Affect & Social Media Seminar, UEL
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Mobility, Sociality, and Affect:
The Commodification of Intimacy through Branded Mobile Apps

What I proposed for this workshop was to talk about the intersections between mobility,

sociality, and affect in order to theorize the design of mobile apps in relation to the

intimate nature of the device. My starting assumption is that intimacy gets commodified

through mobile apps in three ways: 1) the cost of participating in mobile communication;

2) the collection and use of personal information through mobile platforms; and 3) the

naturalization of an economy of 'liking' through social media app interfaces. So far, my

work in this area has been largely theoretical – and this is what I'll be presenting today.

But the hope is that this background conceptual work can eventually get tested in an

empirical study with designers and users of mobile apps. As such, I would love the

feedback of this group on different ways I might proceed with that kind of fieldwork,

since the scope of these ideas is still quite general.

The concepts of mobility, sociality, and affect have been used in various contexts, so first

I'll try to offer some specificity about how I approach them. My primary area of inquiry

is around the political economy of digital media – in this case, the circuits of production

and consumption around mobile applications as nodes of digital culture.

Mobility

To first address mobility, the area of mobile media studies has – over the past decade or so – sought to account for the specificities of mobile technologies versus networked technologies more generally. Indeed, this distinction becomes increasingly difficult to support, given the ways that most personal devices – laptops, fitness monitors, Google glass – are mobile to a greater or lesser extent. However, the spread of mobility across networked artefacts only increases the need for accounts of how mobility works in this context, both as functionality and as ideology.

A central approach that has attempted to convey the meanings of mobility across the social sciences is the "new mobilities paradigm" proposed by Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006). This perspective argues for focused attention to the ways that people and objects move through space on a massive, systemic scale, facilitated by networked mobile communication technologies that afford practical means of co-ordinating such movement, as well as a kind of 'absent presence' for the mover. The authors offer the example of the car as an underrepresented means of mobility in social science research on how people are configured within multiple and shifting versions of place (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 209).

Like the car, the mobile device represents a socio-technical artefact within a networked system, whose patterns of mobility map in complex ways onto dynamics of social power, or what Doreen Massey (1993) has called "power geometries." Mobility itself tends to be cast as a masculine, bourgeois value (Skeggs, 2004), where the celebrated mobility of more privileged subjectivities rests on the exclusion of others whose mobilities may not

be voluntary or even possible at all (Ahmed, 2004). As a cultural value, then, mobility offers differential potentialities for subjectivity and agency constructed through mobile technologies; technologies that are "adopted in, and adapted to, locales and situations that already proscribe certain mobility routes" (Jain, 2002, p. 386).

Sociality

In applying the new mobilities paradigm to mobile devices with an app interface, the social theory that underpins mobility puts forward a systems approach. Systems thinking, drawn from science and technology studies, emphasizes networks of people (understood through the notions of agency and embodiment), things (also with their own kinds of agentic roles), and spaces with particular affordances for movement (Sheller, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006). To focus on the connections and interconnections within such multi-layered networks, an attention to mobile apps highlights their construction as socio-technical artefacts that facilitate certain kinds of interpersonal relationships (Fortunati, 2005).

Andreas Wittel's (2001) account of networked sociality is useful to invoke here: Wittel proposes that unlike the concept of community, which is tethered to place and time, sociality represents the mode of relating to others in and through networked technologies. Such technologies provoke a kind of disembedded subjectivity that, in being mobile, consists of "fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations; of ephemeral but intense encounters" (Wittel, 2001, p. 51). To illustrate what this might mean in view of mobile apps, we might look to Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together* (2011), which details the transformation enacted by mobile devices toward widespread networked

sociality. The changed rules of social engagement that she observes around mobile devices implicate apps as the materialization of narcissistic identity play within networks of diverse social inputs (Turkle, 2011, p. 180). So, mobile apps that serve to enhance interpersonal communication (e.g., chat, VoIP, social media), co-ordination of social events (e.g., calendars, schedulers, maps), networked competition and play (e.g., games, fitness trackers), and so on, all rest on a networked sociality where subjectivities come into contact with each other in increasingly individualized, ephemeral, and intense meetings.

Affect

Given this assumption about the ways that mobile technology shifts our social landscapes, the affective, embodied dimensions of this relational shift are crucial to highlight. For mobile apps in particular, the concept of affect has been applied to activities as diverse as gameplay, listening to music, family care, hooking up, following fashion, avoiding ghettos, and appreciating art, as indicated in the 2013 Apps & Affect Conference program.[1] Affect in this context seems to serve as a catch-all term for energy, emotion, and intimacy, but even so, it is useful for attending to embodied intensities within mobile socio-technical interfaces.

Here I turn particular attention to the affective idea of intimacy, which has been positioned by some authors as a key embodied context for the co-construction of mobile devices. Mel Gregg (2011), for example, positions mobile networked technologies within new orientations toward ubiquitous labour-time that have altered the dynamics of

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[1] http://appsandaffect.blogspot.com/p/program.html

intimate domestic relationships (see also, Wajcman et al., 2009). For Eva Illouz (2013), the internet serves to rearticulate corporality and emotions within a late capitalist logic predicated on instrumentalizing intimacy within new forms of networked industry, such as dating websites.

Drawing upon a narrative of intimacy as posited by Illouz and Gregg, mobile apps might be situated within a cluster of intimate experiences. Not only as McLuhanite extensions of the physical body – captured in the Finnish term for the mobile as "extension of the hand" (Mäenpää 2000) – mobile apps perform intimacy in ways that are intertwined with the body (e.g., Katz, 2003). Having the mobile device "on oneself" at all times, in close proximity, even while sleeping (Richardson, 2007; Turner & Turner, 2014), feeling anxious when the device is not nearby – to the point of even experiencing "phantom vibrations" (Shepherd & Shade, 2012; Vincent, 2006), and interacting with the functionality of the device haptically through the touchscreen (Kaerlein, 2012) all point to intimate physical relationships built up between bodies and devices. More than this, social subjectivity gets implicated in what the device's apps signify and create, which has to do primarily with fashioning the self (through textual, visual, and quantified data representations) within a network of social relationships (Campbell, 2008). And, as a 2012 special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* makes clear, such intimacies are fundamentally gendered (Hjorth & Lim, 2012).

The commodification of intimacy through branded mobile apps
The differential meanings of mobile intimacy reflect an "overlaying of the material-geographic and electronic-social" gendered structures of power (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p.

478). This contemporary context might be traced back to Arlie Hochschild's (2003) contention that the gender differences in the ways that intimacy gets channelled through changing forms of sociality emanate from a capitalist imperative toward increasing commercialization of intimate life. From this feminist political economic perspective, affective notions of intimacy with and through mobile technologies are as linked to the macro capitalist social structure as they are to the micro interactions between self and mobile. Here is where the systems approach of the new mobilities paradigm might intersect with a political economic concern with how branded mobile apps commodify intimacy.

In keeping with the workshop's theme of social media, I focus on branded apps – including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, etc., but also more specialized social apps such as health trackers, dating apps, and networked games – to explore how such apps predicated on tripartite embodied intimacy (with the device, the self, and others) commodify these relationships.

The most direct way in which such commodification takes place is through the monetary cost of participating in the first place: the cost of the device, the service plan, the applications, and additional functionality through in-app purchases. More than simply posing significant barriers to entry, these costs further establish the meanings of networked sociality and mobile intimacy as inextricable with a system of exchange value. And yet significant numbers of people still participate – the Facebook app for example had over two billion users last year (Bonnington, 2015). This points to the ways in which

the apparent need for intimate connections through apps has been commodified in the design of social media ecosystems.

The secondary way that such ecosystems commodify intimacy is through data collection – which is all the more insidious because of its opacity to users. Contrary to the monetary cost of engaging in mobile intimacy, the data cost is typically invisible, legitimized through fine print contracts about third party uses of personal information, or indefinite licenses over user content, or data gathering to support necessary improvements to the service. All of these activities leave "traces of the self" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 222): data trails that reconfigure social subjectivity as composites of informational traces, tethered to place through GPS, in overlapping circuits of commercial exchange. Those two billion Facebook app users, for instance, helped the company to generate a 98% increase on its ad revenue through mobile advertisements last year, targeted using personal, locative data (Bonnington, 2015).

Third, the commodification of intimacy happens even more subtly through the affordances of app interfaces, which demand social validation of the self expressed numerically. The pursuit of likes, hearts, thumbs up, and so on in social media invoke what has been called "the Like economy," where intimacy gets quantified through a technical infrastructure that supports the monetization of ephemeral networked sociality (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). In this way, commodification appropriates not only personal information but social relationships (e.g., Wittel, 2011), self-perception, and cultural expression through a kind of "social media logic" that permeates beyond the app interface itself (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Given these three degrees or concentric circles of commodification, where does such a political-economic perspective lead in relation to the intersection between sociality, mobility, and affect? I'd like to propose new ways of approaching the complex intersections of "endless regimes of flow" around mobile apps, which move at different speeds, scales, and resistances (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 213). From the viewpoint of political economy, taking a lateral perspective on production and consumption networks offers a way to account for the kinds of affective labour and intimate investments implicated in branded mobile apps, as situated within broader social media ecologies (Sheller, 2014).

Future research

The challenge now is to build up a research methodology inspired by Les Back and Nirmal Puwar's (2012) manifesto for "live methods" that treat social relationships dynamically as themselves mobile. The purpose of this approach is to examine the commodification processes that underlie mobile apps as socio-technical artefacts of intimacy, i.e. in thinking about their design, marketing, and appropriation by users (Mackay & Gillespie, 1992).

My initial idea is to start on the user side, by identifying a group of avid users of a particular social media app or specifying a group of people and then asking what social apps they use (e.g., Rickard & Lloyd, 2012) – what kind of app? what kind of users? Does this necessarily mean privileged users? Then the task could be to work backwards by talking to designers of those apps and marketers operating within mobile ecosystems

to try to uncover the circuits of production and monetization behind them (e.g., Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2011), treating the mobile apps themselves as virtual "transfer points" where different actors (human and non-human) intermittently meet in space while on the move (Kesselring, 2006).

I welcome any ideas for how to fill in this kind of project, as well as feedback on the conceptual background around mobility, sociality, and affect. I hope to have conveyed how these three concepts do some important ideological work in late capitalism marked by the ever more insistent commodification of social subjectivities through networked communication.

Thanks very much for your time.

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