Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media

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Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media

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A book like this takes a crowd of people to make a reality, and we wish to acknowledge that crowd. As we map out in more detail in the introduction, this book emerged out of a now-annual symposium (in its fourth year at the time of writing), and for supporting the first two of these symposia we are indebted to the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and the School of Communication and Arts at the University of Queensland.

Thank you to everyone who has participated in these 'Digital Intimacies' symposia over the years—many of you are contributors to the book, and many others can be felt in the way ideas have been shaped or thinking has been prodded.

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We acknowledge the patience, generosity, and of course the words of all the contributors to this book. It is a collection of work that we are truly proud of, and it has been a pleasure for us to work with all of you to bring it together.

Contents

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Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjorth is an artist and digital ethnographer. Hjorth has two decades experience working in cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, collaborative creative practice and socially innovative digital media research. Hjorth is currently the Design & Creative Practice ECP Platform director at RMIT University. The research Platform focuses on interdisciplinary collaboration and creative solutions to real-world problems.

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platforms operate as memory archives made up of digital traces of life over years of use. Brady has studied social media use among particular groups, such as LGBTIQ+ people, young people, tourists, and in the context of alcohol consumption. For more, visit Brady's website: brady-robards.com. Follow Brady on Twitter: @bradyjay.

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Mair Underwood is an anthropologist of the body and Lecturer in Anthropology and Sociology in the School of Social Science, the University of Queensland. Her research focuses on the experience of the body, with a special interest in body modifications such as tattoo and bodybuilding. She is currently conducting an online ethnography with recreational bodybuilders, and has published journal articles on numerous aspects of their experience such as their emotion work and performance and image enhancing drug use. You can find her on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube where you can keep up with her research and discuss it with her. Her passion is community engagement and making social science accessible to the general public.

Son Vivienne is a Lecturer and researcher in Digital Media at RMIT. Son is also involved in community development and arts as an activist and media-maker. Their principal expertise is digital self-representation, online activism, queer identity, and rhetorical strategies/feminist practices for speaking and listening across difference. Their work on digital storytelling is published as *Digital Identity and Everyday Activism: Sharing*

Private Stories with Networked Publics (Palgrave, 2016). Son curates several collective storytelling websites for queer (www.rainbowfamilytree.com) and gender-diverse (www.storiesbeyondgender.com) communities and has over twenty years of multimedia production and distribution experience. For more info visit Son's website: www.incitestories.com.au.

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

From public grief and trauma gone viral on YouTube, to hook-up and dating apps like Grindr and Tinder, to daily documentations on Facebook of meals, coffees, dreams, births, deaths, new relationships, breakups, and much more, intimate lives are being played out, recorded, commodified, and constituted through social media. Even when we are physically alone or isolated, affect travels through digital infrastructures: fibre and copper, satellites, wifi signals, laptops, smartphones, and fingertips. Digital intimacies resonate, console, arouse, invite, surprise, compel, distract, and disappoint.

Lauren Berlant writes that intimacy 'involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way' (1998, p. 282–283). Berlant argues that this story occurs most commonly within 'zones of familiarity'—between friends, between a couple, within families. Social media can function to challenge or disrupt the boundaries of these zones. The boundaries of 'private' realms are also challenged by the ways in which social media can make intimacies more public, for instance, as private messages can be captured and shared in unintended contexts, and as long-forgotten relationships can be resurfaced on Facebook. As Berlant notes, our intimate lives 'absorb and repel the rhetorics, laws, ethics and ideologies of the hegemonic public sphere, but also personalise the effects of the public sphere and reproduce a fantasy that private life is the real in contrast to collective life'. Berlant sets out to 'understand the pedagogies that encourage people to identify having a life with having an intimate life'

(1998, pp. 282–283). In this book we seek, in part, to advance this mission by bringing together a series of timely and carefully selected essays by scholars of digital cultures who are engaging with ideas about intimate publics, 'intimacy' in its many forms in networked publics, and the kind of 'mass intimacy' social media facilitates and commodifies. As the chapters in this collection make clear, social media platforms are now centrally part of the process whereby pedagogies of intimate life as life itself are learnt, (re)constituted, (re)formed, contested, and disrupted.

The study of social media practices has come to offer unique insights into the kinds of questions raised by Berlant, among other queer and feminist theorists, about what happens to power dynamics when intimate practices are made public, and about intimacy as public and political, as defined and shaped by cultural politics and pedagogies, institutions, technologies, as well as geographies. In the following chapter, we chart a theory of digital intimate publics in more detail. We note, following Berlant (2008), that '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 scenes that promise and generate feelings of belonging and consolation'. The intimate publics of social media are increasingly the grounds of our identities, affects, and politics. They are reshaping the institutions of public life. The exploration, expression, and experimentation with the intimate that unfolds on social media is both conditioned by, and challenging to, the hegemonic public sphere. Berlant's (2008) hopefulness for intimate publics is their capacity to foster 'a porous, affective scene of identification' for 'nondominant people'. This is one part of the promise of social media cultures that create, as Berlant notes of intimate publics, an 'experience of belonging' and 'a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x' (2008, p. viii). And yet, social media are also machines through which intimate practices are publicised, privatised, commodified, and exploited. On these platforms, intimate life is increasingly recognisable to machines, and algorithms shape and order intimate identities and experiences. The ubiquitous presence of platforms in our day-to-day flows of attention and feeling entangle them with the doing of ordinary intimacies, and also with intimate invasions of violence and abuse.

We see important connections between the ideas of queer and feminist theorists of intimate publics, and current debates about the meaning

and value of social media networked publics and communities. For these reasons, we see the title of this book as a generative frame for scholarship of digital cultures, one we theorise in more detail in the following chapter. Intimacy, as it is constituted, lived, and commodified in digital communities and publics, and impacted in particular by social media, is a topic of increasing international interest. Debates about this are currently playing out in both scholarly and non-scholarly contexts, across a range of topics and interests, including identity politics, work and labour, health, sexuality, death, and everyday life. This collection operates across and bridges these multiple interests and themes via the frame of 'digital intimate publics'.

The Background to this Book

This book began as a coming together of scholars over the past four years at an annual symposium we've come to call 'Digital Intimacies'. The first two events were held at the University of Queensland in 2015 and 2016, supported by UQ's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, UQ's School of Communication and Arts, and the University of Tasmania's School of Social Sciences. Several of the essays in this book originated as papers from those first two symposia.

Following the success of these first two events, another was held in Melbourne at RMIT in 2017, with support from the Monash University School of Social Sciences. At the time of writing, another is planned for 2018 at Curtin University in Perth. These symposia have spanned multiple institutions across Australia, and have drawn in more than 100 scholars over the past four years. A particular feature of the symposia is the gathering of a new formation of scholars, many early-career or emerging, whose work sits at the intersection of digital cultures and multiple strands of the humanities and social sciences: cultural studies, sociology, criminology, psychology, media studies, design studies, education, and more. We acknowledge the more recent input from co-convenors of these symposia, Jenny Kennedy (RMIT in 2017) and Tama Leaver (Curtin in 2018).

The popularity and endurance of this event points toward the significant critical mass of scholars doing research on digital mediations of intimate life in Australia and the Asia-Pacific, as well as the critical currency, importance, and innovation happening in the area of digital intimacies research across the globe. We hope this book serves as a step in continuing this tradition of research and critical thinking into the future.

The Structure of the Book

The book is divided into three parts: 'Shaping Intimacy', 'Public Bodies', and 'Negotiating Intimacy'. Each part of the book overlaps and intersects with the other parts, but we hope this three-part structure gives the book an accessible shape and serves to guide readers through a diverse range of nuanced and cutting-edge case studies, research projects, empirical data, and theory.

Part I: Shaping Intimacy

The chapters in Part I take up two issues. The first is a critical consideration of how the protocols, interfaces, algorithms, and commercial imperatives of social media platforms shape intimacy. The second is a reckoning with how relations of intimacy and publicness are performed via the infrastructure of digital platforms and devices. What the chapters jointly contribute is a techno-social understanding of digital intimate publics. Public intimacies are no longer formed just by the circulation of texts, but also by the increasingly nuanced relationship between humans and machines, and their differing modes of judgment. On the one hand platforms afford, enable, shape, and constrain intimacies; on the other, public intimacies are an important training ground in the development of platforms algorithms, protocols, and interfaces. The more that social life is lived via platforms, the more platforms are designed to do intimacy, as well as capture, analyse and modulate it. These chapters examine the paradox of digital public intimacies that are interdependent with private for-profit platforms.

In Chapter 1, we begin by mobilising the theoretical frame of 'intimate publics' to help understand how contestations over power play out in social media spaces where the public and private intermingle. We unpack what is at stake in public discourses and debates about 'oversharing' and social media 'excesses', suggesting the generative political potential of attending to unpredictable intimacies on social media that extend beyond the boundaries of couples, families, and even 'communities', following Berlant and Warner (1998). We then chart conceptualisations of digital intimacy as both *social capital* and *labour*, arguing for the need for digital cultures research to hold these perspectives together. We draw together important work on 'strategic' and 'affective' intimacies on social media, and affective and immaterial labour. The social capital and labour involved

in digital intimate publics is unevenly distributed and so, it follows, are the potential rewards, affordances, harms, and exploitations. We argue for a 'politics of publicness' in relation to social media as both space and property.

In Chapter 2, Michael Salter makes a critical intervention into theorisation of social media public/private dialectics as co-constitutional. He charts the way online platforms encourage affectively intense intimate expressions, but then open them up to publicisation, abuse, commodification, and exploitation. We feel this dialectical tension in the ways in which social media open up new forms of public and democratic expression at the same time as they reproduce social relations of dominance like misogyny and capitalist instrumentality, as Salter explains. In his account, social media are not just products of these historically produced relations, they also play a critical role in *naturalising* them. To develop this argument, Salter draws on examples of non-consensual circulation of intimate or private material, and related public concerns over 'revenge porn' and 'sexting'. Salter's crucial contribution is to alert us to the dialectical tensions of digital intimacies: At the same time as they afford voices once excluded from public life, they open up those very same voices to new kinds of harms. In paying attention to this contradiction the historical reproduction of power, and its materialisation in technology, is laid bare.

Grant Bollmer (Chapter 3) offers an account of how digital intimate publics bring to the fore the way in which relations of intimacy are marked by absence. Like Salter, Bollmer offers us a nuanced account of the constitutive contradictions of digital intimacies. He argues that social media platforms invoke intimacy, closeness, and connectivity as affects that displace attention to the irreducible distance that characterises intimate relations, given how they depend on mediations and material infrastructure. Bollmer makes a simple but provocative claim: intimacy is unbearable. As he illustrates, the stakes of this claim matter: intimacy sits at the interface between self and other, inner and outer, reality and fantasy. He articulates how our interest in intimacy today is driven in part by our recognition that social media platforms commodify and colonise our inner-most desires and efforts to connect with one another. Bollmer challenges us to understand how the materiality of social media is conjoined with the body and its capacities to affect and be affected. He offers an account of social media that is deeply techno-social, alive to the interplay between the affective capacities of bodies and the infrastructural qualities of media.

In Chapter 4, Larissa Hjorth argues that selfies are an important mode of bearing witness. She develops this account via examination of the posthumous selfies of victims of the sinking of the Korean Sewol ferry in 2014. Hjorth examines how selfies operate as modes of witness, crafting haunted forms of presence and telepresence between the living and the dead. This chapter emphasises the political and personal import of these media practices, powerfully debunking claims of selfies as trivial and mundane.

Brady Robards, Sian Lincoln, Benjamin Pinkard, and Jane Harris (Chapter 5) explore the ways in which Facebook serves as an intimate public for remembering personal histories. They introduce their interview method of 'scrolling back' through Facebook with their research participants, as a way of reflecting on the role of the platform in mediating nostalgia, memory, and collective remembering. Robards et al. consider examples of teenage 'fandom phases', friends changing their profile pictures to remember deceased loved ones, through to more banal images that prompt rich memory-work related to friends, family, and important moments in their lives. They argue that collectively, these examples indicate the significance of Facebook as an archive of memory, albeit with significant limitations.

In Chapter 6, Dobson argues for an orientation of research into intimate and sexual media practices around power and social justice. She frames such practices in terms of their potential social and economic *value*, rather than in terms of risks and pathologies. Dobson, however, points to the limits of understanding sexting and other kinds of intimate media practices as 'agentic media production', through a careful consideration of research into girls' and young women's digital media cultures. She suggests a clear orientation around social justice is imperative in the context of techno-social relations centred around quantified hierarchies of visibility and status.

The chapters in this part each attend to the paradoxes and ambivalent relations that exist in digital intimate publics between the private and public, connection and apartness, social recognition and abuse, liveness and deadness, agency and exploitation.

Part II: Public Bodies

In Part II, the chapters examine how bodies and embodied experiences are publicised and performatively constituted. Several explore how social media affords visibility and spaces of connection for marginalised bodies and over peripheral interests.

Rob Cover opens this part in Chapter 7, where he investigates men's intimate digital webcamming practices. Cover argues that these practices challenge normative understandings of masculine heterosexuality by drawing on examples of amateur sexual webcammers who identify as heterosexual but perform sexual acts for a gay male spectatorship, and engage in practices routinely coded as non-masculine and non-heterosexual. In this chapter, Cover demonstrates that masculine heterosexuality is not necessarily the site of a closed normativity but, instead, may be heavily implicated in the production of ambiguity, post-binary gender and sexuality, flexibility, and porousness.

Next, Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (Chapter 8) analyse the website TubeCrush, where public transport commuters share and discuss images of men on the London Underground. They argue that TubeCrush foregrounds commonalities in the desires of straight women and gay men, bringing together intimate publics and 'workplace affects'. Evans and Riley carefully argue that TubeCrush provides a sense of sociality and community, alleviating the alienation of the post-Fordist city. At the same time, however, they point out that this connection is produced through an online distribution of images that orients the user to normative desires, closing down more radical potentials.

In Chapter 9, Jozon A. Lorenzana examines the Twitter hashtag #WalangForever. This hashtag is popular among Filipino Twitter users, and is based on a film of the same title. Lorenzana explains how #WalangForever has generated a communicative space where Twitter users make witty references to the movie as a way to express feelings and experiences of heartbreak. In analysing the hashtag, Lorenzana considers when and why young Filipinos use #WalangForever, finding that young Filipinos create momentary intimacies on Twitter. Through its everyday circulation, #WalangForever opens up discursive spaces to protest contemporary notions of love and relationships.

Mair Underwood (Chapter 10) undertakes an investigation of 'Zyzz' fandom, a community of young men who celebrate and draw life inspiration from the now-deceased Australian recreational bodybuilder Aziz Sergeyevich Shavershian. Underwood explores narratives of belonging and solidarity within the fandom, with the goal of better understanding homosocial gender relations between men in order to transform gendered power relations. Underwood argues that aside from the overt misogyny present within this digitally mediated community, there are

progressive elements of these homosocial relations, as Zyzz and his fans are able to subvert and destabilise some performative aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

In Chapter 11, Matthew Hart explores young people's nude selfie sharing practices in Tumblr Not Safe for Work (NSFW) communities. He considers how public displays of naked bodies on Tumblr figure into a sense of both emotional and embodied 'authenticity', producing an intimate public. Framing Tumblr as a safe space for young people with diverse bodies and identities, Hart suggests that the platform can work productively as a site for exploring desire and sexuality. He argues that this analysis can speak back to negative media discourses that frame naked self-representations as inherently risky.

In the final chapter in this part, Son Vivienne (Chapter 12) sets out and draws on a social media storytelling initiative called *Stories Beyond Gender*. Vivienne is particularly interested in how gender-diverse and transgender people might engage with social media in identity exploration while facilitating collective 'world building' practices. The case study is centred on workshops undertaken in regional and urban centres in South Australia, where participants experimented with different forms of self-expression from Twitter poetry to creating memes, blogging about how abstract experiments can come to represent fragmentation and fluidity in gender identity.

Part III: Negotiating Intimacy

In Part III of the book, the final five chapters examine how intimacy is negotiated in a range of digital social spaces, from queer hook-ups and #GamerGate, to funeral recordings on YouTube. This part is concerned with the rules and conventions that govern our digital intimacies.

In Chapter 13, Paul Byron and Kath Albury draw on research from their study into how same-sex attracted young people use dating and hook-up apps. Their participants suggest that these apps are unregulated spaces that require users to develop their own rules and codes of conduct. Byron and Albury consider a range personal rules that have evolved through the use of dating and hook-up apps. As they demonstrate, dating and hook-up apps afford much surveillance and discipline (of self and others), through which codes of conduct are continually produced, challenged, and revised.

In Chapter 14, Amanda Elliot delves into the highly contentious and vitriolic Gamergate phenomenon to provide a rich and nuanced history of the phenomenon, and how the video game industry is deeply implicated in it. As Elliot explains, Gamergate sparked a series of flashpoint issues within the sector, including the exclusionary nature of a 'core' gamer identity, resistance to non-technical, cultural, and gendered critiques of video games, and the gendered employment practices of this post-Fordist industry. Elliot pertinently argues that the phenomenon of Gamergate should be seen as deeply connected to transformations in the nature of economic activity and labour post-Fordism, and the marketing practices of the industry.

Earvin Cabalquinto (Chapter 15) considers the role social media play in maintaining connections between Overseas Filipino Workers and their families at home. Cabalquinto explains how Facebook in particular stirs 'contradictory affective experiences' and 'ambivalent intimacies' where social media connects but also reminds people of the distance between them and their loved ones. He explores the entanglement of 'pains' and 'gains' of Facebook use, shaped by the interdependence of gendered familial expectations and socio-economic conditions in transnational Filipino family life.

In Chapter 16, Jenny Kennedy seeks to answer the question: is oversharing—sharing 'too much' on social media—such a bad thing? Kennedy argues that the notion of oversharing as simply being public with what ought to be private is limiting and neglects the complex social relations and desires being enacted in the process of sharing on social media. In digital spaces, there is constant negotiation of what it means to be a digital subject. Kennedy argues that oversharing is a process of this negotiation. She explores the ways in which oversharing is indicative of desires for belonging and connection, and considers whether oversharing can be a productive and potentially rewarding practice.

To close the book, in Chapter 17, Margaret Gibson and Golie Talaie consider the mediation of intimacy in a funeral recording shared and discussed on YouTube, several years after the funeral took place. Gibson and Talaie draw on the comments from strangers on the YouTube video—and the responses from the mother of the boy whose death the funeral video marks—to develop a broader argument about what they describe as an 'age of extimacy'. They explain that this age of extimacy is characterised by personalised intimacy routinely exchanged between

strangers through social media. Gibson and Talaie suggest that these kinds of digital traces constitute 'digital archives of sadness', valuable for demystifying bereavement experiences.

Each of the seventeen chapters that make up this book are grounded in timely, engaging case studies, and research that will appeal to a wide audience of readers with an interest in how intimate lives are played out, shared, commodified, exploited, and reflected upon in social media spaces. The cases and data at the core of each chapter are drawn from Australia, the UK, the Philippines, South Korea, and of course in international digital spaces that cross national boundaries. The collection breaks new ground in how we think about social media, and takes account of social media structures and technical infrastructures, together with the modes of innovative participation and generative politics flourishing in relation to it. We hope you enjoy reading theses contributions as much as we have enjoyed bringing them together here.

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Shaping Intimacy

Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media: Towards Theorising Public Lives on Private Platforms

Amy Shields Dobson, Nicholas Carah and Brady Robards

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).

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3

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