Ambiguity and Affect in Digital Culture: An Interview with Susanna Paasonen

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The name of Susanna Paasonen is well known to everyone working within media studies, affect theory, porn studies, sexuality studies, internet research, feminist theory, and several other fields. Her research engages with topics ranging from deep fakes to feminist humor, from the problems with online nipple censorship to the entanglements of drugs and technologies. The impressive breadth and interdisciplinarity of Paasonen's research are matched by its rigor and lucidity. Her work productively draws on a diverse range of advanced theories and complex concepts, which are presented in a way that can spark insight with an experienced researcher as it can with an uninitiated reader. This rare mixture of inspired conceptual moves, boundary-pushing, and clarity is on full display in her several monographs, which include *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornograph*y (MIT Press 2011), *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play* (Goldsmiths Press 2018), and *Distracted, Frustrated, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media* (MIT Press 2021). The latter offers a much-needed critique of reductive and totalizing cultural analyses, which diagnose digital media as the culprit of contemporary disaffection. According to different popular as well as theoretical accounts mapped by Paasonen, networked media cause addiction, bring about boredom, and atrophy our attention spans. By mobilizing the conceptual framework of ambiguity, Paasonen sets out to complexify these strong theories of digital media

effects. She effectively blurs the boundaries between distraction and attention, boredom and excitement, and addiction and dependency, to nuance these generalizing and pessimistic diagnoses of our modern existence.

Productive engagement with ambiguity is a key conceptual characteristic of Paasonen's work. She employs this concept as a methodological lens aimed at bringing down polarised and dualistic understandings of different networked phenomena. Against both utopian and dystopian expressions of techno-determinism, the concept of ambiguity allows Paasonen to unveil the complexities and nuances that characterize digital culture. But ambiguity itself is an intricate notion with several definitions, parallel histories, and contradictory assumptions. In Hegel, for example, the human is an ambiguous creature that is both animal and more than animal. Against the logical principle of noncontradiction, ambiguity here refers to a mode of being in which something can simultaneously be and not be; being human means being historical and natural, animal and divine, finite and eternal, subject to both facticity and freedom. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir argues that despite the impossibility of existentialism becoming an ethical system, existentialism reveals that our entire ethical relation to the world depends on that radical ambiguity between freedom and causality that defines human beings. Parallel to these accounts linguistics and structuralism have assumed ambiguity as the key aspect of human language. From this perspective, meaning is always ambiguous because there is always a gap between the signifier and the signified, between representation and that which is represented. This structural gap differentiates meaning from nature, introducing ambiguity at the core of language, politics, and culture. The notion of ambiguity underlies also the concept of the pharmakon, revived by Jacques Derrida and repurposed by Bernard Stiegler, as it does affect theory. The strand of the

latter that is influenced by the work of Brian Massumi has emphasized the ambiguous character of affective intensities as opposed to the unambiguous expression of emotions.

Yet, as Paasonen rightly warns us, both Massumi's stark opposition between affect and emotions and Stiegler's analysis of the malaise produced by digital technologies lack ambiguity and complexity. Throughout her work, she manages to construct a convincing and productive notion of ambiguity that borrows from all these different sources. The result is a concept that does not attempt to cancel its own internal contradictions or ambiguities, but rather exploits them in order to highlight the complexities of our entanglements with digital technologies. The effort to privilege 'both…and' encounters over 'either…or' perspectives remains present even when defining the notion of ambiguity itself. This interview seeks to further explore Paasonen's conceptual framework of ambiguity, its usefulness as a theoretical and methodological tool, and its significance for internet research. It was sparked off by a talk that she gave at the *Noetics Without a Mind* symposium in Rotterdam in November 2022, and conducted over email between January and February 2023. Covering a range of issues such as affective digital networks, politics of representation, accelerationism, algorithmic technologies, etc., this interview is an attempt to show the productivity of such a concept for analyzing digital cultures today. As the emphasis on ambiguity inevitably distorts clear boundaries and complexifies definitions, it provides us with a valuable perspective on the usefulness of blur and its zones of indistinction.

JM&CCB: The conceptual framework of ambiguity has been one of the guiding threads of your research from very early on. This approach, which seeks to attend to the intricacy of things by emphasizing how they can be simultaneously good and bad, empowering and inhibiting, effectively orients your investigation of digital cultures. You draw on the concept of ambiguity to examine a wide variety of issues, ranging from online pornography, and affective formations in networked media, to the circulation of dick pics, and online remembrance of celebrity sex

offenders. What was it that first alerted you of the significance of ambiguity for the study of digital cultures?

SP: This had to do with my accumulated frustration with the forms of academic inquiry that I became socialized, and to a degree conversant in as a 1990s Humanities major: film scholar Constance Penley (3) associated these with "the righteous rush of negative critique" and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (126) with "paranoid reading" within cultural theory. Such forms of inquiry move to uncover the workings of power and ideology that have nevertheless been known and posited from the start, whether these are connected to capitalism, heterosexism, racism, or something else. This is not to argue against the value of addressing social relations of power, for the crux of Sedgwick's critique has to do with circularity: as we always know that things are bad and since bad news is known beforehand, the ensuing analysis cannot yield many surprises in focusing to uncover that which we already know. For Sedgwick (126, 134), such "strong" modes of theorizing have become dominant enough as a "uniquely sanctioned methodology" to block from view other interpretative and epistemological practices, and to cast them as "naïve, pious, or complaisant." Her polemic is concerned with the performativity of knowledge: what knowledge does, what we think we already know, how we come to know this, and what else might be known. It is also concerned with the forms of theorizing that get to be considered critical to start with. Sedgwick (130, 138) wrote in the context of queer theory in particular, intending to create room for other ways of "seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge" than ones operating as scanning, exposure, and unveiling. Such forms would be open to surprise, of *not* already knowing: "Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones" (146).

Since my Ph.D. thesis tackling cybercultural imaginaries from the perspective of gender in particular, finished in 2002, very much moved in a framework of critical uncovering, reading Sedgwick came with a poignant sense of recognition. Part of my interest in affect inquiry when moving into the postdoc phase had to do with finding alternative routes of doing critical work so as to better account for complexities within the phenomena studied. This became the focus of my research on mainstream online porn resulting in the 2011 *Carnal Resonance*.

As the multiplicity of meaning, ambiguity is a fact of life, and innate to cultural objects and phenomena, yet something that easily slips away in cultural analysis unless one persistently holds onto the logic of *both/and*. The slipperiness of ambiguity has to do with multiple factors, such as the prioritizing of macro-level questions over the micro-level complexities of everyday life as academic concerns, or the role of firm argumentation in academic writing. But, as John Law (3–4) argues, there is value in holding onto the untidy, messy, and contingent realities of society and culture. I suggest that, through the logic of both/and, it is possible to explore social operations of power *and* to address phenomena irreducible to them, so as to speak of their simultaneous existence; and to examine cultural objects and processes as innately contradictory and complex.

I find this particularly pressing in the context of objects and debates that seem over-determined—ones connected to porn would be a prime example; those addressing the effects of data capitalism on culture and society could be another—so that we presumably already know what things are about, or what follows from them. Within data capitalism, we know about the ubiquity and invasiveness of surveillant tracking and data collection, as well as the opacities that these processes involve, so there is general consensus on the risks of data capitalism in terms of privacy and political polarization alike. We have also been warned of the risks that social media

poses for the mental health and well-being of young people in particular. At the same time, people younger and older use such platforms for a plethora of reasons and aims inclusive of activist organization, identity work, and world-making, the importance of which is irreducible to the exploitative logics of data capitalism (on its macro-level). With porn, we seem to always already know that it is based on exploitative labor practices and that its imageries are sexist, racist, and ageist so that it supports (straight white) male hegemony. The connection between porn work and sex trafficking is also often posited, despite the lack of evidence or larger-scale production studies concerning the genre. That porn comes in myriad sub-genres, that its performers and producers are a highly diverse bunch, that its imageries are hardly uniform, that porn consumption involves a range of taste cultures by default, and that it is not at all easy to define the object of porn in the age of self-shooting (is dick pic porn?) are all facts conflicting with this received knowledge. My argument would be that, no, we do not necessarily know what these phenomena are about in their totality, or at the very least what we think we already know is not all that we can know.

An attempt to hold onto the logic of both/and has to do with choosing to think less "against" than "beside" (Sedgwick 8) the work of other academics, so as to bring different perspectives together and think through their frictions and connections. The allure and rush of negative critique are, after all, persistently present also in how scholars engage with each other's work in order to prove their own points. I am hardly suggesting that one should not be critical or express differences in opinion, but that an openness to different forms of knowing and making sense of things never hurt, are we to figure out something that we do not already know, from a different angle, with a different set of materials, concepts, or methods. Elizabeth Grosz (2–3) points out how "thinking against" is a gesture of dismissal rather than an invitation to dialogue.

Academic writing is by necessity an exercise of thinking together with other people, both living and dead. It is communication and hence social activity.

JM&CCB: One of the ways you theorize ambiguity is through the classic philosophical concept of the *pharmakon*, which refers to an object that functions both as a poison and a cure. This concept has been famously reinterpreted by French post-structuralist thinker Jacques Derrida and later taken up and employed to examine networked technologies by Bernard Stiegler, the French philosopher of technology. In one of your recent talks, you suggested that your approach to ambiguity is aligned with Derrida's but not with Stiegler's. As a way of further explaining your concept of ambiguity, could you please elaborate on this (lack of) affinity?

SP: I returned to Derrida when thinking of ways to frame my discussion of ambiguity in what became *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*—a book that took a decade to put together. Derrida's work is of course very much concerned with the complexities of meaning and non-binary forms of interpretation, and I have only recently come to realize the extent of his impact on my forms of thinking—I am, after all, a child of the 1990s academia. I have long found his articulation of the co-dependence between the curative and the toxic compelling: that the question is always one of both/and, and that there is no "good pharmakon" without the "bad", or vice versa (Derrida 99). It then follows that analysis needs to hold onto both aspects of the phenomena studied so as to not prioritize the one at the expense of the other. The pharmakon, for Derrida, further disturbs the boundary work between the inner and the outer in ways that resonate with media ecological and technosomatic approaches to networked media as giving shape to experiences and ways of being in the world that I have been interested in pursuing. And if networked media has become infrastructural to how everyday life can be managed, as I think it has, focusing on its toxic impact alone cuts short ways of understanding how this happens, and what it possibly effects.

Thinking through Stiegler's work on technology as pharmakon could arguably have opened up similar lines of association, given the extent of his interest in this precise connection. His approach to networked media and cognitive capitalism, especially in his late work (see *The Age of Disruption*), nevertheless aligns with the generalized pessimistic approaches that I identify as a broad Zeitgeist diagnosis dominant in both academic and popular accounts bemoaning the nefarious impact of networked media. According to this diagnostic framing, the devices and apps that are designed to addict us are distracting us to boredom, eroding our capacities to think, relate, or remember: this is a strong theory of loss and destruction within cognitive/data capitalism. Or, to rephrase, Stiegler ended up foregrounding the "bad pharmakon" in ways doing away with the kind of messiness and simultaneity that I wanted to work through as this was manifest in my empirical research material. Since my aim was to both understand Zeitgeist diagnoses and think through the notions of dependence, distraction, and boredom that they operate with so as to foreground their inseparability from agency, attention, and interest, I did not find it fruitful to frame the enterprise on "Stieglerian" terms. There is also the perhaps aesthetic question of authorial voice, and my preference for Derrida's over Stiegler's, but it was ultimately a decision of how to articulate ambiguity as both a concern and an analytical lens. This is also the approach we took in our collaborative short book, *Technopharmacology*, with Joshua Neves, Aleena Chia, and Ravi Sundaram, where Ravi elegantly addresses the echoes of the Frankfurt School in Stiegler's work, and the constraints that these come with.

JM&CCB: One of the key conceptual distinctions in affect theory is that between affect and emotion. Authors like Brian Massumi argue that affect theory should establish a sharp distinction between these two terms, defining affect as a precognitive, pre-individualized, and non-representational intensity, and emotion as a subjective, cognitive, and representational

manifestation. When studying digital cultures, which trades in representations, audiovisual and textual content, meanings, and individualized expressions, some scholars have argued that this sharp distinction between affect and emotion can become problematic and counterproductive. How would you position your own research on digital cultures in relation to this divide between affect and emotion?

SP: It is a distinction fairly easily drawn on a conceptual level, but things get much more convoluted when moving into media analysis or any other form of empirical inquiry. My interest has consistently been in how affect becomes registered and felt in bodies, how these intensities then push bodies from one state to another, and how these bodies are also specific in terms of their social contexts and layered (personal, cultural) histories: from a feminist perspective, it remains crucial to insist on such particularities so as to not flatten out experience as some abstract human condition untouched by axes of difference. And if one is interested in thinking about how intensities are registered, there are basically three methodological avenues, as far as I can see: abstract theorizing, the tracking of affective traces in cultural texts (be these interviews, literature, or something else), and returning back to one's own affectations after the fact as a form of reflection. I have explored all three avenues which are all (differently) partial in that there can be no access to the immediacy of affect. One gropes after whatever remains, and makes sense of how the immediacy of experience can be retrospectively accounted for. It would seem artificial to do away with emotions as named states and interpretations of feeling within this.

There is of course no uniformity of opinion among scholars as to what the notion of affect means to start with: for some, it is an issue of impersonal life-forces; for others, clearly identifiable basic affects or social contagions of sorts. From early on, I have been inspired by Sara Ahmed's discussion of the inseparability of affect and emotion in how bodies shape and are shaped by the world. From the resonances and dissonances of porn to the circuits of shaming

involved in gendered online hate, I have been interested in how affect becomes sensed and made sense of in encounters between people, technologies, environments, and media content. And if one understands experience as at once affective, somatic, and cognitive, then these different layers of experience bleed into one another and come together in ways that may make them impossible to ply apart from one another. This is concretely about holding on to the logic of both/and.

JM&CCB: Your approach to affect shares some affinities with the influential account of Gilles Deleuze, who develops it through his interpretation of Benedict Spinoza's work. Like Deleuze, you see affects as enhancing, inhibiting, or ambiguous, variations in our capacity to act, brought about by our encounters with human and non-human bodies. Yet, unlike Deleuze, you posit that emotions, as mental states consisting of ideas and representations, are not merely a passive capture of pre-personal affective intensities, but possess agential force as they too can trigger affective responses. For example, you discuss a personal account of recurring frustrations with a malfunctioning computer reported by a female user (2015, 708). These malfunctions are productive of inhibiting affects that diminish her capacity to act as they cut her off from a variety of activities afforded by her networked device. Yet, you also suggest that these affects are further amplified by her awareness of the stereotypes of women as technically incompetent and a recognition that she fits this stereotype. This affective amplification arises mentally and is set off by an idea. How do you theorize this affective power of ideas, and how can it be operationalized for researching digital cultures?

SP: My approach, like probably all affect inquiry, owes to Spinoza's way of thinking about affective encounters as open-ended and to a degree unpredictable—how "the human body can be affected now in one way, now in another, and consequently it can be affected in different ways at different times by one and the same object" (Spinoza 133). When thinking about such objects, or bodies affecting and being affected by one another, it is important to extend focus beyond

material entities to bodies of thought and representation; the stuff of culture, narrative, and history.

Connecting with my previous point on the contextual specificity of bodies encountering other bodies (be these human or not) in the world, they are also attuned in certain ways. Affective encounters are contextual; people are hardly blank slates; things come with baggage. One way to think about is through the notion of somatic archives as reservoirs of experiences, affectations, aversions, desires, and attachments that accumulate and alter as we live out the world. Some of these find resonance, some entail biting sharpness, and some lose their affective impact while yet others gather force, but the idea is that we carry traces of affective encounters in our bodies. A surprising sight or sound may resonate with an experience all but forgotten, or resonances can be found through intentional reminiscence as practiced recall (again bearing in mind the affective, cognitive, and somatic aspects of experience). I started working on the notion of somatic archives in order to conceptualize the resonances and grab of porn tied in with sexual likes, fantasies, and fascinations—yet it is surely not only the sexual that resonates.

So, for example, one disappointing experience with technological malfunction may eat away at one's capacity to act; it can be retrospectively classified as embarrassing, surprising, frustrating, or irritating. Yet if such experiences repeat, they find resonance and possibly intensify so that the ensuing reaction may be intense enough to feel altogether disproportionate. Technological failures and glitches are further intimately tied to our very capacity to be and relate, so that the loss of internet connection or the inability to make an end-device work can cut down one's agency in very concrete ways, to the point of feeling cut off from the world. The anecdote you mentioned had to do with a kind of doubling (tripling?) of a sense of helplessness in repetitive experiences made all the sharper by a meta-level awareness of how such shrunken

agency aligns with stereotypical notions of gender and technology. These accounts of the sharpness of affect in moments of technological failure, which I collected from my students over several years, detailed acute ire and fury but, even more routinely, resigned reflections on mundane dependencies on devices, apps, and connections that are not ours to fully master while nevertheless being elementary to how we can be and act in the world. This point on infrastructural dependencies on devices and platforms was brought into sharp focus during the COVID-19 pandemic as the lives of us many shifted largely online. It may now simply come across as obvious.

To rephrase, engagements with the world, digital media included, involve orientations, attachments, aversions, desires, hopes, fears, and a plethora of other modes of relating. Within this, previous experiences intermesh with cultural narratives and diagnoses that we both use to make sense of the world and possibly resist their perceived biases and shortcomings. Lauren Berlant (21) writes of investments in objects and projections onto them as being "less about them than about a cluster of desires and affects we manage to keep magnetized to them," foregrounding the innate sense of promise that such attachments involve. But such projections and forms of relating can just as well involve hesitancy or even downright aversion, which make dependencies on them ambivalent indeed. These orientations are the stuff of ideas coming from diverse sources that can be in conflict with or layer upon one another. All in all, I find it productive to consider bodies as always being in relation with, and impacted by one another, so that any counter involves not just physical bodies but equally bodies of thought (ideas, ideologies, representations, what have you). We are affected by these different and differently resonant bodies coming together in our encounters with the world.

JM&CCB: In *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*, you examine dependency, boredom, and distraction as *affective formations* of networked media. By focusing on these states as affective formations, you conjointly analyze the recurring patterns that emerge both in affective interactions between human and nonhuman bodies and in ideas employed to interpret the affects arising from these interactions. Is the concept of affective formation your way of negotiating the split between affect and emotion, body and mind? Can it be systematized into a methodological approach for studying digital cultures?

SP: Affect inquiry, from its Spinozan groundings, is resistant to mind/body divides to start with (considering how Spinoza related to Descartes), so arguably it offers means of keeping the body in the heart of things throughout. Since my book sets out to both address Zeitgeist diagnoses of dependence, distraction, and boredom in networked settings *and* to make sense of such dynamics of experience in order to understand the appeal, or resonance, of such diagnoses, I needed to find a conceptual framework for unpacking all this. It was evident to me that there was no doing away with considerations of the discursive—or, more aptly, that the discursive, the cognitive, and the affective needed to be considered together, and as steeped in one another.

Dependence, distraction, and boredom are not affects as such: the first is a relational connection, the second an issue of temporalities of attention, and the third is generally understood as the flatness of affect or as the absence of interest. So, what to call them? Predictably enough, I turned to Raymond Williams' discussion of structures of feelings as social experiences and ways of thinking characteristic of specific historical moments. But things did not quite fit: 'structure' was too fixed a term for tackling affect, there did not seem to be conceptual room enough for non-human actors, and Williams' temporal framing of how residual, dominant, and emergent structures of feeling connect with one another did not map onto a Zeitgeist narrative that rings familiar from those of past decades while also aiming to probe the future. I

then took a cue from Michel Foucault's notion of discursive formations where themes, perspectives, and concerns recur so as to give shape something like a formation but where such repetitions and formations are seen to derive from micro-instances, rather than result from structural forces.

'Affective formations' composed from these starting points seemed capacious enough a framing for considering the distribution of agency, attention, and interest in networked settings emerging from repetitive micro events—posts, hits, pings, videos, glitches—resulting in something socially resonant enough to feed into Zeitgeist diagnoses concerning agency, cognition, and the lost richness of life. Such diagnoses need to find resonance with people's experiences, are they to feel like something that speaks to, describes, or explains them. Hence the template of social media addiction that can be deployed when discussing attachments to platforms and the connections that they facilitate; or the discourse of shrinking attention spans and 'digital dementia;' or Douglas Coupland's poster project, *I Miss My Pre-Internet Brain*, broadly tapping into a sense of something being lost within the contemporary technological conjuncture.

Affective formations are then about ways of experiencing, understanding, and interpreting modes of feeling. They are both forms of experience emerging within the current technosocial context—and, in this sense, akin to Williams' structures of feelings—and about discursive framings of such experiences. My interest was to map out these modes of experience through heterogeneous examples in order to move away from dualistic framings where, say, attachment to devices translates as addiction, where deep focus has been replaced by perpetual distractions, or where enchantment has given way to the barrenness of boredom. Affective formations then also entail oscillations of intensities, from flatness to satiation and back,

considered as patterns of experience. This makes it possible to think of dependence and agency,

distraction and attention, and boredom and interest not as opposites of one another, but as

dynamics of experience encompassing both. As to how to systematize this as a methodological

approach… I doubt to what extent that could be done beyond advancing non-binary modes of

conceptualizing digital media. This is (again) an issue of holding on to ambiguity, simultaneity,

and the pharmakon-like characteristics of media.

JM&CCB: Since its 'linguistic turn,' cultural studies have focused on representation and
meaning as key territories for analyzing social relations (and their reproduction). The 'affective
turn,' instead, argues for a non-representational approach to cultural manifestations capable of
grasping those asignifying forces that shape social formations beyond the level of representation.
In the first case, there is a structural ambiguity of meaning that defines the political aspect of
representations. As Trevor Paglen argues, it is precisely because the meaning of a given
representation is ambiguous that representation becomes a territory of political struggle. In your
work, ambiguity stems not from the non-fixity of meaning but rather refers to the simultaneous
presence of mixed and contradictory ideas and meanings. In light of this, how would you define
the politics of ambiguity and how does this differ from the ambiguity that defines the politics of
representation?

SP: Since the unfixity of meaning is a general starting point for cultural inquiry informed by the

work of Derrida, the work of representation is understood as a messy business by default. And if

we do not set out to analyze singular objects, such as representations, but rather explore

phenomena and events composed of myriad actors (and objects), the question of ambiguity

expands to simultaneity, conflict, and contradiction among and across these actors. This is

unavoidable, I think. The same applies to considerations of experience as composed of multiple

dynamics, attachments, and orientations—and to how affective intensities come about and are registered. In this sense, there is just no doing away with ambiguity.

The politics of representation extend beyond multiple meanings to basic questions such as perspective and voice, and these remain pressing concerns in how we understand the world. For me, a turn to affect has not been about moving away from representation or questions concerning meaning but rather about broadening the analytical agenda beyond the textual so that, for example, porn is seen as an issue of representation, genre, aesthetics, and conventions *and also* as material practices, technologies, affective resonances, economies, and more. Since ambiguity is about meaning, using it as an analytical lens does not really necessitate, or even afford, a dramatic turning away from political (or other) concerns involved in representation as such, yet it allows for considering these in tandem with issues extending this focus—as in the accounting for the non-representational. Rather than positing a division between the representational and the non-representational on binary terms (as one of either/or), I find it more productive to consider them as entangled with one another. I am not sure how viable it would be to outline a politics of ambiguity as such, any more than an aesthetics thereof: for me, the point is acknowledging the coexistence of seemingly irreconcilable developments and meanings, their mutual connections and fundamental complexities, as well as finding means for accounting this all.

JM&CCB: As you indicated in a recent talk, the conceptual framework of ambiguity seems to be productive also with the forced distinctions of algorithmic classifications and the epistemological regimes that they impose. Kate Crawford suggests that algorithmic systems "oversimplify what is stubbornly complex so that it can be easily computed, and packaged for the market" (179). At the same time, algorithmic systems seem to be structurally incapable of grasping the ambiguities and nuances of the affective relations that structure social reality. How can the concept of ambiguity be deployed to develop a critique of algorithmic cultures?

SP: Building on the premise that language comes with ambiguities (not a particularly bold premise at that), it is inevitable that algorithmic systems will fall short in grasping nuances in communication. The issue is explicit in irony and sarcasm abounding online where basically the opposite of what is meant is said for critical or comical effect, but meanings equally shift according to sociocultural contexts that algorithms are blind to. Recent experimentations with, and debates around ChatGPT and other more advanced chatbots are making this point. Such limitations are also evident in the logic of recommendations where streaming media services suggest similar content to that previously consumed when users might in fact be up to something else altogether—music being used for affective modulation specific to mood, moment, company, and circumstance, for example. Wendy Chun's critique of algorithmic homophily, of how the logic of correlation underpinning big data and machine learning breeds not only a logic of sameness but also that of segregation (through sameness and difference), speaks of this issue while further digging into the social power dynamics involved.

I have been interested in attempts to turn affect into analyzable data in empathy analytics, which is a subset of sentiment analysis—from the uses of likes and other reaction options to more detail-oriented attempts to find correlations between emotional expression and types of online content (Paasonen, "Ambiguous Affect"). This economy builds on the logic of correlation (as in 'if you have liked that, you may also like this') and taxonomical understandings of positive and negative affect divided into further subclasses. The overall purpose is to bring qualitative angles to the ways of tracking user engagement so as to map out *the kinds* of experiences that paying attention involves for the purposes of sponsored content, advertising, and content production. Through such predictions, platforms aim to both analyze user moods and predict

what content these users might positively react to. At the same time, affect escapes capture in taxonomical classifications that such predictions build on: independent of the volume and granularity of data extracted on people's interactions, tastes, or likes, it is not quite possible to figure out what they may be into at any given moment, or how they make sense of things.

The issue here is one of ambiguity as both a thing intrinsic to language and meaning-making and the ambiguities involved in how we relate and connect to the world and the diverse bodies within it. Such ambiguity points to simultaneity that is not compatible with algorithmic, computational principles of operation that unavoidably simplify that which they sort out and predict. This incompatibility gives rise to spaces of critique, especially for critiques of reductionism, but also for broader reflection of what machine learning can do, how, and why, and what eludes it. Crawford's punchline of AI not being either artificial (trained as it is with very human-made datasets, carrying and amplifying the cultural bias that these comes with) or intelligent (in that it does not think, but calculates) summarizes incompatibilities in how AI is framed and what is possibly expected from it, and how it operates. Consider, for example, a meme-ish post circulating on Twitter recapping listings of the most important philosophers asked of ChatGPT that moves from an all-male Western top-10 panel to a requested listing of female philosophers, and the inclusion of non-Western (first male, then female) thinkers when this bias is addressed; when the first question is repeated, an identical all-male, all-white list of most important philosophers reappears. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this.

JM&CCB: *Dependent, Distracted, Bored* offers a convincing analysis of the narratives of disenchantment that point to cognitive and affective inhibitions and pathologies brought about by the accelerating speeds of digital media and capitalism. According to other cultural diagnoses, this acceleration should be seen as a revolutionary phenomenon that can disrupt established

power relations and open up the potentials for empowerment. We are a bit skeptical of both strands, those that critique technological acceleration in the name of a normative framework presupposing a more 'authentic' relation between temporality and subjectivity, and those that see technological acceleration as an *a priori* condition for a postcapitalist society. How would you position your own work in relation to this debate? Can the framework of ambiguity help us approach contemporary forms of technological acceleration without falling into binary and totalizing oppositions?

SP: I would like to hope so. Some colleagues have identified my book as optimistic, which came as quite a surprise as it is not all that peppy but basically seeks less fixed ways to account for the experiences of living with networked media. That a project setting out to resist generalizing diagnoses becomes interpreted as optimistic basically speaks of the power and dominance of more pessimistic accounts—of the dominant role that paranoid forms of inquiry continue to hold in cultural theory. Both accelerationism and cultural critiques building on the premise of disenchantment represent this form of inquiry, albeit in starkly different ways. They both build on the premise (or knowledge) that "things are bad and getting worse" (Sedgwick 142). Accelerationism is open to the possibility of things then eventually being subverted through a collapse whereas narratives of disenchantment are not, as they are premised on a kind of authenticity that has become warped. The argument that something has been lost and that things are getting worse presumes that things were once better. In narratives of modern disenchantment, pre-industrialized, proto-capitalistic, and agrarian contexts figure in this vein rhetorically, discursively, as well as literally. Yet if we consider how life was in these contexts in terms of social equality, the richness of experience, boring circumstances, or simply life expectancy, I am not convinced that the issue can be framed in terms of "then better, now worse" in any believable manner. In many contexts, this "better" and more authentic world would, after all, be inclusive of

serfdom and slavery. I simply think that we need different places to start from, and alternative modes for thinking about the world we live in than ones reliant on a figure of a better past lost. Ambiguities also apply to the past.

My perspective can be best defined as thinking besides these debates: acknowledging them, and accounting for their logic and rationale, yet without subscribing to them. We are constantly made and unmade in our encounters with the world, which authenticity deployed as a kind of origin story fails to grasp. Contemporary life is about multiple speeds, both faster and slower, that we become more or less attuned to; there is no singular temporality to refer to, even when discussing a specific medium, media platform, or singular person. The speeding up of things has been a complaint voiced since the mid-19th century (with the invention of the wireless telegraph and railway travel)—it is something of a constant concern that our cognition cannot keep up with technological speeds. In the student essays that I worked with, speed is however not framed as a problem, but rather the lack thereof, as in internet connections lagging and resulting in an unbearable sense of stuckness. They also discuss high connection speeds as the prerequisite for focus, rather than a force of distraction. Clearly, something more complex is at play than a steady erosion of focus and memory as a kind of one-way street.

Judy Wajcman questioned this logic a while back while arguing for thinking about the mediated everyday in context-sensitive terms. Similarly, I am interested in theorization that moves through the empirical, not in terms of ephemeral "grounding" but as a commitment to that which Stuart Hall identified as the worldliness of cultural inquiry. In order to do critical work in this sense, it is necessary to engage with the stuff in and of the world, and to keep one's modes of conceptualization on the move when doing so—this also means moving between micro and

macro levels of cultural analysis. If ways of theorizing do not meet lived realities, as accounted for by different people, something is amiss.

JM&CCB: Are there any phenomena or conceptual issues that in your view do not get sufficient attention from media studies scholars today? Does the field of media studies currently have any blind spots that should be urgently addressed?

SP: I am not quite arrogant enough to argue that I have a grasp of everything done within media studies globally. But resources for basic research are growing scarcer in my context at least, as there is a push for more applied, solution-based, and impact-oriented inquiry. This is not to say that media scholarship should not be engaged with social issues and policy-work, but that the spaces for theoretical work where such impact is not easy, or even possible, to show have narrowed down. And if there is a requirement to detail the impact sought and the methods applied towards this in the application phase, this requires to an extent already knowing what will be found out. As a full professor with some research time, I am acutely aware of the privilege involved in being able to take on more exploratory projects and develop them at the pace they require. So, there is the issue of funding policy that has a very concrete impact on what gets to be studied, and how.

Then there is the question of temporality in our objects of study which, combined with the "publish or perish" imperative for junior scholars in particular, risks things being rushed in order for the output to feel timely. Changes in the media environment are rapid so research on any social media platform, for example, is to a degree historical by the time any journal article gets through the review process; not to even speak of book projects. The rhythm of reflexive and conceptual work is not easy to balance with this sense of things speeding ahead, or research

trying to keep up with shifting techno-social horizons. This is probably something that anyone working on network cultures needs to somehow balance, but we do so from very different positions of privilege. Thinking can, after all, be pretty slow work.

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