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Infrastructures of Feeling:
Digital Mediation, Captivation, Ambivalence

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Infrastructures of Feeling: Digital Mediation, Captivation, Ambivalence

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January 15, 2025

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Abstract

This paper proposes a concept of infrastructures of feeling, building on Raymond Williams’ work on structures of feeling and contributing to current work on digital media/tion, affect and time. It draws on empirical research conducted over the past decade on these themes, including art-making workshops with young people and interviews with digital media professionals. In the first part of the paper, I introduce the concept of infrastructures of feeling and what it might offer to understandings of the contemporary period. In the second part, I develop its affective and temporal dimensions. I suggest that today’s digitally mediated feelings are non-unified, contested, ambiguous and ambivalent and that they indicate a condition of middleliness, or being in midst of form/ation and transformation. In the third part, I consider some of the implications of this argument for cultural politics, including for rethinking distance/presence and what resistance might look and feel like.

Keywords: structures of feeling, infrastructures, digital media, affect, cultural politics

1 Infrastructures of feeling

The concept infrastructures of feeling is a response to the Welsh cultural theorist’s Raymond Williams’ concept *structures of feeling*. This is a much known and mobilised concept, which Williams developed in the mid-twentieth century to capture the dynamism and possibilities of social change, and to define “a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period” (1977: 131). Affect is therefore central.

A structure of feeling designates what is particular about a period through its qualities and sense/sensation as they are “actively lived and felt” (1977: 132). And it is intended to enable cultural theorists to attune to these qualities and sensations as there are in process, or *‘in solution’* (1977: 133, emphasis in original). This is part of a wider quarrel Williams has with theoretical accounts (primarily Marxism) whereby the socio-cultural and personal are separated so that the socio-cultural is approached as static and/or “in the habitual past tense” (1977: 128) – as institutions etc – and it is only the personal that is seen as dynamic and live. Williams argues that structures of feeling attends to the “active”, “flexible”, “temporal present” (Williams 1977: 128); what he calls in an unpublished conference paper, “The Structure of Feeling” from 1967, “a set

of interests, emphases, insights, relations still primarily felt as promptings, impulses, admissions, recognitions” (1967: 12).

Indeed, characterising a structure of feeling are feelings that are emergent or pre-emergent. Williams sees dominant feelings as values, beliefs, practices that are hegemonic and yet are always in unfolding relations with residual and pre-emergent feelings. Emergent feelings are those “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [that] are continually being created” (1977: 123). They are a “not yet fully articulated” image or idea that hovers “at the edge of semantic availability” (1977: 132) and yet nevertheless inform, limit and direct experience and action. These emergent feelings may be “merely novel” or “substantially alternative or oppositional to” dominant culture (1977: 123). It is the latter version of emergence that Williams values, seeing it as providing the possibility of social change; of radically transforming dominant culture into something more equal and egalitarian – socialism. I return to this idea below.

Before then, I want to highlight that this is an approach that foregrounds how emergent cultures – both novel and alternative – take place through the aesthetics of art, media and technologies. For example, in his 1970s book on the new medium of broadcast television (Williams 1974), Williams analyses how previously distinct units of culture – a play, a news item, sport – are organised into a flow of content which are intended to capture the attention of the TV viewer, moving them along from the first to the last programme, capturing them for a whole evening’s viewing. Flow, then, develops as a central organising aesthetic experience, defining a contemporary structure of feeling. In the unpublished paper from 1967, he argues that art does not reflect or respond to the social world but is “part of the making of just these senses of a knowable time and place” (1967: 5). It is directed to “the emergent and changing present; often, indeed, as a way of filling the gap that is felt to exist between the existing superstructure, its explanations and ways of seeing, and actual contemporary experience” (1967: 6).

While it is perhaps controversial to compare the kind of art Williams is describing with digital media (and I say more about this below), I think we can understand digital media today as part of the making of the social as it is “continually forming as we act and because we act” (1967: 4).

Consider, for example, how adults I interviewed talked about the work they do with digital media as meaning they are “literally always on all the time”, “checking to see in real time”, “trying to keep up with everything”:

[group instant messenger] Slack ‘means that you are literally always on all the time because, you know, if something pops into your head’ (Mila).

the other night we had a launch event [...]. We knew that we had a certain amount of influencers and the media there so we would be checking to see in real time what their feedback was, if they were enjoying themselves (Lucy).

it’s just exhausting to try and keep up with everything. That is a feeling of pressure and obligation (Giles).

We have the ability to put our phones down if we want to, but the knowledge that people were following on all of these platforms meant that we were always-on as people (Nicky).

In a workshop I organised in a girls’ secondary school, students visualised their feelings about being on social media. Many of them expressed similar feelings – being ‘on’ all the time, keeping up, checking, scrolling, refreshing, binging. For example, Folasade explained her art work to me:

I chose to do about Instagram. The magnifying glass on the eyes is meant to represent how I always go on it, every day I actually go on it. I go through my feeds and like people’s posts. I just wanted to show how I’m kind of stuck on it, I’m connected to it in a way. And then I did a heart to signify the positives and stuff I like about it and the blue heart to represent things that may be negative.

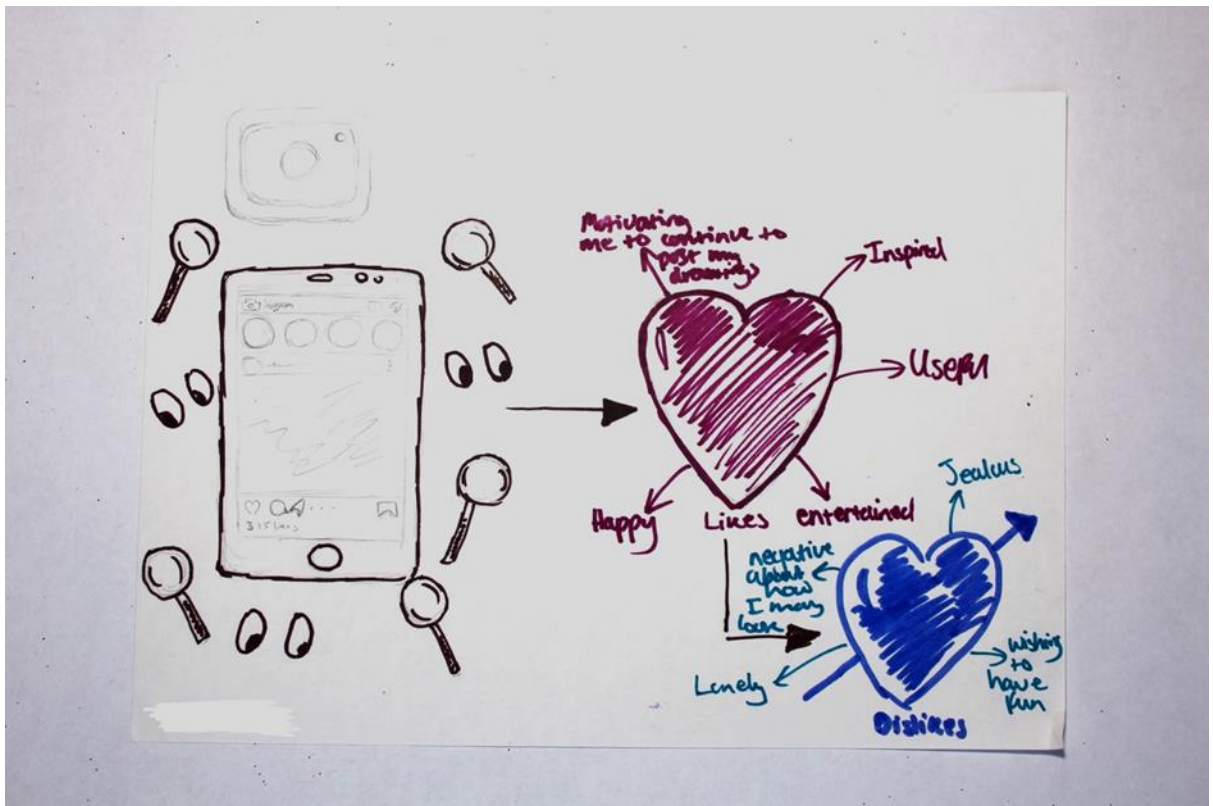


Figure 1: Visualising Instagram. Folasade. 2019.

I’m going to return to, and develop, Folasade’s point about the positives and negatives of Instagram in the second part of the paper. Here, what I want to take from the research

participants are the ways in which digital media – from Instagram to email to Slack – are continuously forming, and re-forming, socio-cultural worlds. They are making ‘the emergent and changing present’ through actions, which are themselves generating and patterning values, beliefs, ways of life that characterise and define this historical present. That is, in Williams’ terms, they are composing a structure of feeling.

However, remembering that Williams developed the concept of structures of feeling in the mid-twentieth century in relation to analogue art practices and broadcast technologies, I want to augment – update – his concept to the digital age. This is where and why I propose the concept of infrastructures of feeling (see also Coleman 2018).

First, the concept of infrastructures of feeling as I contour it seeks to account for the intricate and complicated architectures of digital mediation. As we have seen, these encompass a wide variety of apps, platforms and devices, as well as conventions, standards and affordances. If we think about social media, for example, we can consider the ways in which content circulates across different platforms, so that a tweet references a newspaper article and then becomes news itself, and the ways in which different platforms are built to facilitate certain kinds of sharing, so how a user can post simultaneously to Facebook and Instagram, hashtags can create a certain kind of shared experience of the distributed viewing of a TV series on a streaming service, and so on.

In this sense, the concept of infrastructures builds on existing work in media studies, Social Studies of Science and Technology and geography which takes seriously the “various material assemblages – pipes, cables, data centres, cell phone towers, handheld devices, and so on – that shape the operations of digital platforms” (Plantin and Punathambekar 2019: 164). Such work on infrastructure has emphasised the aim to excavate the scale, scope and inter-connectivity of media infrastructures and the role they play to “undergird and sustain communication networks and media cultures across the world” (Plantin and Punathambekar 2019: 165, see also Mattern 2016). This version of infrastructures works through the prefix “infra”, which refers to the “below”. Susan Star Leigh (1999: 381-382), for example, sees infrastructure as “background processes”, “sunk into and inside other structures” and as “invisible” until it fails. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski argue that one of the central points that infrastructural studies draws attention to, then, are the specific “materialities of media distribution – the resources, technologies, labour, and relations that are required to shape, energise, and sustain the distribution of audiovisual signal traffic on global, national, and local scales” (2015: 5).

I want to expand this work by drawing through Williams' concept and emphasising the aesthetic dimension of infrastructures. That is, while existing work focuses on uncovering the hidden architectures via which mediation functions, I want to take up Williams' idea about pre-emergence as that which "hovers at the edges of semantic availability". Here, then, the "infra" of infrastructures refers not so much to what is "below" or "beneath" but to what is "at the edges" – affective experience that is in solution and that can nevertheless be detected as shaping everyday action. This can be thought through Patricia Clough's argument about "big data" and that the social world today operates not so much in terms of ideological interpellation as "affective modulation and individuation" (2009: 50). This is what she calls an "infra-empirical"; a social modulated through "affective capacities" (2009: 50) which are at the edges of human consciousness.

Brian Larkin makes a similar point about aesthetics, arguing that "materiality is simply one of the multiple qualities that make up infrastructure" (2018: 179). He insists on the importance of aesthetics to them, where aesthetics are understood as "the ambient and tactile ways in which we hear, smell, feel as we move through the world" (2018: 177). And he goes further than this, arguing that infrastructures help to define historical periods:

The materials of infrastructure – iron, mud, concrete, fiber optic cables, plastic – both stand for an era, in the sense that iron was the exemplary material of the nineteenth century, and also bring about a sensory apprehension of existence. This is their aesthetic dimension (2013: 338).

It's clear here how Larkin's account of the aesthetic dimension of infrastructures as the "sensory apprehension of existence" that can "stand for an era" resonates with Williams' delineation of structures of feeling as defining a generation or a period. What is important for an understanding of infrastructures, then, is not only material architectures but also the aesthetic ones.

2 Affect and ambivalence

One way to begin to explicate the "sensory apprehension of existence" of digital media is with Folasade's explanation of her art work about being "stuck on" Instagram, which highlights "the positives and stuff I like about it" and the "things that may be negative". A first thing to note is that we do not have a one-sided view of Instagram here but rather the platform generates and encompasses a whole range of feelings. Indeed, another group of young people visualised their feelings about social media in terms of what they call a spectrum. They worked with the word "generation", which they describe as "an acronym to explain social media but in an unexpected way". We talked

about generations and we thought about positive words that we could use to describe it. Then we did “growth, engulfed, neglect, evolution, restart again, trance, inspiration, options, never-ending and separation” (Rima, research participant). They go on to explain how the acronym represents a spectrum of affects and emotions that social media can create:

we wanted to use positive sides of the spectrum as well as negative sides and then we put restart in the middle because it can be looked at as a bad thing and a good thing. So we thought it was just interesting to see the type of things that social media can evoke as well as the type of things that it makes you strive towards being. So it inspires you as well as it also separating you. So we found that quite interesting, the different sides of the spectrum.



Figure 2: Visualising social media and feelings 1. Group work. 2019.

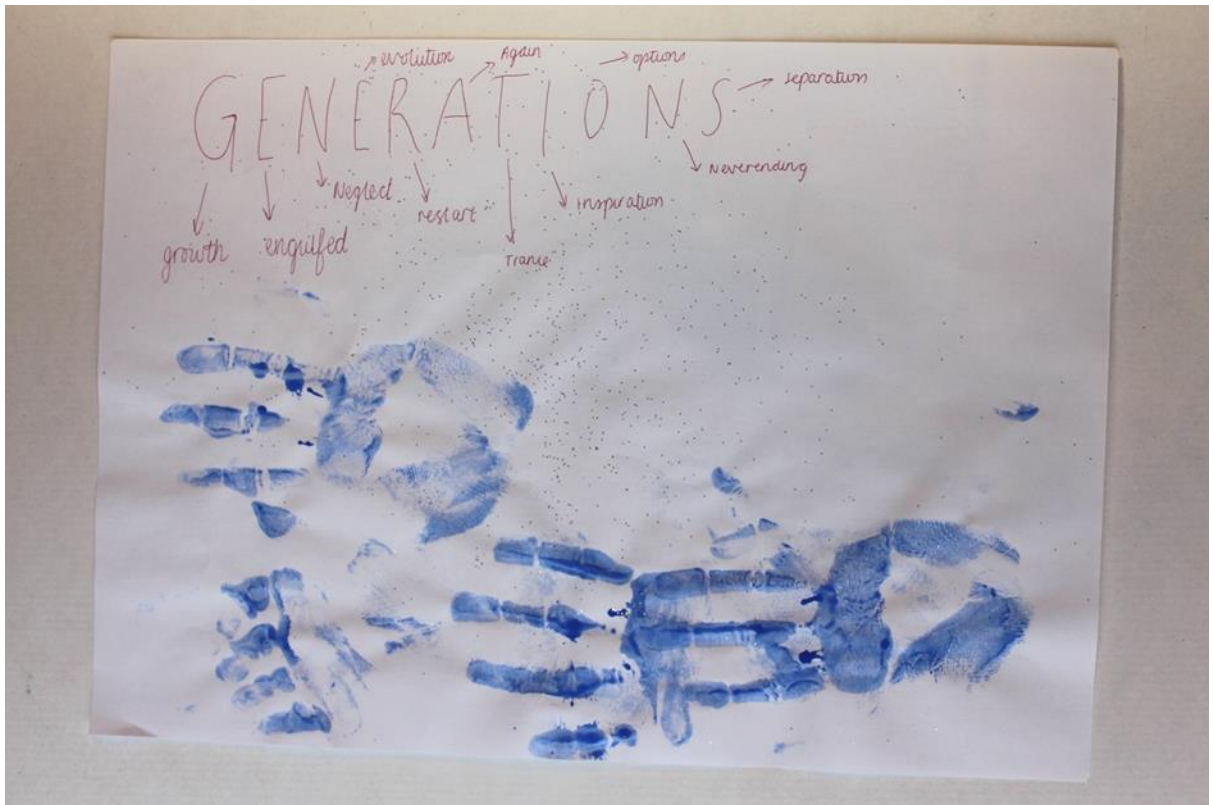


Figure 3: Visualising social media and feelings 2. Group work. 2019.

There is a pervasive current understanding of digital media as addictive. One way of thinking about our current structure of feeling, then, is in these terms. However, I'd like to propose an alternative structure of feeling. Susanna Paasonen (2020a, b) argues persuasively against the understanding of digital media as addictive. Instead, she contextualises contemporary media within longer histories and moral panics about them, arguing that there have always been concerns about the impacts of new technologies on perception, behaviour, values and feelings. She challenges totalising accounts of the present, arguing against seeing the past through rose-tinted glasses – “the golden past” as opposed to our “distracted present”. In particular, she works with Jane Bennett’s (2001) critique of disenchantment in and with the modern world, and Bennett’s definition of contemporary enchantment as ‘mundane somatic moments of being “struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (2020: 14). Paasonen goes on:

Bennett’s focus on everyday marvel, wonder and ‘shocked surprise’ helps to outline different stories on the effects of media technology on our somatic, affective and cognitive capacities. The mundane enchantments she addresses need not be understood as matters of exquisite rapture. They can just as well come in minor scales of fascination and interest when something grabs attention and, in instances of affective resonance, moves bodies from one state to another (2020: 14).

In focusing on the mundane and minor, Paasonen shifts attention from the headline-grabbing extremes of digital mediation to their everyday-ness, and to the ways in which feeling shifts and changes. She develops a nuanced account of the ambiguous and ambivalent feelings digital media generate and pattern – note: not so much “impact” or “effect”. These are “both and” rather than “either or” feelings: “the same object – be it a smart device, an app, an animated GIF, a hardcore porn clip, or a social media update – can result in virtually any kind of an affective encounter, and the ensuing affections can be ambivalent indeed” (2020: 5, see also Turner and Coleman 2023). As such, we need a cultural theory that is “able to hold seemingly contradictory things together in dynamic tension if it is to understand that which it studies with sufficient degrees of granularity” (2020: 5)¹.

My argument is that the cultural theory that is required by such an understanding of feelings as ambivalent puts us in the middle, or in the midst, of digital mediation. By this I mean that feelings are not and/or but are plural, fuzzy and sometimes contradictory and that mediation is an always emerging temporal present.

To return to the spectrum that the young people drew up, consider how “restart, again” sits in the middle: “we put restart in the middle because it can be looked at as a bad thing and a good thing”. The “re” of “restart” here operates to indicate not only a beginning or opening – that something is new – but also the possibility of repetition and of being behind or going back. This is what the prefix “re” signals; as Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer note in their preface to a collection on “the re”, there is a “complex temporality” and “plurivectorial tension” of some of the prefixes that are prevalent in contemporary critical theory, including the “re” (2019: x). The “re” is an “in the middle” temporality. It goes forward and back, it indicates the new and repetition, it is a starting again (Coleman 2020b). Celia Lury (2012) explains the middle as “no longer defined with respect to determinable end points; rather it is an infinite and infinitely divisible space” (2012: 190). She argues that this understanding or fantasy of the “pure middle” is “the work of a medium, or, *in media res*” (2012: 190); that is, in the middle of things.

What I’m arguing is that we can understand today’s infra/structure of feeling in terms of this middleness, or being *in the midst*... I mean this in these senses that the feelings that compose contemporary infrastructures of feeling are ambiguous and-both feelings – minor, mundane, moving from one thing to another. I also mean this in the

¹ This argument might well be troubled by research on online social movements and activism – e.g. those supporting and contesting feminism and far-right politics, which are defined by polarisation. See for example, Medeiros and Makhshvili (2022).

sense that feelings are *temporally* in the middle – that digital mediation is this infinite and infinitely divisible space. What Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska call “the incessant flow of mediation” (2012: xvi). Or what, if we return to Williams and his conceptualisation of mediation which is interested not so much in content as form/formation and aesthetics, is the continua of transformation (Seigworth and Coleman 2023).

3 Cultural politics and captivation

For now, though, I want to think more about the kinds of cultural politics that being in the midst... of digital mediation indicate. In particular, I want to suggest that they require a rethinking of distance/proximity. These are, I think, also questions that emerge from broader thinking about social worlds as affective, as the Affective Societies CRC examines.

Paasonen proposes ambiguity as a means to avoid and challenge models that see digital media as addictive. I think captivation might also be a productive way of understanding the range of feelings experienced by spending time with digital media, being digitally mediated. Captivation refers to a state of being fascinated, enchanted, intensely interested in something – being ‘engulfed’, in a trance, as the young people put it in their spectrum. This state might be awe or terror: captivation refers not to a particular affect or emotion but rather to an affective formation or affective modulation that attracts and sustains that attraction for shorter or longer periods of time. This term, I think, points to arguments about how attention is captured and commodified – what James Ash, writing about video games, calls “a politics of captivation in which the sensual and perceptual relations in the body are organised and commodified by these games in order to create attentive subjects” (2013: 28). And it also points to the kind of “everyday marvel, wonder and ‘shocked surprise’” that Paasonen, drawing on Bennett, argues is central to digital cultures. Captivation draws our attention to the aesthetic experience of being ‘on’ digital media – this is not to pathologise digital mediation, as many accounts of addiction do, but rather to attend to the embodied, sensual experiences that are brought into being through our relations with digital mediation.

To recap my argument so far: I’ve proposed the concept of infrastructure of feeling as a means of giving sense to contemporary ways of life as they are being lived. This means understanding digital mediation in its minor and mundane scales. Infrastructures of feeling accounts for the complicated architectures through which digital mediation operates; this builds on work in STS, media studies and geography which fo-

cuses on the material distribution and circulation of media as well as its content. However, infrastructures of feeling also accounts for the affective and aesthetic dimensions of digital mediation, seeing sensory apprehension as increasingly significant in today's world, not least in part because of the ongoingness of digital mediation where the edges are unclear but nevertheless “exert palpable pressure”.

I've argued that central to the infrastructures of feeling of digital mediation is “mid-leness” – that is, ambivalent ‘and-both’ feelings and a temporality that is always in the process of unfolding, both forwards and backwards. If we are always in the midst of ‘the incessant flow’ of digital mediation, what does this mean for the everyday cultural politics that emerge out of and make up our lives today? And, of course, who is this “we” and “our”?

To begin to explore – if not answer! – this question, it is helpful to return to Williams' original argument about structures of feeling. If you remember, I flagged that this concept is partly intended to identify pre-emerging elements of culture that indicate a “substantially alternative or oppositional” relation to dominant culture (1977: 123) and which therefore carry with them the possibility of transforming class-based societies. There's a lot in this because, for Williams, the identification of a structure of feeling takes place as it is in the process of formation. This he calls “practical consciousness”, which he describes as different to “official consciousness”. Official consciousness recognises social forms “when they are articulate and explicit” – institutions, organisations, traditions in their “effective presence” (1977: 130). “Practical consciousness”, on the other hand, is what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived. [...] It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex” (1977: 130-131). Practical consciousness is what distinguishes a structure of feeling from “more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’” (1977: 132). Williams explains that he selected the word ‘feeling’ quite deliberately to refer to:

characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process* (1977: 132).

Being attentive to liveness and process is, then, an absolutely central part of structures of feeling. But, it's important to note that this is, for Williams, to identify alternatives to hegemony. However, what I'm suggesting is that liveness and process are

today central not only to oppositional and alternative cultures – although they might be! – but also to what we might call mainstream, dominant culture.

Think, for example, of how social media is organised precisely around constantly providing new, fresh content. One of the people I interviewed, Adam, a digital director in the Higher Education sector, described the effort of him and his team put into ‘keeping our [social media] accounts vibrant, so there are things happening’, arguing it was important in order to engage those scrolling, “just looking for something, anything, and these are the sorts of things which pique my interest”. One of the young people, Jade, said, “I’ll skip and refresh just to see if there’s anything interesting that comes up, because what came up, I’m not really interested in” (Jade).

This is a condition that has variously been described as the 24/7 character of late capitalism, by Jonathan Crary (2013), the assumption that everyone is ‘pressed for time’ in accelerated digital capitalism by Judy Wajcman (2014) and, by many people, in terms of the attention economy whereby digital technologies are designed in order to capture and hold attention (which might not be so different to what Williams argues is the case with broadcast TV) (e.g. Terranova 2012). Pre-emergence is now what digital or late or contemporary or whatever-you-want-to-call-it capitalism functions through.

And “we” are well aware of this. In my research, for example, some of the digital media professionals discussed their strategies for avoiding constant checking, in order to curb the always-oneness of digital media and the negative feelings they might engender. Giles discussed how he was “starting to try and redesign my life and my behaviour to avoid it”:

For example, now, my phone is on the table facing down and I’ve got it on loud, so if someone calls me I can hear it. I can’t leave it face up because it will keep bugging me. I think all of us are, I would hope, learning the upsides and downsides of social media and developing our own strategies to cope with it, because the social media companies don’t have our best interests at heart.

This “we”, though, I argue, is not only confined to those of us who would traditionally be seen as well-versed in critical takes on digital media, as Giles was. The young people also articulated their understanding of this. Consider, for example, Marwa’s art work.

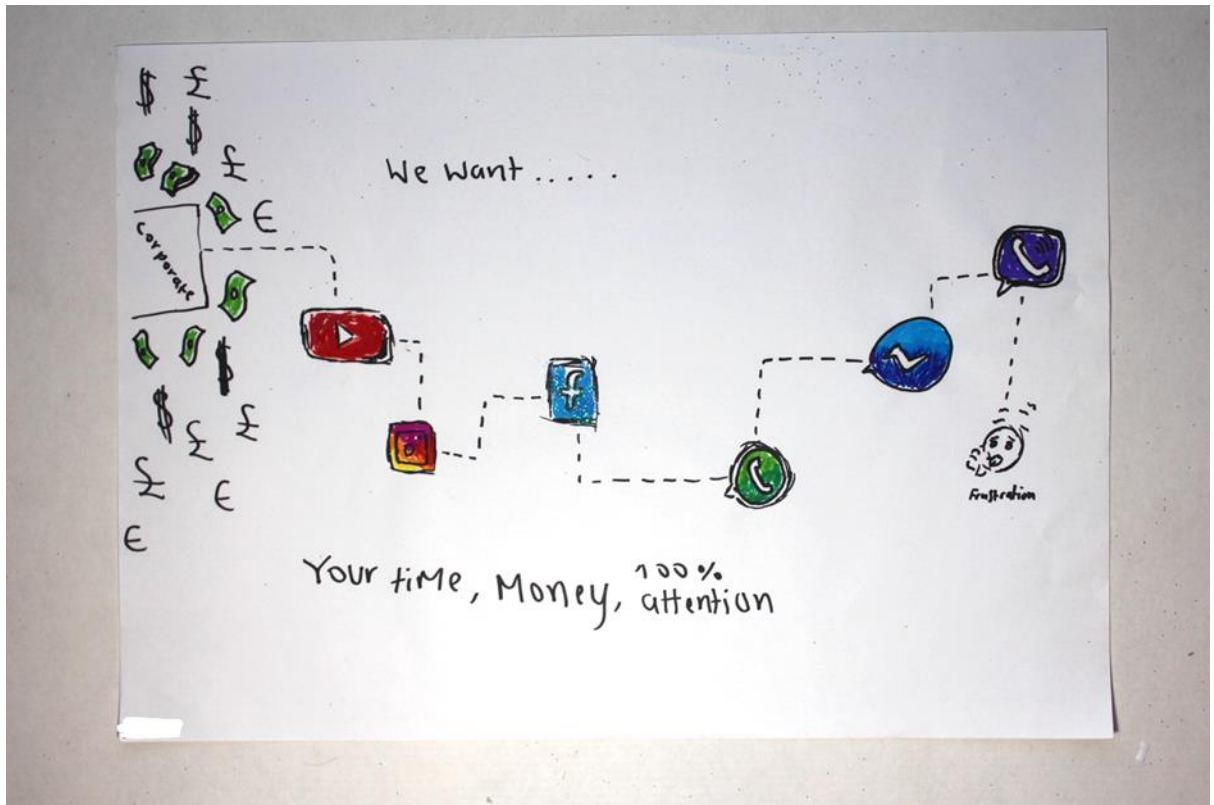


Figure 4: Visualising social media, time and feeling. Marwa. 2019.

If pre-emergence doesn't necessarily signal oppositional or alternative cultural politics but rather is mainstream, dominant, hegemonic, where are we to find cultural politics? There are different responses to this question.

In her book, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024), Anna Kornbluh argues that immediacy is today's cultural style: it's "out there everywhere: the basis of economic value, the regulative ideal of behaviour, the topos of politics, the spirit of the age" (2024: 7). Immediacy, she describes, is a directness, an immersion, a literalness, a sense of urgency "that compresses time into a tingling present" (2024: 6). "Too late capitalism" marks a distinction from late capitalism and postmodernism in that immediacy operates in and as this kind of affective presentness/presence-ness – "a beclouded nonhorizon" (2024: 13).

The book tracks immediacy across the mediums of networking technologies, video, writing and theory. Its central argument is that:

Immediacy crushes mediation. It is what it is. Self-identity without representation, ferment with "no words". The prefix "im-" connotes that negation – in the middle without intermediary, #NoFilter – as well as a prepositionality: the inness or oneness of immersion, intensity, and identity. An estate of direct presence, always on, continuous, abundant, sui generis. Immediacy's pulsing effulgence purveys itself as spontaneous and free, pure vibe. Let it flow, let it flow!' (2024: 6).

Kornbluh is highly sceptical of immediacy and its negation of mediation. Taking theory as a medium, she argues that current theory – including affect theory and STS/ANT – operates in terms of this immediacy: it not only celebrates immediacy but itself performs immediacy. In contrast to immediacy, Kornbluh posits theory as that which “ought to be the medium in which we can step back from the merely evident. It ought to be the medium in which we can situate the valorisation of immediacy as a historical specificity. It ought to be the medium through which we can perceive the systematic and surprising interrelation of culture [...]” (2024: 152). Theory, then, is a medium that ought to operate through *distance*:

Immediacy foments intimacy, immersion, the negation of intercession. Theory takes us out of a situation, out of phenomenality, out of ourselves, and into realms of reflection that escalate to include the dislocation of our ineluctable situatedness, conceptualisation of our many determinations, and speculation about inexperienced possibilities. Immediacy imbibes the immanent. Theory cultivates and cooks, constituting new nourishment for flourishing. Taking distance and cutting distinctions, lineating formations and daring construction, theory risks something other than absorption or blur (2024: 153).

But. What if theory can make sense of immediacy through, rather than by standing outside of, absorption and blur? What if, rather than distance, proximity or presence is what helps us make sense? And what if we don’t try to separate out distance and proximity/presence into a binary but instead start in the middle? What if the “tingling presentness” Kornbluh describes is an insecurely bounded temporality but this does not mean that pasts and futures are not included (see for example Coleman 2020a, Coleman, Lyon and Turner forthcoming)? This, to me, is what affect theory tries to understand and engage. And it is what I think affect theory offers to an understanding of mediation – where mediation is in the middle/in the midst not because it inlays into medium but because mediums emerge from and through it.

By this I mean something similar to how Kember and Zylinska describe the relationship between mediation and media. Mediation, if you remember, is an “incessant flow” (2012: xvi) and media, they argue, are cut into or out of mediation: “mediation is the originary process of media emergence, with media being seen as (ongoing) stabilisations of the media flow” (2012: 21). Or, as Greg Seigworth and I have put it in a recent essay on Williams and Berlant’s concepts of mediation, “mediation is ‘the whole’ of a medium (i.e. an immersive, saturative solution) in motion: not a ‘separable agency’ but in and among the affective formations of elements in varying states of resolution and dissolution” (2023: 180). This is not an understanding of mediation as

that which stands outside of media/mediums and makes sense of them through distance. Rather it is an understanding of mediation as the swirl of embodied experience through which life as it is lived is sensed/made sense of.

This image by Shanade sticks with me.

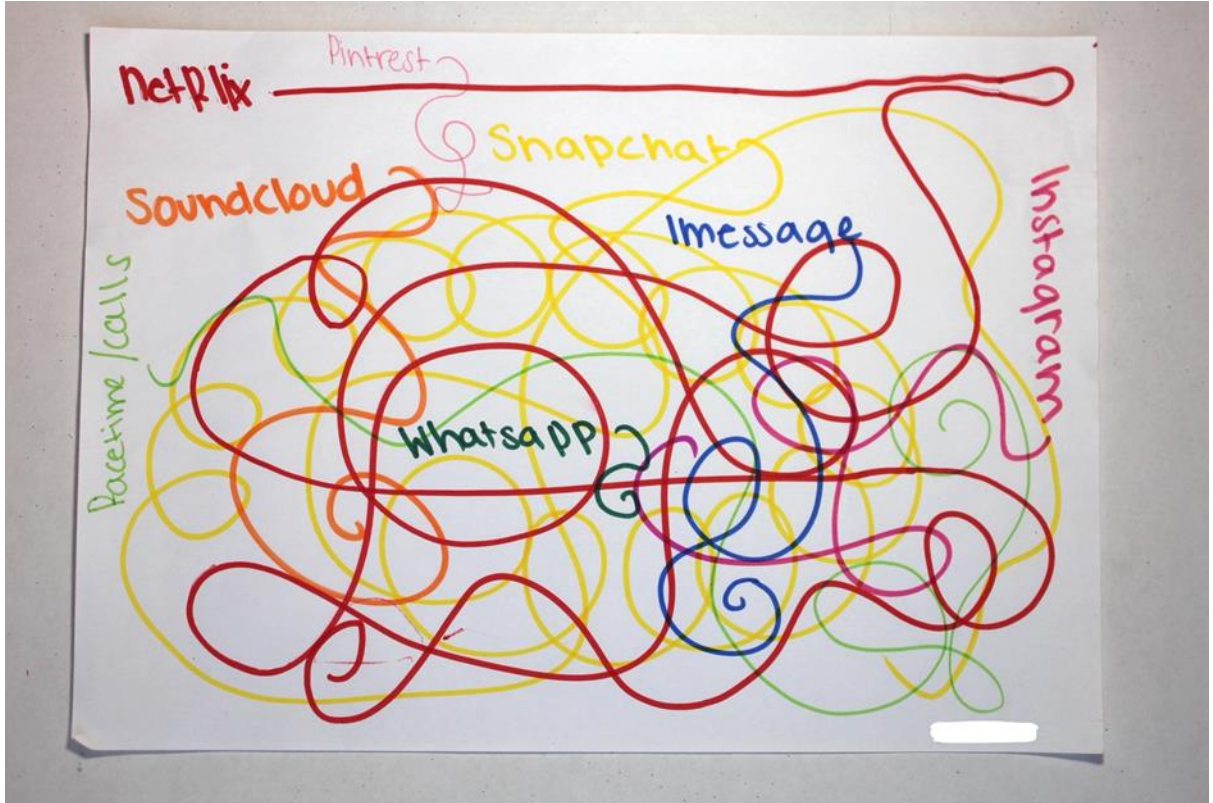


Figure 5. Visualising social media, time and feeling. Shanade. 2019.

Because of the swirling. And also because I think, Shanade is themselves theorising – “cutting distinctions, lineating formations and daring construction” as Kornbluh puts it – not through distance but through the middle of mediation.

Here, I want to return to the middle referring not only to a condition of being *in media res*, in the midst, but also to the *feelings* of digital mediation – what I’ve called captivation or the ambivalence of being neither this or that but and-both. And I want to argue that captivation and ambivalence are modes of presence/presentness. This is close to how Patrick Jagoda, in *Networked Aesthetics* (2016), understands ambivalence. Jagoda sees networks ‘situate us within and shapes our historical present, without necessarily yielding a grasp on it’, and asks, “How is it possible, then, to gain any perspective or critical distance from within a world in which everything is figured as a network?” (2016: 223), where there is no outside? I’m going to bracket off his reference to ‘critical distance’ here, just for a moment. He proposes three responses. The first two he draws from Galloway’s book, *The Interface Effect* (2012). The first is

looking to avant-garde approaches whereby new political tactics and aesthetic forms can be found. This is close to Williams' argument about pre-emergence as indicating oppositional or alternative cultural politics, although I'd argue that Williams' approach would go beyond the avant-garde to consider more accessible, popular cultural forms. Galloway is sceptical of this proposition, not least because "newness" is an essential part of capitalist logics. The second proposition is adopting a stance of disengagement and indifference – "whatever". This might be disconnection, or it may be selected connection, along the lines that Giles describes. But, as Jagoda rightly notes, this "is a privileged stance available primarily to people (myself included) with sufficient technological access and leisure time to develop such weariness" (2016: 224).

Jagoda then proposes his third orientation, which tries not so much to get outside of networks – to create the kind of distance that Kornbluh argues for – but is an "ambivalence, which operates instead as a mode of extreme presence" (2024: 224):

Ambivalence is not a variety of opting out. If anything, it suggests a process of opting in completely. Going all in, however, need not be reduced to naïve complicity or the hyperbolic extremism of strategies such as accelerationism. The problem of network totality can be approached through ambivalence without yielding to apathy, cynicism, disengagement, or hopelessness. Rather, it takes the form of a deliberate intensity, patience, and willingness to forgo quick resolution or any finality at all. Ambivalence, then, is a process of slowing down and learning to inhabit a compromised environment with the discomfort, contradiction, and misalignment it entails (2024: 225).

I would want to consider Jagoda's recourse to slowness as well as to distance; ambivalence may be quick without being accelerationist. But I think his version of ambivalence as extreme presence, as an opting in completely, offers a mode of doing theory along the lines that Paasonen asks for – nuanced, granular and able to comprehend the affective experiences of digital mediation. It also provides a means through which to understand where and how cultural politics might be found.

I argued above that Shanade was themselves theorising from the midst of mediation. That is, their art-work is an articulation, a delineation of formations, from a position of being inside those formations. The "spectrum" of feelings that the young people expressed can be understood similarly: the plethora of feelings that they map out become possible because they are within this spectrum, these feelings. Note how Kornbluh's distanced theorisation of immediacy is one-note: immediacy may be exhilarating, but it is ultimately bad. Theorising from within a situation of being "all in" is instead multifaceted.

In his recent book, Tung-Hui Hu (2022) writes about digital lethargy, linking feelings of exhaustion, laziness, being "too late" to now ordinary forms and activities of digital culture – scrolling, looping GIFs, call center scripts, blocking algorithms. He

argues that while politics, cultural politics, has generally been understood in terms of resistance – an oppositional act that can be identified, even if it is that which “hovers at the edges” – lethargy functions differently:

As a political feeling, lethargy may precipitate resistance, but more commonly, lethargy occurs without any knowledge of a precipitating action or a resolving event; it is a latency that exists despite temporal norms and codes that tell us nothing is happening (2022: xxi).

Nevertheless, Hu argues, digital lethargy must be understood as political. He attends to the labour of those in the global south who are frequently seen as constrained by power and as part of supply chains rather than as producers and consumers, and argues that digital lethargy questions assumptions about agency that resistance is filtered through, and “offers ethical and political reasons why we should be willing to be the ones acted upon rather than the ones who act” (2022: xxvi). As such, digital lethargy can be understood as “participating in a debate about how to be political now” (2022: xxi).

What if we understand the participants in my research and ourselves as researchers as participating in this debate about how to be political now? And what if we are participating from the middle of mediation? And what if this participation involves a whole lot of feeling – feelings which might morph and which might rub up against each other and are not binary but always and-both? What if we see theorising from the midst of mediation not as a failure to be adequately critical, nor a self-absorption in presence, but as a means of working out what Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury call “a newly co-ordinated reality”, one that is “open, processual, non-linear and constantly on the move” (2009: 18).

This is to see ambiguity, lethargy, immediacy and captivation as structures of feeling in the sense that they designate a period or generation. And it is also to recognise, as Lauren Berlant put it, that the present is “under constant revision” (2011: 4). The promises of liberal democracies are fraying, as in Berlant’s account of cruel optimism, and the digitally mediated social is a middle without discernible edges, as Lury argues. While Williams’ concept of structures of feeling is oriented to the pre-emergent as an oppositional or alternative to dominant culture, infrastructures of feeling is attentive to the ways in which pre-emergence is today a central part of dominant culture, and to how cultural politics emerge from and through the middle of digital mediation. This is perhaps an uncomfortable argument to make, for it requires us to re-think long-standing ideas about where and how critique and resistance are located, identified and mobilised. But it also trains our focus on the everyday, the ordinary, as not only always-already commodified but as textured, variously modulated, constantly revised – and

that a differentiated “we” are making and re-making this everyday this as we scroll, swipe, refresh, check, binge, like. Rather than see these banal activities as mind-numbing and addictive, they also provide us with ways to see new cultural politics happening.

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