DIGITAL NETWORKS, DIGITAL PUB(L)ICS (2): GENDER, SEX, EMBODIMENT

Panel Description

The Digital Networks, Digital Pub(l)ics panels (two panels in total) develop a critical conversation around the themes of intimacy, sexuality and embodiment and explore the ways in which these concepts are experienced, invoked and interrogated by different groups, communities and individuals in digital contexts. Speaking to the theme of the 2017 conference, the papers collectively identify, map and seek to understand the formation of publics constituted through paradigms and practices of gender and sexuality. In this panel, scholars come together to explore the manifold ways in which digital publics and social networks are formed around the politics, pleasures and practices of gender, sexuality and embodiment.

In the first paper, the author utilises a specific incident – the criticism of breastfeeding 'in public' – to explore the formation of a feminist online counter-public. Mapping the movement of images, texts and bodies through different forms of space, the author articulates how affect adheres to these objects and becomes a binding force in the development of social media responses to such objects. Recognising that normative and resistant politics are rarely discrete entities, the author examines how the online protest against a Finnish celebrity served to support women's rights to exist in public while simultaneously performing homophobia.

Issues concerning behaviour in public, access to publics, and public performances of gender link the first paper to the second, which similarly focuses on images shared via online social networking platforms. In this paper the author builds on existing scholarly work on 'selfie culture' in order to interrogate the performance of self on Instagram. Focusing specifically on non-normative bodies, the author examines the texts and images connected via the #goldenconfidence hashtag in order to draw attention to the strategies of resistance that users enact online. This resistance is two-fold, responding as it does to both the denial of fat sexuality within the public sphere and also to the public disapproval of sexualised selfies. Through textual analysis approaches, the author investigates how the affect of pride is performed and circulated via folksonomic networks.

In the third paper, the attention to gender continues, while the specific focus shifts from women in public to men in networks. The authors of the second paper draw upon detailed in-depth interviews with men to provide fresh insight into how men navigate

online social networks to perform work, leisure and wellbeing. The authors respond to previous scholarship that has either focused exclusively on gay and bisexual men, or has investigated heterosexual masculinity within the confines of specific platforms. Seeking to intervene in this critical landscape, the authors take a holistic approach to men's use of digital and social media in order to map the multiple meanings contained within everyday digital interactions. The research points to the freedoms that men experience online, while also identifying how the historical (self)censorship of men has migrated to digital space. This censorship pertains to issues of health and wellbeing, and reveals the discursive limits of peer-based online networks.

Finally, in the fourth paper, the author seeks to disrupt conventional thinking around the 'smoothness' of digital network, once again paying particular attention to issues of gender and sexuality. Drawing on research that examines the experiences of queer men in Russia, the author appropriates the notion of 'desire lines' in order to provoke a critical interrogation of network culture that reveals the discontinuities of digital environments. These discontinuities represent an opportunity to recognise the heteronormative investments woven into contemporary understandings of the network, whereby smoothness might best be understood as a flattening down, and a smoothing out of difference and divergence. The digital lives of queer Russian men offer an opportunity to disrupt this logic and, in doing so, acknowledge the ways in which we might queer trajectories and challenge (digital) hegemonies.

While speaking to their own specific case studies, these the four papers work in concert to produce a coherent, critically-engaged and methodologically diverse conversation regarding gendered and sexual publics. In doing so, they signpost both the boundaries of such publics, and the methods by which non-normative folk are challenging such boundaries.

PAPER 1: BARE FLESH AND STICKY MILK: AN AFFECTIVE CONFLICT OVER PUBLIC BREASTFEEDING

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On January 1st, 2016 Finnish celebrity fashion stylist and tv presenter Teri Niitti took a photograph of a woman breastfeeding on a Finnair flight ready for takeoff. He then published it on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In the accompanying text he asked women to cover up their breastfeeding in public and added the following hashtags: *#breast #breastfeeding #mothers #publicbreastfeeding #opinion #decency #firstclass #businessclass #finnair #feelfinnair #newyork #mothers #scarf.* Social network sites gather different collections of people depending on the situation and the network mediates the interactions between members of the public. The types of publics that get together on particular sites and the types of publics that such sites support are deeply affected by the mediated nature of interaction. (Marwick & boyd 2011, 25.) Through technological networks Niitti's post moved from an unmediated public of a plane, where the audience is structurally defined, to networked publics of social media where the audiences are unknown and unpredictable.

While Niitti was travelling from Helsinki to New York, the update was moving through different sites and gained a lot of negative attention. Some people were responding directly to Niitti but many initiated their own discussion threads on Facebook, Twitter and a number of discussion forums. Most commentators were defending women's right to nurse in public and criticized Niitti for posting a picture of an intimate situation without permission. He was also accused of hypocrisy for being disgusted when the female breasts were used for their "real purpose" while simultaneously objectifying women in his work as a stylist. By using hashtags like #publicbreastfeeding Niitti probably caught the attention of audiences that would normally not follow him on social media. Mothers and the so called "lactivists" took notice and started to post breastfeeding pictures on Instagram with a hashtag #teriniitti or #teriniittistyling as a form of protest. Relatively fast the situation escalated to personal attacks. Niitti was verbally abused for being gay and some of the commentators even wished for him to die. After landing, and becoming aware of the storm he had caused, Niitti deleted the post and made his Instagram account private. He later apologized for his lack of judgement but during the next 48 hours and more the post aroused fury and heated conversations all over social media becoming a subject of attention in Finnish traditional media as well.

How did Teri Niitti's homosexuality become an object of negative affect and how did social media negotiate the appropriate public presentation of the female body? Drawing on feminist theorizations of affect, I address these questions through an analysis of a single thread of 370 comments on Finnish discussion forum *Vauva.fi (baby.fi)*, which is

highly popular also outside parenting circles. The thread's communication is very antagonistic in its emphasis on expressions of anger, disgust and resentment. Many are expressing their outrage towards Niitti or the whole debate. Some are accusing publicly nursing women of exhibitionism while others are defending public breastfeeding. Many of the comments discuss the limits of appropriate exposure of flesh while some others connect Niitti's anti-breastfeeding message to his homosexuality and his presumed disgust towards the female body. The thread's angry, critical, sarcastic and provocative expressions reflect feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's (2004) account of the way emotional responses align subjects with and against others (Rossi 2010, 88; Ahmed 2004a, 32).

For Ahmed (2004, 90), stickiness is "*an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*". Lunceford (2012, 41) suggests that by nursing in public, women violate codes of decorum as they are refusing to work within the system. Despite of how the contemporary experience of mothering in Euro-American settings has become increasingly child centered, and how heavily breastfeeding is promoted (Hays 1996; Faircloth 2014), social attitudes on the practice of public nursing vary widely. In addition, even though the anonymous online posts are circulating affects through recognizable representations, in the uses of networked media affective intensities accumulate in such complex ways that their qualities can be hard to distinguish and their intersections difficult to specifically determine (Paasonen 2015, 29; 2011, 231–240). Like Paasonen (2015, 30) points out, social media users are generally driven by a search for intensity and the stickiness of a discussion thread depends on intensities it affords. Human lactation in itself is a very sticky subject and when sexuality is thrown to the mix things gets even stickier.

This process of affective expression is characteristic to networked publics of social media where the gathering and the behavior of audiences can be hard to predict. I argue that the affective dynamics of online discussions on embodiment and sexuality instigate aggressive and provocative performances and affective language due to historical and cultural context. The signs get more affective, the more they circulate (Ahmed 2004, 45). The debate that took place was a typical social media chain reaction in which publicity is difficult to control, and where different discourses encounter each other. I further argue that the affective circulation involved in the case of Teri Niitti made visible how normative speech on gender and sexuality becomes articulated in the era of social media.

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PAPER 2: #GOLDENCONFIDENCE: PRIDE AND SEXUALITY IN BODY POSITIVE SELFIES

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In the popular media selfies are often treated as a source of anxiety and distress. The visual genre is understood as an emblem of vanity or narcissism of today's culture (for ex. Gregoire, 2015). Careless selfie takers, falling off cliffs (FoxNews.com, 2016) or destroying priceless statues (Miller, 2014) in their attempt to catch the perfect selfie, are seen to pose a threat to their own safety, as well as to that of others. Another worry, feeding into the moral panic around selfies, are girls and young women taking sexually provocative selfies and posting them online. In this panic laden scenario, girls and women are seen simultaneously as helpless, ignorant victims of social media and of the people using their selfies for sexual pleasure, and as narcissistic individuals interested only in their looks and in becoming InstaFamous (for ex. Free, 2016).

However, as cultural studies scholars focusing on selfies have pointed out, selfies are a multifaceted genre taken up by people of various backgrounds and identities, for various reasons (Senft & Baym, 2015). The motivations for taking a selfie may be political or activist, for example, (see for ex. Nemer & Freeman, 2015; Baishya, 2015), countering the popular belief that all selfie takers are simply expressing vanity or egocentricity. Following Senft & Baym (2015: 1589), I understand selfie as a gesture or a message transmitting feelings in the form of a photograph, and often accompanied by hashtags that make the selfie's meanings clearer. In body activist and body political contexts, the affect aimed to transmit is usually pride. Pride has been seen critical in the emancipation of marginalized groups (Halberstam, 2005), although the concept has faced critique as well (for ex. Murray, 2008).

This paper focuses on selfies posted on Instagram with the hashtag #goldenconfidence. A typical #goldenconfidence selfie represents a 20-something (most often white) woman posing for the camera in her underwear or in some fashionable gear. Her body is larger than the idealized female body seen in mass media and general public. #goldenconfidence represents the so called body positive movement providing space for bodies of all shapes and sizes (see for ex. Sastre, 2014). Other popular hashtags, related to body positivity, and often used together with #goldenconfidence, include #effyourbeautystandards, #beautybeyondsize, and #fatgirlsbewinning.

#goldenconfidence is understood as an empowering public, centered on the affect of pride, but also as a networked public where affects remain unstable. Affects – understood both as social and corporeal sensations that are always in motion (Ahmed, 2004) – are decoded from the visual objects of selfies, as well as the texts linked to the pictures. Although an isolated selfie, depicting a smiling, full-figured woman posing topless for the camera while covering her nipples with her other hand, for example, may be understood as a visual manifestation of nothing but pride, the accompanying texts

complicate this understanding. The woman posing for the picture explains her decision for posting it in the following way:

'I've had this picture saved in my drafts for a while, and I was scared to post it. I have a tough relationship with the rolls on my stomach, and anytime they show in pictures, I always delete them. But I took a second to think about it, today. This is me, the body that I have worked so hard to love and accept. There's no hiding it, and I shouldn't have to. I'd be doing a disservice to myself and the women who look at me and my body for inspiration to present a constantly edited depiction of myself. So here I am. Rolls and all.' (Person 1.)

I interpret Person 1's hesitation to post the selfie as a signal of how difficult affect pride is to accomplish, since affects are by nature sticky and certain objects (and bodies) are more laden with 'positive' affects (Ahmed, 2004).

The paper discusses (hetero)sexuality as a recurrent element of pride in body positive movement and #goldenconfidence selfies. The discussion is made relevant by the repeated denial of fat sexuality in mainstream public (Harjunen, 2006), but also by the general disapproval of sexually laden selfies. In the case of #goldenconfidence selfies, sexuality can be seen as an activist element working to challenge the prejudices towards fatness. I argue that for subjects discriminated and marginalized in the general public, selfies emphasizing the attractiveness of one's body may be powerful vehicles of empowerment. This is something that the critique on postfeminism and sexual imagery (for ex. Gill, 2007) has failed to recognize.

Since selfies do not work in isolation but are part of a networked public, the paper also looks at the dynamics of affects in reception. The comments received for the above described #goldenconfidence selfie on Instagram vary in their stances. While one commentor says: 'You look so good...beautiful and very sexy' (Person 2), another one asks: 'Is this even healthy?' (Person 3). The dialogue is scrutinized as crucial in expressing, maintaining, and encountering pride and sexuality in #goldenconfidence selfies.

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PAPER 3: MEN AND NETWORKED LIFE

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In this paper, we draw upon in-depth interviews conducted with 10 men, focussing upon their everyday experiences of networked digital media and the relationships they see existing between digital media and masculinity. Our analysis attends to the nature of human and non-human power in the digitally mediated gendering of men. Our interviews highlight the following common themes in participants' discourse:

- Difficulty reconciling their understanding of masculinity with their own performance of identity and behaviour, both online and off
- The tendency to frame themselves as variously non-interested, reluctant and non-users in terms of their participation with networked digital media environments (often despite quite extensive engagement levels)
- A perception that digital media are creating both opportunities for more variation in the range of possible masculinities available to men as well as increased gender based pressures surrounding what it means to be a man (although the perceived breadth of these possibilities and extent of regulation was different across interviewees)
- The integral role of the gendered politics of platforms in archiving, circulating, repurposing, shaping and finding of masculinities through non-human actors such as interfaces, functions and algorithms.

Within our interviews with men, we have gained insights into these common perspectives via exploring digital media use and the gendered nature of work, leisure, wellbeing and sex. In relation to work, we focus on the nature of technology at work and work based social networking performances and practices. In terms of leisure, where the digital plays a part, we attend to the dynamics of online shopping, digital gaming and online sports fandom. Our focus on wellbeing centres around the gendered nature of interactions, or lack thereof, amongst men when discussing such matters as relationship concerns, fathering, fitness and different health conditions. Finally, we attend to the area of sex, and explore men's perceptions of dating, porn and sexual practices such as sexting.

The context of this work is a distinct lack of attention to the links between certain men and digital media over the past 20 years. That is not to say no research in this area exists, but from the overview we provide here we can see certain distinct themes and, as a result, this allows us to point to areas needing more attention.

The strongest theme in present research of the digital where men, the construction of

gender and sexuality and networked life is concerned is that relating to gay men. Early examples include studies of the role of Internet Relay Chat in facilitating sexual connection, social connection and identity work for gay men (Campbell, 2004; Shaw, 1997), Taiwanese gay academic's use of Internet chat rooms as useful political devices (Yang, 2000), and the use, of the now defunct, French Minitel system by gay men (Livia, 2002). Work also reported on the potential sexual health interventions online for gay men (Bolding et al., 2004).

Over the last ten years, studies of gay men's use of digital media have continued a focus upon social and sexual connection but expanded to take note of the contradictions and complications regarding the construction, representation and enactment of gay men's life online – for example (Cassidy, 2016; Dowsett et al., 2008; Elund, 2013; Light, 2016; Light et al., 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010; Race, 2015; Roth, 2015). Work has also continued that seeks to evaluate health interventions for men who have sex with men via contemporary locative media such as GRINDR (Burrell et al., 2012).

Over the last 20 years, a further strand of work is present, though much smaller. This work focuses, predominantly, though not exclusively, on heterosexual masculinities and digital media. This work also has an element of the sexual included within it, though nowhere near as much as that associated with gay men. For example, there have been studies of dating, web camming, cybersex and online porn (Attwood, 2009; Kibby & Costello, 1999). Much less attention has been given to the arenas of work (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Knights, 2004; Kendall, 2002), social connection (Siibak, 2010) and play (Burrill, 2010).

Following the small scale, but in-depth interview based approach of Connell (2005), we add to this literature through a study of the networked life of men. Together our findings respond to the existing literature in the area by expanding the range of digital technologies and contexts for understanding the gendered lives of men.

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PAPER 4: DESIRE LINES: QUEERING MOVEMENTS IN MEDIASPACE

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Background

The Internet and the digitalization of interpersonal communication have in many ways re-drawn the map of queer living, and revolutionized possibilities for same-sex desiring subjects to connect beyond social and geographical constrains. Queer media studies illuminate strong connections between digital environments and everyday life (e.g. Phillips & O' Riordian eds., 2007; Pullen & Cooper eds. 2010; Wakeford, 2002; Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005; Shaw, 1997; Campbell, 2005; Mowlabocus, 2007; 2008; 2010a; Tsang, 2000; Kim et al, 2001), where the online and the offline is sometimes said to be in a "symbiotic relationship" (Mowlabocus, 2010a).

As much writing interested in postmodern geography, this legitimately points at new possibilities for "continuity" across spaces, brought about through digitalization (e.g. Appadurai, 1990; Bauman, 2015; Castells, 1996; Giddens, 1990). That means concepts such as "flow" (e.g. Castells, 1996; Deuze, 2012) and "convergence" (Jenkins, 2004) largely discussing digital media use as integrated aspects of everyday practices and social identity.

But at the same time, queer desire is commonly experienced as "discontinuous" within heteronormative contexts (Ahmed, 2006), as the subject has to leave the main socio-spatial tracks in order to find her sexual object choice. "The closet" further puts queer existence in a constant state of "ambivalence" towards the wider public (Sedgewick, 1990) and for many serves to segment spheres of living in non-intact but highly conflicting ways. It seems then, that queer online media practices *also* call for attention towards "discontinuities" or "ruptures" within theories of media-space. Further, such ruptures are likely to become even more evident when queer expressivity and mobility are undermined by juridical restrictions and public tensions.

Therefore, contemporary Russia seems a productive starting point for discussions of how queer people actively navigate mediaspace; taking turns; choosing paths; time and space-shifting, in order to administrate more complicated aspects of everyday living. That include discussions of how for example the "online/offline divide" (even if only a discursive construct) organizes user experiences of safety and discretion; how online surveillance is understood in relation to other panoptic systems (Foucault, 1977) during juridical and political persecution; and what forms of agency may be nurtured through digital media practice when negotiating restrictions in space.

Presentation

In this presentation I discuss central themes from my dissertation project, focusing on how queer online media becomes integrated with the dialectic of the closet, by queer male Russians. Hence I recognize queer online media practices as part of ongoing contestations over shared space at different scales (Massey, 2005). At stake here are always attempts at control; the mobility of bodies; and social identities.

Seeing the technical and the social as fundamentally co-constituted, I elaborate on the concept of "desire lines" (originally developed within the field of urban planning) to describe off-tack erosions in media –space (Couldry & McCarthy, 2003) making room for non-normative subjectivities. Inspired by Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology I thereby discuss how locative technologies used by queer men *orient* users in the world by mapping out objects of desire, and negotiate the contours of queer existence in relation to the local and the global.

However, discontinuities, bumps and dis-orientation commonly occur at points where desire lines cross or assimilate with formal pathways in brute and contradictory ways. Whereas others have argued for the disappearance of media from our active awareness within a mediatized world (Deuze, 2012), such discontinuities across media-space often constitute moments when media rather *appears*. With examples from my field work among Russian queer men in Saint Petersburg, my presentation will illuminate this lack of "flow" between the online and the offline; between devices and forums; as well as between spatial identities within the mediatized imaginary.

This way I aim to discuss the limitations of digital media's ability to reorganize the spatiotemporal, and the sometimes acute distinction between the symbolic and the material in mediaspace as well as the online and the offline.

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