



## The Internet of feels

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*Palimpsest of practice*, available as Open Access PDF, and *Globalization, culture and development: the UNESCO convention on cultural diversity*, co-edited with Miikka Pyykönen and JP Singh) and several articles on the cultural industries in a global context. He is currently working on a new book: *Global cultural economy* (Routledge 2017, with Justin O'Connor).

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## The Internet of feels

**Networked affect**, edited by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2015, 280 pp., US\$35 (cloth), ISBN 9780262028646

In February 2016, Facebook released ‘Reactions’, a feature that allows users to respond to posts on the social network with one of six different emotional icons, in addition to the ubiquitous ‘Like’ button. The feature promises to translate a broader spectrum of responses into discrete units, in order to facilitate more robust interactions among friends while refining the user data available to the company. Given the origins of the Internet as a communication tool for academic researchers, the military, and government administrators, it is unsurprising that early scholarly accounts conceptualized it primarily as a system for sharing information among rational actors. However, as Facebook’s interface and data collection practices suggest, an exclusively rational, purposive model of Internet use cannot account for the full experience of networked information technologies.

*Networked affect* explores the empirical terrain marked out by the overlap of digital technologies, affect, and connectivity. Or, as editors Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit put it,

At the moment when information machines are becoming so powerful and seemingly lively that we know we are no longer fully in control, theorizations of affect offer ways to understand and explain the implications of the particular technological conjuncture at which the 'networked society' now finds itself. (p. 2)

Broadly speaking, this book argues that affect plays a key role in making sense of the social and phenomenological experience of online interactions, the socio-technical structure of digital technologies, and the larger functioning of social networks in contemporary society. In this, it demonstrates no lack of ambition. The collection brings together a transdisciplinary and international group of scholars and consists of 15 essays at the intersection of affect and technology. The essays are organized into three sections – 'Intensity', 'Sensation', and 'Value' – which roughly correspond to the questions of 'how', 'why', and 'to whom' does affect matter.

Apropos of its name, the first section focuses on how online exchanges are accompanied by varying degrees of intensity, or 'stickiness', such as a heated Facebook debate (Chapter 2 Paasonen), the circulation of images in LGBTQ Tumblr communities (Chapter 3 Cho), the political potential of sexual confession websites in Turkey (Chapter 4 Tzankova), the compensatory agency of avatars (Chapter 5 Hillis), and the psychoanalytic function of social networks within communicative capitalism (Chapter 6 Dean). 'Sensation' addresses affect and the materiality of technologies, including the affective relationality endemic to software design and execution (Chapter 7 Parikka), the affective capacities of the GIF file format (Chapter 8 Ash), analog passions circulated through digital media in Steampunk fan communities (Chapter 9 Sundén), immaterial labour in the production and consumption of alt porn (Chapter 10 Maddison), and students' disaffected engagements with technology in and outside of the classroom (Chapter 11 Petit). The third and final section looks at the value of affect within larger social, political, and economic contexts and traces out the underlying processes and stakes involved. The chapters in this section explore the ideological entailments of productivity management applications (Chapter 12 Gregg), the maintenance of social relations that support digital media economies (Chapter 13 Jarrett), the production of engagement on social networks (Chapter 14 Karppi), and the economic value of affective archives found on social network sites (Chapter 15 Pybus).

The book is most provocative and compelling in the example it sets for researching and writing about affect. Together, the chapters model an impressive range of subjects and methodological approaches, providing a productive array of jumping-off points for readers. For example, Alexander Cho's essay on Tumblr (Chapter 3) draws from over two years of participant observation in LGBTQ communities on the platform and articulates a digital research method that uses the practices of marginalized users to understand more general dynamics of interaction online. Jussi Parikka (Chapter 7) develops a compelling relational heuristic for the description and analysis of software, one that contributes to the study of affect beyond the human. Michael Petit (Chapter 11), meanwhile, experiments

with an affective mode of writing, suggests implications for classroom instruction, and in so doing compellingly connects the methods and products of research.

The book should be forgiven if no one of these approaches decisively addresses the many difficulties in researching and writing about affect, including the inter-related challenges of expressing affect through language, studying the affective experiences of others, and making generalizations from particular cases. Moreover, the contributors to the anthology invoke the term 'networked' in a number of different ways, using it, generally, to refer to the increasing pervasiveness of information technologies, social networks, and political structures. Because the term is rarely invoked as a specific attribute of affect, the book might more accurately be titled *Networks and affect*; most of the contributors are more concerned with the ways that affect operates through and alongside networked information technologies than in theorizing the ways affect itself is networked.

For cultural studies, *Networked affect* contributes to the growing body of work in new materialism that is grappling with the limitations of research primarily concerned with representation, signification, and subjectivity. Given cultural studies' commitment to understanding and enacting social and political change, the range of approaches encompassed by this volume promises to account for the increasingly significant relationship between bodies and technology, beyond any simple determinism. In a crucial move, the various contributors incorporate insights about distributed agency drawn from Actor–Network Theory into theorizations of technology to show how once 'the technological is understood as not merely instrumental but as generative of sensation and potentiality – as agential, to use ANT terminology – it becomes crucial to investigate what emerges in our networked exchanges and encounters' (p. 10). What emerges? The answers are at once local and global: affective charges, like thrills, shocks, and desire; more general dispositions, such as the disaffected state of 'been there, done that'; the social as such; and even overarching structures like informational capitalism.

Returning to the example of the Facebook 'Reactions' feature, *Networked affect* directs readers to attend to the ways technological architecture shapes the possibilities for expression and social interaction, how digital technologies are meaningfully material, and the mutually constitutive relationship between social networks and larger social and political contexts. Like.

## Notes on contributor

**Blake Hallinan** is a Ph.D. student in communication at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her research centres on the technological measurement, expression, and modulation of emotion in historical and contemporary contexts.

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