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## **Digital intimate publics and social media: towards theorising public lives on private platforms**

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We usually think about intimacy as to do with our private, personal lives, as describing feelings and relationships that are most inner, most ‘inward to one’s personhood’ (McGlotten, 2013, p. 1), and concerned with relationships that are most important to us. Sociologists have theorised intimacy as centrally involving mutual self-disclosure (Giddens, 1992), time spent in co-presence, physical affection, and acts of practical care (Jameison, 2011). But, as queer theory and sexuality studies tell us, intimacy is very much socially sanctioned, defined by institutions, laws, and normative social pressures (Berlant, 1998; Plummer, 2003). The sociology of intimacy helps illuminate what, specifically and empirically, is involved in the doing of intimacy in different places and cultures, and for different genders, classes, and social groups. Queer and feminist critical cultural theorists like Berlant have explained how, in late-modern cultures, having a ‘life’ has become equated with having an intimate life (Berlant, 1998, p. 282). Further, as Cefai and Couldry note, ‘What queer theory has taught us is that heteronormativity shapes what can appear to us as “intimate” even in settings where questions of sexual identity are typically *not* articulated as such’ (2017, p. 2). Understandings of intimacy are culturally and socially specific, rather than ‘global’ or ‘universal’ (Jameison, 2011). However, in many places right now intimacy names ‘the affective encounters with others that often matter most’ (McGlotten, 2013, p. 1). From the perspective of poststructuralist queer and feminist theory, producing intimacy can be understood as part of subjectification processes that centrally involve the hierarchical ordering of relationships and psychic concerns, in socially legible ways, in order to make sense of ourselves and those around us. How social media figures in such processes of psychically and materially *ordering relationships* and shaping what *appears as intimate* is part of what we consider in this collection. In this chapter, and this collection more broadly, we are interested in how social media practices challenge and disrupt, as well as how they reinforce and concretise (hetero)normative notions of intimacy as a concept that creates boundaries around certain relationships and ethics of care. Social media are now centrally involved in processes whereby pedagogies of intimate life as life itself are learnt, reproduced, given value, contested, and exploited.

### **Theorising digital intimate publics**

### *Excessive and ambivalent publicisation*

Shaka McGlotten (2013, p. 2) argues that social concerns and ‘technophobic panics’ about the impact of new technologies on our lives have always turned on questions of intimacy. These concerns are intensified by the ubiquity of smartphones, social media, and hook-up apps. ‘Virtual intimacies’, McGlotten suggests, are often publicly constructed as ‘failed intimacies that disrupt the flow of a good life lived right, that is, a life that involves coupling and kids, or at least, coupling and consumption’ (2013, p. 7). Other scholars of digital intimacies have observed similarly derisive cultural attitudes towards digital, mediated, and ‘virtual’ forms of intimacy as potentially ‘diminished and dangerous corruption[s] of the real thing’ (McGlotten, 2013, p. 7; see also Attwood, 2006; Chambers, 2013; Jamieson, 2013; Hobbs et al., 2017). However, intimacies mediated via contemporary social media platforms need to be understood not only in relation to moral panics over the potential weakening of social ties and intimate relations in the digital age, but also in relation to the commodification of relationships built into social media platform infrastructure; that is, in relation to privately owned platforms as places where (hetero)normativities and ‘good lives’ are represented, circulated, constituted, and sold (back) to us (Bucher, 2012; Dean, 2010; van Dijk, 2013; Marwick, 2013; Duffy & Hund, 2015). In short, *digital* intimate publics, like the intimate publics Berlant (2008) describes as constituted via other kinds of mass media address and representation, are complex and ‘ambivalent’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012) in their aesthetics and politics.

Berlant (2008) describes the creation of intimate publics through mass media discourses and texts as scenes of mass intimacy, identification, and subjectification. An intimate public operates, she suggests, ‘when a market opens up to a block of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires’ (2008, p. 5). Intimate publics create shared worldviews and shared emotional knowledge. They are ‘a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general’ (2008, p. viii). An intimate public, she writes, ‘flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an “x”’ (2008, p. viii). Intimate publics can be understood as scenes — centred around media and culture — of the commodification of intimacy, self, and political identities; pedagogical discipline about normativity and normative intimate desires for different groups of subjects; as well as cultural scenes that promise and generate feelings of belonging and consolation.

Such scenes now play out across social and mobile media, as the chapters in this collection illustrate vividly. Social media, as Hjorth and Arnold (2013, p. 125) argue, ‘constitute a new socio-technical institutionalisation of public intimacy’. Some scholars have suggested that new modes of intimacy and visual sexual practices are emerging due to a confluence of social, historical, material and design ‘actants’ (Race, 2015; Dowsett, 2015; Cover, this volume; Hart, this volume). In more mundane, less spectacular, ways the social and cultural meaning of ‘intimacy’ is currently being contested and struggled over via debates about and use of social media. Media commentary about social media frequently air concerns about the ‘excessive’

publicisation of intimate relations and experiences. Are people ‘over-sharing’ information deemed personal (see Kennedy, this volume)? Do they speak too publicly, too frequently, or share too many images documenting aspects of everyday life deemed pedestrian, mundane, uninteresting or crass? Concerns frequently revolve around the possibility that social media makes it possible for people to: document the routines of their everyday lives (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016); fashion themselves as microcelebrities and seek ‘attention’ (Senft, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Abidin, 2016); view and share images of sex and bodies (Mulholland, 2013; Albury, 2015; Dobson, 2015); and, that young people in particular are harmed by sharing images of their *own* bodies and sexuality (Ringrose et al., 2013; Albury, 2015; Dobson & Ringrose, 2015; Dobson & Coffey, 2015). Such concerns are symptomatic of cultural contestations over the meaning of intimacy in the era of social media. These concerns revolve around the moralisation of certain ‘excesses’: of personal information, images, bodies, self-images, emotions (Hendry, 2014). Further, public self-telling and display are coded as ‘excessive’ and pathological for some bodies, whilst celebrated for others in ways that are deeply structured by gender, race, and class (Senft, 2012; Skeggs & Woods, 2012; Pitcan, Marwick & boyd, 2018).

The theoretical frame of ‘intimate publics’ helps us think about how contestations over power play out in the generative, liminal space where the public and private intermingle. Berlant and Warner (1998) advocate for a publicisation of the intimate that speaks against privatisation, in the sense of both space and property, with an understanding of the deep connection between the prioritisation of private property rights and private (heteronormative) spaces and familial relations. In their account, the politics of intimacy in public, beyond seeking safety and acceptance of a range of sexual and gender practices and identities, is about ‘the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture’ (1998, p. 548). They advocate then for a ‘publicisation’ of not just sex, but other significant forms of care, love, and intimacy, with a view to imagining attachments and relations beyond the domain of private, heterosexual, family life, and even beyond ‘communities’; towards re-imagining ourselves as part of broader publics and counter-publics with capacities for less-bounded forms of intimate care and pleasure.

On social media platforms, communication and representational practices related to politics, civic action, work, creativity, social belonging, relationality, friendship, family, desire, and intimacy often intermingle and even co-constitute one another. The tensions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ produced by communicating in a digital space of ‘collapsed’, flattened social contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011) are dynamic, complex, and ambivalent in terms of the risks and opportunities engendered for individuals. Things get especially risky for those marginalised along lines of gender and sexual identity, race, and class (Duguay, 2014; Rubin & McClelland, 2015; Vivienne, 2016; Pitcan, Marwick & boyd, 2018). Nonetheless, the way people use social media makes it increasingly difficult to sustain the illusory separation of politics from intimate life, of both ‘chosen’ and ‘unchosen’ identities from politics, and the illusion of the ‘private’ heteronormative family as the ideal primary source of intimacy and pleasure, rather

than broader communities and *publics*. Beyond the visual display of social connections, being able to trace the words of care and support that people share with each other, read about people's crises and challenges at work, with family and loved ones, unforeseen health problems and accidents, as well as seeing when and how certain identities, images, words or interactions results in conflict and abuse, raise a potentially important challenge, if we recognise it as such, to the hetero-patriarchal framework of privatised intimacy, boxed and bounded within families that Berlant and Warner (1998) critique.

Further, Berlant calls for a consideration of less organised, 'more mobile processes of attachment' in imagining forms of intimacy outside normative relational forms and beyond the purview of institutions, states, nations, and 'an ideal of publicness' (Berlant, 1998, p. 284). More recently, and specifically in relation to digital cultures and social media, McGlotten theorises 'virtual intimacy' as a means to imagine and recuperate 'forms of connection and belonging that are not necessarily identitarian and that do not fit neatly into our beliefs about how we might belong to a couple, a family, or nation' (McGlotten, 2013, p. 10-11). In theorising power and the inscription of intimacy via social and mobile media, Lasen and Hjorth (2017) note the political importance of 'shifts in the regime of attention — in what is perceived, noticed, and affectively witnessed' (Lasen & Hjorth, 2017, p. 130). What are the power dynamics thrown into question through the kind of everyday, mundane, excessive, and intimate 'digital inscriptions' (Lasen & Hjorth, 2017) made by and on social and mobile media, and the associated shifts in the 'regime of attention'?

In this chapter and this collection, we are interested in the possibilities engendered by social media for intimacies that are not fully realised yet, not captured by form or discourse, not overdetermined with normative meanings. More mobile, less organised forms of attachment can and do form on social media platforms. We see it as important to name and theorise the productive possibilities of such, especially in the context of — *not despite* — social media platforms' private for-profit ownership, and platform infrastructures that are designed to exploit people's data, time, attention, and affective capacities. Noticing and naming more mobile processes of attachment, forms of connection that 'don't fit', shifts in the 'regime of attention' — what we might broadly call 'queer intimacies and attachments' on social media — has become extra-significant to aesthetic and political processes because of the importance of human attention to algorithmic machine-learning. But crucially, we must hold on to the double sense of *public* as referring to both space and property ownership. In the context of social media's digital intimate publics that means critically examining the relationship between the political valence of public performances of all kinds of intimacy on platforms that privatise, *as in commercialise and take ownership of*, that intimacy.

#### *Excessive, unambivalent, privatisation*

Machine learning generates new and complicated paradoxes in relation to the institutionalisation of public intimacy via social media. On the one hand, the algorithmic architecture of social media platforms can be seen as a powerful tool for reproducing normative identities and intimacies, because algorithms are programmed to extend,

rather than disrupt, flows of attention. On the other hand, a social media platform can enable a wider array of non-dominant intimacies and identities because it has the technical capacity to mass-customise attention. The commercial models of social media depend on deeper, faster, and richer flows of affect, attention, and expression. There are two ways in which intimate encounters and self-representations on social media generate value. First, by generating more and/or deeper social connections; and second, by generating more and/or deeper platform 'engagement' (time spent paying attention and generating data). The generation of both kinds of value are explicitly intertwined on social media. With this in mind, we can begin to ask about the ways in which certain kinds of embodied interactions and intimate self-telling and displays in digital spaces become coded as both normative and *valuable*.

The function and politics of this value are often understood quite differently via a common dichotomy of disciplinary concerns. Sociological and cultural studies concerns often centre around people's digital media participation practices, habits, and identities; while critical media studies of digital cultures often centre the political economy of data and social media platforms. For scholars concerned primarily with the dynamics and nuances of people's social media participation and content production, digital intimacies can be understood as constitutive of a kind of *social capital* that structures experiences and mobilisations of intimacy, identity, and belonging, and that can be mobilised potentially into other kinds of capital (Hopkins and Ryan, 2014; Harvey and Ringrose, 2015; Lambert, 2016; Abidin, 2018; Raun, 2018; Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Dobson, this volume). When people's sharing practices are viewed primarily in relation to the commercial business models of social media, intimate communication can be seen as a kind of free *labour* (Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2009; Jarrett, 2016; Attique, 2017). That is, the media practices involved in the doing of intimacy online double as the generation of valuable content, attention, social networks, and data. Social media can be critically understood as machines that capture and channel the human capacity to affect one another (Clough, 2009; Dean, 2010; Carah, 2014).

In the sections that follow, we outline in more detail these two critically important perspectives on social media's digital intimate publics: *digital intimacy as social capital* and *digital intimacy as labour*. We highlight the need to hold these together in order to help us think through the constitution of digital intimacies on social media as intertwined processes of human socialisation, subjectification, algorithmic sorting, and machine-learning (Bucher, 2012, 2017; Carah & Dobson, 2016; Carah & Angus, 2018). We intend these perspectives to take up both parts of a conceptualisation of *public* intimacy in terms of space *and* property (Fraser, 1990; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Warner, 2002; Berlant, 2008). We go on to argue towards a 'politics of publicness' on these two fronts. In the sections below we suggest that beyond requiring new, often nuanced, modulations of intimacy-related norms, the digital intimate publics of social media might, in their excesses and transgressions, also productively provoke an explicit questioning of, or challenge, to (hetero)normative intimate relational norms and hierarchies. However, we also chart the political risks of digital intimate publics and their excesses, as they congeal into privately owned and controlled platform infrastructures. The political challenge then is to imagine and cultivate public intimacies

where both the relations and performative practices *and* their infrastructure are publicly held.

### **Digital intimacy as social capital**

Social media powerfully represent, facilitate, and archive people's social and emotional investments. This is part of what has made them so successful. Bollmer (this volume) argues that intimacy is a 'structure of feeling' often arranged more around the *imagined* presence of others and *longings* for connection, rather than around direct reciprocity. Searches for, and imaginations of, the 'good life' promised by intimacy is part of what keeps people logging on (McGlotten, 2013, p. 135). Robards (2013), for example, has written about how Facebook has capitalised on the long-term use of the site, by packaging and repackaging historical digital traces of users' lives and relationships, and resurfacing these for users through 'look back' videos, 'year in review' functions, and 'on this day' posts. Robards & Lincoln (2016, 2017) study how people make sense of their own social media archives, to remember past relationships and connections, revisit teenage years, and also to erase the past to prepare for imagined futures (see also Robards et al., this volume). Hopkins and Ryan (2014) suggest that fostering affective connections and social belonging through practices of sharing self-images, jokes, and memes on Facebook is key to social mobility for the young people in their study from profoundly disadvantaged rural areas, starting university together. Facebook, they suggest, provides these young people with a vital means of building community, support networks, and confidence before entering university. What these kind of examples make clear are the affective, potentially enduring charges associated with intimate and everyday sharing on social media.

Some emergent empirical work is also mapping ways in which people form unpredictable, strange, and mobile connections and attachments, as well potentially new kinds of kinship groups and communities. For example, Andreassen (2017) suggests that new family and kinship groups are forming online in relation to intimate public donor sibling groups on Facebook and extended donor sibling families. Evans and Riley (this volume) theorise the intimate public of female commuters in London that has formed on TubeCrush.com, a site dedicated to admiring the bodies of men on the London Tube. Underwood (this volume) investigates the gender politics of the online global community of young men that connect over a shared love of 'Zyzz' — body builder Aziz Shavershian who died of a heart attack at the age of 22, in 2011. She notes the intensity of emotion that young, often socially marginalised men are able to express to each other around this now somewhat mythological figure. Vivienne (2016) documents digital storytelling practices by LGBTQI parents and families, HIV positive people, and LGBTQI people from rural areas and Islamic countries. For such individuals, simply telling stories from their daily lives on digital platforms constitutes a form of 'everyday activism' and contributes to shifting notions of family and society. Such sharing practices, Vivienne argues, thus have a politics that extends beyond the individual. These are just a few brief examples of research mapping the ways in which people share and connect over interests, experiences, and identities on social media, in

ways that facilitate, or perhaps promise to facilitate, some sense of shared knowledge and belonging, as well as having political valence.

As Illouz reminds us, 'for a particular form of cultural behaviour to become a capital, it must be convertible into economic and social benefits' (2007, p. 63). Social media connections, attachments, relations, and the kind of 'everyday activism' that can be involved in intimate world building through digital media does not always convert directly into capital or social mobility. The point of conceptualising digital intimacies as *potentially* a kind of social capital, or as key to its acquisition, is to highlight such media practices as valuable resources for people, and unevenly distributed ones (Lambert, 2016; Dobson, this volume). Intimacy can be seen as a resource tied to knowledge and power because, as feminists have long pointed out, we are not only 'rational' thinkers and decision makers, but beings with significant social and emotional investments, whose actions and biographies are informed and constituted by these investments, rather than by 'purely' cognitive processes. As Illouz suggests, one's emotional attitude and 'style' define one's social identity, and is crucial to 'how people acquire networks' and build social capital (Illouz, 2007, p. 66). Illouz argues that over the course of the twentieth century, particularly in relation to the rise and popularisation of therapeutic language and psychology as a formalised discipline, a particular emotional style has become valued and valuable. She suggests that being able to narrate the self in ways that constitute it as a 'transparent' and 'authentic' expression of 'internality' has become a cultural pre-condition of forms of happiness and well-being. Key to Illouz's argument is that therapeutic language and the particular form of emotional habitus it has produced as culturally valued is not merely a ploy to discipline subjects and pathologise those unable to conform, but is a *resource* that is good for 'addressing the volatile nature of selfhood and of social relationships in late modernity' (2007, p. 71). Illouz helps us understand the social, material, and psychological stakes of getting a 'transparent' emotional habitus 'right' in one's social context.

Lambert's findings on how people learn to negotiate intimacy in digital spaces make clear the complexity and nuance involved in negotiating emotional style and habitus via social media. Participants in his study were 'highly wary' of the kind of 'unashamed' public intimacy, attention-grabbing, and 'overtly emotional confessions' that have been the source prominent public discourse about the excesses of social media (2016, p. 2568; see also Kennedy, this volume). Public declarations of love for partners and close friends, and of sadness and longing for relatives living far away were given as examples by his participants of 'overly intimate' sharing that, Lambert suggests, alienated the Facebook users with whom he spoke. Sharing about daily consumption practices, such as meals, was seen as 'mundanely personal, rather than interpersonal', and thus 'not intimate enough' (2016, p. 2568) by his participants. Lambert suggests that 'rewarding' performances of connection on Facebook commonly occur through light-hearted, playful, and gregarious emotional tones. He proposes the concept of 'intimacy capital' as a recognition that 'the cultural and socio-technical competencies required to negotiate intimacy and thus have rewarding and "safe" exchanges on Facebook are not distributed evenly in society', and people negotiate intimacy on social media differently based on

cultural and socio-economic background, levels of education, and digital literacy (2016, p. 2571).

The conversion of a 'transparent' emotional style, and intimate revelations and performances on social media into social capital is perhaps most obviously notable in relation to micro-celebrities and influencers (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2018). Recent research in this area makes clear, however, that intimate public revelations and performances need to be understood beyond simple dichotomies of 'strategic' or 'instrumental' versus 'authentic', 'affective' intimacy. Raun (2018), for instance, examines transgender vlogger Julie Van Vu as a subcultural micro-celebrity who he suggests transgresses this dichotomy. Vu combines activism, affective connection, and overt monetisation through product placements and sponsorships. In filming her public hair laser removal along with breast augmentation surgery, and other transgender surgical processes, Vu's content 'appears simultaneously as personal life-story telling, knowledge sharing and product placement' (2018, p. 104). Raun (2018) suggests what matters is 'not whether the intimacy communicated is authentic or not' but rather how it works as a *genre* in the techno-cultural setting, creating and channelling the expectations, attachments, and affects of one's audience adeptly. Berryman and Kavka (2018) analyse 'crying vlogs' and 'anxiety vlogs' by well-known young female beauty vloggers on YouTube, where young women film themselves breaking down in tears, or describing their psychological and bodily insecurities. They suggest that such videos may have lower advertising revenue potential within the economic structure of YouTube. However, crying and anxiety blogs can function as a means of demonstrating vloggers' 'authenticity', and thus fostering valuable intimacy between vloggers and their audience. They suggest such vlogs also function as emotional outlets for the vloggers in visual social media cultures structured by a perceived *compulsory* emotional 'positivity', and dominated by emotional tones of 'the aspirational and the comic' (2018, p. 86; see also, Marwick, 2015; Kanai, forthcoming).

These 'negative affect vlogs', along with other research such as Lambert's, and recent practices like 'finstagram' (fake Instagram) accounts, then also speak to the perception of an overly-prescriptive emotional habitus on social media platforms as required to mobilise and build social capital. The kind of positive, aspirational, and chipper-and-playful but not-overly-emotional affective style noted by Lambert (2016) and the other scholars cited above as 'normative' in facilitating 'rewarding' interactions on social media is commonly associated with, and more easily within reach of, certain bodies with certain social histories, over others. We suggest that a classed, raced, and gendered emotional habitus, profoundly entwined with people's ability to belong and to acquire social capital, is being constituted, judged, evaluated, and struggled over via public discourses as well as private and psychic musings around 'oversharing', excess, and the digital mediation of intimacies on social media. Drawing on Illouz and on sociological and cultural research into digital intimacies, we can begin to think about what it is that people navigate in order to develop a 'valuable' emotional habitus in digital intimate publics. We can begin to imagine the kind of digital, emotional, and psycho-social literacies that come into play when making subtle distinctions and fast, often less-than-conscious, choices about intimate sharing in networked publics. These are distinctions

and choices about the kind of sharing, liking, tagging, and commenting that humanises an individual and strengthens belonging among those with whom it is needed, desired, and valuable, and the kind of intimate sharing and relationality that conversely provokes discomfort, disgust, boredom, annoyance, exclusion, rejection, pathologisation, and feelings of shame that may be associated with the judgement of being 'excessive' (Senft, 2012). Socially marginalised bodies and groups have particular investments in working out the subtle differences between a valuable 'network building' emotional habitus online and a potentially detrimental, pathologised one.

### **Beyond social capital, towards an ethics of expanded care?**

In conceptualising digital intimacies as potential social capital, or at least, as deeply implicated in the acquisition of it, the temptation/risk is then to frame 'intimacy capital' as the 'new good literacy' that people of 'diverse backgrounds' need to somehow develop. Following the queer and feminist theoretical trajectories signalled above, we are led to questions such as: Do marginalised people and groups require more 'intimacy capital' and 'digital literacy' to publicly thrive? Does 'intimacy capital' as a perceived good too easily dovetail with individual responsabilisation discourses and victim blaming/shaming when public intimacy online 'goes wrong'? Is the kind of 'intimacy capital' gestured to by Lambert and others akin to heteronormative social reproduction in digital spaces (Jarret, 2016)? A more transformative politics of digital intimate publics might move towards an ethics of expanded care and radical *shamelessness* (Senft, 2012; Dobson, 2015) in relation to public intimate traces, disclosures, and performances for any body who desires or *needs* such; towards cultures where intimacies and emotional styles of diverse kinds can be performed publicly without shame or judgement. We suggest such moves centrally involve considerations of/attention to 'more mobile processes of attachment' (Berlant, 1998), shifts in the 'regime of attention' (Lasen & Hjorth, 2017), and 'queer intimacies and attachments', as well as 'intimacy glitches': small mistakes, and social missteps that might provoke us to question the boundaries of our care and pleasure. Perhaps it is when people get normative intimacy 'wrong' that there are nascent possibilities and generative spaces opened up for questioning the underlying value/s of such. We suggest, in short, the importance of making space in debates about 'oversharing' and social media excesses to critically question what counts as normative intimacy what does not, and the politics of this.

Social media platforms are spaces of interaction where social contexts (family, work, school, sexuality, subcultural interests, and so on) are often quite radically collapsed, as we've mentioned, and often such context-collapse becomes an involuntary precondition of participation, or is at least only partially conscious, controlled, and consensual (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In such collapsed contexts, an expanded ethics of care and pleasure beyond 'intimates' and perhaps even beyond 'communities' (Berlant & Warner, 1998) becomes all the more important. In digital intimate publics we are sometimes proximate to, witness to, and called or 'tagged' to others', sometimes

effusive, expressions of love, pleasure, pain, suffering, and need from a network of friends, colleagues, acquaintances, family members, and others in a digital network with whom we are close and not so close. The now-normative collapsed contexts of social media do not mean the loss of all hierarchy in personal relationships and the loss of all *contextual meaning* in the ways in which people share and interpret the shared and exposed data of those around them (Albury, 2017). But it does perhaps warrant an expanded ethics of care, of 'queer comrades and generosity' (Warner, cited in Albury, 2017, p. 720), and potentially new digital intimacy practices and modulations that cross (hetero)normative boundaries of intimates and non-intimates and may transgress emergent intimacy norms. Digital intimate publics call for a consideration of how to make space for, and be generous towards, the excesses of girls, of queers, of gushing mothers, lovers, and 'weird' social media friends who don't *know* (remembering the complexities of habitus knowledge) what to comment on and what to scroll past without leaving a trace; from the excesses and transgressions of queer and trans micro-celebrities (Raun, 2017) to those of girls uploading selfies (Abidin, 2016), crying, and asking 'Am I pretty or ugly?' (Dobson, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017), to the kind of 'everyday activism' of LGBTQI communities and families who make their everyday, ('excessive') lives publicly visible (Vivienne, 2016). They call for a consideration of how to ethically witness, and sometimes respond, to those around us who are compelled to, who need to, or who less-than-consciously 'collapse' their broadcast contexts and publicly 'overshare', seek help, care, pleasure, and *attention* (that dirty word) from the digital intimate publics around them.

We intend these thoughts as generative suggestions; ones that require much further development and *fleshing out* (that is, grounding in the experience of bodies) via theory and research. In the sections above we have mapped a conceptualisation of digital intimacy as potential social capital, and tried to think through the ways in which developing or acquiring it involves learning about, co-creating, and practising norms and new modulations of intimacy. On social media this happens through the registration of embodied affects and relations of attention in platform databases, as we explain below in further charting a conceptualisation of digital intimacy as labour.

### **Digital intimacy as labour**

The feminist critique of the immaterial, emotional and affective labour of social reproduction offers a foundation for conceptualising digital intimacy as labour that needs to go hand in hand with conceptualisations of digital intimacy as social capital. What such critique helps illuminate is how the intimate labour of care and of producing and maintaining shared feelings, affects, and intimate and social relations becomes *more* productive under conditions of digital capitalism. In being made productive, practices of digital intimacy lose important aspects of their *publicness*. The labour of intimacy sustains the business model of social media platforms. But, as Jarrett argues, that does not mean 'immaterial labour was only "invented" when it moved out of the kitchen and onto the internet' (2014, p. 15). Feminists have illuminated how, in spheres of intimate life and caring practices, gendered labour practices have long been deeply entwined

with emotions and sociality, so that rather than ‘alienated’ from the labour of the household and care, female subjects feel deeply and authentically engaged in such labour (Weeks, 2007). Jarret (2016) applies these insights directly to digital and social media. She argues that the affective and immaterial labour integral to domestic work is ‘precisely the kind of labour involved in the economically significant social networks of digital media’ (2016, p. 5). Practices of digital intimacy, following Jarret, are mostly unpaid, and stem from relations of care, enjoyment, and social recognition. They are motivated by the desire to affect and be affected. Domestic, affective, and immaterial labour have been understood by feminist scholars as animated by a tension between the social meaning and agency that can emerge from relations and practices of care, and the exploitation of women in social reproduction. For Jarret, it is this same tension that animates the politics of digital media (2016, p. 11). Feminist critiques of affective labour then offer a critical starting point for understanding digital intimacy as labour, because any claim about the exploitative qualities of digital intimacy on commercial media platforms must proceed from the acknowledgement of this tension.

Terranova’s (2000) concept of ‘free labour’ offers a critical early intervention in debates about the appropriation of the affective labour of social reproduction in the digital economy. She ‘identified the role of voluntary, unpaid contributions’ of internet users (Jarrett, 2014, p. 16), demonstrating how their social capacities shaped the emerging digital media platforms. Crucially, their activity was ‘free’ in a double sense: both freely given and unpaid, simultaneously enjoyed and exploited (Terranova 2000, Jarrett 2014). Andrejevic (2011) argues that ‘free’ labour, even though it may be chosen, pleasurable, and socially and politically meaningful, is simultaneously exploited. He argues that ‘the mere fact someone benefits from the efforts of another does not, in itself, constitute exploitation’ and suggests that we consider exploitation as a situation characterised by a ‘loss of control over one’s productive and creative activities’. Thus, it is possible to argue that the mere fact digital intimate publics double as data that feed the commercial model of advertiser-funded social media platforms does not undermine the political valence of their publicness. However, over time, the existence of digital intimate publics primarily on commercial platforms becomes exploitative in the sense that these publics congeal into the material form of the platform.

When we enact intimacy through private social media platforms, we render intimate relations not just visible to, but also owned by, private platforms. When we use a platform for years and years, we contribute to the gradual training of the platform architecture. We might decide eventually to delete our account on a platform, and all the data that goes with it. But what we cannot recover are the contributions we make to the engineering of the platform itself — its algorithmic capacity to shape and reproduce social relations, to make judgments about people like us and our affective capacities. Here then, current prominent debates about ‘privacy’ — either individual responsibility for protecting one’s privacy online, or privacy rights for individual users — divert us from the bigger picture. Social media are historically significant not just for the way they ‘invade’ privacy by accumulating personal information, but also because of the way they digitally enclose and erode the public commons (Andrejevic, 2007). Public intimacy builds the interfaces, protocols, and algorithms of privately-owned commercial

platforms, and with that the capacity of media to calculate and shape intimate relations. The political stakes of this are most acute for those already marginalised along long-standing axes of social inequality including class, race, gender, and sexuality.

To examine the politics of digital intimate publics more fully, then, we need to account for their productiveness within a capitalist digital media economy. Digital intimate publics need to be understood as part of larger historical shifts toward the rendering of intimate life, emotions, care, and social relations, into private capital (Illouz, 2007; Fraser, 2013; Hearn, 2008; Skeggs, 2014; Jarret, 2016). That digital intimacy can function as productive labour must be understood as the outcome of a social and historical process through which the work of social reproduction — work that is unevenly distributed and rewarded — is incorporated into the business models of social media platforms (Jarret, 2016). Below we explore some of the qualities of digital intimate publics that make them particularly productive in terms of providing labour for commercial social media platforms: allowing for excessive and transgressive intimacies; the digitisation of social reproduction; and, the training of platform algorithms.

### *The labour of being excessive*

Above, we have suggested that public debate about digital public intimacy often focuses, in a moralising way, on its excessiveness (Kennedy, this volume). The lens of digital intimate publics enables us to discern ‘excess’ as an important and politicised quality of digital intimate publics; a quality that appears to be intensified by the past decade of the engineering of loops of engagement and attention by major social media platforms. Digital intimate publics can potentially trouble or call into question the dominant hierarchies of social life because they can make visible excessive and socially transgressive relations and identities once more concealed from public spaces (such as those of girls, queers, mothers, lovers, and others mentioned above). While the public visibility of such excesses and transgressions is crucial to the political potential of digital intimate publics, it is also crucial to their value under conditions of digital capitalism. Socially transgressive, excessive, and spectacular relations and performances create vibrant circulations of affect and attention, and thus generate new kinds of value: unique data sets, audience segments, and cultural innovations. The participatory culture of digital capitalism thrives on subjectivities and counter-publics that appear resistive and critical, because this generates new identities and social formations for commercial appropriation (Zwick et al., 2008). Many of the spaces within which such social expressions unfold always-already double as machines for appropriating creativity and affective capacities as value.

Further, the same cultural and socio-technical conditions that enable marginalised identities and communities public visibility also enable the rise of uncontrolled and excessive forms of violence, abuse, and hate-speech (Elliot, this volume; Salter, this volume). Excesses, transgressions, and spectacle are good from the perspective of platform economics, even when they affect other users negatively. That is, even excessively queer relations, excessive expressions of love and care, excessive mundane

‘oversharing’, violence, and hate speech that might make others in the network upset, uncomfortable, disgusted, or otherwise inclined to switch off, are productive under digital capitalism, because at the very least they help train algorithms, teaching them what and who to tune out and in, of whose feeds. Social media platforms afford a multiplicity of expressions, identities, and interactions precisely because they exercise control at the level of sorting and classifying, choosing who gets to pay attention to what kinds of performances.

### *The labour of digitising social reproduction*

Following the longer lineage of affective labour, the doing of intimate relationships on social media doubles as the work of reproducing the social as flows of images, videos, comments, and so on—as digital shadows or traces (Andrejevic, 2007; Robards, 2014; Lasen & Hjorth, 2017). Digital intimacy involves reproducing social relations *as* data, transcribing social relations into databases. While the work of social reproduction is not new, as Jarrett (2014) and Weeks (2007) illustrate, what is new is the form and scale with which digital social media platforms institutionalise this work. Each time a person likes, comments, or shares a photo or message publicly and/or intimately, each time they swipe, scroll, or filter, they transcribe a relationship of attention in a database. They code lived reality. Promotional labourers like influencers, models, celebrities, photographers, stylists, designers, musicians, writers, and so on mobilise their intimate lives as flows of content that capture attention (Duffy & Hund, 2016; Carah & Dobson, 2016; Abidin, 2018). In many cases, these promotional labourers perform identities that draw on the resources of consumer culture, and therefore reproduce it (Hearn, 2008; Banet-Weiser, 2012). Further, low-paid content moderators, mostly working in Asia and South America, do the work of viewing and removing content that violates ‘community’ standards (Chen, 2014). Reddit, for instance, turns largely on the labour of volunteer moderators who must negotiate complex relationships between the platforms their subreddits operate on, the communities they manage, and other moderators they work with (Matias, 2016). From ordinary users, to highly-visible influencers, to below the line moderators, a range of actors do the work of digitising social relations; from transcribing them into databases, and then coding them in the form of likes, shares, comments, tags, flags, and reports. Each of these kinds of work contributes to the construction of proliferating packages of attention available for analysis, modulation, and exploitation by social media platforms and the advertisers who fund them.

### *The labour of training algorithms*

Digital intimacies make the affective capacities of bodies available to the information processing power of platforms (Wissinger, 2007; Preciado, 2014; Carah & Shaul 2016). As people transcribe intimate social relations on platforms, they play a productive part in training algorithms to sort and order content and, as a consequence, to sense and modulate flows of attention and affect. Via the kind of practices mentioned above, platforms learn to privilege expressions, intimacies, and bodies that generate more

affective intensity than others. An issue for critical consideration is that, through such training, platforms learn to identify and maintain boundaries between different kinds of people and intimate relations. Users train platforms to reproduce and reinforce their practices of giving and gaining attention. Over time, as platforms become more algorithmically customised, users cede to the platform decisions about which users will be put into an affective zone with one another. Platforms make these decisions by judging which users will animate extensive engagement via the platform, and which users should be kept invisible to one another because they will curtail or impede continuing engagement. Platform algorithms learn and develop by quantifying human engagement and interaction, and people's practices are shaped by learning and *imagining* what algorithms do (Carah & Dobson, 2016; Bucher, 2017; Carah & Angus, 2018). As such, cultural associations around gender, class, race, ethnicity, ability, age, and other aspects of identity and embodiment become 'baked into' platform algorithms in feedback loops and 'algorithmic imaginaries' (Bucher, 2017).

The labour of digitising social relations involves engineering a dynamic loop between human and machine decision-making (Carah & Dobson, 2016; Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Bucher, 2017). When users learn to create images that garner attention on social media platforms – by making decisions about filtering, cropping, posing, choosing clothes, and using spaces like bedrooms and bathrooms (Carah & Shaul 2016) – they are arguably learning not only to create images that affect other humans, but also to create images that are recognisable to algorithms that have been trained to broker attention on those platforms. As users' perceptions of algorithmic workings effect their use of social media, such as the content, language, and timing of posts, and liking or commenting practices, these practices in turn shape the decision-making of algorithms (Bucher, 2017, p. 42).

### **Conclusion: Digital intimate publics are not public enough**

In this chapter we have mobilised a theorisation of digital intimate publics as a way to ask about power relations, and the politics of queer and intimate world-building practices, in social media spaces. We have traced how practices of digital intimacy double as forms of social capital and as productive forms of labour in the commercial model of social media platforms. We argue for the need to forge methods and frameworks of analysis that can hold these two perspectives together. Socio-cultural research and theory can help to foreground the political potentials for more open, inclusive, queerer intimate world-making via social media, and alert us to the social distributions of social (and emotional) capital. Critical media perspectives illuminate social media as an 'alchemical' (Athique, 2018) procedure of creating value by making sociality technical (van Dijck 2013). Paying attention to this process foregrounds the political risks of doing queer and intimate world-building that doubles as commercial platform-building.

There are, we've suggested, several paradoxes at play in understanding the politics of digital intimate publics on social media, including the following.

- The qualities of digital intimate publics that seem most intrinsic to their political and transformative potential – excessiveness, transgression, affective intensity – are also key sources of commercial value;
- At the same moment that social media affords new opportunities for diverse, mobile, ‘unpredictable’, and transgressive intimacies and attachments in public, digital platforms have developed the capacity to monitor, modulate, and control diverse identities and relations. Where excessive and transgressive expressions and relations reduce or impede flows of valuable attention, platforms learn to quarantine them.
- While social media institutionalise practices of public intimacy, they actively privatise those relationships as economic capital. Public intimacies are not public enough in the sense that participants have little control over what platforms do with their intimate relationships.

What is called for in response to the potential for exploitation when digital intimacy is understood as a form of labour is not a moralist ‘reboxing’ of intimacies into a ‘private’ domestic domain. This is neither possible or desirable. Following Berlant and Warner (1997) and Weeks (2007), the desire to relegate intimacy to the private relies on a false conceptualisation of such spheres as separate and somehow ‘purer’, or less ‘estranged’, places for social and intimate relations than the public domains of work, consumption, and media. Rather, what is called for is to heed the lessons of queer and feminist theory that the most intimate of feelings and relations and the affective care and work that surrounds them has always been central to waged labour under capitalism and the social reproduction that sustains it. We have argued towards a politics of *publicness* on two fronts. First, there is the politics of paying attention to the public, digital inscription of unpredictable relations, attachments, feelings, and expressions of care that ‘don’t fit’ the mould of heteronormative social reproduction and that potentially build queerer, more *public* intimate worlds. Second, there is the need for a politics that prioritises shared control over the material technologies of intimacy; for platform architectures built not just to capitalise privately on new forms of expression, social, and intimate relations, but to enable shared, public ownership of such relations as manifest in the digital. What is required is further attention to the political stakes of the publicness of relations *and* infrastructures of digital intimacy. The problem, as we have argued, is not that social media has somehow made intimate life *too public*, but rather that intimate life on social media is not *public enough*.

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