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‘It’s complicated’: Mobile Intimacy in an Age of Social Media and Affective Technology

Extended Abstract

In the burgeoning of emotional, affective labour by the rise of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and the rise of public intimacy by social media, what does it mean to speak of ‘mobile intimacy’ today? In a world aflut with mobile, ubiquitous technologies how are various forms of mobility (and immobility) across temporal, spatial, geographic, economic socio-cultural and technological differences transforming how we experience and define intimacy?

Writing before the onset of social media, Lauren Berlant observed that intimacy has taken on new geographies and forms of mobility, most notably as a kind of ‘publicness’ (1998: 281). As intimacy gets negotiated within networked social media, the publicness — along with the continuous, multitasking full-timeness — of intimacy becomes increasingly palpable. They are now *intimate publics*. These intimate publics are across generational, socio-economic and geographic boundaries. For Arlie Hochschild, the rise of globalisation can be seen through the role of service care industries (epitomised by Filipinos) whereby women, especially from developing contexts, are exploited for their emotional labour (1983, 2000, 2001, 2003). She notes that with the increasing commercialisation of human feelings (‘feeling rules’) and the intimate, distinctions between work and home have blurred. In this context of gendered labour, we can see ‘mobile intimacy’ takes on different connotations.

For Gerard Raiti, mobile intimacy is the ability to be intimate across distances of time and space, is a global phenomenon (2007: n.p). Defining love as but one component in intimacy, Raiti notes that love becomes a commodity within an ‘economics of emotion’ whereby ‘capitalistic uses of technologies alter power within personal relationships’ (2007: n.p). Indeed, in a period of ‘emotional capitalism’ (Illouz 2007) and ‘affective’ technologies (Lasén 2004), the ‘feeling rules’ of etiquette around types of situations are changing. As the ‘personal’ gets hijacked from a space between people towards a branded part of contemporary technologies — epitomised by the role of mobile, social and networked media (Shirky 2008) — the ‘geographies of intimacy’ (Margaroni and Yiannopoulou 2005) are shifting. Given all these factors, what is mobile intimacy?

This panel seeks to unpack ‘mobile intimacy’ — a notion that encompasses many issues around emotions, co-presence, diaspora, personal technologies and emerging forms of affective, social, and emotional labour. Acknowledging that mobility can take various permutations (technological, geographic, socio-economic to name but a few), the participants aim to focus upon one aspect of mobile intimacy in order to flesh out some of the defining features of what encompasses mobile intimacy.

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