

## **Intimate Infrastructures**

### **We Depend upon:**

#### **Living with Data**

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### **Abstract**

This essay takes on Lauren Berlant's mapping of intimacy as 'connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living' in order to address attachments, dependencies, and vulnerabilities in datafied contexts where digital platforms operate as infrastructures of everyday life. Building on interview material, we explore such intimate attachments as ones rife with friction and inconvenience, asking how vulnerabilities emerge and become differently distributed among our study participants. We argue that thinking about the datafied everyday in terms of intimacy opens up space for considering the fundamental ambiguities involved in what matters to people, what they are attached to, and what they simply need to live with. We further suggest that attending to the complexity and vitality of mundane relating, impacting, and world-making offers ways of exploring and techno-capitalist infrastructures of data extraction and mass surveillance in tandem with other attachments and connections that bind, and matter.

## Keywords

intimacy, data culture, vulnerability, infrastructures

In their 1998 introduction to a *Critical Inquiry* special issue on intimacy, Lauren Berlant writes about intimacy as ‘the kinds of connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living (if not a “life”)', highlighting the surprising forms that these connections may take: anything from ‘nations and citizens, churches and the faithful, workers at work, writers and readers’ to ‘people who walk dogs or swim at the same time each day, fetishists and their objects, teachers and students, serial lovers, sports lovers’ (Berlant, 1998: 284, emphasis in the original).

Taking on Berlant’s mapping of intimacy as ‘connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living’, this essay sets out to broaden the scope of discussions on intimacy from the realm of sexuality to attachments and dependencies that make the self in encounters involving both human and nonhuman actors. We argue that, defined as a matter of dependencies, intimate attachments are infrastructural to how lives are lived and how identities take shape – or, to rephrase, affective infrastructures are something that hold up one’s world (Berlant, 2022: 27; Paasonen, 2018). In what follows, we think with both Berlant’s 1998 article addressing intimacy as connected to social attachments that matter, or are considered to matter, and their 2022 exploration of inconvenience as constant frictions within the connections that we depend upon. Both these pieces are broadly concerned with the desires and dilemmas of living with the social while also theorizing social and political transformation, albeit within different historical contexts: the first thinks through queer intimacies and institutions of partnership and family in connection with the boundary work between private and public lives during the Clinton era; the second addresses nonsovereignty and the possibilities of worldmaking, post-Trump, in the latter stages of the COVID-19 pandemic as the social seems to have broken down.

It is the aim of this essay to bring Berlant’s work on intimacy into dialogue with studies of datafied culture characterized by constant network connectivity, multi-platform engagement, and extensive harvesting and analysis of user data, within which

considerations of the social by necessity encompass the technological. In so doing, we expand considerations of the connections that impact us, and which we depend on, to include both social and technological connections, so that the infrastructures involved are simultaneously vital attachments to people (individuals, groups, and other constellations) and dependencies on the operability of devices, platforms, and information networks. Social distancing measures and lockdowns connected to the COVID-19 pandemic brought such technosocial forms of existence into sharp focus as the lives of many of us— from occupational engagements to learning, socializing, and connecting sexually – shifted online, yet these forms are hardly specific to states of emergency as such. Rather, they are characteristic of contemporary datafied lives in many parts of the globe.

Empirically, our essay builds on an ongoing large-scale research project, ‘Intimacy in data-driven culture’ (IDA, 2019–2025). Involving interviews, workshops, focus groups, and media diaries with diverse groups in Finland – e.g., social media influencers, the long-term unemployed, politicians and political aides, performing artists, cultural workers, users of sexual platforms, undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, students, public officials, therapists, academics, non-binary folks, designers and game industry professionals, the elderly and the young – IDA deploys the notion of intimacy to make sense of infrastructural attachments that our study participants discuss as crucial for living and working in datafied contexts, as well as the vulnerabilities that these give rise to. Our interests lie in the analytical work that Berlant’s take on intimacy allows for in expanding, as well as in complicating, the concept’s standard connotations of sexuality, privacy, or the personal to address technosocial attachments as both crucial and rife with friction. Berlant (1998: 285) argues that intimacy circulates as ‘an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it’. What does it then mean when such an aesthetic becomes mapped onto, and takes shape through, networked means?

Working through Berlant’s take on intimacy (1998) and infrastructures (2022: 20) as ‘the living mediation of what provides the consistency of life in the ordinary’, we address both social connections and the digital platforms used in their construction as matters of infrastructure. At the same time, we attend to technological infrastructures as connected to forms of inclusion and exclusion, and as impacting possibilities to act

in tangible ways. While both social connections and digital platforms are formative as ‘material processes of binding’ (Berlant, 2022: 22) that give shape to lifeworlds, we also argue for a need to be mindful of different kinds of infrastructural dependencies and their implications for everyday life. As we discuss in connection with our empirical work, even as intimacies take unpredictable forms in and through networked infrastructures, not all infrastructures are matters of intimacy in the sense addressed by Berlant. Rather, we suggest that intimate attachments involve an edge, or risk, of vulnerability that can become highlighted by the networked media that we live with. In other words, there is something at stake when things get intimate.

## Intimacies

The etymological roots of intimacy in the Latin *intimus* point towards the inmost, innermost, and deepest so as to suggest something deeply personal and hidden from the outside world. The term is often used as euphemism for sexual relations and acts, as in the field of digital intimacies encompassing “‘sexting’”; selfies; making, viewing and circulating sexual content; using hook-up apps; and searching online for advice about sex’ (Smith et al., 2019: 2). It is also used interchangeably with terms such as proximity and closeness to map out things considered local, private, and embodied (Wilson, 2016). It further suggests close relations which depend on shared knowledge that is not widely available to others. In this sense, intimacy entails knowledge about secrets, bodily information, and personal vulnerabilities (Berlant, 1998: 281).

In the aftermath of 1990s queer activism, Berlant’s (1998: 284) theoretical and political project was to deconstruct the notion of intimacy as tied to particular institutions (family, couple, friendship) and to redefine it more broadly as ‘mobile processes of attachment’. In doing so, they sought to unravel the entangled relations of, and the blurring of distinctions between, the private and the public spheres, considering how individual lives become shaped by institutions, ideologies, and desires. Within their analysis, intimacy refers to institutions and dominant discourses but equally to energies, attachments, and fantasies exceeding these, as well as to transformative practices wherein ‘intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation’ (Berlant, 1998: 282). For Berlant, intimacy builds and organizes lifeworlds at the intersections of social norms and unruly desires, suggesting that

intimate attachments, investments, and orientations operate in an infrastructural vein like those which uphold and afford modes of being and relating. The notion of intimacy then allows for rethinking the modes of attachment that ‘make persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces’ (Berlant, 1998: 288).

In the context of the late 1990s, Berlant discussed the spaces of intimacy as ones expanding from the home to the street (and the club). Twenty-five years later, it is necessary to include networked connections in considerations of sociality so that the connections that we depend upon are also materially about technological infrastructures (Rambukkana & Wang, 2020). In other words, network connectivity comprises an infrastructure that impacts the ways in which connecting is possible, shaping forms of mundane agency and world-making. It is then possible to consider network connectivity as an ‘infrastructure of intimacy’ (Wilson, 2016; Paasonen, 2018) that plays a key role in enabling, maintaining, and shaping connections across personal and occupational lives.

Our infrastructural approach inserts technology and nonhuman actors into Berlant’s consideration of attachment, dependencies, and connections which, while being focused on cultural fantasies and their circulation (in literature and film in particular), has not extended to networked media or technological agencies as such. This said, we recognize that it may seem counterintuitive to shift focus away from sexual lives most often positioned at intimacy’s core. Berlant’s polemic, after all, addressed the fantasy of excluding sex from public worlds as one that structures ways of organizing everyday life, zooming in on intimacies disrespectful of such boundaries (see also Berlant & Warner, 1998). In adapting a queer theory articulation of intimacy to the datafied everyday, it is not our aim to either foreground or efface the importance and complexities of sexual worlds. Rather, we question the popular conflation of intimacy with sex, so that the former becomes something of a euphemism for the latter while other attachments that make the self risk fading from view. To state the obvious: sex is not automatically intimate in the sense of involving attachments that matter, or that are necessary for living, just as intimacy entails broader proximities and connections (e.g., Rosa, 2023). As its Latin root suggests, the intimate is indeed something deeply personal, but not necessarily sexual.

Among the users of a local sexual platform Alaston Suomi ('Naked Finland') interviewed for IDA who regularly participate in play parties and hook up with fellow users, none framed these activities through the notion of intimacy, even as these were described as ones of great importance. Rather, they deployed the term intimacy in the context of publishing sexual and personal content and rendering oneself vulnerable through disclosures. In this sense, intimacy marked the boundary of the kinds of engagements that people were willing to have with one other. For some study participants, intimacy was further tied in with a regional and social sense of belonging, as in Alaston Suomi involving a sense of intimacy due to its relatively small size and the use of Finnish language. All in all, intimacy was then much less connected to sexual displays, communication, or contact than to a sense of proximity: to who or what was experienced as being comfortably or uncomfortably close, and the kind of nearness that was desired to start with. We suggest that this points to the analytical value of considering intimacy in more capacious terms, so that the sexual becomes considered within the broader fabrics of sociality and the myriad ties that make it.

For Alaston Suomi users, intimate attachments encompassed both the platform and the people communicating through it, so that it was not fully possible to consider the one without the other. We suggest that this condition is hardly specific to this particular group of people but rather characterizes networked social formations and investments on collective scales. The everyday lives described by IDA study participants are heavily reliant on access to, and the uses of, networked media. These dependencies range from sociality to professional visibility, banking, taxation, and a plethora of mundane routines.

## **Infrastructures**

Berlant's work is much concerned with world-making – with attachments and comings together allowing for different forms of connecting, making sense, fantasizing, and caring. The mission of *Critical Inquiry's* special issue on intimacy was to 'articulate the ways the utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy meet the normative practices, fantasies, institutions, and ideologies that organize people's worlds' (Berlant, 1998: 282). In the context of networked media, normative forces further include the affordances and content policies of digital platforms. Within this, infrastructures

function as both engines and barriers for change, being both that which someone else runs or operates, and that which allow for the operations of individuals and groups (Star & Ruhleder, 1996): they work to organize the world and the relations within it.

In 1998, Berlant discussed intimacy as connections without using the notion of infrastructure, even as intimate connections and mobile attachments came to stand for infrastructures of life. In *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), infrastructure becomes a key concept mobilized to address both ‘how to live with ambivalence’ and how to engender transformation: ‘The important thing is that we are inescapably in relation with other beings and the world and are continuously adjusting to them’ (Berlant, 2022: 2). This involves a discussion of infrastructures as connective practices and atmospheres that shape lifeworlds – as things that bind. Infrastructures, for Berlant (2022: 95), are made of ‘patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use’. Similarly to intimacy in the 1998 piece, infrastructures are then simultaneously about constraints and potentialities; both tenacious and contingent.

In general, the notion of infrastructure refers to facilities, operations, and services that are fundamental to communal life, that provide a basis for things to happen, and that underlie elements and processes of everyday life. During the past years, media studies inquiry has experienced something of an ‘infrastructural turn’ to the extent that, for David Hesmondhalgh (2020), the very notion has grown vague in its diverse and metaphorical uses and risks losing its analytical power. We, again, suggest that a metaphorical level is inescapable in the binding and connective forces that make sociality. Intimacy itself is an infrastructure as the basis for sociality to happen; it both underlies and enables human existence.

On the one hand, infrastructures are very much material, from road systems to electric grids, data centres, cell phone towers, and fibre optic data cables (e.g., Bratton, 2016; Farman, 2015; Velkova & Plantin, 2023). On the other hand, they are also organizational, and in this sense more ephemeral and metaphorical. Ara Wilson (2016: 247) describes infrastructures as facilities and backbones that ‘shape the conditions for relational life’, building on both Susan Leigh Star’s (1999: 379) take on infrastructures as ‘entwined with social relations and with a complex interplay of structure and agency’ and Michelle Murphy’s (2013: 104) mapping of ‘spatial arrangements of relationships

that draw humans, things, words and non-humans into patterned conjunctures'. It is this sense of relationality, of being in connection and being dependent on, that cuts through our empirical research material describing everyday life experiences in contemporary Finland.

In a very concrete sense, mundane dependency on networked infrastructures results from policy, given the extent of Finnish information society projects launched in the mid-1990s, high availability of internet (and notably high mobile data use), and the degree to which information resources and services have shifted online and citizens are expected to run their errands digitally. In different yet tangible ways, many of our informants discuss the pull of constant connectivity as something that structures their everyday lives. A member of the Finnish parliament recounts:

*I try to not use the phone at home so much, but it is so hard. It's of course evident that platforms are designed in a way that you can't live without them. ... Sometimes my family is a bit upset when the phone is always in my hand... but a world in which people are notified when their message has been seen causes a need to react in a reasonable time. ... otherwise, it's interpreted as a sign of indifference or lack of interest. If you click something, you have to spare a minute or two to react.*

Here, the smartphone is an infrastructural agent allowing for connections that one cannot simply choose to opt in or out of – as in information systems necessary for working, operating as a citizen, or being reachable to others – as well as connections that make the self as active orientations and attachments. This sense of indispensability was reiterated even by participants not participating in social media (or not using smart devices to start with). It then follows that a nonbinary participant interested in political change but unwilling to engage with platforms nevertheless discussed them as essential to culture and politics:

*I'm not active anywhere myself, I can't be bothered ... But anyway, it's such a big part of current human culture fundamentally, and maybe even increasingly, it feels like all even a little bit relevant movements in terms of the future often start online ... I mean I think you can get a lot of information on grassroots movements, or the kind of movements that have not crossed the news threshold, but that make it look like maybe something is happening.*

It is then not only the case that networked media was seen as an important element of everyday life; it was also seen as elementary to world-making as the creation of connections and as the imagining of the possible shape of future things to come. As we suggest below, understanding of platforms – or data capitalism more generally – as governing sociality in a blanket manner is partial in not attending to the heterogeneity of everyday practices and investments, or to the possibilities of doing things differently. That is, such a (macro-level) focus foregrounds the power of ‘normative practices, fantasies, institutions, and ideologies that organize people’s worlds’ while leaving out utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy on more micro scales (Berlant, 1998: 282).

## **Vulnerabilities**

Infrastructures organize the felt boundaries of the public and the private, yield forms of inclusion and exclusion, and give shape to proximities and distances between people. As Wilson (2016) argues, ‘specific infrastructures have provided vehicles for a diversity of forces affecting embodied, relational life’ – including colonialism, imperialism, racism, and sexism. As STS scholarship has shown, there is transparency to infrastructures that work: it is in moments of rupture or breakdown that they become noticed, possibly acutely so (Bowker & Star, 1999: 35). But we may need to rephrase this as: when an infrastructure works for some, they hardly notice it, whereas for others it may be blatantly visible and constantly inaccessible even without ruptures in functionality. Although it may be self-evidently descriptive to consider infrastructures as relational, there is always power at play and, as Wilson suggests, they come entangled with intimacy so as to involve the inescapable question of vulnerability.

There is default vulnerability to the relations and attachments that we depend on for living and, as Helen Thornham (2019: 171) points out, algorithmic vulnerabilities entail how ‘the contemporary datalogical anthropocene is exposing and positioning subjects in ways that not only rarely match their own lived sense of identity but are also increasingly difficult to interrupt or disrupt’. Such vulnerabilities play out in dramatically different ways according to our respective positions, resources, and networks – consider, for example, the distinct stakes involved for the users of sexual

platforms, career politicians, and asylum seekers in doing social media. While the first group, for the most part, keep their different social media profiles separate so as to avoid them being connected to their sexual displays, the second routinely foster cross-platform visibility as part of their public presence. Meanwhile, the third may calculate the risks of being tracked in their countries of departure, as well as by Finnish immigration officials examining their cases, so as to have little public social media presence at all.

Vulnerability in datafied society tends to be conceptualized straightforwardly as a problem that ought to be fixed – as in the vulnerability of technological systems, or in digital divides speaking of social inequalities, or in how digital devices leak intimate information to third parties, jeopardizing individuals’ privacy without their explicit consent. We hardly deny the importance of such quests, yet on a more ontological level also question the degree to which vulnerability is something that can simply be done away with, considering our premise that intimacy involves an edge of vulnerability, and is hence something of a constant in our attachments to the world. Building on Julius Hokkanen et al. (2021), who argue for understanding vulnerability within datafied contexts as an ethical relation and resource, we suggest approaching vulnerability as a realm of action: as that which makes acting within socio-technological infrastructures possible to start with.

Vulnerability brings forth ethical considerations: it awakens individuals to reflect on how they and others are made vulnerable in digital contexts and what ethical responsibilities this involves (Hokkanen et al., 2021). While living within infrastructures does not require ethical consideration as such, this being a basic condition of life, vulnerability forces us to evaluate the consequences that infrastructures and actions may have. Lived vulnerabilities render certain infrastructures more visible than others and, in so doing, open up spaces for ethical reflection – not so much upon oneself as on behalf of others. This form of ethical reasoning may arise out of the vulnerable situation of an individual but grows relational so as to have tangible effects. As an unemployed study participant explained:

*When I'm standing in a bread queue as a customer, I think of the many people there then, even now that they have given info about the food aid delivery days, so I got them*

*by text message but because I asked, I was active. How have they taken care of those who don't know how to use a mobile phone? There are those still [laughs], and there are probably still those who don't have a bank card. Besides me [laughs]. It's a bit like thinking about them.*

This focus on consequences allows us to act – and sometimes to refrain from acting – in support of ourselves and others. Vulnerability is also involved in the act of (not) knowing, as we consider and anticipate the impact of our actions: our knowledge of the functions of digital platforms influences our understanding of potential consequences and thus our ability for ethical decision-making. Shared social media content, for example, may entail tangible risks in relation to one's life and family members, as one of our undocumented participants describes in relation to his former home country in the Middle East:

*Well, my situation is such [that] I still have to go back there and visit. I have my family there. At some point I have to visit. And here I have a very different life. If I'm with someone, a woman or a boyfriend or something, I can't share that on Facebook ... that's why I am not very active there. I can't know when their thoughts will change or develop, or become more accepting. I'm particularly worried about my mother.*

Apprehension as to the stakes and degrees involved in engaging with social media among our study participants has to do with anticipation and the calculation of potential risks that scale very differently. Some politicians, for example, worried about how the unpleasant conversational culture of platforms such as Twitter (since renamed X) works to drive them out of public discussion, and how this puts democracy itself at risk:

*And I remember when Anna Lindh [Swedish minister of foreign affairs] was killed that I was really frightened, and yet it was a very long time ago and social media was not yet there. But somehow I thought that, okay, it's possible; that nobody knows, since one is visible and... I remember that I have always said to the kids that I don't want... That I think it's important not to surrender to this fear and if something happens, everyone should know that one would not have chosen otherwise, since what one fears the most is what it would do to the kids and close family if something horrible would happen. But it's mostly agonizing and frightening like this. I've received some*

[messages] *that have been a little scary but mostly just unpleasant. Mostly unpleasant and such that I don't like being in that discussion, I don't feel like being in contact with those people and I notice that I'm driven out of the discussion. I think it's nowadays more difficult in terms of democracy, than in terms of feeling secure.*

Some of this was echoed by our nonbinary study participants who spoke of a sense of moral responsibility to participate in public discussion on social media platforms. However, they were also acutely aware of how public participation can render them, and others, vulnerable. For instance, as a public Twitter/X participation requires a public profile, the choice to participate means choosing to be vulnerable to attacks. A public forum allows for acting in support of oneself and others by participating in political conversation, but also requires calculation on one's willingness to face negative consequences. Nonbinary users following and participating in activism on Instagram were further hyperaware of the potential to exclude groups in their postings, as they knew from experience what it was like to be left out of things relevant to their lives. They felt committed to attempt to include as many groups as possible and put significant effort into doing so, so as to not recreate the exclusion they had themselves faced.

*I try to get the kind of content on my feed that I can make sure I don't like forget some demographic or minority group and that I for certain have enough information to not insult anyone ... because I on the one hand know what it's like to be the one who's missing from the conversation or the group that gets seen ... And when I do participate in conversation, it's not very often because it makes me very nervous, public speaking, so I circulate the text through many people like 'can you check the facts' and 'do you know any gender studies scholars who could look this through'.*

This highlights how the knowledge of who might be made vulnerable by our actions is intimately entangled with ethical decision-making. In addition to risks being differently distributed, not everyone has the same resources to act in a datafied society, and awareness of such discrepancies is part of the ethical aspect of vulnerability. For example, a concrete, primary boundary separates those with access to digital infrastructures, and those without. Among our elderly study participants, electronic services and devices sometimes amount to an insurmountable barrier. Many articulated

their dislike for smartphones resulting in being factually excluded from a range of services, and occasionally needing to go through considerable trouble to access services face-to-face:

*Health services. For example, booking a laboratory appointment. And then visiting the Kanta site [a service platform for the Finnish social welfare and healthcare sector]. If [you're] renewing prescriptions, sure, you can also do that on the phone but it's a lot more difficult than through the site. So in a way the society forces you to. And on the other hand banking services, they've been priced so high for every bill. First of all, the number of bank branches has diminished. Then it's like if you only have cash bills, you only pay bills by cash at the bank, the opening hours are limited so they receive you on the day (at this and this hour) and give you two hours. And then they charge for every bill, is it like five or eight euros. So they make it so expensive that absolutely no one should, or that everyone should learn to use a computer. Let's put it this way.*

Service infrastructures involve material practices of exclusion connected to consumer preferences and capacities (as in purchasing a device), levels of user skill (being able to operate the said device in networked settings), and use motivation. They exemplify the ways in which datafied culture reworks and amplifies structural vulnerabilities – for example, by charging the elderly and people without access to bank cards high service fees (banks can also choose their customers and many do not give cards to those without a credit score), or in excluding people not using smart devices from access to services and information resources. In many instances, such limitations are outside people's control: consider, for example, the level to which undocumented migrants are excluded from service infrastructures, or even able to hold on to a phone number if using anonymous prepaid SIM cards.

More often than not, practices of exclusion impact those already in disenfranchised positions. Within legal and political discourse, vulnerability is a marker attached to people structurally at risk – as in the case of sexual and gender minorities, the elderly, the young, the unemployed, the disabled, or the refugee. While drawing on this structural articulation and remaining sensitive to social divisions, our research also frames vulnerability more broadly, and ambiguously, as a realm of action. Everyone is acted upon and becomes shaped in and through encounters and connections with the

human and nonhuman bodies in the world. This means that vulnerabilities are a constant, even as they take shape differently depending on one's positioning.

## **Ambiguities**

As infrastructures, digital platforms organize relations and connections. Meanwhile, routine somatic, affective, and cognitive attachments to digital devices can come across as prosthetic so that there is much intimacy to their use. There is much ambiguity to how devices and platforms extract (often intimate) user data in the course of all this. Extracted user data is a driving engine for data capitalism as raw material that can be used for various ends from product and service development to data bartering, targeted marketing, and the prediction of user and consumer preferences at scale. There is much opacity in how data circulates and becomes repurposed in ways that individual users have little control over, even if the overall dynamic is broadly known (e.g. Myers, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Data capitalism premised on the extraction and analysis of user data aims to identify connections that we depend upon in order to optimally monetize them: in this sense, intimacies keep its wheels turning.

Living with a double awareness of depending on digital infrastructures and simultaneously rendering ourselves objects of data extraction is the new normal, a default setting of contemporary life. Living outside these infrastructures and connections is not a real(istic) possibility. Still, there is unease to the mundane rhythms of connecting through networked means. In our research with Finnish actors, social media presence remained the norm, albeit a contested one:

*But sometimes you notice... it's probably the most, somehow, oppressive situation when you feel that you haven't posted anything for a while and then you have to cook up something because of your presence there. Perhaps I've, I've at times done also that even if I don't know how it goes. I suppose they don't disappear from there anywhere and in that sense, they affect the algorithm. If you've been away for a month, you are not hot stuff in the eyes of the algorithm. But, on the other hand, someone has said that the algorithm of Facebook operates in such a way that it if you have been away for a month and then you suddenly update something, it highlights it to all, 'look at this, a miracle has happened, they have posted again after a long pause, everyone, read this', because it benefits the purse of Facebook. In that way it binds, stimulates users by illustrating it*

*is worth being there, 'do you notice how many people I showed your post, although I didn't show your previous post hardly for anyone'. It is unbelievable that after you write your next post, it is visible only for one third of users compared to the preceding post. And you can't have any influence on to whom it is visible in the first place (Actor quoted in Soronen & Koivunen, 2022).*

If there was uneasiness with the knowledge of how algorithms structure social media visibility and connectivity, our informants also articulated fundamental ambiguities involved in their participation. Following Elija Cassidy (2016: 2614), this can be understood as 'participatory reluctance' – namely engagement 'when we would actually prefer not to or would rather do so under altered circumstances'. A cultural worker explains:

*I'm not terribly, I'm not, like, politically very active on social media. That is, I do try little to be so, but I'm not, I feel the whole social media, my relationship to social media is very contradictory. And I do feel guilty about how much, that I don't do enough of it, and on the other hand I don't want to be there at all. So a kind of hate-love-relationship, but not even love, something, I feel that I'm in a somehow violent relationship and one I can't escape [laughs].*

This sense of inescapability, jokingly compared to an abusive intimate relationship, speaks of dependencies cut through by plural, mutually contrasting affective intensities as well as about the humanization of technology. While hardly monotone as such, attachments to platforms were more straightforward among social media influencers who, for the most part, grew up with networked media and who depend on it professionally. Their work would not exist without networked media – instead of an abusive lover, digital infrastructures were seen as intimate work buddies. This was despite how the influencers participating in our focus groups articulated degrees of unease with third-party data leakage and the overall uses of their personal data. This was noted, but described as an inconvenience rather than a threat; as less of a barrier to active participation than a necessary trade-off.

Following Berlant (1998: 285), social media influencing blurs the boundaries of public and private lives, building on an aesthetic of attachment where 'no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it'. This aesthetic of attachment is concretized in how

influencers personify and embody commodities and services and make them appear authentic, real, and relatable – intimate – through visually rich narratives and by incorporating them into their (imagined?) intimate lives (Pöyry et al., 2019). Influencers get intimate with brands and consumers, humanize commodities, and create relatable contexts around them, as well as with their followers.

Influencer work is premised on a closeness with digital infrastructures: this is not merely an issue of access as influencers literally depend on them for (making a) living. While the actor quoted above saw the power of algorithms as oppressive, influencers addressed intimacy with algorithms, the ‘mechanical decision-makers’ (Bishop, 2018), as mandatory in demanding them to post certain types of gendered, visual, and textual content to gain publicity. The lost intimacy with algorithms, i.e., the possibility of them not showing the content, was described as causing frustration, stress, and confusion: *what went wrong?* Influencers then acknowledge the central role that algorithms play in shaping their feeds, publicity, and occupation at large. As automated infrastructures, these become palpable when content is not displayed as expected; when one is not seen.

Actors and influencers identifying algorithms as ‘oppressive’, ‘violent’, and ‘demanding’ hint at intimacy with them (Wiehn, 2022; Elliott, 2023). Machine intelligence is not just a mechanical decision maker but also a demanding boss who monitors users, learns intimate things about them, and shapes their occupational behaviour by suggesting to them how to do their work. Algorithms form an infrastructure of intimacy that works within us, amplifying and steering personal desires, preferences, choices, and behaviours (Ruckenstein, 2023). As not just computational procedures but as socially constructed means (Gillespie, 2014), they are complexly interwoven in, and shape, culture and society.

For many of the influencers interviewed, intimacy was only possible when logging out or travelling, away from their networked everyday lives, speaking of critical dependencies on network media as an intimate work partner. Interestingly, and in contrast to Berlant’s conceptualization of the late-1990s, the influencers saw the offline world as a realm of intimacy and online environments as the public one. They further reported having made rules when to be online/at work and offline/having free time –

while, at the same time, also highlighting that being offline was hard. Pondering whether this or that occurrence makes a good Instagram post, they had learned to look at the world through the eyes of platform infrastructures.

Although intimacy is the crux of influencing (Rocamora, 2018) – a way of working by intimating with technology, a resource, and an aesthetic that gives shape and content to work, as well as a register through which to connect – it is less open to being described as something deeply personal in the sense suggested by the term’s Latin root. As influencing builds on doing, sharing, and performing intimacy, influencers’ intimate lives outside work were described as something not performed inasmuch as something akin to just being. Drawing boundaries between intimacy as a mode of (public) work and intimacy as privacy was seen as difficult yet necessary, a prerequisite for having a life.

### **Inconvenient, yet vital**

Following Berlant (2022), such frictions and the contingent drawing of boundaries speak of felt inconveniences in one’s proximity to the world and the people and infrastructures that make it. Affording pleasure, such proximities equally involve a range of negative intensities. Berlant (2022: 36) discusses ‘the inconvenience paradox of dependency’ as one of ‘needing people or a situation and hating to have that need’ – a friction not dissimilar to Cassidy’s ‘participatory reluctance’. In other words, the intimate connections that make us, and on which we depend for living, are rife with ambiguity while making evident our default lack of sovereignty. Digital infrastructures allow and delimit, afford and shape the formation of intimacies and lifeworlds – and also raise the question of what gets to count as intimate.

Many freelance actors and theatre employees spoke of social media as actualizing anxieties over professional identities, belongings, and communities. While social media platforms are partly workplaces for sharing promotion materials advertising productions, the presence of many overlapping audiences requires emotional labour and causes anxiety: the relationship is not simply instrumental as both updates and inactivity require self-reflexivity. For politicians, digital platforms serve as an even more vital work infrastructure that enables and constrains interactions with citizens and electorates. Furthermore, social media serve as intimate workplaces that are

virtually 24/7 present in all real-life situations. Politicians not only broadcast their personal lives (happily, reluctantly, or strategically), but also need to constantly assess their personal wellbeing within strict time pressures and heavy workloads while meeting citizens' expectations. They must appear as subjects who enact democratic virtues while simultaneously employing marketing strategies guaranteeing media visibility and electoral success – endeavours that are mutually exclusive on many platforms (Hokkanen, 2022).

Studies conducted in the UK have highlighted how the 'ubiquity of instant politics via social media' means that switching off from political work becomes essentially impossible (Flinders et al., 2020: 266). While the MPs we interviewed carefully protect their families and friends, they also use different platforms to establish public intimacies and struggle to master their appropriate social codes. For most of them, the idea of many selves and different intimacies/socialities seemed self-evident, even if they subscribed to ideals of authenticity and, similarly to the social media influencers interviewed, aspired to coherence across their profiles. Within this privileged group, digital platforms cause stress, anxiety, and boundary work, but the MPs' selves are not (or are seldom) at stake.

Participatory reluctance was equally present among the users of sexual platforms who regularly articulated misgivings about Alaston Suomi's vernaculars, moderation practices, and design, and deployed diverse tactics for protecting their privacy. They nevertheless also spoke of the platform's importance in allowing for sexual sociality, expression, and discovery (see Paasonen et al., 2023). Importantly, they addressed a sense of openness that allows for decreasing, even if not fully erasing, shame connected to diverse bodies and sexual desires, especially when these do not conform to dominant social norms. Despite mixed feelings, they articulated desires and possibilities for world-making within networked attachments premised on sexual sociality. In an even more pronounced articulation of world-making, our nonbinary study participants addressed social media platforms and the information and communities that they provide as questions of *life*. For many of them, social media is the first, if not only, place to gain access to information about being nonbinary (Jaaksi, 2023). Social media allowed access to and the space to create communities that showed

participants that they are not alone with their experience – that there are countless others like them.

Simply being on social media and seeing other nonbinary people on their feeds was described as essentially important. Those who more actively posted about their experience tended to consider it a political act (Hokkanen, forthcoming) to make themselves visible to others and participate in the process of creating an idea of what it means to be trans or nonbinary, both for those engaged in defining themselves as trans/nonbinary, and for a wider non-trans audience. While they discussed online communities as being full of tension and exclusion, and articulated concerns about screen time and personal safety, platforms essentially allowed for many of the nonbinary study participants to simply exist.

The socio-technological connections that we depend on for living are, in sum, rife with friction. Some of these connections are matters of operability of everyday life, and in this sense instrumental rather than intimate. If we however understand intimacy as encounters and attachments involving an edge of vulnerability, it underpins everyday life in persistent and unpredictable ways. We argue that thinking about the datafied everyday in terms of intimacy opens up space for considering the fundamental ambiguities involved in what matters to people, what they are attached to, what kinds of frictions they identify in their networked engagements, as well as what sorts of vulnerabilities become registered, and possibly distributed.

In this sense, a focus on intimacies in studies of datafied societies opens up a parallel route to that of broad critiques of the logic of data capitalism and the increasing commodification of all aspects of life through the collection and processing of data (e.g., Zuboff, 2019; Lupton, 2020). It is one that acknowledges manifold dependencies on digital infrastructures and the complexities involved in how intimacies are created with and through networked media. In our proposed approach, data extraction and mass surveillance are met with the complexity and vitality of everyday forms of relating, impacting, and world-making, and techno-capitalist infrastructures are considered in tandem with other attachments and connections that bind.

It is our argument that, in its focus on the complexities, ambiguities, paradoxes, and stubborn inconveniences that living within the social entails, Berlant's work offers

media theory avenues for thinking with a logic of both/and where mundane world-making through networked means is considered with as much gravity, and care, as analyses of data capitalism's exploitative practices, and where the former is not seen as dictated or predetermined by the latter (see also Paasonen, 2021). Considering digital platforms as infrastructural to everyday life on levels both individual and collective, personal and governmental, means that the transparency and fairness of their data practices is elementary. This lends specific acuteness to critiques of data capitalism. We however argue that such a macro/structural/ideological/political economy level of critique does not suffice alone. The connections we make; the attachments we foster; the doubts that we harbour; the things that we refuse, opt into, and cherish, as well as the worlds that we strive for in datafied settings hold equal gravity. Living within the social means living with the techno-social. This is more often inconvenient than not, but so it is with the stuff of life.

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A key detail about Lauren Berlant and pronouns: Lauren's estate provided a brief statement on this, which we quote here: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed – knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they'. 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about her/they".