7

FEELING DIGITAL

Key questions

- In what ways has the coming of digital society changed the social dynamics around emotions?

- How can theoretical concepts such as friction, stickiness, and grab contribute to explaining how emotions come to play a part in digital society?

- What are the mechanisms behind hate speech online, and why may digital hate campaigns be hard to battle?

- How can trolling be understood to be based on a new type of affect that is specific to digital society?

- What does the cute cat theory tell us about the role of affect in digital society?

Key concepts

The affective turn * affect/feelings/emotions * affective intensity * friction * flaming * trolling * lulz * cute cat theory * stickiness * grab * resonance * hate speech online

As much as the internet and social media have been discussed in relation to a visual turn in the social and cultural sciences (see Chapter 6) they are also important in relation to *the affective turn*. This turn, which happened in recent years, reflects a growing awareness in research of feelings and emotions for society and culture (Clough & Halley 2007). Of course, emotions have always been absolutely vital to

how people function. But cultural and social research has avoided dealing with them for a long time, instead focusing on processes that have been perceived to be more neutral, such as representation, mediation, and signification.

The affective turn allows for new perspectives, some of which are highly pertinent in relation to digital society. While most sociological theories of emotions focus on things that happen between individuals who are co-present in social contexts, emotions are also important in the mediated chains of interaction between people through which norms and a sense of collectivity are formed. Durkheim (1912) aptly argued more than a hundred years ago that 'the force' of the collective is the result of people fixing sentiments (feelings) to things (symbols, objects, events, and so on).

In this chapter, I will look at how sociality in digital society — for example, the circulation and uses of online videos, 'likes', photos, and so on — is largely driven by different forms of affect. Social exchanges take place in networks where the friction between people and technologies gives rise to emotions of varying intensity. I will discuss research that sees *affective intensity* as a key driving force for digital sociality. Covering phenomena such as flaming, trolling, lulz, and cute cats, the chapter introduces the theoretical concepts of stickiness, grab, and resonance, for an understanding of the emotional aspects of digital society.

NETWORKS OF FRICTION

As you have already seen in previous chapters, questions can be raised about to what extent, and how, digital society transforms the previously known ways in which people relate to each other and to society. Naturally, then, one can also ask whether interaction on the internet and in social media changes how emotions are formed and expressed between people. Is it possible, for example, to love or mourn online? And if so, how do the parameters change when such feelings are expressed in digitally networked media? What does it really mean to 'like' something in terms of a 'like' button? And how do things such as asynchronicity and anonymity (see Chapter 4) change the social dynamics around emotions?

When thinking about these things, it is important to remember that questions of emotions and the media are not specific to digital media. It goes without saying that a phone call or something we see on television can make us feel things. But some have argued, however, that questions about mediation and emotions have become more acute in digital society. Sociologists Tova Benski and Eran Fisher (2014: 1) say that this is because the internet allows for 'more elaborate modes of sharing, communicating, performance, and display', which 'all are key ingredients of emotions'. The internet and social media, therefore, generate a new emotional language, new manifestations of emotions, new ways in which feelings bounce between people, and so on.

Affect, feelings, and emotions

The distinction between the words 'affect', 'feelings', and 'emotions' has been debated. Internet researcher Zizi Papacharissi (2015) says that it is essential not to confuse the three. She explains that 'affect' is an experience of intensity that can often be unconscious. It is a particular energy, mood, or drive, which may in turn generate a particular 'feeling' with someone. Possibly, that feeling can subsequently materialise in the form of an expression of emotion. In other words, affect comes before the individual, while feelings are personal experiences of affect. Emotions, on their part, are socially communicated feelings. Sociologist Imogen Tyler (2008: 88) takes another route and says that any absolute distinction between affect, feelings, and emotions must be refused as it is 'critically and politically useless'. So, it might be good to remember that these three words can be taken by some to refer to somewhat different things. There is no clearly established terminological consensus here, though. In this book, I will use them as quite synonymous.

One way of understanding affect in relation to digital society is to use *actor-network theory*, a perspective that was mentioned briefly in Chapter 5. In this view, all subjects, human as well as others (hardware, software, gadgets, language, etc.) become what they are through their connections with others. Basically, actor-network theory argues, as one might tell from its name, that actors must be understood through the networks of which they are a part. The networked connections are what make the actors come into being as such. Internet researchers Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit (2015) argue that as such networks are in a constant state of interaction, interplay, and becomings, they generate *friction*. That friction, in turn, generates affect, feelings, and emotions. They explain (2015: 10):

> An individual looking at a display screen, for example, is connected to a computer, itself an assemblage of hardware, protocols, standards, software, and data. Once connected to an information network by means of modems, cables, routers, hubs, and switches, the computer affords access to other computers, online settings, people, groups, and files. All this entails a rethinking of both human and nonhuman actors and how affect is generated and circulated.

While this sounds a bit abstract, another way of putting it is that things that people do on the internet, and in social media, are largely about affective attachments. Online, people articulate desires, deal with issues of trust, and foster interests, activities, and

relationships that might be of deeply felt importance to them. In discussions through digital media, or when taking part in different types of content, we will laugh, cry, get seduced, become furious, or be interested. Paasonen and colleagues argue that online connections, as well as disconnections, are shaped by fluctuating and altering dynamics of love, desire, and wanting. Still, they say, many examples of internet research have presumed that digital tools and platforms are reasonably instrumental and neutral channels, through which the flow of information runs — at least relatively — smoothly. Some approaches also seem to assume that most users are quite rational and enlightened. Paasonen (2015) argues that this has brought about research perspectives that do not bring affect into the equation, and which therefore fail to account fully for the passionate character of many online exchanges.

EXERCISE

Consider various social media platforms and the different ways in which they are used. Think about the types of encounters between humans and/or non-human actors (images, videos, sets of relations) that may play out here. Try to map out different types of emotions or feelings that drive exchanges. What about social connections with 'friends'? What about online videos, memes, or viral links? In what sense can our engagement with such things be driven by affect? Which emotions can you think of, and in relation to which types of encounters or interactions? To what degree, and how, can you instead map out instrumental exchanges between neutral agents? Also, try to think of how social media platforms as such can be said to configure if and how affect becomes a factor in the interaction. Discuss, for example, differences between Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

AFFECTIVE INTENSITY

It should come as no surprise that emotions have been an important element of internet use ever since the early days of the medium. Discussion groups, social connectivity in general, and the motivations that make us share and circulate content, are all about intensities and sensations that are created in online encounters between people, digital platforms, images, videos, text, and sounds. But Paasonen (2015) argues that in spite of the crucial role played by affect in our experience of digital society, far too little research has been done in this area.

It is an important point for Paasonen that people's uses of social media are generally driven by a search for intensity. We are looking for some kind of 'affective jolt'.

This desire for intensity, Paasonen argues, is what makes users of digital tools and platforms interested and motivated to move across sites, networks, and discussions. Interestingly, she also points out that even though the thrills we seek are often not delivered, there is in fact also an element of affect to the very boredom that might keep us moving steadily from one item of content to another, as we search for something. Paasonen argues that interactions in digital society are driven by what she calls *affective intensity*. Affect is a force that attaches people to certain communities, networks, topics, tools, and so on. It is affect that makes people use social media and pulls them back for more. Calls for support, aggressive outbursts, descriptions of harm and hurt, or waves of sarcasm or amusement, are the types of actions and experiences that knit digital society together.

Paasonen makes this argument by referring to feminist researcher Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of *stickiness*. In Ahmed's view, things might be sticky both because of enjoyment and antagonism – both positive and negative affect. But some commentators, such as Grusin (2010), have claimed that social media is generally biased towards fostering only positive affect. A good example of this would be that Facebook has a like-button, but no corresponding dislike-button (although YouTube has one). According to this perspective, social media operate in order to minimise expressions of negative affect, such as fear, shame, and disgust. Grusin further argues that the positive jolts of merriment and surprise generated by cute and odd cat videos are symptomatic of the relationship between social media and emotions more generally.

Stickiness

Sara Ahmed (2004: 11) has formulated the very useful concept of 'stickiness' to describe how some of the objects that are shared and circulated socially 'become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension'. Things can be sticky because they are loaded with affect. And sticky things can obviously stick to other things. Online we might find sticky videos, sticky images, sticky hashtags, or sticky discussion threads. As things go viral they are stuck together by affect. The stickiness of such things might be measured by how often people reply or comment, share or like, or dislike, the content in question. For Ahmed (2004: 45), there is a '"rippling" effect of emotions; they move sideways (through "sticky" associations between signs, figures and objects)'.

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ambiguous ways, so that a 'like' is not necessary a like in all contexts and for all users. Furthermore, she emphasises that many memes, or cat pictures, might seem harmless at first glance, but that they in fact might also have unsettling qualities. Paasonen (2015: 29) states that:

> in uses of networked media, positive and negative affective intensities intermesh and cluster in complex ways to the degree that their qualities are difficult to tell apart and their intersections hard to precisely determine.

So, exchanges over the internet are affectively driven, but the type of affect that drives the exchanges can often be ambiguous. People connect, disconnect, share, and react because of emotions that they experience in doing so. These emotions might be both positive and negative, and are often much more intense than many early internet researchers expected. The internet, therefore, is a space where affect is both activated and expressed. Not only does it arouse and transmit emotions, it also influences how those emotions are shaped and displayed.

EXERCISE

Think about Grusin's view that social media in general tends towards expressing positive affect, and Paasonen's view that much content that might seem harmless can in fact have unsettling qualities. Try to apply these perspectives to your own experiences of social media. Also, think about the balance between thrill-seeking and boredom that might drive or guide our clicking and browsing behaviours online. To the extent that you agree that 'affective intensities' is an important part of digital sociality, what positive and negative emotions can you identify as central to what people do online? Are there emotional grey areas, or even all-new types of emotions, which can be experienced online?

FANNING THE FLAMES

Online social actions that express affect in the form of aggression, insults, and hatred towards other users are sometimes called *flaming*. Back in the 1990s, cultural critic Mark Dery (1993) defined flaming, or 'flame wars', as 'vitriolic' online exchanges that are conducted in public. He identified this type of discourse in discussion groups and emails, and argued that there is a 'wraithlike' nature to digital communication.

which tends to make hostility escalate much faster online than in face-to-face situations. He wrote that 'disembodied, sometimes pseudonymous combatants tend to feel that they can hurl insults with impunity (or at least without fear of bodily harm)' (Dery 1993: 1). This is, of course, in line with the perspective discussed in Chapter 4, that the reduced social cues in computer-mediated communication can disinhibit people.

Aligning with the criticisms raised in relation to Suler's disinhibition perspective (see Chapter 4), other scholars who have researched flaming have underlined the importance of not jumping to the conclusion that it is a direct effect of computer-mediated communication as such. Communications researcher Joseph Kayany (1998) argues that flaming, rather than being an antisocial consequence of simply using communicating through computers, has to be understood from the perspective of social context and group norms. Some political, religious, or otherwise 'sensitive' topics may have a tendency to bring out uninhibited expressions of hostility, and Kayany made the point that this is a facet of human communication in general, not just one found on the internet. Furthermore, there is the issue of definition, as according to communications researcher Philip Thompsen (1996: 302), 'a flame is not a flame until someone calls it a flame'.

In an experimental study, computer scientist Peter Moor (2007) analysed the role of perceived social norms on flaming behaviour in the context of posting text comments online. He found that users flamed more often when the commenters before them had done so. He concluded from this that people tend to conform to norms of flaming, meaning that if one person starts doing it, others will follow in their footsteps. Similar patterns of imitation, peer pressure, or even escalation, may of course happen in the same way offline. But in many online settings, a fair amount of people will write just one comment and never return to the discussion again. This disables accountability, and might also contribute to people being extra aggressive, since they don't have to wait around to take the consequences of anything they have said.

As we find in offline life, some forms of flaming can be done jokingly, as a form of friendly online 'trash-talking'. Even though the flames expressed can be received in different ways, whatever the intentions of the flamer (see the discussion about encoding/decoding in Chapter 6), the things said are not necessarily rooted in deeper sentiments of hate. However, they might still be, and regardless of the intentions of every individual person who is vilifying or attacking someone, these comments can sometimes add up exponentially to massive hate campaigns. This has to do with the specific dynamics of online debates more generally. When emotions are expressed in computer-mediated and networked modes of communication, the specific affordances as well as limitations of the platforms seem to easily contribute to making affect sharper, while also reducing people into stereotypes.

133

Love online

Love, romance, and sexual attraction are among the feelings that are often discussed in relation to the internet and social media. Research on online dating and cybersex has generally argued that online relationships, if compared with their offline counterparts, tend to be more intimate and emotionally more intense (Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Consequently, different aspects of love online have been explored in a number of studies. A main focus for that research has been on self-presentation strategies in online dating, and many results have confirmed similar patterns to those discussed in Chapter 4; namely that people can reveal a surprising amount of intimate details, as well as build trust, through computer-mediated communication.

THE FACELESS MULTITUDE

We must remember, however, as discussed in previous chapters, that these same affordances that can bring out affect sharpened into aggression can at the same time be essential for some people's opportunities and possibilities to peacefully express their identities and their views on the world. Law professor Danielle Keats Citron (2014: 61) argues that it is not necessarily the case that the internet fuels hate or brings out the worst in us. She emphasises the importance of anonymity for empowerment:

> Political dissenters document governmental abuse on micro-blogging sites because they can disguise their real names. Teenagers share their concerns about coming out to family and friends on LGBT sites because they are not worried about being identified. Under the cloak of anonymity, new parents are more willing to be honest about the difficulties of raising children without worrying about being labeled a bad parent.

At the same time, networked digital tools and platforms can obviously also facilitate the emergence of cyber mobs. Various extremist groups were indeed among the very earliest users of the first incarnations of the internet. Still today, it seems that people are more inclined towards antisocial behaviour, and joining bigoted mobs, when interaction happens online — relatively anonymously, asynchronously, and so on. Things may also get further amplified as online communication tends towards group polarisation. People who are inclined to turn to radical groups are 'nudged to greater extremes' if participation in such groups takes place online (Citron 2014: 63).

The same processes can contribute to making people who are generally not very radical or extreme in their views move towards more relentless views online. According to Citron, using the internet can thus radicalise people, pulling fence-sitters into either/or positions. Furthermore, the networked and viral character of online communication can significantly worsen the damage made by spreading the abuse both far and wide. There is also, Citron argues, a tendency to trivialise the feelings of people who become targets of hate and harassment online. In the 'Wild West' zone of free speech, which the internet is sometimes believed to be, anyone feeling hurt risks being seen as a hysterical 'drama queen' unable to realise that threats and attacks might be 'just words', satire, or a way for the alleged haters to simply pass time or beat boredom.

The so-called Gamergate controversy in late 2014 was an illustrative example of the emergence of a cyber mob. The controversy sprung from a longstanding debate over sexism versus progressivism in computer gaming culture. According to Wikipedia, this hate and harassment campaign started in August of 2014, when game developer Zoë Quinn — creator of the critically acclaimed game DepressionQuest — was aggressively accused in a blog by a former boyfriend of having, among many other things, cheated on him with a gaming journalist in exchange for media coverage.[1] Soon, other people joined in, on IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Reddit, 4chan, and other forums, spreading the accusations further. Some think that the widespread support for the harassment campaign had to do with many traditional gamers not liking the 'artsiness' of her creations. People who dared to joke about or criticise the attackers, such as game developer Brianna Wu and feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian, soon also became targets of extreme hate speech, and increasingly disturbing threats. It did not stop there, however, as other female game creators and journalists were targeted as well, some leaving the industry and others being driven from their homes by a series of violent and extreme threats.

These events quickly developed into a full-scale internet culture war over the presence of women in the gaming sector, both as in-game characters, and as gamers or developers. This war, said *The Washington Post*, was taking place between 'a motley alliance of vitriolic naysayers: misogynists, anti-feminists, trolls, people convinced they're being manipulated by a left-leaning and/or corrupt press, and traditionalists who just don't want their games to change', and 'independent game-makers and critics, many of them women, who advocate for greater inclusion in gaming'.[2] However, Gamergate was something more than a mere consumer movement or an expression of subcultural drama.

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[1] https://thezoepost.wordpress.com.

[2] www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/.

It tapped into a larger conflict over gender, misogyny, visibility, and inclusion. Many of the tens of thousands of people who contributed to the controversy still claim that it was just about ethics in gaming journalism. Such claims, however, did not fit with the rape and death threats Quinn received, as well as the posting of Quinn's personal information (her address, nude photos, etc.) online. For anyone claiming the controversy to be less about ethics, and more about sexism, there was a high price to pay.

In February 2016, as Quinn's ex-boyfriend's court hearing drew closer, Quinn became hesitant. Her ex-partner had become an internet celebrity, and the hate mob had grown more powerful. The court case appeared to intensify the threats, so she decided to drop the case, as she felt that the legal justice system would be unable to protect her from the online hate campaign. The ex-boyfriend was not the worst of the harassers, and very far from being the only one. The meticulous documentation kept by Quinn, Wu, and Sarkeesian 'suggested a faceless multitude, who together were profoundly more frightening and disruptive than [the initial] blog post ever was'. In a video interview,[3] Quinn explained how she did not 'think the courts are ready to even deal with this' and because of that 'it doesn't feel like a battle worth fighting'. Citron agrees that there is a huge lack of support available to victims of online abuse. In one case, unrelated to Gamergate, the police called the harassment in question 'annoying and immature Internet communications [that] did not meet the criteria for criminal prosecution' (Citron 2014: 88). Speaking specifically on Quinn's case, Citron said: 'At some point, it becomes too much for the system to bear. You can't nail down criminal liability in a case like Zoe's, where there's such a huge number of actors' (2014: 88).

EXERCISE

Look for traces of Gamergate on the internet — in blogs and news sites, on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so on. Make sure to get an insight into the types of threats and attacks that the targets were subjected to. Try to analyse the controversy by drawing on previous discussions about anonymity (see Chapter 4), networked publics (see Chapter 2), networked individualism (see Chapter 5), and the notions of affective intensity and stickiness in this chapter. Generally, try to identify what elements of these events are due to social mechanics that are unique to digital society. Which of these things could not have happened without the internet and, most importantly, why?

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[3] www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/02/17/in-the-battle-of-internet-mobs-vs-the-law-the-internet-mobs-have-won/.

TROLLS AND LULZ

It might not be very surprising that people love, hate, befriend, and fight each other on the internet and in social media. As society is increasingly also taking place in online settings, it seems a natural consequence that basic social forms such as sociability, conflict, and dominance come along with it. However, as I have discussed in previous chapters, digital society also gives rise to social forms that appear to be more specific to its modes of interaction. One such phenomenon is that of *trolling*. The existence of this ambiguous practice of posting inflammatory remarks, wrongful information, false accusations, or other content which aims to stir up emotions and generate strong reactions, underlines the complexity of online interaction.

Trolling is different from flaming, which translates into hostility, aggression, and insults. Trolling is a form of intentional provocation, entailing a broad repertoire of more nuanced practices: posting opinions that one does not really hold, being intently categorical, making comments that are abruptly off topic, and so on. Internet researcher and literary scholar Whitney Phillips (2015) is interested in this grey area of ambiguous behaviour online. She argues that many digitally mediated interactions fall somewhere in between play — crass joking, identity experimentation, etc. — and hate — systematic bullying, hate speech, and other behaviours that are obviously damaging. So, while far from all encounters on the internet can be defined in terms of trolling, the phenomenon nonetheless brings into view a hinterland of social practices, which can also contribute to wider understandings of how digital sociality works.

The roots of trolling

In her book on trolling, Whitney Phillips (2015) describes how the roots of the phenomenon were in newsgroups such as alt.tasteless and in the proliferation on the early internet of so-called shock-sites. Such forums nurtured a nihilistic attitude towards content, and fostered a culture of pointing unknowing web surfers to shock-images that 'can't be unseen', or to completely pointless stuff. Subsequently the infamous /b/ discussion board — a subset of the anonymous online forum 4chan — became a steady breeding ground for trolling. /b/, a 'random' board with a 'no rules' policy, became an incubator of sorts for making trolling into a coherent and recognisable practice. Internet researcher Lee Knuttila (2011) describes the 'dirt and ore' of /b/:

(Continued)

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the tens of thousands of peo...
just about ethics in gaming,... habitually unpleasant
and death threats Quinn re... f personal infor-
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In February 2016,... n matched with
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...ernet slang acronym-cum-word for laughter (lol). Lulz refers to a certain
...laughter that is unsympathetic and ambiguous. It 'celebrates the anguish of
...ughed-at victim' and expresses 'amusement at other people's distress' (Phillips
...15: 26). Trolling is done 'for the lulz'. The only reason for trolling is to extract lulz
...from a situation. But even though this means that trolls don't mean to do any real

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[4] https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Lulz.

(Continued)

> The derogatory specter which haunts /b/ stems from its habitually unpleasant discourse. There is minimal regulation of /b/, beyond the posting of personal information, images of child pornography and discussion of 'raids' on other Web sites. Even these nominal rules are regularly flouted. /b/'s enigmatic in-jokes, disparaging language, distressing gory images and unbound arguments are often matched with glimpses of astute political discussion, heartfelt moments of virtual friendship and sparkling banter.

The origin of the notion of trolling has been debated. The word 'troll' can make us think of the trolls of Scandinavian folklore. At the same time, 'trolling' may describe the fishing technique by which a lure is dragged behind a moving boat. Obviously both the mischievous character of mythological trolls and the activity of luring someone are functioning metaphors for the practice in question. Phillips found that internet trolls are a diverse group, ranging from individuals seemingly lacking in any form of empathy, or those being explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic, to individuals who can be surprisingly respectful, even though they also engage in trolling.

Trolling refers to a whole spectrum of occasional as well as persistent behaviours, where some are very aggressive, and would legally count as harassment, while others are relatively harmless acts of misleading others for humorous purposes. In her research, Phillips found that in spite of a wide variety of trolls and trolling behaviours, there are still some consistent markers of what trolling is. First, she argues, a troll always self-identifies as a troll. In other words, there is no accidental trolling. Simply provoking others, simply flaming, or simply expressing racist, sexist, or homophobic sentiments does not as such constitute trolling. Nor does the act of disrupting online discourse with stupid questions. According to Phillips' definition, trolling is something that a self-identifying troll sets out to do.

Second, trolls are motivated by 'lulz'. This is a variation — or a corruption[4] — of the internet slang acronym-cum-word for laughter (lol). Lulz refers to a certain kind of laughter that is unsympathetic and ambiguous. It 'celebrates the anguish of the laughed-at victim' and expresses 'amusement at other people's distress' (Phillips 2015: 26). Trolling is done 'for the lulz'. The only reason for trolling is to extract lulz from a situation. But even though this means that trolls don't mean to do any real

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[4] https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Lulz.

138

harm, Phillips (2015: 36) still underlines that 'lulz are predicated on asymmetry' as their pursuit means that trolls' targets become objectified pawns.

Trolling is based on the idea that nothing should be taken seriously. It revels in the attachment-free aspects of the internet and social media. Behind 'the mask of trolling' users are free to choose to what extent the things that they say and do reflect their actual personal beliefs or not. On the other hand, trolling depends on its targets not being anonymous, or at least being willing to disclose some of their offline vulnerabilities and attachments. While trolling as such is obviously both ideologically and ethically fraught, it still expresses something crucial about the mechanics of online interaction.

It might seem easy to dismiss trolling as aimless, immature, and unnecessary. But at the same time, trolls also develop skills in manipulating flows of communication or people's reactions — trolls are 'agents of cultural digestion' (2015: 10). Trolling can also make us aware of overlaps that may exist between what we feel to be negative or positive, threatening or desirable. Phillips (2015: 11) argues that:

> trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the troll's most disruptive behaviors.

So, trolling points to the complexities of social actions online. People will do things with different motivations or aims, and these actions can get aggregated through networked media, and get intended as well as unintended consequences, which can be good and creative, as well as hateful and destructive.

GRAB AND RESONANCE

In order to account for the complex relationship between digital media and emotions, Paasonen suggests a shift away from a one-sided focus on representation. She means that if one only studies social exchanges and experiences from a textual perspective — just analysing written or other symbolic traces of what people have said or done — the sensory and embodied aspects of being digitally social are framed out. Therefore, she says, we must avoid 'logocentric' views, because they rely on linguistic models for understanding social life. So, instead of only looking at the posts that people have made, the photos they have uploaded or viewed, and the videos that they have created or watched, we must also think about how the content *affects* the users. This, however, is easier said than done, since it poses a delicate analytical challenge.

In media research and criticism more generally, there has historically been a tendency to devalue popular genres such as sentimental 'weepies', thrillers, and low comedy. This might have to do, some say, with the fact that such genres tend to be bodily felt rather than intellectually experienced. The same goes for many genres in

internet culture. Paasonen (2011) makes her point in relation to a case study of online porn, which in spite of its widespread use, is still conspicuously under-researched. It is consumed by at least a quarter of all Western internet users, and was crucial for how the internet as such developed into a commercial medium. It is everywhere, but somehow still seen as marginal. This can at least in part be explained by its strong affective charge.

As Paasonen (2011: 2) explains: Pornography attaches 'the viewing body to its affective loop: in porn, bodies move and move the bodies of those watching'. Furthermore, people's encounters with online porn involve intimacy. That intimacy can be desirable, surprising, unwanted, disturbing, and so on. But it is still intimacy. And this mechanism in digital society is applicable not only to the example of porn, but also for things ranging from pictures of cute cats that make our hearts melt, to shock sites with horrendous depictions of gore, which we can't erase from our minds. The content is physically experienced, and this poses problems for researchers who need to keep their analytical minds straight. Rather than watching content on the internet, Theresa Senft (2008: 46) argues, people are 'grabbed' by its content. Senft writes of 'the grab' as a specific dynamic of spectatorship and participation that is characteristic of digital society:

> By 'grab,' I mean to clutch with the hand, to seize for a moment, to command attention, to touch — often inappropriately, sometimes reciprocally. To grab is to grasp, to snatch, to capture. Grabbing occurs over the Web in different ways during each stage of production, consumption, interpretation, and circulation.

Being influenced by Senft's notion of the grab, Paasonen agrees that doing things with the internet and social media is quite different from engaging with television or cinematic fiction. In her studies of porn, Paasonen explains that from the narrow perspective of representation — what story it tells, what imagery is shown — online porn is largely the same as pre-digital porn. The difference now is in the technological makeup and the related modes of engagement:

> Users do not merely choose a video to watch, as one might do with VHS, DVD, or a pay channel. Instead, they search, browse (through sites, listings, and directories), bookmark, click, download, upload, leave comments, rate, log in, and compare. (Paasonen 2011: 259)

Such things render engagement with social media a stronger visceral character than many other, and previous, forms of media use. It is not that books, music, films, and television, doesn't move us emotionally. Indeed, all of these media often do. Loud

live music is certainly felt in the body, as is what we experience when watching a stunning 3D movie at a cinema. But many of the visceral experiences of non-internet media also happen at the representational level. In those cases, we are moved by identification — with the story of a book, the lyrics to a song, the symbolic power of a photograph, and so on. But in some settings — especially so with digitally networked and interactive media — something more happens. Paasonen suggests that we use the concept of *resonance* to describe this. Once again, using online porn as an example, resonance describes not only the force and grab of porn, but also how users attach themselves — stick — to the content. Resonance, for Paasonen, is about connections between affective content and affective audiences and how they resonate, or dissonate, with each other.

AWW!

The largely popular social news and entertainment site Reddit is organised into special interest pages that are called 'subreddits'. As of 2015, the site has several hundreds of millions of visitors that take part in submitting text, images, and videos, and in 'upvoting' or 'downvoting' content on these pages. One of the default subreddits — this means that everyone who is creating a user account is automatically subscribed to it — is 'Aww'. Its focus is to 'post pictures, videos and stories of things that make you go, "Aww!" from utter cuteness'.[5] The subreddit abounds with pictures and videos of adorable puppies, bunnies, kittens, and so on. It is allowed to post pictures of humans as well, but images of young and/or small furry animals are by far the most popular items to share.

Aww is one of many examples of how cuteness, as argued by Japanese Studies scholar Mio Bryce (2006: 2265), has become a 'powerful cultural medium'. This is expressed in relation to Japanese pop culture in the form of anime and other genres, expressions, or things that can be described as 'kawaii' (a specific form of cuteness), but also in the fact that there is an over-abundant interest in things that are cute in internet culture more generally (Wittkower 2012). Cuteness is, for example, an element of some internet memes, and most prominently of so-called LOLCats (Miltner 2011). The LOLCat meme, an image macro (see Chapter 2) of one or more cats with humorous, misspelled, or grammatically incorrect captions, draws at least in part on an 'affective appeal of cuteness' (Shafer 2012). For some reason, images and videos of cats are in heavy circulation all over the internet. In many social media contexts, it might indeed seem as if it is 'kittens all the way down' (Lobato & Meese 2014).

[5] www.reddit.com/r/aww/wiki/index.

Civic media researcher Ethan Zuckerman (2015: 134) has written that the contemporary internet was even designed 'in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats'. Of course, he does not really mean that the internet was conceived as a vehicle on which to share cat photos. He uses cute cats as a metaphor for user-created day-to-day content, and he argues that the post-web 2.0 internet is, on the whole, a space for regular people to make and circulate a mix of everyday things. Being interested in civic uses of digital media, Zuckerman argues that the social networks that are established and maintained among people who create, share, like, and comment on 'cute cats' has a latent capacity to be mobilised for political activism, should the need arise. This idea — sometimes called the *cute cat theory* — points out that publishing platforms that were designed to be used by activists or other specialists are often less effective than more widely used digital tools and channels:

> Internet tools designed to let ordinary consumers publish non-political content are often useful for activists because they are difficult for governments to censor without censoring innocuous content; because censorship of inoffensive content can alert non-activist users to government censorship; and because activism using consumer tools can tap the 'latent capacity' of non-activist users to create and disseminate activist content. (Zuckerman 2015: 132)

Another important dimension here, which is beyond the scope of Zuckerman's argument, is that this latent capacity often comes from the 'cute' stickiness — returning to Ahmed's notion — of the content that is circulated. The underlying potential for forceful action relies, in other words, on the affective appeal of the communication infrastructure. And apart from infrastructure, maybe it is also about the affective intensities stuck to the cute cats in themselves which are mobilised for political purposes in these cases. As communications researcher Zizi Papacharissi (2015: 93) puts it, the platforms are already 'affectively disposed', and when this is the case *affective publics* can be mobilised.

In her research on political activism, Papacharissi argues that the internet and social media facilitate political expressions and formations that are grounded in affect. In line with the discussion above about the cute cats, Papacharissi says that people become connected by discourses that are affectively charged, and that feelings about both private and public issues and things are very important driving forces for networked publics. In other words, Papacharissi, like Paasonen, sees affect as a key element of digital sociality. Drawing on research that has been described previously in this book, about the means through which social media can facilitate people's feelings of engagement, Papacharissi argues that networked technologies create affective

connections among people. This happens when 'affective gestures' call networked publics into being. Such affective gestures can take the shape of cute cat pictures as well as of explicitly political discourse – the point being that affect is not a bearer of any agenda, but simply of intensity.

> Thus, affective attunement demonstrated through liking a post on Facebook, endorsing an item in a news aggregator, uploading and sharing a YouTube video, or using a meme generator to create and share a simple message via a photograph is indicative of civic intensity and thus a form of engagement. (2015: 25)

So, while the internet and social media can function as a space in which to express virtually any type of emotion — love, hate, anger, or the heart-warming feeling of looking at an adorable furry kitten — it is also interesting to think about what the affective character of digital media means more generally. Learning from perspectives such as those of Ahmed, Paasonen, Papacharissi, and Zuckerman, one conclusion would be that the very fact that people keep channels open by circulating everyday or random content that sticks, creates a powerful latent potential for mobilising networked publics for a variety of social and political reasons and aims.

EXERCISE

You have read in this chapter about how online sociality is driven by affective intensities. Such intensities can come from feelings of 'aargh' (as in flaming), 'lulz' (as in trolling), 'eww' (as in being shocked or disgusted), or 'aww' (as in cute cats). As you have seen, some researchers think that there is a family resemblance to the emotions evoked by things ranging from the shocking to the cute. Now, go to a site such as imgur.com and browse through some of 'the most viral images on the internet'. To what extent can the images you find be understood in terms of affective intensity, grab, and resonance? What different emotions do the images seem to evoke? Can you construct a typology of the most common emotions? Try to reflect upon what function content like this has for social interaction and society more generally. You could also search the internet for 'reaction videos' — an emerging genre in its own right which documents and shares emotional reactions to content — and approach them from a similar perspective. Think about the social action of sharing reactions. What does it mean?

FURTHER READING

Papacharissi, Zizi (2015). *Affective Publics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Papacharissi's book about 'affective publics' looks at how political expressions online —
both everyday, casual ones and massive movements — are enabled by social media. This
is because social media are a particularly good fit for expressing feelings of engagement.
Affective publics, driven by storytelling, can feel their way through digital society.

Hillis, Ken, Paasonen, Susanna, & Petit, Michael (Eds.) (2015). *Networked Affect*. Cambridge,
MA: MIT Press.
In this edited volume, a group of researchers address the relationship between networks
and affect. Rooted in the emerging field of 'affect theory', the book covers how our inter-
actions with websites, apps, forums, gifs, and the like, allow us to experience a variety of
sensations. It is about affective online encounters and the often contradictory and complex
feelings that they may arouse.

Phillips, Whitney (2015). *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Phillips' book on the relationship between trolling and mainstream media is the best book
to date about the phenomenon. She argues that trolling is not as deviant as it is made out to
be, but that it fits rather well with how the contemporary media landscape works. Trolling,
she argues, can also be seen as a form of cultural critique.