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## CAREFUL ATTUNEMENTS: THE CHOREOGRAPHING OF CARE THROUGH SMARTPHONE PRACTICES DURING, AND AFTER, CRISIS

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In this paper we explore how smartphone users in Victoria (Australia) used their smartphones to find and manage information, emotions and networks during the 2019-2020 Australian summer bushfire crisis. Our human-centred, lived experience approach deployed drawing, critical reflection and group discussion. Using these techniques elicited the emotional responses and motivations of our participants during this journey in and after the crisis. We draw on the concept of affective witnessing (Papailias, 2016; Richardson and Schankweiler, 2019), a process whereby the boundaries between mourner and witness blur through the affective intensity of mobile media. We frame affective witnessing in terms of feminist materialism of care practices (Pols, 2011; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011; Lupton and Hjorth, 2020) to focus on the importance of taking care seriously—care at a distance of family and friends, self-care and care of intimate digital publics.

We draw on data collected in two workshops held in Melbourne, Australia, shortly after the crisis. Participants ranged from 19-70 years old from diverse cultural backgrounds and were recruited using snowball and convenience sampling. The workshops drew on everyday lived experiences to capture the emotional textures of caring during a crisis, and the ways participants' relationships with their smartphones changed or remained the same during the bushfires.

The mediation of the Australian bushfires through the smartphone enabled affective witnessing across Australia and the world as the landscape burned and communities documented and broadcast their experiences, which were then subsequently picked up by other social media users and news outlets, repackaged and shared. Thus, the

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affective qualities of images, stories and experiences were distributed to distant others, and created other choreographies of affective witnessing and care.

Anthropologist Penelope Papailias argues that the role of “affect” in witnessing today means that we are all impacted in ways that require us to re-examine grief as part of everyday life. Papailias, drawing on Judith Butler, argues that these moments of grief illustrate the inequalities of bodies—that some bodies matter more than others (Papailias, 2019). Mobile media brings grief literally and metaphorically into our hands. It reminds us that death isn’t the binary opposite to life. Rather, it is through the rituals of connecting with grief in quotidian ways that we can make sense of the world. Our social media feeds in our hands weave messages of loss and love almost seamlessly. In the case of the recent bushfires, affective witnessing and smartphone engagement became further entwined.

Affective witnessing, as defined by Richardson and Schankweiler, enables us to “account for both the centrality of affect and emotion to witnesses and witnessing and their inherent relationality” (Richardson and Schankweiler, 2019, p.168). Bearing witness is an affective and emotional experience, and devices such as the smartphone now enable a far greater reach of our abilities to witness, observe or participate in events. Thus, affective witnessing foregrounds how “mediation acts to capture, coalesce, and modulate the intensities of witnessing” (Richardson and Schankweiler, 2019, p. 169). We found the affective intensity of bearing witness to the crisis was related to how directly impacted participants were. Those who lived in fire-prone areas, were visiting or had loved ones in affected regions were more acutely aware of the need for analogue medias; while those who did not experience such direct impacts described being emotionally affected by the constant bombardment of updates, images and communications. The constant exposure to bushfire materials therefore demanded assessments about for what or whom to care and how.

It is essential to acknowledge the ethico-political nature of caring with technology. In doing so, we draw and expand on Jeanette Pols’s notion of “care at a distance” to consider non-institutional contexts by which media mediates how we care when co-present (Pols, 2011; Lupton and Hjorth, 2020). Feminist materialist theories of care contextualise our investigation of how caring involves distinguishing what matters to us and how we choose to care. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues, “interests and other affectively animated forces such as concern and care are intimately entangled in the ongoing material remaking of the world” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 87). Caring via smartphones during the bushfires was dynamically material as the smartphone intervened both actively and passively—redefining priorities, creating slippages in temporality and boundaries. Smartphones configured our participants’ politics of care by giving them access to constant updates about the unfolding crisis, which then determined where they focused (or managed) their attention with blocking apps, mindfulness, and by touching or picking up their phones to soothe their feelings of anxiety and stress. We found the socio-material contexts in which participants lived contributed to them determining how they were able to care, and be cared for by, their loved ones.

Our preliminary findings show that self-care and care at a distance became critical during the crisis. Much of the work-arounds and techniques operated across intergenerational connections. In this care at a distance, performativity around suppressing feelings of worry and hopelessness are interwoven with constant notifications and moments of self-care. These practices were underpinned by two key factors—proximity of affective witnessing, and care literacies. Through discussion in the workshops, we found that there were multiple assemblages of media being employed during a crisis in order to stay informed and communicate. Whether participants had knowledge of these different media and their choreographies were often the result of media literacies. For example, during the fires, networks went down in affected locations and people had to turn to older media like radio and landlines. Participants who were familiar with bushfires often had a more systematic and literate approach to the medias necessary to understand and respond to the crisis, while participants without that familiarity seemed to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available and struggled to comprehend and digest their emotional responses. As we formulate our responses to these findings, we invite discussion on how affective witnessing, self-care and care a distance might be practiced in other similar crisis contexts.

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