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Internet and Emotions

Edited by
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Internet and Emotions

Nothing seems more far removed from the visceral, bodily experience of emotions than the cold, rational technology of the Internet. But as this collection shows, the internet and emotions intersect in interesting and surprising ways. *Internet and Emotions* is the fruit of an interdisciplinary collaboration of scholars from the sociology of emotions and communication and media studies. It features theoretical and empirical chapters from international researchers who investigate a wide range of issues concerning the sociology of emotions in the context of new media. The book fills a substantial gap in the social research of digital technology, and examines whether the internet invokes emotional states differently from other media and unmediated situations, how emotions are mobilized and internalized into online practices, and how the social definitions of emotions are changing with the emergence of the internet. It explores a wide range of behaviors and emotions from love to mourning, anger, resentment and sadness. What happens to our emotional life in a mediated, disembodied environment, without the bodily element of physical co-presence to set off emotional exchanges? Are there qualitatively new kinds of emotional exchanges taking place on the internet? These are only some of the questions explored in the chapters of this book, with quite surprising answers.

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To my family.
T.B.

To Roya.
E.F.

Figures

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Introduction

Investigating Emotions and the Internet

Tova Benski and Eran Fisher

What is the nature of emotions invoked on the Internet? Can we love online? Can we mourn? What does it actually mean to "like" on Facebook? And how do emotions come into play in a Skype conversation? The book *Internet and Emotions* wishes to answer these questions and more by bringing to the fore and demarcating an emerging field of interest at the intersection of two major developments taking place in the last couple of decades. The first is the penetration of the Internet into virtually every sphere of social life. From friendship and dating to shopping and mourning, no aspect of economic, political, cultural, and social life has remained unaffected by the Internet. The Internet is no longer merely another tool that people use, but an environment within which they operate and live (Poster 1997). The second development has been the advent of the sociological study of emotions. The sociology of emotions looks back on more than 30 years of history and has experienced exponential growth as a research field in recent years. Theoretical and empirical scholarship has refined our understanding of emotions and the emotional world, and has demonstrated that emotions are present in every aspect of social life and play an important role in central processes and structures. The question of media and emotions is an enduring one, but it has become ever more acute with the Internet, since unlike previous media, the Internet allows for more elaborate modes of sharing, communicating, performance, and display—all are key ingredients of emotions.

The book collects 13 chapters that explore the emotional facets of and processes occurring within the new socio-technical environment of digital, network technology. As new emotional practices emerge, new emotional feedback loops are built, and new emotional language and manifestations crystallize on the Internet, the need also arises to study them empirically and theorize them. Questions arise concerning feeling rules and display rules in the virtual world, the role of computer-mediated-communication in the daily lives of couples, the ways in which anonymity and disembodiment affect the disclosure of emotions on the Internet, the differences and similarities among various genres of computer-mediated-communication in the affordance of emotions expression, and so forth.

DISEMBODIMENT AND SOCIAL ACTION ONLINE

One of the striking conundrums raised by considering mediated emotions is: what is the status of emotions in an environment of virtual presence and disembodiment? That is, because emotions are inextricably bound with embodiment in at least two ways. First, emotions are felt and "run" through the body. Indeed almost all sociological definitions of emotions include a psycho-physical bodily component that is usually addressed as 'feeling' (Ben-Ze'ev 2001; Fontaine et al. 2002; Lazarus and Lazarus 1994). Arlie Hochschild (1983, Appendix A) claims that emotions are one of the most important biologically-given senses. Like all other senses, it is the means through which we learn about our relationship to the world, and therefore it is essential for survival. It connects external and internal reality by sending signals that are interpreted by the self, and alerts people to prepare for action, through the body. Second, emotions are perceived as reactions to external events, particularly actions by others, which affect the person and mostly involve social interactions in embodied face-to-face situations. Barbalet (2002), for example, conceives of emotions as an experience of involvement in an event, a situation, or a specific person. It is the immediate (i.e., un*media*ted) contact of the 'self' with the world through involvement, which very often involves social interactions. Most sociological theories of emotions assume the embodied presence of two or more partners in the interaction event (Kemper 1990) or interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004). In sum, emotions are perceived as interactional and embodied.

But emotions are key not only to interactions at the micro-level of individuals, but also to the shaping and reshaping of macro social structures such as cultural norms, political structures, and economic processes. And here, too, the question of an embodied co-presence is central. Randall Collins (2004), relying on Durkheim's description of the ways solidarity is produced in society (Durkheim 1912/1995), presents a theory of Interaction Ritual (IR) chains. An IR is constructed by assembling human bodies in face-to-face interaction. Emotions evolve throughout the ritual and as a result of the ritual. As a result of a successful IR, solidarity can be reaffirmed and reproduced around traditional norms and symbols, but it can also lead to the construction of new symbols and new norms, hence leading to social change. Why is embodied co-presence so vital for a successful IR to take place? Because on top of allowing the communication of abstract information, face-to-face interactions also involve additional bodily ingredients, such as a rapid back-and-forth of micro-behaviors (e.g. voice tones and rhythms, bodily movements).

The question arises, then: what happens to emotions, a key ingredient of interactions and social solidarity, in our technological age, where so much interaction is mediated by new media forms, such as text messages, Facebook posts, and Skype conversations? What happens in a mediated, disembodied environment, without the bodily element to set off a process of

building IRs, thus contributing to social solidarity and social change? Are there new kinds of IRs with new forms of solidarity taking place on the Internet? Or does online interaction completely lack the kind of emotional component which would allow for successful IRs to take place? Empirical evidence thus far points to a mixed answer: the Internet does allow for IRs to take place, but with weaker effects: "collective effervescence never rises to very high levels; and solidarity, commitment to symbolism, and other consequences continue to exist but at a weakened level" (Collins 2011).

As the chapters in this volume suggest, the question of presence and embodiment online is complex. Taken together, the chapters suggest that rather than talking about 'disembodiment' it is more useful to think of new modes of embodiment and co-presence on the web. For example, Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain suggests the term "transconnective space" (Chapter 8, this volume), and suggests that the media richness (Daft and Lengel 1984) provided, for example, by Skype can itself serve as a prosthetic membrane, substituting the actual body. We might, then, need to think of different and multiple types of embodiment taking place in various media forms. This point relates to the unique characteristics of the Internet. The Internet is a complex, multi-faceted technology that integrates many media forms; it is an ensemble of media. Hence, when we talk about 'the Internet' we, in fact, talk about different and varied information and communication technologies. Writing or reading a blog, querying a search engine, emailing, reading a newspaper online or reading news from multiple resources using RSS feeds, using Skype to communicate with friends or colleagues—all of these entail different media and different experiences. Moreover, these various media tend to converge online—watching 'television' or 'movies' online, speaking over the 'phone' using Skype, or reading a 'newspaper' online (Jenkins 2008). This is highly consequential to emotions. To the extent that emotions involve the ability to communicate minute micro-behaviors (such as vocal gestures or facial expressions), then a higher media richness (such as provided by Skype) may facilitate a kind of Interaction Ritual which Facebook may not (see: Collins 2011).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EMOTIONS ONLINE

Another fundamental tenet of the sociology of emotions, pertinent to our concern here, is the notion that emotions are not merely subjective and individual but also social; they are not merely sensory and cognitive experiences but also involve normative and performative aspects. Emotions are filtered and constructed through social norms which dictate how one should feel (feeling rules), and behavioral codes which dictate how one should express these emotions (display rules; Hochschild 1983, 1990). Behavior is not simply a mode of externalizing emotions; it also informs people of how they feel, and can facilitate or curb sensory experiences. For example, feeling

rules and display rules of mourning in Western cultures commonly delimit the expression of grief temporally and spatially, so that it is more acceptable to grieve in cemeteries than in other places. Such rules, then, dictate the display of grief, which in turn may influence how grief is experienced and dealt with. In the context of this volume the question that emerges is: what happens when the context where behavior takes place changes? How, for example, a different set of behaviors that emerges in online cemeteries changes how emotions of grief are experienced, displayed, and operate in interpersonal and public contexts? These themes are taken by Nina Jakoby and Simone Reiser in this volume.

As a technology, the Internet can be characterized as relatively decentralized and distributed (compared with the mass media), allowing users to interact with the media, participate in the production of its content, and collaborate with others. But the Internet should not be thought of merely as a technology; rather, it is a socio-technical system comprised not only of machines, but also of human actors, regulations, social norms, and social structures. In the same way that the mass media cannot be understood outside the context of mass society, mechanical technology, the big factory, and the political system within which it operates, so it is appropriate to situate the Internet within its social context. The overarching concept which seems both to account for the multiple characteristics of the Internet and relate these to the social context is the notion of networks; indeed, the Internet can be seen as an expression and an enabler of network society.

The development and deep penetration of the Internet has occurred concurrent with deep social transformations in the last few decades, resulting in the emergence of the network society (Castells 1996). The network society is characterized by increased connectedness and interdependence between nodes. This is highly consequential to society, economy, politics, and culture. It also has two important implications for the study of the Internet and emotions. The sociology of emotions asks us to look at emotions as taking place *between individuals* and within *social contexts*. Networks entail increasing connectedness between individual nodes (for example, through emails or Skype conversations), as well as new social spaces where emotions are invoked and performed (exemplified in public and semi-public spaces such as blogs, forums, and social networking sites).

Social life itself has become more fragmented, distributed among different places, experiences, and friends. In such a liquid environment, as Bauman (2000) puts it, online communication may help overcome the difficulties of sharing emotions face-to-face. This is apparent, for example, in the case of work life. As Elisabetta Risi suggests in this volume, "experiences of [job] insecurity are 'dispersed,' since precarious workers are themselves scattered in different work sectors and companies" (Risi, this volume). The Internet can serve as a locus for displaying and experiencing emotions in a realm of employment which has become more networked, where workers are more atomized and dispersed. This, in turn, might uncover and highlight

the societal origins of these emotions, and allow for political action to take place. In other words, the Internet is both an expression of atomization and a means to overcome it. A similar idea is found in Henrik Fürst's analysis of a Swedish dating site (Fürst, this volume), which is seen by users as one of the possible social arenas for meeting future partners and love. Users are drawn to the dating world looking for the alleviation of feelings of loneliness and in order to gain a feeling of self-worth through the evaluation of others.

The Internet, with its multiple technologies, also gives rise to a variety of different types of virtual spaces and practices. Some of the practices like mobile phones, SMS, or spaces created by Skype conversations retain the characteristics of the private sphere, where public access is restricted, giving rise to one-to-one channels of communication. Other types of Internet media are more public in their nature, such as community forums, blogs, vlogs, and international appeal sites, creating one-to-many channels of communication, often communicating with individuals unknown and unfamiliar to the author. As a result, some of these spaces defy the private/public binary: on the one hand some of these sites are open to all, making it public, but on the other hand these sites might feature very personal information and emotion displays, thus turning these spaces into the most publicly-created private spaces we can encounter.

Notwithstanding the popular image of the spaces that emerge through various digital communication technologies as affording spontaneity, wide public accessibility, freedom of expression, and horizontalism, some of the chapters in this volume show otherwise. We will bring here only three examples that make the point in clear voice. First, Fürst, in his study of a Swedish dating site shows that perhaps the most clearly emotion-directed sites on the Internet are in effect well-structured, highly-controlled spaces. His study reveals the phantasmagoria of happiness—or rather of a hope for happiness—built into the site, commercialized, and regulating commitment of users. Second, Jakob Svensson, in his chapter on the rationality of emotion displays online, focuses on the connection between emotions management online and the new constellations of power relations in the network society. Contrary to the image of the web as a horizontal, flat space which allows equal access to all participants, Svensson highlights how power relations are reproduced on the web. Emotions display online require elaborate forms of reflexivity and identity negotiation. The middle and upper classes, he argues, have greater access to acquiring these skills. They develop what might be termed after Bourdieu (1984) *digital* social capital which can be translated into other forms of capital. Finally, third, contrary to the common view of open accessibility, many online spaces, from talkbacks to forums, are carefully monitored. For example, Frances Shaw (this volume), in her analysis of feminist blogs in Australia discusses the efforts invested in the moderation of the site to create a "safe space" where feminist counterhegemonic ideas can develop freely, and where strong emotions, not easily accepted by codes of politeness and civility in the mainstream public

sphere, can be freely expressed and shared. But this 'freedom' and 'openness' are achieved through restricting access to the forum.

The Internet offers a unique place to study emotions, not only for empirical and theoretical reasons, but for methodological reasons as well. It can be thought of as a unique laboratory for the study of emotions for two key reasons. First, the Internet is a fertile ground for a huge diversity and amount of communication of all sorts and from a large and diverse group of people. Much of that communication is emotional, reflecting immediate feelings, sometimes, as they occur—most use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter is now occurring on mobile devices. Second, these communication acts are all registered. Data may not always be readily available because of commercial reasons or privacy concerns. But when communication data become available, it is relatively easy to analyze since it is likely to be relatively complete and includes meta-data such as time and location, and at times other pieces of important demographic information about the authors of the data, such as gender, education, or online behavior. Indeed, much Internet and emotions research takes advantage of these characteristics, analyzing online communication through either quantitative or qualitative methods. A combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods is particularly interesting, given the unique nature of data online: it is human communication, which is hard to reduce solely to quantitative features (hence the use of qualitative methods), yet it is comprised of huge amounts of speech acts (hence the use of quantitative methods). Such analysis can account for large quantities but still retain minute interpretive qualities.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The book is comprised of 13 chapters, divided into four parts. Part I of the book features three chapters which attend to theoretical and methodological considerations. Chapter 1, Power, Identity, and Feelings in Digital Late Modernity, by Jakob Svensson, explores how emotions are managed and displayed online, and how this new environment for emotions display forms new relations of power. Svensson associates the unique character of managing emotions online with the "reflexive identity negotiation of digital late modernity." He sees the management of emotions online within the long lineage of what Norbert Elias (2000) called "the civilizing process," where emotions are taught to be contained and manipulated. Social networking sites (SNS) put further strain on individuals to manage their emotions in order to increase their social capital, and gain recognition and status from peers. As Svensson puts it, "reflexive identity negotiation, an urge to display a coherent and attractive self, guides emotion work online" (Svensson, this volume).

Svensson asks how the display of emotions online is rationalized and for what purpose. Building on Hochschild's conceptions of emotions display

as a form of capital in labor (1983), Svensson shows how feelings may be managed in SNS for identity purposes: "To answer the increasingly important question in late modernity of who am I, people turn to feelings in order to locate themselves. . . . On SNS users . . . negotiate their identities and group belongings through displaying feelings" (Svensson, this volume). Unlike smiles for flight attendants, feelings on SNS rarely have any monetary exchange-value for users, but they can be exchanged for recognition and status. The network architecture further intensifies the importance of connections and connectivity between people: "The rise of (semi)public management of feelings can thus be understood in light of an increasing need to account for others and co-exist in a society where connections between people multiply and connections in themselves become more and more important" (Svensson, this volume).

In Chapter 2, Feeling Through Presence, David Boyns and Daniele Loprieno employ categories from Interaction Rituals Theory to the study of emotions online. They argue that the Internet is a particularly vibrant setting "in which emotional interactions are prominent in social interaction" (Boyns and Loprieno, this volume). As aforementioned, Collins' theory of Interaction Rituals posits emotions as central to social cohesion and social change, but predicts that the more technologically-mediated our interactions become, the less likely they are to invoke the same levels of emotional energy as direct face-to-face interactions, for lack of physical co-presence. The chapter tackles the central issue of virtual presence by asking to what extent technologically-mediated interactions can transcend the lack of bodily presence.

The chapter argues that a form of disembodied, parasocial presence can in fact take place, but it is conditioned on two "illusions" enabled by digital technology: an illusion of intimacy, and an illusion of non-mediation. "Through experiences of 'parasocial presence,'" the chapter argues, "individuals become emotionally immersed in technologically mediated interactions, their interactions develop qualities that simulate the experience of co-presence and take on the more general characteristics of IRs" (Boyns and Loprieno, this volume). The chapter provides empirical evidence to the power of the Internet to offer emotionally-charged experiences. Most notably, research into online worlds (particularly games) finds that they provide immersive experiences which invoke a high level of emotional engagement and a strong sense of presence and intimacy.

Chapter 3, Measuring Emotions in Individuals and Internet Communities, by Dennis Küster and Arvid Kappas, provides an overview of fundamental methodological challenges in the study of emotions online. It raises key questions for anyone researching emotions online, such as the difficulty of a direct, simple "reading" of emotions online (e.g., a smiling emoticon might actually indicate feelings of embarrassment), and explore possible solutions. The Internet offers a unique opportunity to collect and measure emotions' expressions on it. It is a unique social setting in that records are

kept and create a rich database. Studying emotions on the Internet "offers vast amounts of data and greater ecological validity than most laboratory experiments" (Küster and Kappas, this volume). The chapter outlines three areas of emotions measurement, each requiring its own unique methods, and each revealing a different facet of the intersection of the Internet and emotions. First, we can investigate large amounts of emotional content readily available online (through qualitative or quantitative content and data analysis). Second, we can inquire into the subjective emotional experience of users (using self-reporting, through interviews or questionnaires). And third, we can record bodily responses indicating emotional states in real-time Internet use.

Part II of the book focuses on emotions display online. It features four chapters, each dealing with new ways by which emotions are displayed in a mediated environment. Chapter 4, Grief 2.0, by Nina Jakoby and Simone Reiser, investigates the new emotion rules of grief which emerge online. The chapter employs virtual cemeteries as a "methodology lab" to explore, test, and challenge assumptions of symbolic interaction theory regarding grief, particularly its insistence on physical parameters. The authors suggest that virtual cemeteries set mourners free from feeling rules in four ways: they are unrestricted by time limitations, and they allow spiritualization and afterlife beliefs, mourning for untraditional "family" members (such as a secret lover), and direct conversations with the dead. At the same time, while virtual cemeteries offer a social space that allows more freedom from conventional feeling rules of grief, they also enforce their own feeling rules, such as an infinite process of mourning. The chapter highlights how the unique spatiality and temporality that exists on the Internet transforms grief, as much of the feeling rules and practices involved in mourning and grief are tied with elements of space and time, indicating, for example, where grieving is acceptable and to what duration after the death of a loved one. The chapter concludes that the Internet has not given rise to a new form of grief, but it has influenced how grief is expressed: "The feeling rules exist prior to the medium by which emotions are expressed . . . The Internet only influences the way emotions are expressed but not the experience of the emotion itself" (Jakoby and Reiser, this volume).

The problem of displaying emotions online and the means to overcome this problem are also taken up in Chapter 5, Islamic Emoticons, by Andrea Stanton. By carefully interpreting the use of emoticons within a specific online social setting, the chapter shows how emoticons "help ameliorate the disconnection caused by the anonymity and disembodiment of online avatars" (Stanton, this volume). By thus, it is also contributing to a central conundrum of the Internet and emotions: how can emotions be displayed without bodies (physical and identifiable)? The chapter explores emotional display in online Muslim communities, giving us an intimate and detailed account of how mediated emotions operate. It studies the acceptance and use of specialized "Islamic" emoticons in online Muslim communities by