (2018) challenge Massumi's binary distinction between cognition and affect, and emotion and affect. They include excerpts from Massumi's essay *The Autonomy of Affect* as "not ownable or recognizable, and is thus resistant to critique". Affect as resistant to critique in the eyes of Boler and Davis (2018) is a romanticized conception, and "such bifurcations work against — or at a minimum appear to ignore — long-standing feminist theorizing that has sought, for decades, to theorize beyond the binaries of body and cognition, and emotion and rationality, showing the ways these mutually shape and form what and how we know (Campbell, 1994; Frye, 1983; Hochschild, 1987; Jaggar, 1989; Lorde, 1997)" (80).

This is not to say that Boler and Davis (2018) object towards all concepts existing in the current discourses of affect within new media research. In fact, they acknowledge Papacharissi (2016)'s work on understanding affective attunement and her five propositions to interpret the "texture of networked publics, and tonality of expression as it relates to social media" (Boler and Davis 2018, 81). However, they view the influence of Massumi's earlier works

in Papacharissi (2016)'s and other scholars' formulation that rely on alleged presence, and therefore alleged autonomy, of affect slightly amiss for the purposes of observing affect from feminist and political perspectives in media theories. They state, "While the attention to affective attunement is potentially useful, in deploying a definition of affect as quantitative, pre-personal, non-conscious, and non-signifying, one is left with a myriad of questions about how particular emotions are targeted, produced and manipulated within the affective politics of digital media" (Boler and Davis 2018, 81).

Continuing Boler and Davis (2018)'s acknowledgement for the engagement of Papacharissi (2016)'s affective publics as mobilized online and offline, the excerpt above further delineates their disengagement with Massumi's account of non-conscious affect in favor of theories that address the emotionality within society and online communities through structures of storytelling that flow co-constitutively from social media into public spaces. Boler and Davis (2018) ultimately emphasize the importance of affective discourse in digital networks by conceptualizing affect as a collective contribution which rely on social contexts, human interaction and the embodiment of affect into emotion that simultaneously (re)occur.

Yet, there seems to be a progressive shift in the recent works from Massumi, particularly in his book *Ontopower* (2015), where he addresses similar views as Boler and Davis (2018) through the examination of politics and governmental power exercised in broadcast media shortly after the terrors of 9/11. Massumi (2015) specifically addresses fear and the affective modulation of fear through channels that catch the affective attunement of the public. The terror alert system set in place by Bush's administration was an exercise of power in a "social environment within which government now operated was of such complexity that it made a mirage of any idea that there could be a one-to-one correlation between official speech or image production and the form and content of response" (174).

Massumi (2015) here acknowledges the complexity of networked bodies, and although in his article he refers to broadcast media, I argue that it could also be applicable in the context of social media. Through their proposed understanding of affect, Boler and Davis (2018) direct attention towards a shift in a political "crisis of truth". By unpacking "truthiness" and "post-truth" they illustrate observations of a U.S. political landscape where the individual and collective sense of "truthiness" prioritizes the perception and interpretation of facts that then influences public opinion regardless of their factuality. This mirrors Massumi (2015)'s accounts of fear and the affective modulation of fear by government, as "the alert system was designed to modulate that fear. It could raise it a pitch, then lower it before it became too intense, or even worse, before habituation dampened response. Timing was everything. Less fear itself than fear fatigue became an issue of public concern. Affective modulation of the populace was now an official, central function of an increasingly time-sensitive government" (171).

Even though Massumi (2015) still refers to an "autonomous force of existence", he applies it in relation to fear and the "quasi-casual relation to itself" (182), thus equating fear to possessing a double-feature, fear as emotion and as affective force. Through this understanding of affect and emotion as inseparable along with his declaration of fear as an ontopower, Massumi (2015) in this body of work claims the "full spectrum of fear, up to and including its becoming-autonomous as a regenerative ground of existence, in action and in-action, in feeling and without it with thought" (185). By framing affect in the context of fear, and fear's ability to be experienced "nonconsciously, wrapped in action, before it unfurls from it and is felt as itself, in its distinction from the action with which it arose..." (176), Massumi (2015)'s work, at least in his probings of fear, bears more of a resemblance to Boler and Davis (2018)'s definition of "affect as emotions on the move".

4 Frustration, Fear, and Trauma in Networked Publics

"Affective feedback loops are central to the creation of these personalized emotional and informational ecosystems, as they are the mechanism by which affect circulates from the user, into the algorithmically determined product, which returns 'desired' content back to the user... In this movement, the relations established by social media platforms are as much relations between people and econo-technologically instantiated version of self, as they are between separate individuals 'mediated' by technologies." (Boler and Davis 2018, 76)

"My fear is that algorithmic media provides the technoscientific instrument for making trauma time an operative tool of state and capital... As instruments of automated media reliant on computational process for production and distribution, algorithms 'anticipate the automation of subjectivity' (Andrejevic 2019, 11) and, by implication, the potential for automated trauma." (Richardson 2023, 429)

The last section of this essay goes further into the negative registers of affect in media, and how it assembles itself in new forms of technology. We have already discussed, through a political lens, of Massumi (2015)'s dissection of fear as well as Papacharissi (2016)'s framework of the agential nature of affective publics. Meanwhile, in addition to its illustration of the entanglement between humans and networked devices, Paasonen (2019)'s work in *Resonant Networks* insinuates the connection between affective publics brought together by intensities of feeling, as she states "...following Zizi Papacharissi (2015), affective publics involve shared articulations of emotion that bring forth more or less temporary sense of connection, which, with a contagious kind of intensity, can fuel political action... It then follows that a scholarly focus on affect should not be confined to 'good vibrations' and pleasurable exchanges, just as investigations into resonance ought not exclude dissonances from their agenda" (52–53). Finally, Boler and Davis (2018) express their urgency for scholars towards understanding the "interplay of affect, emotion and digital media to understand the 'networked subject' of contemporary politics" (82).

The discussion of affective feedback loops from Boler and Davis (2018) in the excerpt above provides room to widen the scope onto racialized, classed, and gendered nuances of mediatized politics by incorporating critical algorithm studies. They suggest that "Algorithmic governance refers to the ways in which our digitally-mediatized experiences of the world — and hence our exposure, values, and reality — are shaped by artificial intelligence of algorithms designed according to commodified, consumer-oriented logics" (83).

Within the context of affective and networked publics, Richardson (2023) provides a comprehensive introduction to algorithmic trauma that relates to the facets of affective discourse in media theory. "Returning to the proposition that media shapes trauma and trauma shapes media, algorithmic trauma and its affective ruptures can be conceptualized as distinct from traumas manifested in other media. Autonomous, traumatic, and machinic, affect animates ever-shifting relations within and between technical systems, flesh bodies, and worldly contexts. Algorithmic systems introduce a radical computational contingency into both the arrival of the traumatic event and its latent return which renders the virtual potential of trauma into coded probability" (440). In relation to Davis and Boler and Davis (2018), the affective feedback loop fundamentally trained to direct "desired" content back to the user, in the framing of traumatic algorithms circulates and thus perpetuates traumatic content through algorithms and its architectures of machine learning.

Richardson (2023) illustrates collective trauma occurring "through recursive mediations, taken up by and transmitted through different media technological renderings". To reckon with the mediality of trauma, then, is also to confront its material and affective dynamics within situated contexts (Atkinson and Richardson 2013). But as Jenny Edkins (2003, 58) argues, trauma is also tightly bound to power, and in the context of political abuse, "trauma

involves confronting the arbitrary, contingent, and ungrounded nature of authority structures" (429). The potential reverb of trauma as it courses through affective feedback loops, and its inherently political sources of war, discrimination, and other social issues possess a bleak outlook towards our relationship with technology, however it is an outlook that I take as necessary to build collective action and affective politics against infrastructures that remain invisible yet continuously gain power.

5 Conclusion

The discussions surrounding affect within networked publics continue in tandem with the development of technology. In this current day, and almost surely in the futures to come, society remains tethered to devices and its afforded affective networks. I illustrate this using central concepts of affect theory discussed in this paper, from the conceptual understanding of affect itself, the sticky resonance and reverb in networked publics of social media that oscillates and is relational to offline publics, and the affective feedback loop of affect in positive and negative registers.

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