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INTRODUCTION

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# Mediated intimacies: bodies, technologies and relationships

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In Ken Plummer's groundbreaking study on intimacy, he notes that the word intimacy first appears in a Western dictionary in 1632 to mean 'inmost or innermost thoughts and feelings' (2003, p. 11). This coincides almost exactly with the emergence of René Descartes' rational subject of modernity, equipped with his distinctive interior life (1637/1927). Over the course of modernity, various discourses of intimacy have evolved to designate types of relationship that the modern subject [implicitly male, white, heterosexual, bourgeois, reproductive] might establish with a variety of others. 'Traditional' discourses of intimacy have referred to physical contact, sex, romance or passionate love, invariably with a spouse.

Newer discourses of intimacy have emerged that refer to the non-sexual relationships of family life (Chambers, 2013). More recently, a range of social and cultural theorists who have theorized the relationalities that became possible in the conditions of late modernity, have argued, in different ways, about the democratization of intimacy. 'Elective intimacy' (Chambers, 2013; Davies, 2014), 'pure relationships' and 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992), non-normative, casual and promiscuous intimacies (Berlant & Warner, 1998: Reay, 2014) have become the focus of interest, as have forms of intimate labour (Boris & Parrenas, 2010) that involve personal care, physical closeness, or familiarity and private knowledge (Bernstein, 2007; Boris & Parrenas, 2010; Constable, 2009; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Wolkowitz, 2006; Zelizer, 2005; see Burke, 2016 for a discussion). These have drawn attention to the expansion of the range of others that late modern subjects can legitimately be intimate with, as well as the modes of intimacy they might practice. They trace the development of 'the sphere in which we become who we are, the space in which the self emerges' (Oswin & Olund, 2010). At the same time, while the sphere of the intimate excites considerable fascination and attention, it continues to be seen as relatively unimportant within the wider scheme of political and public life. This is partly because of the division between the capitalist sphere of production and the site of social reproduction, upon which capitalism depends but does not necessarily support or sustain (Fraser, 2016). Yet politics, economics and intimacy remain profoundly interconnected.

What, then, is mediated intimacy? In some sense, all the forms of intimacy outlined above are mediated – in that they require a medium through which intimate relations can be established between the subject and the other. Whether it is language, the basis of Jamieson's 'disclosing intimacy' (1998) in which intimacy is established through the disclosure of information previously understood to be too private to share. Or whether it is through affect and the varying intensities of Lauren Berlant's theorizings of intimacy (1998). With this said, mediated intimacy has emerged as a specific term in recent debates on intimacy in sociology and media and cultural studies and has, thus far, two distinct, if overlapping meanings. The first was developed by Rosalind Gill, in relation to the ways that discourses of intimacy, specifically sex and relationship advice, are mediated in women's magazines (2009). This conceptualization of the term has been taken up by a variety of scholars looking at sex and relationship advice in a variety of contexts (Barker, Gill, & Harvey, in press; O'Neill, 2015). The second meaning of mediated intimacies comes from Deborah Chambers' book on relationships on Facebook, and, building on a range

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of groundbreaking social media literature, refers to the sorts of 'personal connections' (Baym, 2010) made possible through the sorts of digital platforms designed to network people (as both individuals and groups) together. These have focused on a range of personal relationships, 'mobile intimacy' (Hjorth & Lim, 2012), 'ambient intimacy' (Reichelt in Deuze, 2012, p. 231) and other 'intimate connections' (Ito & Okabe, 2005), as well as on the new 'seductive intimacy' of mediated work (Gregg, 2011).

This special issue is an attempt to develop insights made by both, containing contributions that explore not only the ways discourses of intimacy have been mediated in popular media, but also the range of intimacies that have both been constrained and made possible by constantly evolving networked technologies. In attempting to do this, we felt it necessary to frame the intervention this special issue is making, not in relation to (late-)modernity, like so much of the existing academic literature, but instead in relation to a range of recent developments in contemporary culture: notably, the contested hegemonies of postfeminism and neoliberalism and innovations within queer theory. Approaching it in this way has enabled us to map some important contradictions that have emerged in relation to intimacy in recent years. What happens to intimacy in a context in which neoliberalism has successfully privileged competitive, individualistic, market relations in all areas of social life? Has it negated the individual's capacity for intimacy (Bauman, 2003) and to what extent does it relate to the 'commercialization of intimate life' (Hochschild, 2012)? Or have different forms of intimacies proliferated as yet more sites at which capital can be accumulated (Skeggs & Yuill, 2015)? What sorts of intimacies proliferate in these conditions: those which consolidate hetero-patriachial power hierarchies or those which subvert them? What are its effects upon gendered (self) representations and sexual subjectivities? What part do the specificities of different media texts and technologies play in this context? We are told that we have more access to other people's lives, thoughts, experiences, sexual connections, than ever before. Moral panics circulate across platforms expressing anxiety over the apparent sexualization of girls and young people's exposure to the proliferation of pornographic sites (Dobson, 2015; Egan, 2013; Hasinoff, 2015; Ringrose, 2016; Smith, 2010). In addition, we are more connected to our friends, lovers, strangers and family through online networks. Dating and hook-up apps potentially facilitate relationships online. Media have become 'infrastructures of intimacy' and connections are now formed not only with other people, but with 'devices, apps and platforms' (Paasonen, in press).

### Queer intimacies

Since the beginnings of internet studies, different scholars have been mapping the ways that networked technologies have facilitated queer intimacies that may have otherwise been difficult to establish offline (Campbell, 2004; McGlotten, 2013; Mowlabocus, 2010). These studies have shown how groups of people whose desires for intimacy have fallen outside heteronormative acceptability, have been able to use these technologies to self-represent and instantly connect with networks of similarly desiring subjects from around the world.

Our first three contributions in this special issue further explore the possibilities afforded to queer subjects by networked technologies. The first is Rebecca Farber's '"Transing" Fitness and Remapping Transgender Male Masculinity in Online Message Boards'. This article explores the ways that transmen use a Reddit message board in relation to fitness regimes which Farber uniquely theorizes as transing practices. Farber finds that these boards are used in ways that, in some respects, reinforce normative connections between masculinity and aspirational muscularity, but that in others, queer the subjects who can legitimately aspire to this condition.

In 'From alliance to trust: Constructing Queer-Crip Intimacies', Andrea García-Santesmases Fernández, Núria Vergés Bosch and Elisabet Almeda Samaranch explore how queer and 'crip' (functional diversity) activists use Facebook to forge political alliances in relation to the documentary 'Yes We Fuck!', which looked at the sexuality of different functionally diverse people. They argue that in building these alliances, these activists were able to draw on both queer and crip discourses in ways that brought 'into play their bodies, emotions and intimacies and thus generate an enormous potential for political action that questions ableism as well as heteropatriarchy.'

Finally, for '"Tumblr mostly, great empowering images": Blogging, reblogging, and scrolling feminist, queer, and BDSM desires', Alessandra Mondin has carried out an online survey for an audience study of feminist pornographies. In this article, she analyses the response of 90 participants who mention Tumblr in their answers and, in doing so, maps the particular ways that affect circulates amongst people who use this specific platform to consume queer pornography.

## Postfeminist intimacies

Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker argue that after 2008 the media 'polarised gender norming' (2014, p. 1), The polarizing and reification of gender norms has also been noted by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff in *New Femininities* (2011). The articles by Laura Favaro, Akane Kanai and Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka locate their analysis within a digital media landscape made legible by Gill's (2007) framing of a 'postfeminist sensibility'. The online texts that they investigate are situated within a postfeminist popular culture which, in Angela McRobbie's analysis, takes feminism into account and then repudiates it (McRobbie, 2004). These authors focus on mediated intimacies that are securely located within a consumerist logic and that police normative femininities.

In her article 'Girlfriendship and sameness: affective belonging in a digital intimate public' Kanai draws on Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of an 'intimate public' as afforded by the Tumblr blog WhatShouldWeCallMe. Through an affective-discursive analysis of this blog and five of its adaptations Kanai argues that the intimacy of this digital public is based on fantasies of normative feminine sameness. In '"I Guess a Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend": The Role of Intimacy in the Celebrification of Beauty Vloggers', Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka focus on the commodification of intimacy in the vlogs posted by the beauty influencer Zoella. They suggest that Zoella forges an intimacy between her self-representation and her viewers through a big sister persona. By doing so she encourages an intimate connectivity between her audience, the brands that she associates herself with, as well as the gender predispositions that are linked to her celebrification with and through the commodities that she shares.

Favaro employs the qualitative data collected in interviews with magazine contributors from the UK and Spain to explore relationship and sex advice in online content for young women's lifestyle magazines. The author highlights how notions about authenticity are increasingly central to the mediation of intimacy within this digital commercial media product uniquely created *for* and largely *by* women. In particular, she notes how sex advice by women for women is heteronormatively and often misogynistically about increasing men's enjoyment. For example, as one contributor to *sofeminine.co.uk* warns her readers, 'One thing men don't like is mechanical oral sex, performed without passion'.

## Seeking intimacies

Our final three articles focus on the opportunities for seeking and consolidating intimacy in three distinct groups – teens using Snapchat in the UK, families with donor-conceived children in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, and 'sugar daters' from a range of countries on the website SeekingArrangement.com.

Kavita Nayar's article 'Sweetening the deal: Dating for compensation in the digital age' discusses sugar dating, a practice that challenges the notion that intimacy and economics should be distinct. Sugar dating refers to paid sexual encounters which are understood as authentic relationships. The discussions of online sugar daters reveal a tricky negotiation of the 'drama' implied by romantic relationships and the cold instrumentalism implied by paid sex. Sites like Seekingarrangement provide digital spaces in which women are encouraged to put themselves first and to put a value on the attributes that make them successful sugar babies. However, this form of 'egalitarian intimacy' is only made possible by devaluing women who work in the sex industries and by reinforcing distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' sex.

In 'Snapchat Memory and Youth Digital Sexual Cultures: Mediated temporality, duration, and affect', Jessica Ringrose and Sarah Handyside examine mediated sexual connections and intimate relationships in teens' social networking cultures, focusing on the Snapchat messaging app. Exploring on the mixture

of transience and permanence of 'snaps' exchanged through Snapchat, the article examines how their exchange becomes a form of currency within relationships, according to a sexual double standard in which girls' snaps are often read in a negative way. At the same time, Snapchat offers ways of rethinking, reinterpreting and remediating intimate memories of sexualized and sexual encounters.

Finally, in 'New kinships, new family formations and negotiations of intimacy via social media sites' Rikke Andreassen explores how social media sites such as Facebook enable new practices of intimacy in donor families. Defining intimacy as relational and referring both to 'the experience of belonging and connection and the practices that surround, lead to and negotiate belonging and connectedness', she shows how online intimacy is developed in relation to experiences of public and private, community, proximity and emotional intensity. These practices of intimacy make possible new family formations and new understandings of kinship.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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