Research Article

Anna Malinowska*, Toby Miller

Sensitive Media

Abstract: The paper engages with what we refer to as "sensitive media," a concept associated with developments in the overall media environment, our relationships with media devices, and the quality of the media themselves. Those developments point to the increasing emotionality of the media world and its infrastructures. Mapping the trajectories of technological development and impact that the newer media exert on human condition, our analysis touches upon various forms of emergent affect, emotion, and feeling in order to trace the histories and motivations of the sensitization of "the media things" as well as the redefinition of our affective and emotional experiences through technologies that themselves "feel."

The last decade or so has witnessed the rapid development of digital communications technologies and personalized devices—the spread of which has been a vital (if not dominant and even domineering) force, both socially and individually, in private and public spheres alike. This development has activated a debate about many topics, such as the supposed mixture of freedom and control, of *anomie* and connectedness provided by affective uses of the newer media; their significance for human interactions; and their cost in labour and environmental terms (Maxwell and Miller, 2012; Malin, 2014; Qiu, 2016). When the iPad was launched outside the US in 2010, protesters in Hong Kong responded by ritually burning photographs of iPhones. Similar protests have occurred in India, Mexico, and other offshore assembly sites (Barboza 2010; Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour 2010).

The emotional aspects of these debates are in keeping with the longstanding tendency to associate psychological states with emergent media technologies and stories. New gadgets and genres have always brought with them marketing techniques and governmental interventions focused on high emotional reactions, accompanied by concerns about supposedly unprecedented and unholy new risks to rational conduct by audiences that in fact recur again and again: cheap novels from the 1900s; silent then sound film during the 1920s; radio in the 1930s; comic books of the 1940s and '50s; pop music and television from the 1950s and '60s; satanic rock as per the 1970s and '80s; video cassette recorders in the 1980s; and rap music, video games, and the internet since the 1990s. Effects studies have spun their web around everything from public policy to press coverage to moral panics to Edenic fantasies about an unalloyed relationship between citizens that can elude the gatekeeping power of state and capital. Young people in particular are simultaneously regarded as emotional dupes whose feelings will get the better of them through the high-tensile experiences of new technologies and stories, and/or as extraordinarily agile users of gadgets and genres, the new masters of the world (Miller, 2009).

The most recent celebrations and panics concern the digital media, in ways that repeat this history but add something new, as well. A central focus has been people's emotional engagement with and via "technological things" as a means of theorizing the impact of computers, smartphones, smart applications, add-ons, and social websites on human communication to form new styles of interaction, and the design of emotion into the very gadgets we use. This is where the performance of the self and emotional labour alike become embedded in technology (Goffman, 1956; Hochschild, 2012).

*Corresponding author: Anna Malinowska, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec, Poland, E-mail: a.h.malinowska@gmail.com
Toby Miller, University of California, Riverside

One key issue has been the relationship between new digital devices, platforms, environments, and humans' receptive-affective affordances. The recent transformation of our haptic skills in order to use touch-screen "appliances" has prompted new trajectories in the expression of emotion and the definition and use of the media. Whereas the change in human capacities provoked by new technologies has been analysed at length, little (or, at least, not enough) has been said so far on the affective experience of the newer media beyond the usual array of effects magic. This may be because, the "media [as] technically constructed means to convey messages, [are believed] not [to] 'have' emotions" (Döveling, von Scheve, and Konijin 1). Marvin Minsky observes that "no machine could feel or think, worry about what might happen to it, or even be conscious that it exists" (7). But as our reliance on digital media grows, and the ties with technology tighten to the level of genuine fondness, perhaps the media themselves become affective. We definitely insert into them many emotional functions and features as both designers and users. Do they respond to such stimuli with feelings?

Perhaps we live in an era of *sensitive media*; for not only are the devices we use smarter and more intelligent—they are also "emotionally capable" in how they convey, reflect, and respond to human needs. Emoticons (in chat applications), assistive artificial intelligence (like Siri), companion robots (such as Pepper) express and perform emotionally in ways that seem to equal (if not outperform) human emotional conduct.

These phenomena of media sensitization have been gradually embedding for some little time, facilitated by several factors. The most significant is the growing accessibility of media devices, following decreasing costs of technological production, distribution, and purchase. Only twenty years ago, personal computers were a luxury, let alone cell phones and tablets—which were still in an incubation phase at that time. Today, with 7.5 billion people on the planet, there are 8.04 mobile subscriptions, which means more cell phones in use than there are people alive. Over 50% of the world's population has regular internet access—a number rapidly changing due to the fast growth of underdeveloped countries. Approximately 2.3 billion people have experience of social media. When translated into the use of actual apparatuses (and their accompanying software) this represents significant immersion into these media.[1] Companies like Vodafone have been all over the idea of affect and these devices for many years: "[m]obile phones have become affective technologies - that is, objects which mediate their expression, display, experience andcommunication of feelings and emotions." Vodafone refers to them as "an extension of the human body [...] building and maintaining [...] groups and communities" (Lasén, 2004).

As these newer media morph into our daily existence, we become more attached to the devices. To use McLuhan's metaphor of media as the "extensions of man" (McLuhan, 1964), we are extended by them structurally, in the most somatic and emotional sense. Phantom-limb reactions to separation from various mobile "gadgets" (like phones, tablets, smartwatches) have been widely reported in the social-science and technology literature. Also, various forms of dependency, usually connectivity addictions, have been identified in relation to our media use, with panic and anxiety the most commonplace markers of the detachment from media services (Vincent and Harper, 2003). The need of a permanent tether to private and social contacts, information, "services," and associated intimacies allowed by the media imbues them with exceptional emotional value and resonance. Media devices change from mere go-betweens in human-to-human relations to active participants. As Konok *et al.* (2016) observe, in media-bound interactions, the traditional meanings of emotion(al) objects (and emotional acts) become radically redefined; the human feelings that appear in human-to-human mediated exchanges are more and more extended by and through the media themselves; we come to approach the media with care normally bestowed on humans or other living forms. The cell phone lying between friends on a coffee table and treated with greater care and devotion than the cigarette packets they have displaced as addictive signs of being alone together and together alone.

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[1] New Media Europe, https://newmediaeurope.com/stats-shake-new-media-world-2017/#. That said, the prevalence of devices capable of articulating to social media, or doing so occasionally, may be misleading; many fewer people have access to broadband or even ongoing accounts than own cell phones. The sheer number of gadgets is a poor guide to their use. For example, the cost of broadband in the Global South is 40.3 of average individual Gross National Income (GNI). Across the Global North, by comparison, the price is less than 5 of GNI per capita (International Telecommunication Union 4).

Our "care" for media devices shows specifically through adaptive processes with which we attempt to alter (or overcome) the mechanical nature of media "things" and enhance their emotionality in order to have better interactions. Entire strands of business are preoccupied with "emotional design" that seeks to make media products affectively effective, and in this way, more binding to the mass consumer. The emphasis on feelings in the new-technology world is about the rediscovery of the potential of psychology for technological advancement (and yearly revenues).

Emotions have their own exuberance. When combined with pragmatism (traditionally associated with technology) they make the media more profound—beyond mere usability. Clearly, the human experience of technological things and environments is less about collaboration and more like cohabitation today. As McCarthy and Wright (2004) point out: "we don't use technology; we live with it [and] much more deeply than ever [...it] involves us emotionally, intellectually, and sensually" (ix). We have entered the digital sublime, where the feelings of encountering something beautiful induced by high design match the awe invoked by its computing power (Mosco 2004)—one of those rare moments when the duelling forms of philosophical aesthetics, the beautiful and the sublime, truly meet, breaking apart a hitherto steadfast binary.

For that reason, technology pundits identify, celebrate, and call for more empathetic media devices. Rosalind Picard, co-founder of Empatica, Inc. (a company specializing in wearable sensor devices for human data analysis) suggests that emotionally-intelligent machines are the necessary future of technological She contends that "if we want computers [...] to adapt to us, and to interact naturally with us, then, they will need the ability to recognize and express emotions, to have emotions, and to have what has been called emotional intelligence" (*Affective Computing* x). Picard argues that this is a condition of both human-to-machine and human-to-human mediatized experiences. Emotional incompatibility between people and their devices may threaten the attempted synchrony of those experiences: "[c]omputers that repeatedly ignore human expression of irritation towards them are likely to be significantly less liked as a product than those that respond to people under duress. Companies that care about their customer's feelings will pay attention to these skills on designing their technology's interactions" (Picard, "Towards Machines").

Emotions sell, and media marketability is always a priority for media development. Interestingly, emotions sell better today than cognitive prowess. If we examine some major technology landscapes (specifically robotics, currently dominated by the pursuit of emotionally-impeccable algorithms and designs) the logical intelligence of machines seems to be on the wane. We increasingly expect qualities from our devices that go beyond problem solving; they are more companions than assistants. Media platforms, especially social ones, create affective environments that allow for emotional connectivity and expression across time and space that may never have been experienced before. Perhaps because of disappointment with analogic forms of communication and the interactions behind them, we succumb to "sensitive" media. And even if denied the ability to feel things about the world, the media "feel" us, as their construction and malleability are increasingly articulated to an emotional allure. Consider such media options as customized cases, personalized notifications, ringtones, desktops, screen walls, and finally, individualized interfaces and content (e.g. a personal birthday Google logo or Facebook memory slideshows etc.). Seemingly practical, they bind us emotionally. And we seek in them emotional succour and a public imaging of our private identities.

Lev Manovich's recent study of Instagram users describes the high affective impact and effectiveness of medium interfaces. He suggests that "how people understand and use [Instagram], how they implicitly follow conventions of photo culture and define their styles in opposition to these conventions, how they construct their self-representation [...] create emotional effects and bonds between authors of photos and their followers." This constructed environment grants users a sense of personal fulfilment and offer experiences that do not "make them [the users] any less *authentic* or less *real*" (40). On the contrary, they find social and private satisfaction in fabricated space: "what is real is *what they feel, their emotions, and their aesthetic preferences* [and that of the medium] *that generate a sense of coherence and self*" (134). Similar conclusions come from studies of Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat—platforms whose semiotic infrastructure is as empathically potent as it is exhibitionist. If the 20th century was an era of psychoanalysis, the 21st one is an era of psycho-expressionism. Never in the history of the humanity have we confessed

and shared so much, and seen others confess or share on such a large scale—we have truly become the "confessing animal" of Catholicism and the psy-function (Foucault 59).

The urge to self-expression defines our collective existence. It binds the "feeling of the self" to the commons and the new *techne* of social togetherness. More than ever, the self is emotionally (i. e. subjectively) dependent on the collective. The collective, in turn, as Dominic Pettman reminds, "is now elicited and encircled by private interests and technologies (what Mark Andrejevic calls 'the digital enclosure')" (121). Both spheres are fundamentally defined by the *dictatorship of transparency* and *the regime of Likes*, to which—and this characterizes them most acutely—we succumb from a seeming free will (Byung-Chul Han 2017). This is the moment when Dallas Smythe's (1981) fundamental insight into media audiences—that they are constantly performing labour that is sold through their emotional engagement—meets Heidegger's (1977) account of the role of foresters in cutting down trees that then form the base material from which magazines, newspapers, and books are made, then proceed to entertain them and take their name and emotional engagement as evidence of customer satisfaction and public opinion.

The German media philosopher Byung-Chul Han speaks of "the boom of emotion in our times" as an effect of neoliberal policies (earlier described by Illouz as *emotional capitalism* [2007]). Han points to a link between the rise of the power of feeling (and affect) and emotional design of media gadgets.[2] He writes:

> The neoliberal regime deploys emotions as resources in order to bring about heightened productivity and achievement. [...] *rationality*—which is the medium of disciplinary society—hits a limit. [...] At this point *emotionality* takes its place, which is attended by the feeling of liberty—the free unfolding of personality. After all, being free, means giving free reign to emotions. Emotional capitalism banks on freedom. It hails emotion as the expression of unbridled subjectivity. [...] More and more, social media resemble digital panoptica, keeping watch over the social realm and exploiting it mercilessly. [T]he occupants of today's digital panopticon actively communicate with each other and willingly expose themselves. That is, they collaborate in the digital panopticon's operations. Digital control society makes intensive use of freedom. This can only occur thanks to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure (*Selbstausleuchtung* und *Selbstentblößung*)

Resonating with such emotional tensions, the media and their accompanying devices are significant agents and designers of our emotions. But are they capable of emotions themselves? There has been an ongoing discussion about the emotional affordances of media things (computers, avatars, robots, and AI), sparked some time ago by writings in *speculative realism*, *object-oriented ontology*, and Latour's insistence on the agency of scientifically-constructed objects and nature as well as humanity (1993).

The coincidence of emotions in these technologies and neoliberalism may draw attention away from the ways these innovations emerge—which has nothing to do with individual consumers or inventors and everything to do with the US military and publicly-funded scholarly research. Click wheels, multi-touch screens, global positioning systems, lithium-ion batteries, signal compression, hyper-text mark-up language, liquid-crystal displays, Siri, cellular technology, microprocessors—the internet itself—these donations to our daily digital lives came from the US Defense Advanced Research Agency, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, the US Department of Energy, the CIA, the US National Science Foundation, the US Navy, the US Army Research Office, the US National Institutes of Health, the US Department of Defense—and US and western European universities. Nothing to do with entrepreneurs or even corporations; everything to do with military interests seeking to harness body and brain towards the attainment of purposive goals and funding scholars to make those things happen (Mazzucato 2015).

That origin story does not necessarily tell us everything about the lived human experience of daily use of these technologies; but it tells us a great deal about the centralized model of emotional registers preferred by their makers, most of all the capacity for surveillance of conduct. And this is in keeping with the history of virtually all developments in media technology since the First World War (Virilio 1989).

Yet for all our daily interaction with a variety of devices and digital/technological forms, we know very

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2 It is, however, important to note that Han distinguishes between feelings, emotions, and affect to which he ascribes different roles and different social efficiency. A feeling, to Han's belief, represents an aptitude, a preference, and empathy – something constative, describable, and, therefore, objective. Emotion and affect, on the other hand, are subjective states, involuntary reactions that are fleeting, unstable and short in duration. In this way, they carry a different psychological potential, and allow for different forms of manipulation.

little about their emotional and cognitive identities. Interactions between humans and media and technology objects arise from a strong anthropocentric core based on the master-slave dynamic in which media things and digital entities are subservient to human purposes and needs. But as Sara Ahmed suggests, things and objects are entities in their own right. They contribute to our lives and environments by what they are, what they do and how they work. We should therefore orient ourselves towards their nature as analysts. In Arjun Appadurai's words, "[w]e have to follow the things themselves, for their meaning are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (5). So are their sensitivities. This line of inquiry is in keeping with our foremost historian of media technologies, Roger Chartier (1994) and phenomenologist of the digital, Horst Ruthrof (1997). The logic and life of the commodity sign is a constantly changing, attenuating, and accreting one. Their military pre-history and the surveying qualities of the newer media continue to inform our reality.

Ahmed's *orientation-to-objects*, which she associates with queer perception and positioning, corresponds with what Ian Bogost defines as *alien phenomenology*. As he explains in relation to our coexistence with computers:

> To be sure, computers often *do* entail human experience and perception. The human operator views word and images on a display, applies physical forces to a mouse, seats memory chips into motherboard sockets. But not always. Indeed, for the computer to operate at all *for us* first requires a wealth of interactions to take place *for itself*. As operators or engineers, we may be able to describe how such objects and assemblages *work*. But what do they *experience*? (9-10)

Following Latour, Steven Shaviro (2016) has recently explained what it is like to think in keeping with an avatar and operation system. He includes non-human (and non-organic) forms of cognition and feeling into the subjective experience of self. In a similar vein, Mario Perniola (2017) has proposed that we revise the emotional abilities of technological intermediary forms to recognize "the nature of the feeling which is not yet fully [...] or no longer human" (29). These new voices radically redefine the common perception of feelings; they also respond to the changing landscape of emotionality and notice that the media and technology objects will soon have an even more active part in shaping our emotional environment. Perhaps for that reason, we should open ourselves to new forms of sensitivity and reconsider "what Graham Harman calls 'human access' to other entities and other minds" (Shaviro, "Consequences of Panpsychism" 22).

Emotions have histories—entire feelings disappear and emerge with geopolitical conjunctures and linguistic ebbs and flows. As the vocabulary of emotions becomes governed, technologized, commodified, and experienced, it is subject to struggle, and hence to disappearance as well as emergence. The new encoding of feeling into and out of our newer media may well produce new futures, as the latest iteration in the history of the emotional phenomenology of the media take its place in what may turn out to be a reciprocal form. The artificial intelligence people and science-fiction writers alike have been sending dystopic and utopic futures our way almost as long as the cheap paperback has been available. Perhaps their time has finally arrived.

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