

Affective Body Politics of Social Media

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Social Media + Society
October-December 2019: 1–5
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305119880173
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Abstract

In this introduction to special issue, we elaborate our use of the concept *affective body politics* in the context of social media. Bringing together two theoretical concepts, the notion of “body politics” and that of “affective politics,” we direct attention to the carnal ways in which bodies experience practices of governance, how they affect and are affected by other bodies. The introduction maps out some of the interdisciplinary voices that study affect online, provides an overview of the papers in this special issue, and concludes by considering ideas for further discussion.

Keywords

affect, affective politics, body politics, social media, sexuality, gender

From clickbaits to fake news, heated Facebook exchanges, viral Twitter messages, Grindr, and Tinder swipes, the landscape of social media is rife with affective intensities of varying speeds and lengths. Waves of outrage grow and wither in filter bubbles while hashtag campaigns weave together political passions expressed in series of tweets, pointing to the affective qualities of political exchanges and networked exchanges alike. On social media, affect circulates, generates value, fuels political action, feeds conflict, and reconfigures ways of doing and making sense of bodies, identities, and communities. Zooming in on this landscape, this special issue addresses the affective *body politics* of social media in particular.

Body/Affective Politics

To speak of affective body politics of social media is to bring together the somewhat established theoretical concept of “body politics” with the more novel notion of “affective politics.” While the former has been in use for some decades in feminist and other critical inquiry addressing the social policing and control of human bodies, the latter relates to the so-called affective turn in cultural theory since the late 1990s (e.g., Clough, 2008; Koivunen, 2009; Seigworth & Gregg, 2009). Although both concepts focus on corporeality and its political dimensions, they involve different approaches to how power relates, becomes attached to, and gives shape to bodies. Building on Foucault (1978), discussions on body politics have focused on how power operates through discourses that are produced and maintained by the state and its various institutions. Meanwhile, inquiries into affective politics have been more interested in how power becomes

experienced intimately in and through the body (see Abel, 2007, pp. xi, 85). Bringing the two concepts together means directing attention to the carnal ways in which bodies experience practices of governance, relate to, and give shape to one another. In the context of social media, these bodies extend from human ones to the nonhuman rhythms of newsfeeds, the aesthetics of interface design, the parameters of engagement set by end-user license agreements, and algorithmic predictions and decision based on metadata.

Academic discussion on body politics are rooted in US second-wave feminism politicizing the personal, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women’s Health Collective, 1971, originally *Women and Their Bodies*, 1970), being a popular landmark encouraging women’s ownership over their bodies (also Rich, 1976). With its open discussion of masturbation, sex, birth control, and abortion, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is implicative of the ways that body politics remains to be understood in connection to practices of governance and respective spaces of individual agency. *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Waylen, Celis, Kantola, & Weldon, 2013, p. 161), for example, discusses “rape, contraception, hair and clothing styles, pregnancy, or sexual harassment” as quintessential questions for body politics and defines feminist studies on body politics as involving inquiries into how “political power but also work, religious life, domestic work, and intimate relationships” organize bodies. While this special issue

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examines sexuality, bodily autonomy, and the stylization of bodies, it does not merely focus on the regulation of bodies, or on the operations of social power through online platforms. Rather, our interests expand to how affect, as the capacity to relate, impress and be impressed, creates dynamic connections between human and nonhuman bodies and, in doing so, gives shape to social movements, campaigns, and activist groupings, such as #MeToo (see Sundén & Paasonen, this issue), lactivism (Lehto, this issue), body positivity (Hynnä & Kyrölä, this issue), and trans-activism (Steinbock, this issue).

While the turn to affect has been critiqued for downplaying concerns connected to social power, ideology, and politics (e.g., Hemmings, 2005; Tyler, 2008), a growing body of scholarship addresses the role of affect in moving bodies to social action or in stopping them from moving (see Johns & Cheong, 2019; Nikunen, 2018; Papacharissi, 2016; Pedwell, 2017). For John Protevi (2009), “political affect” involves the body politic of affective mobilization that emerges at the crossroads of the somatic and social, and that becomes expressed on personal, group, and civic scales. On a personal level, a somatic body politic becomes registered as “patterns and triggers of bodily action and reaction” while, on a compositional group level, “we see short-term events of concrete social perception and action, forming eventual bodies politic, or perhaps less barbarically named, social encounters” (Protevi, 2009, p. xii). On the civic social level of political physiology, this mobilization entails “a body politic in the classical sense, what we will call a civic body politic: the patterns and triggers of institutional action” (Protevi, 2009, p. xii). Moving the discussion to social media, and Twitter in particular, Zizi Papacharissi (2016, p. 311) similarly examines affective publics as “mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” and as supporting social change.

Understood as relational intensity registered in bodies, affect is not reducible to personal feeling or a clearly definable emotion. It is transformative in moving bodies from one state to another and in building up and shattering affiliations. On social media, the oscillating registers and dynamics of affect shape online connections and disconnections between bodies, giving rise to new assemblages and modes of political action and belonging (Paasonen, Hillis, & Petit, 2015, p. 1). By situating affective body politics in the context of social media, this special issue shifts focus to how technology, through its architecture and use, is key to the constitution, maintenance, and contestation of affective body politics. While discussions of body politics have often focused on human experiences alone, the affective body politics of social media involve interplay and communication between human and nonhuman bodies. It takes seriously the way that affect, as the capacity to relate, impress and be impressed, creates dynamic connections between them. Affective body politics, as examined in this issue, concerns the capacities of all kinds of bodies to affect and be affected, sometimes in

patterned and premediated ways, sometimes spontaneously and unpredictably.

Affect and Social Media as a Research Area

The aim of this special issue is not to formulate territory for a new field of study but rather to contribute to the variety of interdisciplinary voices that characterize the study on affect online. Sampson, Maddison, and Ellis (2018, pp. 3-4) describe a similar purpose in the introduction to the collected volume, *Affect and Social Media*. Together with *Mediated Intimacies* (Nebeling Petersen, Harrison, Raun, & Andreassen, 2017) and *Networked Affect* (Paasonen et al., 2015), the volume is one to recently bring together examinations of affect in connection with social media. Although there is plurality and, at times, even messiness to how affect and social media become discussed, interdisciplinarity plurality need not be a source of distress: it may just as well be cause for creativity and inspiration (Sampson et al., 2018, p. 4). Such plurality does, nevertheless, mean that studies of affect and social media build on multiple, possibly mutually conflicting theoretical frameworks, disciplinary, and conceptual starting points. For its part, *Affect and Social Media* builds on the notion of *affective capitalism* (Sampson et al., 2018; see also Karppi et al., 2016), while *Mediated Intimacies* operationalizes *intimacy* as its conceptual focus (Nebeling Petersen et al., 2017) and *Networked Affect* is structured on the concepts of *value*, *intensity*, and *sensation* (Paasonen et al., 2015).

Affective capitalism, value, intensity, sensation, and intimacy are also discussed throughout this issue, yet in careful combinations with the bodily, the fleshly, and the somatic as they intermesh with the political. The contributors acknowledge how affectivity on social media translates into profit and examine how users' bodies become engaged in processes of value generation (see Pilipets & Hernández, this issue). Intimacy, intensity, and sensation are addressed particularly as concepts that help to capture the feel of social media (see Van der Nagel & Espíndola, this issue). In other words, while social media is approached from a variety of theoretical angles, each contribution to this issue is committed to considering how the corporeal aspects of social media matter and how they can be studied. Taken together, the articles point out a multitude of ways in which embodiment and corporeality are tied to social media usage, architecture, content, and its connective affordances.

Mapping Affective Body Politics

The eight articles in this special issue work in pairs, each of them addressing affective body politics in different contexts, from the affective expression encouraged by social media architecture to user experiences and everyday practices, to

the affective sexual politics of social media, and to affective group transformation.

The two articles kick-starting the issue focus on the dynamics giving shape to affective body politics of social media. They discuss the “appropriate” expression of affect and bodies as it becomes articulated in current body political movements and activism, analyzing the possibilities of affective expression connected to body politics. Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen focus on the #MeToo movement and its treatment in three separate vignettes: the Netflix stand-up comedy *Nanette*, Lauren Maul’s online musical comedy built around male celebrities’ apologies for sexual harassment, and the uses of irony in the appropriation of the pussy-bow blouse as a feminist symbol. Sundén and Paasonen argue that feminist humor, as made evident by these examples, may work through and as “affective homophily”—the pressure and love of feeling the same or expressing similar affective stances. Arguing for affective heterophily, the love of feeling different, instead, Sundén and Paasonen suggest that laughter, despite or possibly due to its seeming inappropriateness, afford for affective lifts, and spaces of dissent conducive to feminist politics.

Mari Lehto’s article analyzes a Finnish social media debate that was sparked to life when a celebrity gay stylist, Teri Niitti, published a picture on Instagram of an unknown woman nursing her child on a plane. As Niitti’s post started to spread across social media platforms, lactivists hijacked #teriniitti to share their own pictures of breastfeeding, and the event soon escalated to personal attacks and toward broader media coverage. Lehto argues that hashtag practices, such as the ones involved in the debate examined, facilitate affective engagements that can be particularly prone to stick to certain marginalized bodies. Like Sundén and Paasonen, Lehto is interested in how social media allows for affective connections confined to strict parameters of feeling together. While in the case of the #MeToo movement, affective homophily has involved shared expressions of outrage, anger, frustration, and sadness, the #teriniitti incident gave rise to two different, yet equally uniform articulations of disgust: contributors to the debate either expressed disgust toward the lactating female body or were disgusted by gay men assumedly unable to understand the beauty of breastfeeding.

The second pair of articles examine how affect, screens, and platforms become entangled in the uses of social media. More specifically, these two articles focus on the affective capture of images of the body on two rather different platforms, Netflix and Reddit. Elena Pilipets analyzes Netflix as a networked experiential environment, focusing especially on the trope of binge-watching and the possibilities for user engagement that it caters. Pilipets focuses on users’ affective entanglements with the platform as ones stemming from its systems of recommendation, attention, and attachment. By analyzing users’ adaptations of the viral catchphrase “Netflix and chill,” Pilipets argues that the Netflix experience benefits from the circulation of the meme. She goes on to show that

media practices such as binge-watching can be understood as mediated entanglements of affect, bodies, and platforms that involve movement on different levels, encompassing both the affective motions of the bodies of the binge-watchers and the circulation of Netflix memes across social media.

Continuing on the notion of movement, Emily van der Nagel demonstrates its centrality for grasping how the social exchange, circulation, and use of images and texts work on social media. Her article focuses on the subreddit, TributeMe, where affective exchange between participants takes the form of tributing—the sharing of intimate pictures, ejaculating on them, documenting this, and posting back the outcome. Through 2-week-long studies of the subreddit, the article explains how affective exchanges are intensified through the circulation of digital images. Van der Nagel argues that tributes show affect as moving in two ways: through the body, with the ejaculation evidencing arousal and standing in for a physical encounter, and through social media platforms where images are circulated as digital objects. Her analysis of TributeMe shows how digital objects, physical ejaculate, social media platforms, and media devices all layer, further intensifying experiences of intimacy. The subreddit does not only facilitate affective, pseudonymous practices and connections between users but also configures them.

The themes of sexuality and affect are further examined in Antonia Hernández’s and Eduardo Espíndola’s articles that both focus on the sexually explicit webcam platform, Chaturbate. Hernández sets out to investigate the site’s technical and economic model. First outlining the conventions of the webcamming genre as established in the late 1990s, the article then asks how the different (both human and non-human) actors on Chaturbate mimic these on a larger, accelerated scale. Drawing on textual and visual data including public broadcasting and chat logs, dedicated online forums, blog and social media posts, and web archives, the article investigates established zones of intensity on both early webcams and in their current incarnations in particular. Hernández argues that the extraction of value from sexcam platforms involves resorting to earlier conventions of the webcam genre, such as the perception of simultaneity, closeness, and authenticity.

In turn, Espíndola zooms in on one of the sex features of Chaturbate, namely remote-controlled vibrators that can be turned on by the audience through tipping activity. By observing the use of the sex toy, Lovense Lush, Espíndola analyzes the way human and nonhuman actors come together in an intimate networked setting. Drawing on both actor-network theory (ANT) and affect theory, the article explores the collective webs of relations that make up a sexual livestream performance. It demonstrates how affective intensities move through multiple actors to bring people together, to stimulate them, and to connect them with one another despite a lack of a shared spatial frame. Espíndola’s ethnographic study of a “crowdfucking” event involving both

human and machine actors exemplifies the impact of networked technologies for the ways of experiencing, feeling, thinking, and having sex. The technological infrastructure is not, the article argues, merely a supporting player in the event, but a key partner within the overall erotic setting that, together with human partners, participates in forging the very ideas of sex and intimacy that emerge in the event.

The final two articles conclude the special issue by considering activism involving two differently marginalized groups: self-identified fat people and trans people. In the first of these, Kaisu Hynnä and Katariina Kyrölä explore the concept of body positivity through the framework of affect. While acknowledging the need to critique body positivity for implementing new norms and for foregrounding personal choice, the article offers an alternative view by considering affective appeal of body positive online content: what makes body positive and fat activist blogs so engaging? Drawing on three separate blogs, the Finnish *More to Love*, its successor *PlusMimmi*, and the US-based *Queer Fat Femme Guide to Life*, Hynnä and Kyrölä ask how these blogs offer alternative ways of feeling (in) one's body, arguing that the blogs involve the potential to open up the world of online fat activism and body positivity for their audience, and to thereby offer a sense of community. While the blogs studied are not exempt from broader normativity, Hynnä and Kyrölä suggest them as being potential spaces where a body can "forget itself and just feel."

While both of these two articles consider digital culture as significant for community formation and group transformation, Eliza Steinbock conceptualizes the Transgender Day of Remembrance as imagined community styled by necropolitical attunements. Diving into the continuities afforded by digital platforms for reactivating 1990s Transgender Nation politics, Steinbock utilizes conceptual analysis and media archeology to investigate the affective and conceptual continuities between contemporary digital transgender activism and the Transgender Nation's politics of 1992 to 1994. The article focuses on four interrelated examples: the 1995 AOL Gazebo transgender chat room, the 1999 Remembering our Dead digital database inventorying trans deaths, an annual digital campaign monitoring transgender murders by Transgender Europe since 2008, and the 2016 digital video "103 Shots" made by trans visual artist Cassils in response to the massacre of trans and queer people at Pulse Nightclub. Steinbock investigates which trans bodies are included or excluded in these examples and how they involve direct action or invite affective attunement.

One of the goals of this special issue was to further develop some of the ideas that were first introduced at the *Affective Politics of Social Media Symposium* at the University of Turku, Finland, in 2017, bringing together a diverse group of scholars to discuss affect in contexts of networked communications. By focusing on the notion of body politics, one of the symposium's key themes, this special issue encourages open discussion and co-operation in further

expanding examinations into affect and social media, as well as the possible implications and forms that body politics may take in this economical, technological, and cultural conjuncture. We hope that the issue serves as inspiration for further scholarship attending to the affective body politics of social media.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all the contributors to this Special Issue for their exceptional papers and the blind peer reviewers for their engaged and productive suggestions and critique. Furthermore, we would like to extend a warm thank you to our colleagues Katariina Kyrölä, Mari Pajala, and Valo Vähäpassi who worked with us in the organizing committee of the *Affective Politics of Social Media Symposium* held at University of Turku in 2017, and supported by the International Institute for Popular Culture (IIPC), an event which was the starting point for this Special Issue.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research presented in this introduction was partly funded by the Academy of Finland research project Sexuality and Play in Media Culture.

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Susanna Paasonen is professor of Media Studies at University of Turku, Finland. She is the author of *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (MITP, 2011) and *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play* (Goldsmiths Press 2018); co-author of *NSFW: Sex, Humor and Risk in Social Media* (MITP 2019, with Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light) and *Who's Laughing Now? Feminist Tactics in Social Media* (with Jenny Sundén for MITP); as well as co-editor of *Networked Affect* (MITP 2015, with Ken Hillis and Michael Petit).