Social Media and the Materialisation of the Affective Present

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A prevalent way in which social media and other digital technologies are currently framed is as hyper-connected, always on, affective and non-representational, and as involved in re-working boundaries between production and consumption, and between temporalities and spatialities. For example, Twitter describes its mission as "[t]o give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (https://about.twitter.com/company), while Facebook explains its News Feed as "a regularly updating list of stories from friends, Pages, and other connections, like groups and events" (https://newsroom.fb.com/products/). Instagram describes itself as

> A fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with a mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos'
>
> (https://www.instagram.com/about/faq/).

In these three brief, indicative examples, various social media platforms are depicted as spatial and temporal connections, enabling links between people and events to be shared in the moment, and perhaps also kept forever.

In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which social media is understood to be reworking time through its connectivity, immediacy and instantaneity. In particular, I suggest that social media may produce a particular kind of a 'temporal present'[1] where bodies, technologies and the socio-cultural are intertwined and experienced in terms of 'aliveness'[2], and 'always-on-ness'[3]. I suggest these qualities of social media be understood in terms of what Raymond Williams terms pre-emergence[4]. I draw on the materialist tradition of Williams and more recent new materialist approaches to media and culture, to consider whether and how social media constitutes an *infra*-structure of feeling, where data capture and connections between and across various platforms, devices and technologies are key, and through which practices such as linking, tagging and checking and affects such as compulsion, frustration, anxiety and joy are materialised.

The 'temporal present'

One way to understand the kinds of temporality that are central to social media is in terms of the present. That is, the connectivity, instantaneity and constant availability of social media creates a present temporality; a temporality that is concerned with 'the now', and that is stretched and condensed in various ways. It is important to note that such a temporality does not preclude the past or the future – as noted above, present events can be archived into the future, and as I discuss below, the present is a flexible temporality, potentially incorporating other temporalities. Furthermore, such a present temporality is affective; it is 'fun', 'quirky', and involves friends sharing experiences. As a number of different scholars might put it, it is a temporality that is '(a)live'[5].

Taking up Williams' influential work on 'structures of feeling' can help to elucidate these points. For example, in his essay 'Structures of Feeling', Williams develops an account that seeks to comprehend culture not as 'fixed forms'[6] but as an 'active', 'flexible', 'temporal present'[7]. In this way, he aims to direct attention towards the dynamism of culture; rather than being analysed in terms of a 'habitual past tense', culture can and should (also) be understood as 'this, here, now, alive, active'[8]. Such an approach to culture draws on the relationships between what he defines as 'dominant', 'residual', and 'emergent' culture. Dominant culture refers to hegemonic culture[9] and residual culture to what "has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only, and often not at all, as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present."[10] Of particular salience to a concern with a present temporality is emergent culture, which Williams describes as such:

> By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture (and in this sense 'species-specific') and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel. Since we are always considering relations within a cultural process, definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant[11].

In this quotation Williams posits emergent culture as that which is both novel and new, and which is "substantially alternative or oppositional" to dominant culture. As such, dominant culture comes to stand for a "habitual past tense"[12]; that is an understanding of culture as fixed and finished. However, dominant culture occupies

an important position in Williams' schema, as it enables both emergent and residual culture to be identified and made sense of. Thus, while he emphasises an understanding of culture as (a)live, he also maintains that there is a need to attend to the past (and the future, as I will go on to discuss).

Williams goes on to offer a more complex account of emergent culture, naming what he terms 'evident emergence' and that which is pre-emergent:

> What matters, finally, in understanding emergent culture, as distinct from both the dominant and the residual, is that it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form. Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named (1977b: 126).

Here then, Williams argues that what is most significant to an understanding of emergent culture is that which is "active and pressing but not yet fully articulated." It is thus not a practice that can be readily identified or that already has a form, but that which is in itself in the process of emerging. Crucially, Williams argues that:

> It is to understand more closely this condition of pre-emergence, as well as the more evident forms of the emergent, the residual, and the dominant, that we need to explore the concept of structures of feeling.[13]

Social media as pre-emergent

How might social media be understood as a "condition of pre-emergence"? What assistance does such an understanding contribute to an exploration of a structure of feeling? Again, turning to Williams' work is productive. Published in the 1970s and 1980s, Williams focuses on how a structure of feeling is generated by textual forms. For example, in 'The Welsh Industrial Novel'[14] he describes how nineteenth and twentieth century novels both capture and create a specifically 'Welsh structure of feeling'[15] that comes from the physical characteristics of Welsh industrial areas and the social relations and historical events that have come to compose its working life[16]. He tracks the emergence and development of this genre of writing, explaining how it moves from the *experience* of mass industrialization in Wales to its *observation*. It is only when it is able to observe, rather than experience the situation, that it becomes a coherent genre. Drawing on the distinction made between pre-emergent and emergent culture, what Williams is pointing to here is how, in the transformation from experience to observation, a particular genre is formed. Experience may be thus conceived as pre-emergent and observation as emergent.

My suggestion is that social media is experiential, and hence is pre-emergent. It is a series of practices, activities, flows and events that, as Williams says, are not 'fully articulated' but hover 'at the edge of semantic availability'[17]. Consider for example, how in the three examples introduced above, the emphasis is on what is happening. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are platforms organised as feeds that are always updating, presenting a constant flow of images and text. These images and texts do not so much cohere as indicate the movement of data. As such, they are experienced more than they are observed.

Affect: The pre-emergent

What is also suggested with the understanding of social media as pre-emergent is that the liveness and happening of social media is a situation that is experienced – felt – 'before' it becomes something coherent. In this sense, the 'pre' of pre-emergence becomes particularly important. Moving from the cultural materialism of Williams to the new materialisms can help shed light on this 'pre'. Some theorists see these two traditions as difficult to bring together – for example Joss Hands[18] sees the new materialisms as failing to account for the social and cultural contexts in which technologies emerge, which is central to Williams' arguments. However, in terms of my focus here, in both Williams' and more recent approaches, sensation and feeling are identified as key means to understand the social world. For example, while Williams concentrates on structures of feeling as essential to comprehending the dynamism and activity of the social and cultural world, Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford propose the notion of '***the happening*** of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency, and sensuousness'[19]. Furthermore, where Williams focuses on the pre-emergent as that which helps to make sense of a structure of feeling, Patricia Ticeneto Clough argues that social and cultural theory needs to attend to the infra-empirical – that is, how the "activity of our world today to a large extent takes place at time-space scales far finer than those of human perception, at the probabilistic scale of affect."[20] For Clough here, the social today operates not so much in terms of ideological interpellation, or subject formation, but through "affective modulation and individuation."[21] This is a social modulated at the edges of perception and consciousness[22], through the "affective capacities"[23] of both humans and technologies. Taking up Clough's point, Williams' identification of the significance of the emergence of the cultural and social is amplified today; what is in a state of pre-emergence, what "hovers at the edge of semantic availability," is increasingly not only the preserve of emergent culture, but what the dominant social and cultural 'is'[24].

As I have suggested, this state of pre-emergence is especially the case with social media. Social media data is created in real time through a range of different devices, and is collected and analysed in this 'same' time. While humans may be partly involved in these processes of creation, collection and analysis, they are only one aspect of it; technologies like mobile phones, swipe cards, and social media are involved in their creation, and computer technologies can analyse this data far quicker than humans. Thus, both users and analysts of social media experience rather than observe. The speed of this 'real time' experience may therefore be understood in terms of the present – it is not the fixed and finished 'past tense' but in Williams' terms, is the 'active', 'flexible' 'temporal present'.

Furthermore, in more recent work Clough, Karen Gregory, Benjamin Haber, R. Joshua Scannell, argue:

> Big data doesn't care about 'you' so much as the bits of seemingly random information that bodies generate or that they leave as a data trail; the aim is to affect or prehend novelty[25]

The first part of this quotation emphasises the displacement of the human within the datalogical network – a key theme in work in the new materialisms, where humans may be one part of a network or series of connections, but not necessarily most important or at its centre. The second part is productive in terms of thinking about the pre- of the present, where the aim of big data is not only to care about what 'you' have done, so much as what you are doing and may do. To 'affect or prehend novelty' is for big data to "seek to prehend incomputable data and thereby modulate the

emergent forms of sociality in their emergence."[26] Big data is concerned with the emergence, or the 'pre', of the present. The present is flexible, happening, live – that is, is in the process of emerging. In this sense, it is future-oriented.

Not only is the pre-emergent important to new materialist work, it has also been theorised by those working on affect. As a force that registers in the body before it may be comprehended or made sense of, affect is understood as physical or emotional states or activities that are pre-conscious[27]. Indeed, Brian Massumi suggests that one way to understand affect is in terms of a 'missing half-second'; an activity that occurs in the brain – and this also might be extended to include the body more generally – prior to that activity being made conscious[28]. Specific affects that may be produced through engagement with social media, and digital media more generally, include, for example, a compulsion to frequently check on our own or friends' Facebook posts, or our emails; the lure of the Twitter flow; an anxiety if we are away from our mobile phone; nerves about our laptop running low on battery; boredom at agreeing to terms and conditions during online shopping; frustration when internet pages take a while to load, or when updates to applications interrupt what we're doing; joy at speaking to a friend on Skype; distraction by working across different screens; immersion in a Netflix box set… While some of these affective states might be articulable in/as language – frustration, anger, nerves, for instance – others may be vaguer, or not so easily expressed, and indeed might escape or exceed their expression in language. They hover "at the edge of semantic availability"[29].

Infra-structures of feeling

Bringing together the materialist position of Williams and new materialist work on data and affect indicates that pre-emergence is a particularly significant aspect of

contemporary media culture. Drawing on both Williams' definition of pre-emergence as the "active and pressing but not yet fully articulated," and on the importance of what Clough terms the 'infra-empirical' to social media and digital culture, to conclude I suggest the concept of infra-structures of feeling as a helpful means of studying and making sense of such qualities of the present. The concept of infra-structures of feeling is intended to account for both pre-emergence and for how this pre-emergence is organised and arranged. On the latter point, for Williams, a structure of feeling may be identified in a particular genre of literature or series of artworks (such as the genre of Welsh industrial novels). In terms of how the pre-emergence of social media is encountered and experienced, it is worth considering the role of, for example, various digital devices, apps, platforms, and their associated practices, as contributing to an infra-structure of feeling. That is, rather than being located in one genre, social media works across a potentially diverse range of supporting structures. In this sense, the term 'infra-structures of feeling' seeks to account for the often neglected technological and institutional linkages or systems that are central to the organisation and functioning of social and cultural life[30].

As a term that also points to the 'pre' – that which cannot necessarily be articulated and is 'just-before' a practice that can be clearly identified – 'infra' also seeks to account for the affective dimension of the emergence of social media. Whereas Williams' analysis was largely restricted to literary texts and art, I would like to enlarge his approach to consider texts more widely, as text*ures.* In particular, it is important to note that Williams' concept of structure of feeling isn't only a means of identifying a specific culture, but is also *a methodology* – the development of a mode of analysis that doesn't split the personal and social, and convert the social to fixed forms. The term texture is then, perhaps, one way of 'getting at' the infra-structures of

feeling that are created through what hovers in everyday media experiences, practices, objects, devices.

As well as expanding what might count as a text, 'texture' is also a means of highlighting the affectivity of social media. Williams defines a structure of feeling in terms of a:

> [S]et, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emerging, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies[31].

There are clear connections to be made here between Williams' understanding of a structure of feeling and how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines texture as "an array of perceptual data that includes repetition" and that connects and distinguishes between different scales, "but whose organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure"[32]. Both emphasise process and emergence, and organisation and structure. In the way that I'm developing it, thinking through textures and infra-structures helps to grasp the 'just-beforeness' of the present. Indeed, expanding the notion of texts to 'textures' is to respond to Williams' argument that "the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present"[33]. Here, it is helpful to make a connection between this definition of texture and what Kathleen Stewart terms "ordinary affects", which "work not through 'meanings' per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds"[34] A texture is a becoming, a

worlding. It is, in the terms that I have been developing here, an affective experience that is temporally present.

Endnotes

¹ Raymond Williams, "Structures of feeling" in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977a): 128-135.

² Les Back and Nirmal Puwar, *Live Methods* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), Les Back, Celia Lury and Robert Zimmer, "Doing Real Time Research: Opportunities and Challenges", Discussion Paper, National Centre for Research Methods (2013), http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3157/, Williams, "Structures of Feeling".

³ Patricia Ticeneto Clough, *Autoaffection: Unconscious Thought in the Age of Teletechnology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁴ Williams, "Structures of Feeling".

⁵ Back and Puwar, *Live Methods*, Back, Lury and Zimmer, "Doing Real Time Research", Esther Weltevrede, Anne Helmond and Carolin Gerlitz, (2014) "The Politics of Real-time: A Device Perspective on Social Media Platforms and Search Engines", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 3, no. 6 (2014): 125-150.

⁶ Williams, "Structures of Feeling", 129.

⁷ ibid, 128.

⁸ ibid, 128.

⁹ Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977b): 121-127: 121.

[10] ibid, 122.

[11] ibid, 123.

[12] Williams, "Structures of Feeling", 128.

[13] Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent", 126-127.

[14] Raymond Williams, (1980) "The Welsh Industrial Novel", in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 1980): 213-229.

[15] ibid, 221.

[16] ibid, 221-2.

[17] Williams, "Structures of Feeling", 132.

[18] Joss Hands (2015) "From Cultural to New Materialism and Back: The Enduring Legacy of Raymond Williams", *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 56, no. 2: 133-148.

[19] Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford, *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012: 2).

[20] Patricia Ticeneto Clough, "The new empiricism: Affect and sociological method", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12, no. 1 (2009): 43-61: 54.

[21] ibid, 50.

[22] ibid, 44.

[23] ibid, 50.

[24] Rebecca Coleman, "Theorising the Present: Digital Media, Pre-emergence and Infra-Structures of Feeling", under review.

[25] Patricia Ticeneto Clough, Karen Gregory, Benjamin Haber, B. and R. Joshua Scannell, "The Datalogical Turn", in *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-envisioning Research*, ed. Phillip Vannini (London : Routledge, 2015), 146-164: 154.

[26] ibid, 153.

[27] Hands makes another distinction between the theorization of affect in the new materialisms and feeling in Williams' work, arguing that in the former affect is pre-conscious and in the latter feeling is sub-conscious.

[28] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement. Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002). For a critique, see Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London: Sage, 2012) and Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[29] Williams, "Structures of Feeling", 132.

[30] See for example, Stephen Graham, *Disrupted Cities: When Infrastructures Fail* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), Andrew Lakoff and Stephen Collier, 'Infrastructure and event: The political technology of preparedness', in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy and Public Life*, ed. Bruce Braunn and Sarah Whatmore (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 210): 243-266.

[31] Williams, "Structures of Feeling", 132.

[32] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 16.

[33] Williams, "Structures of Feeling", 129.

[34] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.