

Infrastructures of intimacy

What was two decades ago a special, knowing and ultimately rare added layer of communication in the form of mundane social arrangements made through email, webcam sessions, newsgroup exchanges or Internet relay chat (IRC), exchanges in and through networked media have, especially with the ubiquity of social media services and the mobile Internet, become elementary components of social communication. Connections are constantly made, maintained and severed in Tinder matches, flirtatious Facebook interactions, sexual Snapchat sessions, Skype conversations, vitriolic Twitter exchanges and confessional WhatsApp messages.

This chapter argues that network connectivity is not merely an instrumental factor – or ‘channel’ – for mediated belongings, but a sociotechnical affordance that supports and modulates them. Everyday lives are lived and intimacies surface and wither in networks composed of human and non-human actors. These networks facilitate and condition the myriad forms that individual agency, intimacy and other attachments take. Following Lauren Berlant, intimacy is a matter of ‘connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living’ (2000, p. 4, emphasis in the original). Describing sensations and relations of closeness, trust and desire, intimacy cuts across all divides between the online and offline, which, in the era of constant connectivity, are increasingly ephemeral to begin with. Network connectivity functions as an affordance and resource without which individual and collective lives would no longer function in quite the same way. In fact, connectivity has grown into a matter of infrastructure that is reminiscent of electricity, gas or water supply, or heating.

All kinds of mundane routines and connections with partners, friends and family are paced and facilitated by networked communications (e.g. Lasén and Casado, 2012; Wise, 2015).

Network connectivity functions as an *infrastructure of intimacy* that plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of friendships, sexual arrangements and affairs of the heart, as well as in the forging of their shapes and intensities. Intimacy, as discussed here, therefore refers not only to connections between people but to the networked environments in which these connections unfold and the connections that are formed through devices, apps and platforms: each of these aspects impacts on people, and people depend on them to live.

In order to examine the role that network connectivity plays as an infrastructure of intimacy, I draw on a body of 70 essays written by Finnish undergraduate media studies students between 2013 and 2015, describing the sensations evoked by the failure or breakdown of mobile phones, computers and network connections. By asking the students to write about how such instances of technological failure felt, I wanted the class to tackle the elusive yet tangible affective underpinnings of ubiquitous connectivity with the premise that these most readily manifest in moments of rupture (for more detail, see Paasonen, 2015). While some students focused on the immediate irritances of failure, others addressed ruptures of network connectivity as broader modulators of their sense of agency and intimacy attachments. It is the latter set of essays that this chapter builds on.

Written in response to a given theme as a class assignment, with the authors having granted permission for their work to be used as research material, some of the essays are knowingly hyperbolic in their stylistic choices, flourish and expressions of frustration and rage. Written as they are by media studies majors, they include more allusions to Marshall McLuhan's thoughts on the novel 'extensions of man' than one might otherwise anticipate. The students who composed the essays, aged 21 to 44 at the time, are undoubtedly privileged in their access to media and communication technology. They are all residents of a fairly wealthy Nordic country that has 100 per cent net connectivity in the population under 35; also in this

population, mobile phone penetration and smartphone use have long been high (Statistics Finland, 2015). I propose that the intimate connections and disconnections the essays address nevertheless resonate across generations as ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977, pp. 133–134) in societies where the mobile Internet has come to be taken for granted (Ling, 2015; also Richardson, 2007).

As particular as the essays are in their format, scope and purpose, they offer insightful vignettes into the affective dynamics of living with and through network technologies.

Cutting through the essays is a tension between the desire for technology to function and to instrumentally improve the quality of life, and the recurrent experiences of failures, lags and dysfunctions that fuel fundamentally suspicious outlooks toward the devices and applications and the kinds of connections and attachments they facilitate or fuel. Arguing against the ideal of frictionless technological operation, the essays depict prosthetic cohabitation with apps and devices as generative of both joy and anxiety, and as persistently haunted by the shadow of disconnection that disrupts not only intimate arrangements but also possible ways of being in the world, more generally.

Always at hand

The degree to which the operability of everyday lives is dependent on network access tends to become viscerally evident when there is none: ‘Without Internet connection it feels like living in darkness. As if anything can happen I have no means of finding out about it’ (female, born 1983). This is particularly the case with smartphones: ‘when it’s taken away, one no longer knows what to do’ (female, born 1990). The lack of connectivity involves being cut off from the multiple networks that give rise to individual agency, providing modes of engaging with the world, the people, objects and spaces within it (see Latour, 2011; Gomart and Hennion, 1999). These networks are technological as well as social, and connected to the obligations of

study and work and the thrills of entertainment and romance, alike. Device use is premised on human control – even human control over the world, more generally (Wise, 2015). When lack of connectivity renders such control inaccessible, the limitations of one’s capacity to act become palpable, to the degree that one may feel ‘completely cut off from the world’ (female, born 1990).

Smart devices afford both emotional and social relational presence (Hjorth and Lim, 2012) that may be cumbersome to construct through other means. The ‘salient and transitory modes of intimacy’ (ibid., 2012, p. 477) afforded by mobile technology have been broadly explored in relation to their affective nuances and ambiguities. Networked communications help to keep intimate relations together and bind them with more force, while extending their spaces, shapes and rhythms (see Ito and Okabe, 2005; Clark and Sywyj, 2012). By doing so, they blur the lines of the private and the public – as compromised, convoluted and murky as these arenas are to start with.

For the older students, networked connections were not always part of mundane routines but had long since grown into their elementary constituents: ‘Computer and mobile phone are as self-evident as breathing – until they fail’ (female, born 1970). Students born in the 1990s had grown up with mobile phones and may have had smart phones since their early teens.

Members of this generation described mobile phones as their body parts as early as the 2000s, well before the rise of app culture (see Oksman and Rautiainen, 2003; also Clark, 2013).

Having navigated different generations of devices with varying communication and entertainment functions, the students were highly aware of their current attachments to the devices:

Before my phone broke down, I hadn’t thought how dependent one can be on one small gadget and in this case on one of the gadget’s single functions [SMS].

Little like a body part, the performance of which is always so much taken for granted that one gets all confused when it's damaged. (female, born 1988)

Different communication and media technologies have been moulded into extensions of the senses. They attach to us as solidly as our limbs and if problems occur in their use it feels like someone amputating our hands – or at least momentarily tying them with cable ties so that we wouldn't be able to use them without great pain. One can consider them as third legs of sorts, without which we feel castrated. We constantly stick our hand into our pants just to check if it's still there: we glimpse Facebook and WhatsApp on our phones, waiting for something, checking that the connection still works, that it's still there. (female, born 1993)

In these accounts, attachments concern devices and – predominantly – their overall functionality. The perpetual use of smart devices has, as in the sarcastic account cited just above, become incorporated into bodily schema through gestures and motions that are repeated both purposefully and routinely. Writing of bodily schema, Ingrid Richardson (2005, n.p.) defines technologies and bodies as covalent participants in mapping out meaning and environment, which constantly intermesh as forms of 'techno-soma'. Not only are smart devices central nodes for managing everyday lives, but they are also carried physically close to the body, operated via touch and occasionally even slept with. Examining accounts of intimate attachments to technological objects, Jaakko Suominen (2011, p. 18) identifies them as 'technological romances' of longing and fascination, spanning the era of modern computing. Devices are used as tools for connecting with romantic interests, yet human-technology relations, themselves, follow romantic patterns in their highlights, frustrations and disappointments (Suominen, 2011). Care is given to our cohabitation with devices, precisely because they afford 'connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living' (Berlant, 2000, p. 4, emphasis in the original).

Mobile devices have become crucial to our ways of feeling out the world. Yet somatic and haptic intimacies of this kind ultimately seem to have an instrumental edge connected to operability. In the student essays, devices come across as elementary in their affordances, but also as easily replaceable material objects. They are seldom loved as such, or held onto for sentimental reasons alone.

Problems related to cell phones are particularly irksome since one has grown somewhat dependent on one's phone and the possibility of constant communication [...] The thought that I cannot be reached or that I cannot reach others at the moment of my own choosing felt and still feels difficult and even odious. (Female, born 1991)

Above, the student describes the simultaneous desire and obligation to maintain constant reachability in ways that resonate with discussions of mobile phones engendering 'intimacy and a feeling of being permanently tethered to loved ones' (Vincent, 2006, p. 39) through perpetual compulsory connection (also Gardner and Davis, 2013). The desire and obligation for reachability is galvanised by a sense of potential – an orientation towards that which is possibly within reach or possible to occur. These potentialities, as described in the essays, are centrally about contact and the risk of missing out, as well as the *fear* of missing out on the events that are unfolding in the world more broadly. Defined as 'a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent', fear of missing out (FoMo) associated with social media involves a 'desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing', even when it is inconvenient (Przybylski et al., 2013, p. 1841; also Fox and Moreland, 2014).

If one goes offline, a message from a lover or friend may go unnoticed, and one may miss out on social engagements and new connections. This virtual sense of the possible involves an investment in things that are soon to come. Thus, it orients and motivates the use of smart

devices (cf. Deleuze, 2002). Without network access, the virtual remains separate from and inaccessible to the actual, resulting in an experience of isolation and a diminished capacity to act:

The user is violently cut off from all the legal commodities belonging to him and forced to plan his actions entirely anew. The situation feels a little like loosing a mobile phone; I've been cut off from all my social networks, I'm truly alone. Internet represents at least for me also some kind of electronic presence, constant reachability. Being separated from that against one's will comes as a bit of a shock. (Male, born 1991)

When the mobile phone is left at home or breaks down, reachability ceases. It feels like being isolated from the whole world. Often in moments just like this I imagine that of course everyone is missing me right now when I don't have my phone with me. And when I finally get hold of the phone again I notice that nobody has tried to reach me all day. (Female, born 1992)

Of course there are also days when it would be nice if nobody could get in contact and I even long for some isolation from people. Then the mobile phone not working can feel like a relief. Fairly soon after such positive sensations however fear hits of for example missing an important call or for example my parents getting worried since they don't happen to get in contact for a minute [...] I wouldn't think of leaving anywhere without the phone really. (Female, born 1994)

This mood of constant expectation is simultaneously one of obligation and concern, involving social ties as well as the very operability of everyday life. Going offline means cutting people off and possibly causing worry to intimate others by mere unreachability. Thus, breaching the expectation of constant mediated presence may be experienced as stressful (see Fox and Moreland, 2014). Escapes from connectivity may have their allure, but they are less sustainable in practice:

Inability to access the Net may occasionally cause certain experiences of disappointment if for example you've waited messages from friends or want to follow up on the news on things important to you. One may imagine being left out of something and fear isolation from the online world but also from society on some level. These days full membership in society seems to also involve a certain requirement of participation facilitated by the Internet in particular.

(Female, born 1990)

The mood of expectation is tied in with the rhythm of devices' notifications of new messages, posts and updates. As these punctuate and puncture everyday life, one's focus constantly shifts, moves and re-emerges as distracted attention (Paasonen, 2016). The steady flow of notifications can be experienced as disruptive and disturbing (Gardner and Davis, 2013), yet the mood of expectation is also one of possibility, and hence steeped in degrees of hopefulness.

Forced slowness

If there is one default aspect of technology, it is its imminent failure: devices eventually break down and applications are haunted by glitches. Even if these are expected, abrupt instances of technological failure can evoke sharp sensations of irritation and helplessness. Yet they may also involve degrees of joy over the lack of access. The following excerpts, in which students describe their smartphones breaking down and their momentary resort to older devices, address the pleasure involved in transformed routines of communication:

As a smart phone user I'm used to browsing the Net even several times and hour but the shell [shaped phone] made it only possible to call, send SMS and play Snake. Against all expectation, using a device several years old felt very

liberating rather than frustrating as it was completely unnecessary to constantly fiddle with the mobile. (Female, born 1993)

It was fascinating to notice that during those two days I actually felt quite liberated. Instead of WhatsApp I needed to call or send traditional text messages, I didn't check Facebook every 15 minutes and when I wanted to know what the weather was like, I had to look out the window instead of just staring at the forecasts on the phone's weather app. (Female, born 1993)

While describing their fears of missing out, these students also write of shifting from phatic Facebook communication – that is, communication for communication's sake – to more substantial messaging. This was experienced as liberating for the time it took them to get their smartphones back from repair: a week and two days, respectively. The moment of failure facilitated a reflexive reversion to earlier communication habits, as dictated by the concrete limitations of older generation devices. This break from regular rhythms of network use was experienced as enjoyable, due to its impermanence: it did not involve a permanent detachment from platforms through which sociability was organised.

The 'aesthetic of attachment' (Berlant, 2000, p. 5), through which intimacy spreads and lives, involves connectivity routines that are particular to applications and platforms. In addition to abrupt gaps in operability, there are a plethora of ways in which mediated intimacies can lag, from momentary glitches to congested networks and the frustrations of asynchronous communication. Slow connections irritate due to the default assumption of immediacy: 'I consider myself a pretty patient person but when the Net is both extremely slow and cuts off, it's hard to remain calm' (female, born 1992). The expectation of immediacy that is associated with smartphones entails the instant availability of information, goods, services and people (Gardner and Davis, 2013). Lags interfere with this by forcing a slower tempo or discontinuous rhythm on one's interactions.

Waiting doesn't go with contemporary high tempo, information-glutted life, neither does 'slowing down' as a concept for that matter. Even philosophers and yoga teachers talking about slowing down want technology to work without fault and fast. (Female, born 1990).

While a different speed of use would have been not only tolerable but even expected a few years ago, high speed connectivity has since become ingrained in sensory schema as a matter of habit. As we are increasingly attuned to immediacy, forced disconnection gives rise to unsavoury affective dissonance. The experience is one of speed and potentiality coming to a halt – indeed, of one's very life being at the risk of lessening (Anderson, 2004) – as one falls out of synch with the surrounding world. Many scholars have theorised about the stress and cost of lives speeding up, particularly in connection with networked media (e.g. Hassan, 2012; Stiegler, 2012; Wajcman, 2015). Such analyses have addressed the toll of accelerated lives, wherein time seems to rush by as well as to run out, and there is all too much numbing stimulus for sustained attention. The student essays foreground the incompatibility of the stress and toll of forced slowness with the overall rhythm of life. It is therefore not the speed that is framed as an issue, but speed slowing down against one's will, and the limited options for social engagement that this engenders.

Intimate connections and disconnections

Intimacy is about gradations of proximity and, as such, is always relational to detachment.

Connections that are made and maintained through networked media can be equally considered disconnections, as Tero Karppi's (2014) and Ben Light's (2014) studies of social media render evident. Karppi notes how '[d]isconnection interferes with daily routines and operations of connective social media'. More than a passing irritation, the lack of connectivity basically reconfigures available ways of being in the world. Karppi uses disconnection as an

analytical prism for understanding the ambivalent appeal of social media services and the difficulty of fully detaching from them. For his part, Light (2014) is interested in the social and spatial disconnections that people plan and execute in social media through acts of friending, liking, unfriending, blocking and limiting the accessibility of updates.

Disconnection can, from both of these perspectives, be seen as the default effect of connectivity that is not simply negative in its resonances. This is crucial to keep in mind, given the evident appeal of narratives of loss connected with networked communications. According to these narratives, relationships are becoming shallow and people are feeling increasingly lonely as they isolate themselves behind screens rather than engage in direct interaction (see Gardner and Davis, 2013). Sherry Turkle opens her widely read *Alone Together* by arguing that ‘technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies’, yet ‘networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to one another’ (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). According to this line of argumentation, the navigation of emotional lives through smart devices leaves us lonely and lacking in the kinds of intimacies that physical proximity and face-to-face communication allow. A similar perspective emerges in studies exploring the ‘dark side’ of social media, according to which the high use of SNS correlates with a lower quality of life, lower self-esteem and feelings of distress (Fox and Moreland, 2014, p. 169). When setting out to explore the so-called dark side, one is likely to discover it – just as studies examining the sunnier side tend to find something of the sort. Ambiguities fit poorly with such binary framings.

This line of argumentation is familiar to a media historical perspective. Television, for example, has been diagnosed as both a medium that isolates family members from one another and one that facilitates new forms of togetherness (see Tichi, 1991). Broad narratives of lost sociability connected to media see devices as taking over the role of human partners,

and see media content as replacing human-to-human communication. In practice, this involves much more complex assemblages of human and non-human actors, routines, social roles and obligations, aims and interests, as well as times and spaces of communication.

Following Light (2014), relationships and intimacies that are managed in social media are always part of a broader nexus of social proximities and distances, mediated presences and absences. Some intimacies are publicly communicated in relationship status updates and manifestations of love and affection that are shared with social media friends and followers. Other intimacies, particularly those that fail to fit the normative intimate patterns of monogamous partnership, kinship and friendship (Berlant, 2000), may be kept under wraps. Networked exchanges are stored and accumulated in personal archives (as on Facebook), or may disappear with little trace from the users' sight (as in Snapchat). Yet all such attachments are visible to the services used, through the massive user data archives they compile, store and mine. While users may experience their data as private, the data is actually corporate property that is impossible for the users to manage or delete (e.g. Gehl, 2011; van Dijck, 2014).

Intimacies that are managed through social media depend on the ever-increasing performance of server farms, the capacity of underwater cables and the usability of material devices, alike.

Devices and applications are also incorporated into our corporeal organisation as externalised memory archives of people, moments and places (Gehl, 2011; Pybus, 2015). The student essays describe the involuntary effacement of such archives as particularly unnerving. The loss of digital photographs was equated with an effacement of one's actual past (female, born 1970; female, born 1989), while the destruction of a SIM card was compared with letters and photographs having been thrown into a fire (female, born 1989): 'Photographs, music and text messages disappear with devices, which feels as if memories themselves disappear when they are no longer concretely visible' (female, born 1991). These are not accounts of technology

amputating intimacy, à la Turkle. On the contrary, they point to the importance of technology in supporting intimate connections of the past, present and future:

Early in the summer I worked in Stockholm for a couple of months and we mainly kept in touch with my girlfriend through Skype. We both had sufficiently fast Internet connections and well functioning computers so everything was supposed to be okay. But when we did talk with the video image on, sound turned to mush or got cut up so that it was impossible to make it out. It was absolutely infuriating that we couldn't keep in contact in ways intended. Especially since one was used to seeing the other 'live' daily before leaving for Stockholm. (Male, born 1989)

Planning and setting up a session using the video call service Skype with a significant – yet geographically distant – other may result in absolute joy in seeing that person's face, hearing their voice and sharing a moment. These connections are nevertheless routinely marred by glitches as the video image freezes, the sound grows patchy and incomprehensible and connections get lost. Lagging connections, frozen exchanges and the fading of mediated presence into snippets of out of synch sound may fuel frustration that can, in retrospect, seem disproportionate. Moments of failure involve the loss of immediate contact as well as a more visceral sense of aborted or deferred intimacy. There is a violent edge to the feeling of having been cut off against one's desire – and against human agency, more broadly construed. When an expectedly routine form of exchange fails, the uneasy precariousness of network media connections becomes manifest: on the network, intimate contact can be easily lost in instances when it matters so very much.

Like all applications, Skype emerges from an assemblage of human actors, network technologies, services and representations as immediate and intensely mediated, and intimately proximate and persistently distant. Looking into the eyes of the person on the

screen involves simultaneously looking at the camera, the screen, the image and the person, with all these dimensions intermeshing in the hybrid yet ever so human figure available to us. The mirror images displayed by webcams add a further layer of mediation, as the sight of the other person's face is always subtly different from that which is witnessed in person. Amplified through loudspeakers, the grain of another's voice is similarly altered, resulting in a sound that is simultaneously familiar and a little strange.

The reliance on the visual and the auditory in webcam communication cuts off elementary parts of human sensoria, such as the sense of touch. Yet the webcam image viewed on screen, accompanied by a familiar voice and animated by a sense of immediacy, involves a particular sense – or texture – of presence of the kind that Ken Hillis (2009, p. 263) conceptualises as 'affective materiality specific to online exchanges'. Similar to Jenny Sundén, who studied the embodied underpinnings of textual online exchanges (2003), Hillis explores the dynamics of absence and presence facilitated by networked connectivity, seeing it as laced with desire for 'someone so near yet still so far because just out of material reach' (Hillis, 2009, pp. 14, 210). In other words, mediated contact – on Skype, or elsewhere – does not do away with physical distance or a sense of absence. It may, in fact, heighten these things.

Re-emergences and transformations

Online communication is driven by the dynamic and imperative of immediacy, yet it also entails a panoply of asynchronicity, relating to users' different time zones and varying personal rhythms of checking apps and logging in and out. In this way, connection and disconnection, attachment and detachment are routinely – even inextricably – fused in ways that are both comfortable and not. The question is not only what might be lost in the course of networked communication, but also what might emerge – as in structures of feeling. In Raymond Williams' (1977, pp. 133–134) classic definition, structures of feeling are emergent

formations and social experiences ‘in solution’ – matters of ‘particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions [...] starting-points and conclusions’. Structures of feeling are qualities and experiences of life that are common to specific generations, contexts and locations. They are ephemeral in the sense that they are still emergent, and hence difficult to quite pin down.

The structures of feeling that emerge from the student essays are those of constant connectivity marred by perpetual lags and fuelled by expectations of imminent experiences. While a sense of anticipation folds into the future, it also entails a sense of the past, connected with memories that are stored and shared as digital data. The notion of structure implies degrees of fixity and sameness, yet these can, following Brian Massumi (2015, p. 87), be seen as ‘dynamic, open-ended, composed of ongoing variations on itself’ – processes that make it possible to see ‘how are certain regularities enabled to *re-emerge*, across the variations, in always new forms’. Framed in this vein as re-emergence, the memory reserves stored on Facebook or a memory card reverberate with the more physical archives of print photos while the glitches of Skype can be considered in relation to the noise and interference of long-distance phone calls.

In past decades and centuries, mediated intimacies – and mediated interpersonal communication, more generally – depended largely on the postal system and telephone network. These were both, and remain, infrastructures of intimacy with their own speeds and tempos. Letter exchange involves a rotation of days – and, historically, that of weeks – during which one can do little else but wait. The synchronicity of telephony, since the late 19th century, did away with the need for such anticipation, while also tying communication to specific devices that were, before the era of mobile telephony, bound to particular physical locations (e.g. Fischer, 1994). As horizons of possibility, technologies open up forms of

connection and exchange while framing others out. In doing so, they build on previous solutions and routines of communication – as in the shift from paper mail to email – while also fundamentally transforming them (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). As novel forms, rhythms and avenues of mediated connection emerge, they feed into patterns and structures of feeling that provide everyday lives with a particular tempo and feel.

At the same time, much of the intimacies and lags addressed above involve novel forms of emergence that do not follow the patterns of telephone communication or letter exchange. The contemporary media landscape involves distinct affective intensities. Sensory attunement to the presence and functionality of personal devices – and the information networks they are connected to – structures everyday lives in ways that are uncharacteristic of the telephony or much of the computing culture that preceded the 1990s. Both the expectancy of things to occur and the perpetual engagement with platforms, resources and applications orient the present and provide it with a particular tenor, as uneasily as this may sometimes reverberate. In moments of failure, some of this routine unravels, momentarily disrupting forms of contact and accessibility. The inaccessibility of infrastructures of intimacy generates patterns of restlessness and frustration that render palpable the degree to which current re-emergences of mediated connection and disconnection differ in their qualities from those previously exercised, felt and lived.

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