

Affective Fabrics of Digital Cultures: Feelings, Technologies, Politics

Welcome Address

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Hello everyone and welcome. After months of organising and of endless emails with which I spammed your mailboxes, I am so happy to finally see you all here. I won't speak for long, as we have two very full days ahead of us, with several very exciting plenary speakers and sessions. So as the organiser I just want to share with you a few thoughts on how this event came into being.

The aim of this conference is to examine the relations between technologies, and in particular, new digital technologies, and affective politics. Over the next two days, we will be thinking about how affect works in on-line networks and digital assemblages; about the affective regimes of on-line sociality; about perceptions, sensations, affective movements and public feelings that emerge in our highly mediated and digitalised environments. We will look at the cybertouch of war, violence and terror; and at the structures of feeling that operate in the digitalised everyday and computerised ordinary. We will examine psycho-political formations of nation, race, empire, population and generation in the age of digital reproduction, mediated visions and globalised communication technologies. We will ask: How do digital cultures shape our political horizons of fear, anxiety, mourning, hate, hope?

The idea for this conference has been in the back of my mind for several years, first when I was doing ethnography of an online community and researching politics and violence in and out of cyberspace. I used to present my work on racist, nationalist and homophobic violence, and in particular, disgust and hatred, as they were performed in on-line social spaces, and was repeatedly asked, whether on-line racism or homophobia reflect the 'real' social life off-line, in other words, how representative are on-line discussions of what 'really' happens. I was also asked what impact, in my opinion, the cyberviolence I observed had on 'real' social interactions.

I never had and still do not have a satisfying answer to either question, because I think the questions themselves were the wrong ones. Leaving aside the assumption that off-line interactions are somehow more 'real' – assumptions that I do not share, and that are already extensively problematised and questioned by many scholars of digital media and cybercultures – I think that what was also problematic here are the visions of origins and impact.

The first question positions off-line social life as the authentic 'origin', which can be reflected or represented on-line; the movement of meaning here comes from off-line to on-line. The second question, on the other hand, presumes that it is the on-line that creates violence in the first place, which then 'spills over' and affects social relations off-line. But I actually think that neither is the sole origin, and that our attention should be shifted from origins and impact to movement and circulation of affect. The movement of racism, nationalism and homophobia – and other forms of politicised everyday violence – in and out of cyberspace creates complex and messy relations, relations that cannot be grasped through concepts of reflection, representation or influence – models often used in the analysis of media texts.

So instead, I put forward the concept of reverberation,¹ taking inspiration from acoustics and musicology (although I used the term metaphorically, rather than literally). In acoustics, reverberation describes the physical process by which the sound bounces off hard surfaces, reaching the ear with possible delays – if the surface is in the distance, the sound ‘returns’ with an echo. In discussions of ‘acoustic space’ or ‘soundscape’, particularly in relation to music in urban sites, reverberation is about the movement of sound and the ways it can become distorted, intensified or muffled as it moves between physical objects, encountering barriers and mixing with other sounds. I chose the concept of reverberation as a useful metaphor because it invites us to think not only about the movement of violence in and out of cyberspace, through bodies, psyches, texts and machines, but also about the multiplicity of effects such movement might entail. Reverberation is a concept that makes us attentive to the simultaneous presence of speed and stillness, distortions and resonance, intensification and dissolution in the process of moving. As such, it also allows tracing and opening up processes of change, resistance or reconciliation, in the face of affective economies of mediated violence.

I continue thinking about this – the ways we can think feelings, technologies, and politics *together*, through each other – as we are being bombarded by new mediated ‘wars without end’,² but also by new – and constantly changing – digital communication technologies. For example, it is now clear that such technologies are fundamentally changing the terrain of warfare and conflict. Attacks on the ground and in the air now go hand in hand with information warfare, propaganda and racist attacks in blogs and YouTube videos; conflicts between states or stateless groups reverberate in cyberattacks by hackers from each side, and testimonies of atrocities are now captured on mobile phones and circulated via social networking sites.

So today, one has to be particularly attuned to the role of digital media in shifting forms of global and national citizenship, local and cosmopolitan identities, and the affective regimes of connectivity and hatred. Digital information technologies have multiple and often contradictory usages and meanings where politics are concerned. And yet, such multiplicity and complexity have not yet been adequately theorised. Most research on war and digital media, for example, focuses either on the new tactics of warfare and terrorism in the digital age, or on the changes to traditional media practices in reporting and representing war. But what about the changing cultural perceptions of victimhood and testimony? What about the shifting notions of local, national and cosmopolitan belonging at the time of instant messaging, Facebooks, twitters, and other, ever evolving, technologies of connection? What about the constant availability of information through digital media – blogs, social networks, mobile phones – and the structures of feelings such availability creates?

The idea of this conference crystallised last year, as I was working on what I call the ‘cybertouch of war’ – the intersections between on- and off-line military violence, the mediation of wars and conflicts, and the affective regimes that emerge in cyberspace at the time of imperial invasions, ‘wars on terror’, and globalised mediascapes. I was, and still am, interested in thinking about the ways war, violence and death can *touch* us through the monitors of our computers, laptops and

¹ Kuntsman, A. (2009) *Figurations of Violence and Belonging: Queerness, Migrant-hood and Nationalism in Cyberspace and Beyond*, New York and Oxford: Peter Lang.

² Mbembe, A. (2003) ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.
New York: Sage.

mobile phones – whether by causing an immediate emotional response from media users, or by creating long-lasting changes in the ways we experience and conceptualise testimony, suffering, compassion and justice. The notion of cybertouch gestures to the material-semiotic character of digital cultures and searches for the way to account for the intertwinness of technology, feelings, war and politics in what Donna Haraway would describe as technoculture and what Caren Kaplan defines as a ‘global matrix of war’.³

What I am trying to tease out is how *digital structures of feelings* - for example, the ways wartime testimonies, circulated on-line, are always already suspected of being photoshopped, made-up, not real or half real – so how they work together, or side by side, with broader political and affective forces, for example, with what Judith Butler calls regimes of grievability⁴ : where only some lives are seen as valuable and mourned if lost, while others are seen as insignificant and already socially dead, so then if killed, this doesn’t really matter.

It is this kind of theoretical encounter s - between political and affective regimes; between technological transformations and shifts in structures of feeling – that inspired me to organise this event. This conference, interdisciplinary in its focus and its mission, brings into creative tension two fields that are receiving growing scholarly attention: cultural studies of affect, public feelings and the politics of emotion, on the one hand, and scholarship on digital culture, new media and information-communication technologies, on the other. The two do not intersect often, and I believe that such intellectual dialogue is crucial. I hope that it is what we are here to do.

Before we move on to our very exciting first plenary session, I would like to thank RICC - Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures - and The Leverhulme Trust for hosting and generously funding this event. RICC has been my truly inspiring intellectual home for the last two years; it is also a home of Manchester Digital Media Network.

Another huge thank you goes to Caitriona Devery, RICC’s coordinator, who is a true conference wizard and an amazing colleague – she helped me clog up your mailboxes, and make sure you are all here today. Without her help this event would not have been possible. And last but not least, our postgraduate student volunteers – who you have already met during registration, and who are there if you need anything – Adam St Clair, Andie Soco, Ashley Brown, Elisa Coati and Viktor Leggio, thank you so much for being here and for making sure everything runs smoothly.

And of course, thank you all for making it to Manchester and for allowing this great event to take place.

And now, over to Rachel and Melissa.

³ Kaplan, C. (2009) ‘Twitter Terrorists, Cell Phone Jihadists and Citizen Bloggers: The “Global Matrix of War” and the Biopolitics of Technoculture in Mumbai’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7–8), pp. 1–14.

⁴ Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Life: Essays on Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso.