

Biopolitics and Affective Life: Investigating the Digital Ordinary

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ABSTRACT

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Jacqueline Matskiv

This thesis contends that the central problem of affect theory—the body’s potentiality to affect and be affected in return—is in fact a distinctly biopolitical one. Beginning from this claim, this thesis explores how biopower targets and manages the affective capacities of its subjects, and how digital media inscribe this dynamic and reflect it back to us. Specifically, it poses the following: what might a feminist inquiry into the affective logic of contemporary biopolitics, as made manifest in the digital ordinary, tell us about life under contemporary configurations of power? In posing and responding to this question, I mobilize a biopolitical paradigm to illuminate the power dynamics implicit in everyday affective life in the digital world. More specifically, I argue that social media platforms could only emerge in the context of neoliberal biopolitics, and that they can thus be mined for evidence of its mechanisms, logics and motives. Methodologically, I demonstrate that this does not require insider expertise of the workings of algorithms or the internal operations of social media companies, but rather a patient, critical attentiveness to our ordinary affective experiences online.

Keywords: *biopolitics, affect, social media platforms, digital ordinary*

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Introduction

Writing a thesis on the topic of biopolitics during the COVID-19 pandemic has been nothing short of an extended lesson in both the relevance and ambiguity of the term. When people would ask me about my research, many would nod knowingly upon hearing the word “biopolitics,” some even commenting that “it’s a huge issue right now.” Of course, these people were not wrong. But like the pandemic itself, biopolitics is never just one thing, but rather something which emerges out of a constellation of things: it is not just a biological discourse, nor only a social one; it is not strictly a legal or political matter, nor only an economic one; it is not a question of local versus international scale, not simply a set of security issues and strategies, not just an opportunity or paradigm for capitalist “innovation.” It is both all of these things and none of these things.

Michel Foucault defined *biopower* as the “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of political strategy” (2007, p.1). *Biopolitics*, then, concerns the strategies and mechanisms themselves, and the vast configuration of knowledge and power on which they depend. Put simply, biopower is the force and biopolitics its application—while they are distinct, one does not exist without the other. Yet Foucault’s preliminary definition seems only to invite more questions, which Foucault undoubtedly understood himself, given the fact that it prompted two years worth of lectures at the end of which he felt he had barely broached the issue. For one, the definition begs the distinctly biopolitical question of what constitutes “the basic biological features” of the human being to begin with. As for the political strategy, one is tempted to ask what kind, and to what ends. Perhaps a better entrypoint is Foucault’s observation that biopower governs populations by targeting the “natural processes” inherent to them, treating them first and foremost as a species

bound to its material environment. In other words, the *object* or *target* of biopower/politics is not the legal subject or citizen of the nation-state, but rather the living body, which is acted upon via its surrounding environment. Foucault described this relation between the environment and the body—both individual and collective bodies—using the concept of the milieu, which emerges out of the interface between the two. More than a set of physical conditions or constraints, the milieu is the *medium* in which bodies and the forces external to them circulate, shaping one another reciprocally. The milieu thus represents a *sensorial* and *affective* landscape or medium as much as a spatial one. To quote Kyla Schuller, biopower “works by situating individuals in dynamic relation and calculating and regulating how their bodies affect one another within a milieu” (p.10).

The problem of biopolitics is thus the problem of the body’s potentiality, the capacities afforded by life and the environment in which life unfolds. By turn, it is the problem of the body’s potential to carry and spread a virus, to (re)produce, to provide, to harm, to move, to feel. Its potential to affect other bodies and be affected in turn. Biopolitics is the politics of defining, delineating, regulating, affording, withholding and co-opting this vital capacity. Biopower, then, ultimately works at the level of “feeling, relationality and care” in their most inalienable forms, hierarchizing and marketizing human affects in order to subject them to the cold logic of capital (Schuller, 2018, p.34).

Beginning from this definition of biopolitics, this thesis explores the ways in which biopower targets and hierarchizes the affective capacities of its subjects, and how digital media inscribe this logic and reflect it back to us. More specifically, it demonstrates how the affectives lives of certain subjects/bodies are deemed less valuable and thus merely instrumental in fulfilling others’ vital needs elsewhere, and how these human affective needs, ties and impulses

are co-opted and commodified by digital social platforms. This thesis is framed by the following central research question: What might a feminist inquiry into the affective logic of contemporary biopolitics, as made manifest in the digital ordinary, tell us about life under contemporary configurations of power? In other words, I endeavour to find out what the framework of biopolitics, and the concept of a digital ordinary, might reveal to us about the impasse of the political present. Implicit in this inquiry are a number of problematics. First, if biopolitics is so concerned with the biological body, then what could it tell us, as an analytical paradigm, about affective life in a digital world? Furthermore, if it is so huge and insidious and systemic, then what could it reveal to us about ordinary affective life? In response to these questions and problems, I undertake a reading of digital social platforms as a biopolitical control mechanism *with a long history*, as a successor of preceding biopolitical projects intended to delineate the vitality or *affectivity* of bodies in relation to one another, and thus their relative value and claims to protection. I argue that social media platforms could only emerge in the context of neoliberal biopolitics, and that they can thus be mined for evidence of its mechanisms, logics and motives. Methodologically, I demonstrate that this does not require insider expertise of the workings of algorithms or the internal operations of social media companies, but rather a patient, critical attentiveness to our ordinary experiences online.

Theoretical paradigm

Such a project necessitates a view of biological and social existence as fundamentally inseparable in the context of biopolitics—a framework that extends back to Michel Foucault’s foundational work. Indeed, for Foucault, biopower targeted the body to ultimately get to something that lies beyond it—something like the “internal rationality” or psychology of the individual (Foucault, 2008, p. 223). In her historical study of the rise of American biopolitics,

Kyla Schuller (2018) demonstrates that biological and sentimental ontologies of the body have been entangled since the early days of modern science, working in tandem to determine the “vitality or unresponsiveness of a living body” (p.3). Under this paradigm, one’s assumed sentimental or emotional capacities were inscribed by the biological categories of race and sex, and were seen as the main catalyst of species evolution. Here, the body figures as a kind of “biocultural formation,” in which “culture impresses itself directly on its material and produces inheritable traits” (p.41). Writing about contemporary bio-economies, on the other hand, Kalindi Vora (2015) ties biological commodities like organs to affective ones like customer service work, arguing that their value lies in a form of “vital energy,” defined as the “substance of activity that produces life” (p.3). Looking beyond developments in biotechnology, Vora (2015) argues for an understanding of biocapital as an “overall market of life-supporting energies and services,” backed by a social logic which values both the subjective and physical needs of some bodies at the expense of others. Biocapital in this sense points to a *spectrum* of phenomena as varied as the production of intimacy by social media influencers and the psychological labour of content moderators to domestic work and sexual services. Attending to the productive ambiguity of the vitality that fuels biocapital—the way it straddles the falsely imposed line between the biological and social, the material and affective—opens up social realms of life to a biopolitical analysis. Such an approach recognizes the fact that beyond the “state-determined categories of nation and population,” biopower “governs at the level of basic interactions between friends and lovers, laborers and bosses, and neighbours and families,” operating intimately and affectively as much as it does systemically and materially (Schuller, 2018, p.34).

This topic and approach diverges from the prevailing association of biopolitics with the study of the biotechnology industry and fields like genetic engineering/genomics, studies which

emphasize how these developments push the limits of capitalism and definitions of life. These projects are largely concerned with what could be characterized as the informational substrate of the human biological body (and the manipulation thereof), with authors interrogating the now predominant understanding of biological life as *essentially* informational, as (genetic) information materialized (Thacker, 2010). In contrast, this thesis begins not from the question of the biological body per se, but from what might be characterized as the *feeling* body, the *social* being in its milieu. Put differently, it is concerned less with the technical or scientific side of biopolitics than with how it shapes the senses and our modes of relating to one another in everyday life.

More broadly, my elaboration of the object(s) and concept of biopolitics is informed by a feminist materialist paradigm, after Barad (2003), which emphasizes the ways in which matter and discourse are inextricable. This refers not only to the ways that power/knowledge acts upon (human) bodies/subjects, extending and narrowing their vital capacities (the domain with which Foucault was primarily concerned). Rather, it is more broadly about “the materialization of phenomena” as the ongoing discursive process of boundary-forming, of rendering an indiscernible field intelligible—itsself as much an affective process as it is a rational one. For Barad (2003), matter is a *performance* of the world as configured by discourse. This is central to the analysis/question of biopower—we might ask, how and under what kinds of conditions are bodies being configured to perform and organized to appear intelligible, or in Barad’s (2003) words, how are they involved in the active process of “mattering?” Under this paradigm, “apparatuses are the exclusionary practices of mattering through which intelligibility and materiality are constituted” (p.820). “Materiality” is thus to be treated as very much material, as in embodiment, and simultaneously discursive, as in historically specific *modes of organizing*

bodies/matter (Clough, 2018). In this context, mutually exclusive definitions of biological and social life, of the material and the discursive, inhibit deeper consideration of how discourse is inhabited and “made to matter.”

Chapter outline

The central question of chapter 1, *Biopolitics today: A digitalized economy of vitality*, can be summed up as follows: what are the conditions that led up to the present, and how does the framework of biopolitics help us parse them? To begin to answer this question, I turn to Michel Foucault’s foundational work on biopolitics and neoliberalism, and supplement it with contemporary feminist literature in the field. In doing so, I explore race and sex as quintessential biopolitical technologies, emphasizing the ways in which they target and shape affective/social domains of life *via* the biological body. Here, I consider in depth the link between theories of biopower and affect, demonstrating how biopolitics and affective politics (or “sentimental” politics)—highly mediated as they are—are not only conceptually, but *historically and empirically* inextricable from one another. Central to this analysis is Schuller’s *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2018): an in-depth study of 19th century Western biopolitics and its entanglement with evolutionary race science and sentimentalist discourse. Here, Schuller does a kind of long history of affect theory, uncovering its distinctly racial undertones and material consequences in the process. I ground these dynamics in the present by way of an analysis of contemporary “bioeconomies,” specifically via Kalindi Vora and her work on postcolonial India. Vora (2015) paints a picture in which ‘biocapital’ or ‘vital energy’ flows across the globe in the forms of biological and affective commodities—flows increasingly facilitated by developments in digital technology. This leads me to my next question: how are these biopolitical logics, discourses and practices being reconfigured, inscribed and mediated—automated, optimized,

intensified—through digital media? In response, I close the chapter by turning to social networks and analyzing the ways in which they instantiate and extend the biopolitical dynamics discussed thus far. Following authors like Tiziana Terranova, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, and Tero Karppi, I paint a picture of social media platforms as milieux in which the vital subjectivity and sociality of users are reconfigured into a kind of biocapital.

If chapter one addresses the conditions that led up to the present, then chapter 2, *Biopolitics and the everyday: Investigating the digital ordinary*, asks how might we look for evidence of these conditions in the [digital] everyday. Alternatively, the chapter begins from a prompt: what would happen if we turned to the intimate and supposedly mundane (rather than the systemic and historical), in our effort to understand contemporary biopolitics and its consequences on affective life? In response, I propose the concept of the “digital ordinary,” which I develop through a series of definitional propositions and illustrative vignettes. Inspired by Lauren Berlant’s and Kathleen Stewart’s notions of “the ordinary”—an “affective commons” that emerges out of an assemblage of practices, knowledges and affects, tinted with the quality of *everydayness*—I ask what follows from the observation that our “ordinary” is now a thoroughly digital one, and explore what this means given the preceding biopolitical analysis of social media platforms (Berlant, 2012; Stewart, 2007). By way of a preliminary definition, the “digital ordinary” refers to the milieu of algorithms, softwares and platforms (and the design logics and profit motives that underpin them) which together mediate our collective, social experience of the present. As such, the digital ordinary lies not in these digital objects and technologies, nor in our responses to them, but rather in what emerges from their interrelation. Considering the social web through this lens heeds Karppi’s (2018) claim that to think about social media through biopolitics necessitates thinking of them as environments—as *milieux*—as opposed to reducing

them to technological instruments. This shifts the perspective from one of *use* to one of *immersion*, and the question to what it means to live *in* rather than *with* media, as Deuze (2011) puts it. More specifically, approaching social media platforms as *sensory* environments uncovers the ways in which their stimuli “prime” and “cue” specific affective states, tendencies, modes of attention and behaviour, and how these forces shape platforms in return (Massumi, 2015, p. 57). In other words, it emphasizes the largely invisible, “ordinary” objects and affects which impinge themselves daily on the collective sensorium, thus introducing the question of how they are actively shaping it, and to what ends.

Methodology

In chapter 1, I take the well-worn concept of biopolitics and mine its genealogy for new possibilities, experimenting with how we might steer it toward new ends, or bring it into relation with new problems.¹ I endeavour to explore how the vast-ranging concept and paradigm of biopolitics allows us to productively move between different phenomena and contexts and to approach them in fresh ways, without collapsing difference or doing away with specificity in the process. Moving from theory or concepts to objects, I ask: how might we employ biopolitics as a generative impression of the world and its structuring relations? What would this *do*? To begin to answer these questions, I look to a range of thinkers to explore how the framework of biopolitics

¹ Concepts, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari demonstrate in *What is Philosophy?* (1994), are always created in relation to specific problems, and as such may be “modified or recast by being brought into relation to a new problem and new concepts” (Patton, 1996, p.318). According to the philosophers, concepts do not however point to independently (pre)existing objects or states of affairs—rather, they express or “speak” events (p.315-316). In this sense they are *self-referential*—the concept “posits itself and its object at the same time as it is created” (p.316). Working with and creating concepts, which for Deleuze and Guattari constitutes philosophy proper, is thus an essentially *creative* or generative pursuit (Patton, 1996).

figures in their impressions, focussing not on what it “exposes”² but on what it does with the given material—how it functions as a kind of language, a system of interpretation. From here, I attempt to translate specific (digital) phenomena into this language, piecing together my own impression of contemporary life as coloured by biopolitics.

In chapter 2, I take a complementary approach, beginning from the experiential as a way of working through the theoretical. So while the forces under consideration remain the same, the scale of their operation and the position from which I attend to them is vastly different. The chapter itself is meant to illustrate this process of moving between the theoretical and the phenomenological as much as it is meant to showcase the outcome—in this way it functions as a kind of performative thought experiment. The purpose of this thought experiment is resolutely *not* to equate the life-determining effects of biopolitical forces and histories with mundane user experiences on social media, but rather to see what emerges when we try to hold such diverse phenomena in our heads simultaneously, treating them as different parts of the same biopolitical story. Thus, if chapter 1 “pulls back the curtain” on digital social platforms by exploring the histories that lie beyond them, then chapter 2 looks at them from within, working in the thick of the (affective) user experience to draw attention to these histories at work in the everyday. This implies a different *positionality*: in chapter 1 I look mostly from the outside in—which implies both a certain privilege and a loss—whereas in chapter 2 I seek to forge connections *with* the outside *from* within, beginning from my own experience of the digital ordinary. My methodological choices and materials in each chapter reflect these different locations: while I draw on primarily theoretical texts in chapter 1, in chapter 2 I begin from something like my own ethnography of ordinary digital experiences. What emerges from the latter is more of a

² Here I am thinking of Sedgwick’s (1997) proposition that we focus on what knowledge *does* (how it is performative) rather than whether or not it is ultimately true, whether or not it successfully exposes something “out there.”

“sensitizing concept” than a prescriptive one; the digital ordinary does not so much tell us what to expect when we look at the world as it suggests a new way of looking at it, of attuning oneself to the biopolitical in the (digital) everyday (Bowen, 2019).

As such, the digital ordinary poses the methodological problem of generalizability (Bowen, 2019). Paasonen (2014) describes this as the tension between particular, embodied, situational accounts of affectation, or the “singularly phenomenological,” and the desire to generalize the singular experience for the sake of developing theory (p.139). To work through and with this tension, a number of scholars in the domains of affect theory and media studies have taken up the practice of working from affective vignettes, or short compositions that record resonant scenes and situations. The particular, singular encounters or situations that comprise such vignettes are treated as illustrative instantiations of broader social, political and cultural phenomena, lending themselves to a kind of grounded analysis. I mobilize the affective vignette as a method of approaching my milieu and as a means of testing out the concept of the digital ordinary. In doing so, I am indebted to the work of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart and her compositionalist cartography of “ordinary affects” (Gibbs, 2007, p. 226). I also take inspiration from Stewart’s and Lauren Berlant’s project *The Hundreds* (2019), in which they write speculative vignettes under the constraint of a one hundred word limit, weaving together theory, observation and language to test the limits of what a written composition can do. While I can hardly claim to be as poetic as they are, this approach to “doing theory” and producing knowledge resonates throughout the thesis, and has inspired me to search for new ways of grounding theory in my everyday life. More simply, it has validated an instinct to work with small or mundane moments, and to treat them as serious material—as a way of engaging with “serious” theory.

This method and style of writing has a long history in Cultural Studies inquiry into the everyday, or what might otherwise be described as the “intimate mundane” (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019). Raymond Williams’ work on the ordinariness of the everyday (and his emphasis on its value to cultural inquiry), as well as his notion of “structures of feeling,” very clearly informs the work of Berlant and Stewart, for example. Other central figures in this lineage include Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin [specifically his unfinished work *Arcades Project* (1982)] and turn of the century sociologist Georg Simmel. To all these thinkers, the everyday “offer[ed] itself up as a problem, a contradiction, a paradox: both ordinary and extraordinary, self-evident and opaque, known and unknown, obvious and enigmatic,” it called for a new poetics and methodology (Highmore, 2001, p.16). This broadly took form as an “aesthetics of the fragment,” in which small, individual moments and fleeting sensations are treated not as raw material for the construction of a systematic worldview, but rather as a potentially telling part of a heterogeneous, dynamic assemblage (Highmore, 2001). Thus, despite all of its contradictions and ambiguities (or perhaps precisely because of them), the ordinary, intimate, mundane and everyday have long called out to those interested in power relations and their naturalization through everyday practices (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019, p. 111). Crucially, such an approach is not concerned with testing hypotheses, uncovering “inherent” meaning, or making totalizing claims (Paasonen, 2014). And it should be noted, neither is this thesis. Rather, it seeks to attune itself to affective rhythms, intensities and sensations (and their social and political implications) and to then translate them into a form that resonates on the page (Gibbs, 2007). The hope is that doing so will spark moments of recognition and critical reflection, and in the context of this thesis, an examination of how our ordinary digital milieux have been biopolitically configured to move us in particular and profitable ways.

Chapter 1:

Biopolitics today: A digitalized economy of vitality

Michel Foucault theorized biopolitics as a material configuration of knowledge and power which takes life itself as its primary target. Under biopower, the *nature* of the human species becomes the correlate of politics, with life (*bios*) representing a “border to politics” that should “simultaneously be respected and overcome,” which “seems to be both natural and given but also artificial and *transformable* [emphasis added]” (Lemke et al., 2011, p.5). Biopower is thus a form of power that activates and regulates living beings as *bodies* in the name of vitality, growth and optimization. Yet investing in vitality necessitates rooting out and eliminating anything deemed to threaten it, from both within and without. Thus, in order to “secure and protect the *permanently endangered naturalness* of the population [emphasis added],” its life-enhancing characteristics, tendencies, forms of freedom and self-regulation must be systematically fostered, while those deemed to be life-threatening must be systematically eliminated (p.47; Schuller, 2018). This is where biopolitics shows its distinctly racial underbelly, with race representing for Foucault the “primary way of fragmenting the field of the biological” along such lines (Schuller, 2018, p.49-50). Life is consequently rendered an abstract, measurable variable in racial equations of human value (Vora, 2015, p.11). Put differently, biopolitics forges a direct link between strategies of life enhancement (or investment in the vitality of some) and life depletion (at the expense of the vitality of others), all under the guise of nurturing life and its productive forces (p.3; Lemke et al., 2011, p.4).

Biopolitics works on the level of what Foucault calls the “population.” More than a given set of individuals, the population represents a multiplicity or series of variables and processes “to be managed at the level and on the basis of what is natural in these processes” (Foucault, 2007,

p. 67). As such, the figure of the population erases the binary distinction between the individual and the collective, with the individual appearing as a strategic “relay” or “condition” for obtaining something at the level of the population. As both the “end and the instrument,” the population is a kind of fluctuating statistical spectrum—a gradient from the “normal” to the “abnormal”—which can be tweaked and stimulated to self-regulate according to state interests. It is “a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities even in accidents, in which we identify the universal of desire regularly producing the benefit of all, and with regard to which we can identify a number of modifiable variables on which it depends” (p.74). Bounded only by the common reservoir of “desire,” the “nature” of the population becomes an indispensable tool of modern government, such that one seeks to govern “within this nature, with the help of it, and with regard to it” through both direct *and* indirect means (p.75). Foucault defines this “nature” as covering everything from the “biological rootedness through the species up to the surface that gives one a hold provided by the public”—the “public” being the population “seen under the aspects of its opinions, ways of doing things, forms of behaviour, customs, fears, prejudices, and requirements” (p.75). In short, it is both biological *and* social existence, and everything that lurks somewhere in between [indeed, as Schuller (2018) demonstrates, the very distinction between the two is only a relatively recent product of biopolitical discourse itself]. For Foucault, the figure of the population inaugurated a new domain of knowledge: that of political economy. No longer would government concern itself with strictly mathematical and militaristic equations; rather, its task would be to manage the population’s “natural” economic behaviours, *or everything outside of the strictly economic itself*. In Foucault’s words, “government must not form a counterpoint or screen, as it were, between

society and economic processes. It has to intervene on society *as such, in its fabric and depth* [emphasis added]” (Foucault, 2008, p.145).

The space of this intervention is the milieu, which occupies the conjunction of the population and the “quasi natural events occurring around them”—a confluence of forces which produces a “circular link between effects and causes” (Foucault, 2007, p. 21). Foucault takes the figure of the town as the primary instance of the milieu: that quasi-natural, quasi-artificial space that exists in a reciprocal relation with its inhabitants, shaping their bodies, movements and relations. After Darwin, Foucault asserts that it is through the milieu that one affects the organism/species-being—to act on the population is thus to act on and through the milieu. He gives the example of 19th century epidemics, which were tied to swamps—the epidemic was indirectly targeted by addressing the problem of the swamps (Karppi, 2018, p. 73). The problem of biopolitics thus begins with the discovery and conditioning of the “nature” of the population (as a spectrum of biological and social phenomena), the problem and method of adjusting this nature in and through a constructed milieu. Put differently, it is the problem of how to act on the body and its affectivity by strategically acting on its environment.

In what follows, I take up Foucault’s theory of biopolitics (or rather, his theory of the *conditions* that led to the rise of biopolitics) in an effort to excavate what it might tell us about contemporary conditions of life. Forty years later, how might we take up Foucault’s foundational work and spin it in new directions, while still emphasizing its perspicacity? For one, such a project necessitates explicit recontextualization and a filling in of some (very crucial) blanks. As Lemke et al. (2011) point out, Foucault did not take up the problem of colonialism in any systematic manner, nor did he commit to analyzing the sexed component of racial discourse (p.43). I take up the challenge of supplementing these gaps by enlisting the help of contemporary

feminist scholars who consider the long history of biopolitics in relation to race, gender and colonialism in their work. Specifically, I draw on Kyla Schuller's analysis of 19th century American biopolitics and its entanglement with evolutionary race science and sentimentalist discourse, in order to emphasize the *material* and *historical* roots of what might be called contemporary affective politics. Kalindi Vora's work on postcolonial bioeconomies, on the other hand, proves crucial to situating the historical in the present. As affective economies are increasingly mediated through and shaped by digital networks and technologies, I underscore the indispensability of the human labour and vitality that keeps said economies afloat, and how it is divided along lines of race, gender and class. In other words, before getting into discussions of the affective minutiae of digital life—or conceptions of users as disembodied “dividuals”—I argue that we must first consider the macro forces, discourses and events that have set the conditions for our so-called ordinary digital life, very literally shaping bodies in the process.

Common to the authors I draw on is an emphasis on the **affective and social domains of life as a key site of biopolitical control**, as opposed to the typically foregrounded biological and physiological domains. Alongside Foucault, Schuller, Vora and others, I highlight how these typically opposed domains are fundamentally inseparable (bound as they are through binary opposition), arguing that in order to understand contemporary biopolitics, we first need to understand the integral role played by affect and the feeling body—affect denoting that which binds together bodies *through feeling* (Schuller, 2018, p.4). As Schuller (2018) demonstrates, theories of affect and affective economies of value (and their historical precursors) fill a crucial gap in theories of biopolitics by providing the conceptual framework through which the body is understood as being acted upon by other bodies and the environment, or rather, by the *milieu* at large (p.9). With these conceptual and theoretical building blocks in place, I turn my attention to

the digital and its role in biopolitical production and control today. After all, “data and the production of data are the means through which the [biopolitical] population-environment pair is understood and produced today” (Karppi, 2018, p. 73). In the second half of the chapter, I ask: how are these biopolitical logics, discourses and practices being reconfigured and mediated—automated, optimized, intensified—through digital technologies, specifically social media platforms? I demonstrate that digital social platforms—and their mechanisms of affective extraction and capture—should not merely be thought of as a novel development in the history of biopolitics, but rather as a logical outcome and continuation—by other means—of preceding equations in which the vitality or *affectivity* attributed to a body (or the lack thereof) determined its value, and thus its political claims to life (p.3).

Biopolitics and Political Economy: Foucauldian foundations

For Foucault, the “birth of biopolitics” is inextricable from the emergence of liberalism, which for him represented much more than a political philosophy or ideology in the traditional sense (Lemke et al., 2011, p.45). Rather, liberalism was for him a particular art and technique of government, which finds in itself its own justification and rationale. At its core, it is a political-economic rationality which sees “economic and vital processes *as from the beginning* deeply intertwined [emphasis added]” (Terranova, 2009, p.253). As such, liberalism comes to *necessitate* the “corporeal techniques and forms of self-guidance” characteristic of biopolitics in the name of the economy. It is the political-economic paradigm that makes biopolitics intelligible, essential and defensible (Terranova, 2009).

Foucault explains that liberalism emerged as a response to 18th century critiques of unchecked state power, in an effort to justify the need for government while ascertaining its threshold. This was accomplished by an appeal to the so-called “naturalness” of economic

processes, upon which the government, in principal, should not infringe (Terranova, 2009, p.238). Crucially, such infringement would no longer be treated as a question of legitimacy, but rather as one of *efficiency and utility*—an overbearing government was simply less efficient in securing prosperity and internal stability (p.238). With this logic, nature itself is redefined; its status as the relatively autonomous “background” region of government activity morphs into the latter’s “permanent correlative”—it is the vital dynamism of the economy and population (and their “natural laws”) from which the government must now take its cues (p.238). Liberalism, as a new “art of government,” thus represented “much more a *naturalism* than a liberalism, inasmuch as the freedom that the physiocrats and Adam Smith talk about is much more the spontaneity, the *internal and intrinsic* mechanics of economic processes than a juridical freedom of the individual recognized as such [emphasis added]” (Foucault, 2008, p. 61). Freedom is thus redefined in an economic sense, as in the independence from governmental overreach. To ensure this “freedom” is to preserve the “internal and intrinsic” mechanics of economic processes at all costs.

The emerging “nature” of political economy saw its correlate in the evolving “second nature” of civil society, as it emerged from “radically transformed relations of living and production” (Lemke et al., 2011, p.46). With these discursive relations established among government, population, economy and nature, the state faced new tasks and objectives: it became essentially self-evident that the role of the government is to intervene upon and manage the “nature” of the population (their status as both biological and civil/economic beings) in the name of adapting to an autonomous economic “nature.” The rationale thus becomes circular: “governmental practices should be in line with the laws of nature that they themselves have constituted” (p.46). Consequently, the natural laws of the economy and their dependence on “freedom”—that is, economic non-intervention—become the justification for ever-increasing

and ever-more intrusive techniques of control on the level of the population. Liberal economic theory and its “laissez-faire” philosophy thus becomes the condition for “the creation of a formidable body of legislation and an incredible range of governmental interventions to guarantee *production of the freedom* needed in order to govern [emphasis added]” (Foucault, 2008, p.65). The principle of economic non-intervention leads paradoxically to unrestrained social intervention, with “procedures of control, constraint and coercion”—to be broadly called security tactics—now being implemented in the name of freedom (p.67).

This interplay between freedom and security captured something absolutely essential about liberalism for Foucault; it was what explained the “dramatic rise of disciplinary techniques” in an age supposedly defined by freedoms (p.67). Simply defined, security is a method of managing the population in its milieu—as such, it is the primary “technical instrument” of liberalism. The milieu is its medium and the population—as a series and spectrum of possible events—its object-target. While security works in tandem with disciplinary strategies, it can largely be characterized in contrast to them. Rather than beginning with a pre-defined model or ideal and adjusting reality in its image (as does discipline), technologies of security begin with reality itself, treating it as a statistical distribution of events with its own norms and averages (Lemke et al., 2011, p.47). Security thus does not work by prescribing or preventing, but rather attempts to “stand back sufficiently so that one can grasp the point at which things are taking place, whether or not they are desirable. This means trying to grasp them at the level of their nature, (...) at the level of their effective reality” (Foucault, 2007, pp. 46–47). Security thus “respond[s] to a reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality (...)—nullifies it, or limits, checks, or regulates it” (p.47). Put differently, security strives to direct the self-regulation of phenomena—it strives to anticipate, modulate and regulate reality to the point

that regulation itself would become obsolete. As such, it is constantly bringing new elements under its purview: “production, psychology, behaviour, the ways of doing things of producers, buyers, consumers, importers, exporters, and the world market,” not to mention all the external factors that influence these phenomena (p.45). For Foucault, this is ultimately a technology of power which “regulates through and by reliance on the freedom of each,” organizing the conditions *in which* one is “free” through the milieu (p.49).

The steady adoption and application of these logics and practices would eventually result in the mutation of classical liberalism into *neoliberalism*, or the evolution of a technique of government into “a whole way of thinking and being” (Foucault, 2008, p. 218). Foucault describes American neoliberalism as a “global claim,” a “utopian focus” and a “general style of thought, analysis and imagination” (p.219). More precisely, it is the “always provisional, always locally contested, working out of a problem: how the overall exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of a market economy” (Anderson, 2012, p. 37).

This problem necessitated transformations to classical liberal economic doctrine—namely, the decoupling of the market economy and the political principle of “laissez-faire” (Foucault, 2008, p. 132). Competition was no longer imagined as a “primitive and natural given,” but rather as a formal principle that needed the proper conditions to function—one which called for “permanent vigilance and state intervention” (p.132). Phenomena like inflation and monopoly would thus have to be regulated to allow for the “natural” flourishing of competitive tendencies. As such, they are labelled “foreign bodies”—as opposed to processes endemic to competition—which must be rooted out at all costs. This logic quickly escapes the strictures of the economy and moves into all the domains previously thought to be external to it (p.148). The problem specific to *neoliberalism* thus became the problem of how to

develop the “*concrete and real* space in which the formal structure of competition could function [emphasis added]” (132). The role of social policy thus transforms from that of a counterpoint to economic processes/policy into the latter’s appointed guarantor—after all, to correct for the destructive effects of the market on society would in fact be a form of economic intervention, *an infringement on freedom* (p.145). And so the social becomes yet another market variable.

The result, according to Foucault, is decidedly different from the model of mass society, ruled by consumption and commodities (as diagnosed by Marx). The “supermarket society” is replaced by the “*enterprise* society”—with the individual no longer reduced to a consumer and agent of exchange, but evolving instead into “man of enterprise and production” (p.147). Consequently, the economic extends itself into what was previously understood as the private realm. Private property, the home and family, the community and the individual become sites of capital production and accumulation, *enterprises unto themselves*. The cultural ramifications of this are all around us, amplified by digital media economies. The principles of “self-branding” so central to social media platforms are one case in point. As Khamis et al. (2017) explain, self-branding “harmonizes with neoliberal notions of individual efficacy and responsibility” and “rests on a capitalist faith in enterprising, resourceful and *self-directed* labour [emphasis added]” (p.17). At the same time, “individual entrepreneurship becomes ‘the conduit for self-realization,’ in which the achievement of affective and social aims (e.g. self-reflexivity, building community ties) is subsumed under the rubric of enterprise development, rendered dependent on the capacity to undertake the labour of self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Genz, 2015). The result is a kind of neoliberal moral framework in which “each of us has a duty to ourselves to cultivate a self-brand,” to cultivate the self-as-enterprise (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.56). It is in this sense that

neoliberal political economy, for Foucault, begins to concern itself with “the analysis of internal rationality, the strategic programming of an individual's activity” (p.223).

One domain in which Foucault evinces these emerging neoliberal logics at work is in theories of human capital, which take up the question of labour not as an abstract economic variable, but as an internal attribute of the individual. Labour is reconfigured as a form of capital inseparable from the person who possesses it, a “capital-ability” of which the owner is a kind of head of enterprise, the enterprise of herself. “But how is this capital accumulated?” Foucault asks. Besides innate and hereditary elements (e.g. genetics), Foucault explains, human capital is acquired through the whole set of “cultural stimuli” available to a child as she develops (p.229). For example, the investment of *care, time and affection* by parents are considered to be foundational elements in the formation of human capital, as well as general investments in health and medical care. What emerges is a kind of “environmental analysis” which attends to how “stimuli, forms of life and relationships” function as investments in a future income (p.229). In other words, an analysis of the cultural milieu as it bears upon production. In this brief thought experiment on human capital, Foucault glimpses an increasing emphasis on the intangible elements of human subjectivity and sociality as key domains of capital accumulation and biopolitical control.

Countless scholars have picked up where Foucault left off on these matters. His late lectures on biopolitics and neoliberalism have been particularly influential in the anthropological and sociological study of biotechnology, with theories of human capital morphing into those of “biocapital,” broadly defined as a “form of extraction that involves isolating and mobilizing the primary reproductive agency of specific body parts” (Vora, 2015, p. 3). As a specific kind of human capital, biocapital captures and commodifies the reproductive processes inherent to

biological and social life, both of which have traditionally existed in contrast to capitalist production. In light of this, many have claimed that we are witnessing a new epoch of biopolitics with the rapid growth of the biotechnology industry, and the ways in which it is changing capitalism and pushing the limits of what counts as life (see Cooper, 2008). Among the most influential of these voices has been Nikolas Rose, who has diagnosed an emerging “politics of life itself” which—although he underscores is not without precedent—he argues is unique in its emphasis on the *molecular* level as a key site through which “the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures” is managed and manipulated (Schuller, 2018, p.23). Yet it should be emphasized here that capital accumulation has always relied on the “reproductive” domain (whether that reproduction is cellular or social) and that its increasing infringement on the level of “life itself” necessarily “incurs a mounting debt that is displaced elsewhere”—on certain bodies, on certain *others* (Anagnost, 2011, p. 214).

Anagnost (2011) is one of many considering the cultural and social politics which are emerging in parallel to these politico-economic developments. Specifically, she considers the discursive value coding of bodies by way of the term *suzhi* (quality) in contemporary China. *Suzhi*, Anagnost (2011) explains, is a measure of human capital produced through *investments* in the “embodied capacities of the neoliberal subject,” such as education and healthcare (p.213). Value here is thus measured not as intrinsic labouring/reproductive capacity, but as a form of investment and something to be accumulated. The body of low value, then, is equivalent to the figure of the “unskilled” worker, the one that did not have the requisite resources to invest in oneself, to invest in a speculative future that lays beyond the immediate demands of survival. Anagnost (2011) illustrates the very material effects of this discourse through her examination of the commodification of blood in China’s rural provinces in the 1990s. As Anagnost (2011)

explains, blood collected from peasant donors was used as a “form of venture capital (and as a raw material) in a government initiative (...) to build a biotechnology industry” which at the time was still a “speculative form of investment in the so-called knowledge economy” (p.213). One reason why the sale of blood became significantly more profitable in the 90s was a trend in preventive medicine to make products containing blood plasma (p.223). This trend coincided with the disintegration of healthcare benefits, part of significant economic reforms of the period (in which China was transitioning from collectivism to market socialism). Anagnost (2011) writes:

Preventive health products, for those who can afford them, are increasingly becoming part of the ‘care of the self’ integral to a neoliberal regime in which the health of the body becomes *an enterprise one must invest in* to maximize health and vitality, and to offset the increasing costs of healthcare. *If such biological products are understood to contribute to the physical quality, the suzhi of the middle-class body, then one must make note of the ironic circuit of value that ties the blood of rural poverty to urban self-care, a form of monstrous accumulation in which the very [material] substance of the body is removed and grafted elsewhere* [emphasis added]. (p.223)

This case demonstrates remarkably the complex web of biopolitical discourses, practices and knowledges in which the biotechnology industry is embedded. Put differently, it demonstrates how questions of “biocapital” far exceed questions of the sale of blood, tissues and organs, which are caught up in affective economies of value as much as they are in financial ones (Vora, 2015). Further still, this case very literally instantiates the biopolitical equation in which the vital enrichment of some bodies depends on the vital depletion of others’, and the ways in which this is obscured by appeals to economic innovation and development (Vora, 2015, p.3). As

Anagnost (2011) explains, the Chinese blood economy spawned its own shadow economies, which led to massive HIV outbreaks in the rural provinces. In response, the government persecuted activists who called attention to the skyrocketing infection rates for “*affecting the investment environment*” (p.222).

It is such cases that call for an expanded notion of human/biocapital, one that underscores the continuum from the biological to the social and affective. Kalindi Vora (2015) takes up this call with her own (re)definition of biocapital as an “overall market of life-supporting energies and services, produced through ways of inhabiting the body and understanding life that evolved out of earlier (gendered and racialized) social and economic forms [emphasis added]” (p.4). Specifically, she looks at the role of contemporary India as a key market and producer of biocapital for the West, and how this itself is an enduring legacy of colonial geopolitics. In doing so, Vora (2015) makes crucial links between seemingly disparate markets and forms of labour, such as “domestic care, customer care [specifically call center work], the production of biological commodities and services like human organs and gestation, and ‘noninnovative’ knowledge work [in IT]” (p.1). What ties these together, Vora (2015) argues, is a reproductive economy that traffics first and foremost in *vital energy*, whether in forms biological, affective or somewhere in between. Crucially, the true value of vital energy—defined as the “substance of activity that produces life”—can never be fully accounted for by a labour theory of value, registering instead as a “subjective marking of what is exhausted” (p.3, p.19). Given the biopolitical devaluation of the subjective lives of the bodies and populations providing said vital energy, this labour is rendered “artificially cheap” and subjected to a kind of “racial discounting” that guarantees its availability for exploitation (p.6, Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003, p.3). In this

way, the providers of said labour are kept in the impasse of poverty and alienation, while its consumers use it to sustain their vitality.

More specifically, Vora (2015) makes the case that production of affective commodities for consumption by more affluent others—broadly but not exclusively flowing from the Global South to the Global North—is essentially equivalent to the blood economy in Anagnost’s (2011) case study. It is a circuit of value in which the energy of some bodies (deemed to be less valuable) is drained for its investment in other, apparently more valuable populations³. Vora (2015) maintains that affective commodities (e.g. care, empathy, attention) are a form of biocapital in that “they can be produced by what the body already contains and impact the ability of oneself and others to continue to thrive, yet they must be exchanged for the means of continuing to support the life of that body *even as it is used up as the instrument of production*” [emphasis added] (p.52). In this way, certain subjects/bodies are transformed into a source of raw affective resources—into producers of biocapital—expropriated and instrumentalized to sustain and replenish the vital resources of other lives, while their own are depleted in the process.

And so we find ourselves in a situation in which both human subjectivity/sociality *and* embodiment are simultaneously the source and site of labour, its value and its ultimate product. And while developments in information and biotechnology have been essential in both “opening up the human body and subject” for value production and for making the outsourcing and globalization of said value production possible, it should be emphasized that the underlying logic of these developments is far from new (Vora, 2015; Schuller, 2018). Rather, they explicitly rely

³ Take, for example, the foreign domestic labour industry—a highly gendered and racialized form of care work—which creates in own circuit or chain of value, in which, as Parreñas (2000) describes it, a “three-tier” transfer of vital energy occurs: while class-privileged women purchase the low-wage household services of migrant workers, these workers purchase the even lower-wage services of poorer women left behind. In this way, each step up the biopolitical scale depends on the production of vital energy by someone one step below.

on the biopolitical categories of race and sex and their history of delimiting the affectivity or vitality of a body and thus the value of its labour and life.

The biopolitics of affect or, a long history of the politics of vitality

As Anderson (2011) puts it, biopower and affective politics are two sides of the same political question. As such, “the emergence of affect in the lexicon of contemporary cultural theory has been accompanied by a specific claim about how contemporary forms of biopower now attempt to know *affective bodily capacities* [emphasis added]” (Anderson, 2011, p.30). Political power thus becomes the “calculable part of affect,” concerned with the production of reliable variables in an aleatory field—the variables being the power to affect and be affected in a given encounter and/or environment (Massumi, 2015; 2009). Yet as Schuller (2018) reminds us, to affect and to be affected are not one and the same thing, as relationality is rarely equal and unimpaired. Contemporary affect theories—which from the outset conflate the two with one word—must thus be approached with caution, so as not to “unwittingly recapitulate the conceptual apparatus of the biopolitics of feeling” (p.11).

As a form of power that seeks to manage the relations between human beings in their environment, biopolitics targets the “affective linkages” among bodies and their milieu (Massumi, 2009; Schuller, 2018, p.9). Affect may thus be understood as the “somatic interface,” to borrow Schuller’s (2018) terminology, through which “the individual body links to a larger species-being that materializes over time” (p.8). In other words, it is that which “aligns bodily space with social space, mediating between the individual and the collective” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). The milieu is thus to be understood as an affective environment as much as physical or spatial one, shaping how one moves through, and encounters other bodies, in the world. It materializes as a series of “choice architectures” which stimulate, modulate and direct the

population's "common reservoir" of influence, shaping their senses, instincts, habits and social boundaries in the process (Anderson, 2011; Schuller, 2018, p.9).

In *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, Schuller (2018) demonstrates how affective politics and biopolitics are not only conceptually, but also *historically and empirically* inextricable from one another. Long before it was called "affect," a body's sensory and emotional capacities were indexed through the categories of race and sex, which together functioned to secure a "hierarchy of somatic capacity" (Schuller, 2018, p.12). Schuller (2018) traces the roots of this logic back to 19th century American sentimentalism, which as she demonstrates, was essential to the consolidation of modern biopower. Together with evolutionary race science, sentimentalism emerged as an epistemological and ontological paradigm which determined the relational capacities of bodies. More specifically, it "worked in tandem with science to consolidate power at the site of the feeling body"—accomplished by way of the concepts of race, sex and species (p.5). Much more than a narrow aesthetics and politics of morality, sentimentalism served to align the population with its milieu and with discourses of national and civilizational progress, with all the hierarchies and divisions the latter entail (p.57). Ultimately a politics of vitality, sentimentalism was the historical precursor to contemporary affective politics.

For Schuller (2018), sentimentalism is the answer to the question of how bodies came to be understood as capable of binding together into the biopolitical phenomenon of the population (p.4). As a discourse of emotional *and* physiological feeling, sentimentalism offered this requisite "bodily bond"—albeit one that depended on difference. It did this by way of discourses of "impressibility," which were dominant in pre-genetic theories of evolution. Related to the *impression*, or the trace an idea or object leaves on the body, *impressibility* denotes "the capacity

to *receive* sensory impressions *and to retain and incorporate changes over time* [emphasis added]” (p.8).

Impressibility thus indexed the “agential responsiveness” of the sensorium to its milieu. In the early 19th century, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, the founder of evolutionary theory from whom Foucault borrowed the notion of the milieu, reformulated the concept of impressibility into an account of species evolution. In his theory of “self-regulating” evolution (as opposed to Darwin’s natural selection), the body was understood as an *accumulation* of sensory impressions/experiences, which it incorporated and then passed down through heredity. In Schuller’s (2018) words, “impressions were understood as the precipitate of experience that *bodied forth the feelings of the past into bodies yet to come*” [emphasis added] (p.48).

Impressibility thus stood at the intersection of the individual, the milieu and the species at large (p.8). Yet as much as the body’s impressibility signalled a vital responsiveness, it also signalled vulnerability and suggestibility, something like the “permanently endangered naturalness” of which Foucault spoke. In other words, the impressible sensorium was susceptible to violation, to “infection” by way of the senses (p.19). This is where the higher order faculty of “sentiment” comes into the picture. Defined as the “capacity to mount an *emotional response* to a physical impression,” sentiment secures bodily “volatility” by submitting it to emotional and moral reflection (p.36). Sentimentality, then, was a means of taming the body and of steering its changes over time. As an ontological framework, it positioned the body as a kind of “biocultural formation” which could be molded through the force of habit and the disciplining of the emotions. Under the rubric of sentimentalism, strategies and practices of “sensorial discipline” proliferated, serving as templates for the cultivation of self (p.18). Schuller (2018) sees this discipline at work in a wide variety of domains, including but not limited to discourses on

sexuality, the aesthetic politics of “taste,” and in various cultural ephemera like the household manual and the mass domestic novel, which served a didactic function when it came to instilling gendered bourgeois ideals (and passing them down to offspring) (p.18-19).

Already evident in this description are the distinctly racial undertones of sentimentalist discourse. If impressibility was the key to civilizational progress and evolution, then according to this logic, the “uncivilized” were necessarily “unimpressible”—incapable of anything beyond instinctual reaction. What emerged was an ontological binary: on the one hand there were the receptive, impressible, reflective and disciplined (i.e. the civilized), and on the other, the insensate, impermeable and helplessly impulsive (i.e. the racialized) (p.8). Not only did this binary position some bodies as capable of evolution while others remained trapped in an “eternal state of flesh,” it also rendered the former contingent on the elimination of the latter—in other words, evolution necessitated weeding out those that/those which couldn’t evolve (p.8). As Schuller (2018) explains, “impressibility and sentimentalism distinguished civilized bodies as receptive to their milieu and able to discipline their sensory susceptibility and as such in possession of life and vitality that required protection from the threat posed by primitive bodies deemed to be impulsive and insensate, incapable of evolutionary change” (p.4).

In this framework, race signified the ongoing, physical accumulation of sensory impressions and the discipline thereof, rather than a fixed and interior quality. This conception of race straddles the line between social constructionism and biological determinism—indeed, as Schuller (2018) explains, it marked the transition between the “transformable race of the 18th century and the rigid, interior genetic logics of the twentieth” (p.11). Race in the 19th century was thus biological and inborn, but *not* immutable (in the context of evolutionary time). Rather, it indexed *differential affective capacity*, or more specifically, the differential capacity to be

affected *over time* (p.50). In its proponents' eyes, this logic effectively justified—even called for—the colonization and assimilation of the racialized. Depending on where one stood on the racial hierarchy (with Black and white on opposite poles), one could either be “nudged out of stasis” through cultural genocide (Schuller gives the example of the residential school system), or used as a source of labour for white capital accumulation (p.55). As Schuller (2018) puts it, being resistant to progress also implied being resistant to pain, which rendered the racialized obvious “targets for multiple forms of unfree and free labour, forced reproduction, and/or coerced experimentation” (p.14).

Racism thus became an essential biopolitical technology, charged with the task of “determining the relative biological value of the features of the population” so that those deemed to threaten its overall well-being—those that “lingered on as contagion,” to quote a prominent evolutionary theorist of the period—could be effectively be eliminated (p.49, 54). Indeed, racism was a central aspect of modern biopower for Foucault, who claimed that it secured its “death function” by reconfiguring it “in the interest of life” (Lemke et al., 2011, p.39). Foucault observed that the emergence of the modern biological conception of race effectively turned what were previously societal conflicts (e.g. religious, linguistic, regional) into struggles for existence within an evolutionary schema (p.41). Accordingly, he defined racism as an ever-mutating “schism in society that is provoked by the idea of an ongoing and always incomplete cleansing of the social body” (p.43-44).

What role did the sex binary play in this biologically-bound racial scheme? For Schuller (2018), sex and gender solidified as effects of racial biopower—as a *function* of race understood as a hierarchy of affective capacity. The emerging sex binary of the 19th century came to “stabilize the precarity of the impressible [civilized] body” by coding its associated vulnerability

as a feminine attribute. Thus, it was “ladies, children, artists and homosexuals, among others,” who were deemed to be overly susceptible to their sensory and emotional impressions, and consequently in need of sensorial discipline. As Schuller (2018) explains, the civilized body was essentially split down the line of embodiment and rationality by way of sex: on the hand was the “sentimental woman, who possessed both a heightened faculty of feeling and a more transparent animal nature” and on the other, the “less susceptible and more rational man,” freed from the “burdens of embodiment” by virtue of his manhood (p.16). According to Schuller (2018), this distinctly feminine susceptibility became the subject of both conservative and feminist discourses of the era, positioned as either a weakness requiring paternalistic management or a kind of sensibility that justified womens’ political rights (and which in turn justified the lack of rights for racialized populations coded as “insensate”). These mutually reinforcing hierarchies endure today in the division of reproductive labour from productive labour, or more specifically, in the conditions that reduce some bodies to sources of reproductive “vital energy” (to gesture back to Vora) and elevate others as consumers of it as a means to a productive end.

Biopolitics and social media: Affective discipline and frictionless modulation

The production, exchange and consumption of disparate forms of “vital energy” is increasingly made possible by developments in information technology, which have drastically refigured how we conceive of both human subjectivity and embodiment. Various thinkers have posited that biopolitical production today ultimately takes the form of information and communication, working first and foremost on the levels of the symbolic and affective. As Hardt & Negri (2000) put it, “communication is no longer impoverished in the name of production, but rather production is enriched to the level of complexity of human interaction” (p.293). Hardt and Negri (2000) glimpse this in the rise of computational labour—both the creative manipulation of

information and the non-innovative/reproductive digital labour on which it depends—as well as in the “informatization of industrial production,” in which information and communications technologies transform the way material goods are produced, and often, the very material goods themselves. In both cases, Hardt and Negri (2000) argue, it is “information and communication that are the very commodities produced.” Eugene Thacker (2010) proposes the term “biomedia” to account for this paradigm shift, defined as a process of mediation and set of discourses which make possible an understanding of life as *essentially* informational (p.123). This information is material (information as bodies, bodies as information), and this “material” is alive precisely *because* it is information (in other words, it is not secondarily information) (p.123, p.127). As a discourse, biomedia constructs “life itself” as “both a medium and as a process of mediation,” or alternatively, as “at once the tool and the object” (p.123, 127). With this concept, Thacker (2013) points not to the novelty of a biopower that targets and harvests the vitality of the population, but to the *methods* of said power, which are now increasingly digital, informational, and automated. This raises the question of how such emerging methods are changing or even *obscuring* the biopolitical logics that constitute their foundation. Quoting Thacker and Alexander Galloway, Karppi (2018) asserts that “biopolitics defines a *means* for the production of data surrounding its object” (p.74). It is what *facilitates* datafied surveillance, production and capital accumulation. Yet while these processes take increasingly arcane and invasive forms, we need look no further than our news feeds for evidence.

A number of scholars have approached the study of digital social platforms from a biopolitical framework, analyzing them as extensions or instantiations of the biopolitical mechanisms and neoliberal logics discussed thus far. Karppi (2018) explains that there are three elements of biopolitics that are important to analyzing social media. First is the population, as the

essential figure/object of biopolitics. Second, the management of the population by way of the milieu/environment. Third, the centrality of data production to this project, as “the means through which the population-environment pair is understood and produced” (p.73). For Karppi (2018), social media platforms ultimately “turn masses into populations by producing their interests and by conditioning their interactions” (p.37). As such, social media platforms are to be thought of less as digital “artifacts” and more as “processes of engagement,” or a continuously negotiated, emerging model of sociality.

This model of sociality takes the form of the network, that ubiquitous “topological figure” used to track and represent everything from “friendship to contagious diseases” (Terranova, 2015; Chun, 2016, p.43). As Chun (2016) describes it, the network encapsulates perfectly neoliberal connectivity, as it dissolves the social into individuals connected through shared behaviour. The network thus “link[s] and breach[es] the personal and the collective, the political and technological, the biological and machinic and the theoretical and empirical” (p.39). To quote Terranova (2015), the network is ultimately a mode of organizing the milieu and directing the “series of events that traverse it toward specific ends”—it does this by balancing growth with stability, and chaos with predictability.

Terranova (2015) theorizes digital social networks as an extension of the neoliberal logic that Foucault called the “enterprise of the social,” understood as a “fabric of relations between networked and entrepreneurial selves” (p.119). What’s unique about digital social networks, however, is their unique capacity to address equally the micro and macro levels, to modulate the relation between individual users and populations of users (Karppi, 2018). Terranova (2015) demonstrates how social media platforms not only implement a model of society as a network, but how they do this on a resolutely *psychological* level, managing the latter as a natural

economy of sorts (rather than superficially subsuming the social under an economic grid) (p.119). Quoting William Davies, Terranova (2015) claims that social media platforms provide for neoliberal/biopolitical governance a model and “technique by which the social *can finally be known* [emphasis added],” so that real-time fluctuations and variables in social activity can be measured and regulated as if they were fluctuations in price (p.111-112).

Terranova (2015) traces the models, analytics and data collection practices—and the contemporary obsession with “Big Data” more generally—to twentieth century modern graph theory and the related domain of social network analysis. As it emerged in the 1930s, modern graph theory attempted to supplement the blind spots of a statistical view of society by mapping its micro dynamics and revealing its underlying “psychological structure” (p.122). It did this by treating society as a “network of binary relations structured by relations of *sympathy and antipathy* [emphasis added],” which could be plotted mathematically and displayed as “sociograms” with their own laws and functions. Early social network analysis would eventually shapeshift and transform into contemporary network science, moving incrementally away from the domain of social psychology and into those of mathematics and physics. Yet as Terranova (2015) argues, digital social platforms have re-actualized the vision of society as an affective network made up of individuals who behave according to natural “macro-laws” which can be plotted and directed. As Terranova (2015) observes, this vision maps onto what Foucault called “civil society”—the domain *outside* of the strictly economic which the neoliberal/biopolitical regime takes as its primary correlate. In this space, it is “disinterested interests” that bond subjects together (rather than a “shared interest in maximum profit from exchange”)—that is, the forces of “*instinct, sentiment and sympathy*,” of “*empathy and repugnance*” (p.117). On social media platforms, these “disinterested interests” are abstracted—rendering empathy and

repugnance interchangeable, for one—and made productive. As Clough (2018) puts it, the density and richness of human affect is technologically reduced to “affect itself,” rendered into nodes and edges.

Terranova (2015) takes up Facebook’s Open Graph Protocol—essentially one huge social graph—as a clear illustration of these logics. By design, the Open Graph protocol aims toward the infinite expansion of networked objects in its purview; as such, it was essential to the transformation of Facebook from a social network/directory into an ever-expanding *platform*. The Open Graph protocol, like the concept of the platform itself, is centrifugal by design, integrating ever more objects and actions while allocating them unique identifiers⁴, so that as it expands in range it also cements a “deeply granular universal addressability” (Terranova, 2015, p.121; Karppi, 2018). As Karppi (2018) writes about Facebook, “on the one hand, user engagement is moving or tending to move *away* from a center, as in expanding to everywhere and everything, and on the other hand, it is moving or tending to move *toward* a center that is intensifying all the relations and making them Facebook compatible [emphasis added]” (p.39). In this scenario, user engagement functions as a kind of control mechanism (Karppi, 2018). Defining engagement as the very *threshold* between user and platform, Karppi (2018) emphasizes how it is distinct from user *participation*. Thus, while “engagement-based business models try to capture and capitalize on the public’s *desire* to participate,” their value production depends equally on dynamics unfolding below and beyond the level of voluntary participation, beyond even user consciousness (p.29).

For Chun (2016), this is where the force of habit enters the picture. Habits are the gradual product of interactions between user and platform, the product of their mutual affectation. Habits

⁴ Examples include cross-platform logins and cookies, which make it easier to tie individual users to actions (Chun, 2016, p.57).

are also what collapses the distinction between the individual and statistical body⁵, making data analytics possible in the first place (Chun, 2016). This is due to their particular nature: habits occupy the space between the voluntary and the involuntary (turning the former into the latter through repetition), and between the conscious and the automatic (p.6). In Chun's (2016) words, "habit, as a form of second nature, reveals the power of humans to create new structures and reactions *in response to their environment*; it is (...) a sign of *human plasticity* [emphasis added]" (p.7). Thus, social media platforms may be said to target users on the level of something like their impressibility (to gesture back to Schuller)—indeed, from the platform perspective, the user and her data profile is *nothing but the gradual accumulation of habits*, tied to others in the network through correlations among habits (Chun, 2016).

Yet like impressibility, the human ability to form and cultivate habits can be read as a form of vulnerability or susceptibility as much as a form of agential adaptability. User habits, after all, are what enable premediation, they are what feed the anticipatory "capture systems" of our platforms (Chun, 2016). Karppi (2018) defines premediation, after Richard Grusin, as the process of mediating the future "at the very moment that it emerges into the present" (p.76). Premediation "condenses time and gives different future directions, it does not offer total freedom for the user *nor total control* over a user's choices but *works somewhere in the middle* [emphasis added]" (p.77). A control mechanism par excellence, social media platforms' strategies of premediation depend on this essential interplay between user freedom and algorithmic modulation, a feedback cycle which restructures each in the other's image. To gesture back to Foucault, platforms *consume* freedom, they capture and restructure it. Chun

⁵ Chun (2016) argues that platforms interpellate the user in a way that points to this collapse by addressing them universally as a "singular yet generic YOU." In its plural form, Chun explains, "YOU" still refers to individuals as individuals, as opposed to creating a communal subject, as opposed to forming a "we" (p.117).

(2016) highlights this with the notion of the “capture system,” as proposed by computer scientist Philip Agre. Capture systems essentially work by breaking down actions into discrete units “which can then be articulated into various grammars and schemes for optimization and normalization” (p.59). This allows for the direct identification, measurement and comparison of said actions, and thus facilitates the marketization of all social (inter)actions (p.60). Yet unlike traditional surveillance systems, the capture system relies on the relatively free movement of its target. “A capture system,” Chun (2016) writes, “enables a *finer grid* [than a surveillance system] *by presuming and enabling mobility* for, in order for something to be captured, it must be in motion [emphasis added]” (p.60). Thus, Chun (2016) concludes, by engaging in “heavily captured activity,” users “have a certain freedom, namely, free creation within a system of rules” (p.60). Yet by imposing their particular grammar and rules, capture systems restructure our actions—they have a performative function. In this scenario, user habits/actions are repetitions that enable creative anticipation and performative capture, used as “alluring evidence of an already present future” (p.3; Clough, 2018, xiii).

Users’ habits are also what enable their categorization and subsequent distribution across every-shifting algorithmic value schemes. Cheney-Lippold (2011) proposes that algorithmic categorization marks an important shift in biopolitical control mechanisms—namely, a shift away from immutable, essentialist categories to a dynamic behavioural model of categorization. Taking gender as an example, Cheney-Lippold (2011) demonstrates how a cybernetic conception of gender is always in flux, changing in response to new information (and other biopolitical categories, such as one’s age group), potentially to the point of overturning attributes previously considered essential. While this cybernetic model of gender (or race, or age) works in tandem with its “offline” disciplinary counterpart, it also marks the changing relation that categories

have to populations—namely, that categories adapt to populations (at the micro level) as much as populations are expected to adjust to them (at the macro level). As Cheney-Lippold (2011) writes, in the digital realm, “the exclusivity of gender’s meaning then becomes held within the logic of the categorical system *as defined by a particular algorithm*. The cybernetic definition and redefinition of gender then provides a form of *elasticity* to power [emphasis added]” (p.174). This elasticity is characteristic of what Cheney-Lippold (2011) names “soft biopower” (as opposed to “hard biopower”), which supplements the discursive production and naturalization of biopolitical categories (such as gender/sex, race and age) with data and statistical analysis, modulating algorithmically how the categories themselves are “determined to define life” (p.175). Thus, if hard biopower divides up and stabilizes the population through categories (e.g. race, sex, age, class, ability, etc.), then “soft biopower” adapts the categories themselves to the (micro)dynamism of the population, so as to “better serve the rationale of hard biopower” (p.178). In this scenario, the “essence” of the user (her identity) becomes quite literally tied to her habits, and the continually changing meaning attributed to them. These habits are then captured and gradually restructured, through premediation, to “softly persuade users towards models of normalized behaviour and identity” (p.177).

Yet it should be emphasized that in the context of this algorithmic “elasticity,” the rigid, immutable and essentialist very much remains. As countless scholars studying artificial intelligence (AI) have demonstrated, algorithms tend to amplify existing race and gender disparities (among others), further reifying these categories in the process (Crawford et al., 2019). The impulse, after all, is still to classify, to construct difference. There also remains the question of what kind of data the algorithm is trained on, and what kind of people have designed it. Further still, how have these designers formulated the “problem” that needs an algorithmic

solution? Just one salient example out of many is affect/emotion recognition AI, which claims to “read” users’ inner states by collecting physiological data⁶ (Crawford et al., 2019). For Crawford (2021), such technologies operate according to a “phrenological impulse,” defined as the “practice of drawing faulty assumptions about internal states and capabilities from external appearances, with the aim of extracting more about a person than they choose to reveal.” Thus while such developments might represent a biopolitical elasticity on the surface—attempting very literally to read and respond to user affect in real time—they ultimately rely on the rigid logics of discredited race science and physiognomy, replicating the categorizations of a decidedly “hard” biopower.

Beyond categorization, our habits are ultimately what make us susceptible to the aforementioned persuasion and suggestion tactics—for as Chun (2016) puts it, the only way to satisfy a habit is to do it. What happens when our habits, or rather, the satisfactions that accompany their repetition, are withheld from us? To quote Chun (2016), “when habit goes from being something that you have to something that you lose,” it becomes addiction, “*a form of dependency, a condition of debt* [emphasis added]” (p.4). To force users to rehabilitate, to “reeducate” their habits, is thus a means of keeping them in a cycle, in which the striving for the return to habit (to the satisfaction of the habitual) keeps them coming back. For Dean (2015), this dynamic is marked by a kind of perverse form of enjoyment, which she explains using the Lacanian concept of the drive. The drive is an affective circuit maintained in motion through the

⁶ To date, there is no compelling scientific evidence that AI can detect emotions. In fact, a comprehensive 2019 study concluded that “tech companies may well be asking a question that is fundamentally wrong” [See Barrett, L. F. et al. (2019). Emotional expressions reconsidered: Challenges to inferring emotion from human facial movements. *Psychological science in the public interest*, 20(1), 1-68.]. Despite the evidence against it, such technology is already being put to use, most notably in the fields of labour management and education. The Hong Kong startup “4 Little Trees,” for example, assesses children’s facial expressions in the virtual classroom, claiming to track their emotions and motivation levels, which are then used to “forecast” grades (Crawford, 2021).

perpetual failure to capture the object of desire. This looping repetition (picture a hamster wheel) produces an addictive intensity—an excessive, self-destructive form of enjoyment Lacan called *jouissance*—that bars us from achieving a sustainable state of satisfaction. In the process, we become “affectively saturated” by our attachment to this “atrophied field of enjoyment” (Berlant, 2011). And so we keep scrolling—satisfaction always remains one click, one link, one swipe away. For Karppi (2015), this is the affective promise of the “happy accident,” or the potential of discovering something interesting, something worthwhile on our news feeds. The very search for the “happy accident” becomes its own form of habitual enjoyment, producing an intensity that draws us in. In this scenario, “we cannot escape enjoyment, but neither can we claim it as our own” (Dean, 2015).

These affective loops and habitual tendencies (dependencies) are what networked media subsist on, and what platforms like Facebook put at the core of their business models and call “engagement” (Karppi, 2015). This affective element trumps the communicative—as Dean (2015) argues, intent, content and meaning take the backseat in the name of communication for its own sake, or rather, for the sake of maintaining a fantasy of affective abundance (that is, the endless potential for happy accidents). This is cemented through the force of habit and repetition, through user behaviour both conscious and unconscious.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to analyze the historical, material and embodied elements of contemporary biopolitics, with a focus on the social and affective domains of life as a key site of control. In doing so, my intention was to emphasize that the intangibility or abstractness so often associated with contemporary biopolitics—particularly in its datafied forms—is not to be equated with an immateriality, an absence of the human element. Rather, I aimed to show that the

so-called “knowledge economy” depends on often invisible affective economies to keep it afloat, in which some shoulder the cost while others reap the benefits. I began with an overview of Michel Foucault’s foundational work on biopolitics and liberalism, with a focus on his analysis of naturalistic liberal discourse and the interplay between freedom and security so essential to neoliberal political economy. I then supplemented Foucault’s account with Kyla Schuller’s (2018) historical analysis of sentimentalist discourse as a biopolitical technology that delineated the relational capacities of bodies within the population. Schuller (2018) cements the link between biopolitics and contemporary affect theory by demonstrating how a body’s “impressibility”—its capacity to affect and be affected—is what binds it to other bodies and its milieu, forging a population out of individuals. Vora (2015) and Anagnost (2011), on the other hand, show us how this dynamic manifests in a variety of contemporary industries trafficking in commodities both biological *and* affective, as sources of a reproductive vital energy to be consumed by some at the expense of others. In these accounts, we glimpse a biopolitical preoccupation with the non-rational and bodily (or “natural”) forces that shape the population, and how this domain is gradually subsumed under the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Finally, I turned to the digital to explore how these macro dynamics are inscribed by social media platforms and their design logics. Reading the digital social platform/network as a present-day technique of managing the population in its social milieu, I consider how users are targeted through the affective linkages between individuals and between individuals and their (digital) environment. Here, “affective linkages” are made legible through an analytic of habits, which signal both the population’s impressibility and susceptibility to categorization and capture, but simultaneously point to that which escapes the strictures of an economic rationale. In Foucault’s own words, life on the one hand “is that which is made productive through techniques

of intervention,” but which nevertheless “exceeds attempts to order and control it” (Anderson, 2011, p. 28).

Chapter 2:

Biopolitics and the everyday:

Investigating the digital ordinary

How might one go about grounding these questions of biopolitical control mechanisms in the rhythms of the digital everyday? In other words, how do we now return to the level of the immediate, embodied, sensory and particular, as a way of pushing back against forms of biopower that work through processes of normalization (Anderson, 2011)? What would attuning oneself to the affective elements of biopower look like in practice, specifically in the context of the digital (ordinary)?

To respond to these questions, this chapter takes up the concept of the “digital ordinary,” which captures our ordinary lived experiences in the informational milieu. The notion of a digital ordinary attempts to think together the endless series of fragmented temporalities, visualities, affects, values and entities (both human and non-human) that make up the social web, and how they congeal together to create something of a collective, if incoherent, experience. It posits ordinary, micro and singular yet generic sensations and experiences, particularly but not exclusively those associated with social media use, as an indispensable lens into an emerging “affective commons”—something like the “unstated residue” of collective life (Berlant, 2012). As an analytical lens, it urges us to begin to unravel the profound extraordinariness of what has become our ordinary.

While the “affective commons” of the digital ordinary continues to expand, touching all of us in various ways, it should be emphasized that the concept implies a kind of central subject position that remains out of reach for many: the everyday user or consumer of devices and platforms, as opposed to the *producers* of the various forms of vital energy that contribute to

their creation and sustainment, such as factory workers, invisible content moderators, noninnovative IT programmers, Amazon Mechanical Turkers⁷, and countless others.⁸ The digital ordinary, so to speak, has a constitutive outside on which it relies. Yet its connection to and dependence on this outside is much more intimate than one might assume. In other words, as distant as they often appear to be, the users and producers of the digital ordinary are bound by the same biopolitical dynamics and logics of control and extraction. They run into the same impasses, albeit on drastically different scales.

I explore the analytical potential of the concept of the digital ordinary by writing vignettes about my own ordinary online experiences. Each vignette in the chapter reveals something characteristic of the digital ordinary and thus something about our collective, affective experience of the present. Beginning from specific events, messages and Instagram posts (respectively), the vignettes expand into micro case studies—potential materials and lines of thought for exploring the digital ordinary as both a sensorial and structural milieu. The vignettes themselves emerge from a preliminary definition of the digital ordinary as the **milieu of algorithms, softwares and platforms which together mediate our social experience of the present**. As such, the digital ordinary constitutes both a constructed and sensory environment, one shaped equally by its designers and proprietors on the one hand, and its users and dwellers on the other. Out of this definition follow three propositions, which organize the vignettes thematically: first, the digital ordinary is characterized by affective and temporal fragmentation, producing a sensorium that is simultaneously dulled and overstimulated. Second, the digital

⁷ Amazon Mechanical Turk is a platform that facilitates piecemeal digital labour often intended to supplement the work of machine-learning algorithms, such as content deduplication and moderation.

⁸ This circle of producers expands well beyond strictly digital realms and those adjacent to them, including all those taking on others' reproductive labour (e.g. domestic workers, caregivers) while they engage in so-called "knowledge work" or digital leisure.

ordinary is invested in the production of profitable habits and in tracking and capturing the circulation of feeling throughout the population. Third, the digital ordinary binds its inhabitants, making it difficult, if not impossible, to opt out or leave. Broadly, the first proposition tackles the digital ordinary as an affective and sensory experience, the second emphasizes the forces and operations shaping the former, and the third illuminates the intimate relation between the two, demonstrating how this intimacy makes it difficult to detach ourselves from the digital ordinary. Far from exhaustive, these propositions serve as a starting point for thinking about what the digital ordinary might do as a concept, and what this might in turn reveal to us about contemporary biopolitics.

Our ordinary is a digital one

Stewart (2007) defines the ordinary as a “shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life” (p.1). In other (less poetic) words, the ordinary emerges out of what we do (and how we do it), how we feel, and what we desire. It is both the domain we generate together and the domain *in which* we generate (Berlant et al., 2020). As such, the ordinary is both “intensely present *and* enigmatic” (Berlant, 2011, p.4). Like Foucault’s milieu, the ordinary emerges out of “the conjunction of events produced by the population and the quasi natural events occurring around them,” a confluence of forces resulting in “combined, overall effects bearing on all those who live in it” (Foucault, 2007, p. 21). More simply, it is the medium “in which circulation is carried out,” in which things both ordinary and extraordinary happen (p.21). As such, the ordinary is not everyday life per se, but rather the gradual build up of its *everydayness*, accounting for the “quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergences” (Stewart, 2007, p.2). Returning to Stewart’s (2007) definition, it can be said that ordinary comes into view

through the affects that flow through it, to be found in “impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds” (p.2). Ordinary affects are the experiences that bind us, they are the “animate circuit” that powers our milieux, “conduct[ing] force and map[ping] connections, routes and disjunctures” in the process (Stewart, 2007, p. 3).

Mobilizing the notion of the ordinary allows us to attend to our original question—posed at the outset of this chapter—of how to grapple with the everydayness of biopolitical mechanisms of control or, put differently, how to come back down to the immediate and experiential when thinking about power. The concept of the ordinary does this in the way that it brings into view as a “scene of immanent force” something of what terms like “neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, globalization” and biopolitics try to systematize and reveal (Stewart, 2007, p.1). Turning to ordinary affects as a source of knowledge animates these concepts, pushing back against their imposition as “dead effects (...) on an already innocent world” (Stewart, 2007, p.1).

A number of scholars have mobilized notions of the ordinary and the everyday in their study of digital media, many of which take up the question of our vernacular engagement with algorithms. Bucher (2017), for example, explores the ordinary affects associated with user experiences of the Facebook algorithm through a series of vignettes. Bucher (2017) uses these cases to develop her notion of the “algorithmic imaginary,” which refers to the “mental models that people construct about algorithms” while emphasizing the “productive, affective power that these imaginings have” (p.41). Emerging out of users’ ordinary experiences with and feelings about algorithms, the algorithmic imaginary reveals the “recursive force relations” between our collective imaginings and the actual operations of algorithms, or in other words, how algorithms

and users affect and are affected by one another in the milieu (p.42). Willson (2017), on the other hand, considers the consequences of the “algorithmization” of everyday life practices, or the delegation of everyday actions and decision-making processes to algorithms, such as searching for and evaluating information, communicating and navigating directions. Willson (2017) considers algorithms in light of the tension between corporate design strategies and user tactics, claiming that “while the strategies of corporations such as Google work to shape the environment and practices of its users, (...) the tactics users employ when engaging in these practices and in these spaces intersect and iteratively shape the ways in which the everyday is manifest and experienced” (p.143). Focussing on algorithmic strategies (rather than user tactics), Banning (2016) uses affective vignettes to explore how algorithmic functions and platform protocols construct “affective situations” that prime and exploit human communicative impulses, such as through automated invitations and default settings that encourage publicity. These are strategies which ultimately trade on “user affiliations and affection for others,” and in the case of spam and/or automated phishing attacks, on users’ trust and naivete (Chun, 2016). Others, such as Paasonen (2015), opt to analyze accounts of ordinary digital breakdown and network failure to uncover the “elusive yet tangible affective and somatic underpinnings of ubiquitous connectivity” (p.702). By examining “moments of rupture”—typically accompanied by a sinking feeling, disorientation and general visceral unease—Paasonen (2015) reveals both the force and the tenuousness of the pleasure of digital connection and seamless user anticipation, or more profoundly, of users’ sense of agency and control. Paasonen’s (2015) approach echoes Berlant’s (2011) and Chun’s (2016) premise that it is typically in a state of crisis—big or small—that the ordinary (and the habits and affects which underpin it) comes into view. In other words, it is only when we feel a threat to our objects and the attachments that bind us to them that we pause to

consider them for what they are (and what they could be) (Berlant, 2011). These are ultimately moments of affective conversion—something reveals itself when everyday pleasures are temporarily transformed into sources of acute frustration, when the ordinarily dull becomes shocking in a new context, and when the familiar becomes foreign after you look at it too long. The method of the affective vignette prompts us to pay close attention to these moments for what they might reveal.

In the following sections, I use vignettes as a starting point from which to explore the ordinary ways in which social media—and their biopolitical capture logics—bind their users, enticing them into an impasse. Each vignette builds upon and develops the definitional propositions, or alternatively, the propositions emerge from the vignettes. Far from exhaustive, the vignettes serve as a kind of exercise in thinking and practice, a test-run of a concept that seeks to illuminate the extraordinary in the digital everyday.

Proposition 1: The Digital Ordinary is characterized by affective and temporal fragmentation, which produces a sensorium both dulled and overstimulated.

Zoom fatigue, junktime and leaky presence

Since March of 2020—when the outbreak of COVID-19 was declared to be a global pandemic—the video-conferencing application Zoom has seen a meteoric rise in its user base and popularity. Downloads of the app grew exponentially (with its stock value following suite) during the early weeks of the pandemic. While some turned to comparable apps such as Skype, Zoom has without a doubt been the platform to endure one year into a global health crisis. It has become the go-to digital conduit for study, work and social life for millions of people around the world. It has become the vessel and background of ordinary life in extraordinary times.

About a month into this “new normal,” reports of widespread “zoom fatigue” began to surface (Sklar, 2020). People complained of “headaches and

migraines, blurred and double vision, eye irritation and pain, lack of focus and general exhaustion,” among more psychological effects such as feelings of isolation, alienation and anxiety (Abdelrahman, 2021; Murphy, 2020). These unintended side effects were quickly reconfigured into a business opportunity, specifically by AI companies in labour management. These companies proposed “solutions” such as using personalized 3D avatars as presence proxies for exhausted workers in video calls (Abdelrahman, 2021).

At the same time, concerns over the platform’s privacy and security policies began to emerge. News broke that Zoom was collecting personal data from users’ meetings for targeted advertising, and that its mobile app was providing data to Facebook’s Graph API (Consumer Reports, Motherboard). (Following these revelations, Zoom promptly announced changes to its data-sharing policies, but this hardly precludes the platform from reintegrating these practices into their Terms of Use under a new guise in the future, as done by Instagram in the previous vignette.) There were also widespread complaints of what came to be called “zoom-bombing”—strangers crashing zoom meetings (often subjecting attendees to disturbing, obscene and/or illegal content) after finding the meeting links (enough to gain entry) on social media. Networks of toxicity sprouted around the new practice, exploiting the leakiness of social media and Zoom to target their victims.

Now, nearly a year later (at the time of writing), Zoom remains one of the most popular choices for working and studying remotely. For whatever reasons, the platform has stuck, its status morphing from the unfamiliar and temporary to the mundane and quotidian.

The phenomenon of “Zoom fatigue” points to the inadequacies of video communication technology when it comes to simulating liveness or presence. As Murphy (2020) puts it, “the way the video images are digitally encoded and decoded, altered and adjusted, patched and synthesized introduces all kinds of artifacts: blocking, freezing, blurring, jerkiness and out-of-sync audio” (p.1). Psychologists and neuroscientists explain that these glitches and their by-products are hampering our ability to communicate non-verbally—that is, to read, mirror and

react to one another's micro facial expressions and changes of tone, among other things. To compensate, the brain goes into overdrive, and the user begins to feel like they're performing their emotional responses as opposed to, or on top of, experiencing them. In other words, the user is forced to do a kind of affective translation work, nodding vigorously, staring at her webcam in an attempt to simulate eye contact. What's lost on Zoom is not merely the element of shared physical space, but the capacity to co-create in this space an affective one.

More precisely, what makes Zoom (and comparable video-conferencing platforms) so fatiguing is the element of the lag or time delay. While Zoom works to keep its latency under 150 milliseconds (the maximum amount of time before the conversation begins to feel unnatural), a lot still depends on network connectivity and the device one is connecting from (Pierce, 2020). This is temporal fragmentation *as* affective fragmentation—if the message (whether verbal or visual) takes too long to reach us, it doesn't read the same (if it reads at all). The result is not so much a simulated presence as—to quote Steyerl (2019)—“degrees of withholding absence” (p. 25). The temporal disorientation characteristic of this poor substitute for face-to-face communication is compounded by the myriad other timelines and timeframes that structure our digital lives, asynchronous and (hardly) synchronous alike. Steyerl (2019) calls this digital temporality “junktime.” Junktime is a “temporal infrastructure that consists of fractured schedules and dysfunctional, collapsing just-in-time economies in which people frantically try to figure out reverberating asynchronicities and the breakdown of riff-raff timetables” (p.24). It is “wrecked, discontinuous, distracted and runs on several parallel tracks” (p.24). Junktime is a symptom of the demand for 24/7 availability; it is the experience of having to manage and distribute one's presence as a resource and form of capital (Steyerl, 2019). And as Steyerl (2019) argues, junktime—in many ways the great equalizer, as it increasingly restructures the work and

attention of esteemed professors and microworkers alike—has turned unmediated presence (communication, connection, liveness) into a much sought-after commodity, and one that it is always scarce (Bucher, 2012). In Steyerl’s (2019) words, “junktime is the material base of the idea of pure unmediated endless presence” (p.24). The result is a widespread premium on presence (which platforms like Zoom capitalize on), engendered by the ubiquity of digital platforms and their techniques of affective/cognitive capture and monetization (p.23).

Many of the tech “solutions” that have popped up in response to the widespread “problem” of Zoom fatigue have been designed with this premium on presence in mind—in other words, they have sought to come up with a method to maximize presence without sacrificing productivity (by giving people more time off to make up for the symptoms of Zoom fatigue, for example). More often than not, this means relegating the “affective translation work” to technology, in an alleged attempt to free up the worker’s mental energy. One major proponent of this kind of “solution” has been El Kaliouby (2020), co-founder of the emotion AI company “Affectiva” (alongside Rosalind Picard), which sells facial-expression analysis software (Abdelrahman, 2021; Lohr, 2011). Writing in the context of the pandemic and widespread Zoom fatigue, El Kaliouby (2020) proposes a live “emotion newsfeed” for virtual events, in which users’ cameras would detect their emotional reactions and share them in the form of comprehensive metrics. “Picture an emotion newsfeed that could aggregate, moment-by-moment, the audience’s responses to a presentation, and visualize that energy; for example, imagine a graph that shoots up when people are engaged or enthusiastic, or displays the crying-laughing emoji when people are laughing” (El Kaliouby, 2020). The benefits of such a technology are framed by El Kaliouby (2020) as helping organizations to gauge the “emotional health” of their employees (and thus to more efficiently extract affective labour from them). Yet

one can easily imagine such detailed behavioural data being beneficial to other organizations and platforms for adtech purposes. Indeed, a major part of Affectiva's business model is their "media analytics services," which they offer to manufacturers, retailers, marketers and content producers as a means to "objectively measure" how emotions influence consumer behaviour. They boast that the "world's largest brands" and corporations, such as Walt Disney Television and Kellogg's, alongside market research firms and consulting agencies, are already using these services; the company is confident that this software will soon be applied across the web (*Affectiva Media Analytics*, n.d.; Lohr, 2011). Unfortunately, Affectiva isn't wrong—similar emotion-recognition programs are being marketed to survey students and workers remotely in order to "read" their inner states and gauge motivation levels, among other things (Crawford, 2021).

This kind of behavioural surveillance and targeting is often discursively framed as a way of optimizing or "personalizing" services and outputs, and thus a way of better serving users/customers. Put differently, the appeal of such capture techniques is reframed or justified as being actually beneficial to its targets, as a way of attending to their needs. In her research on data literacy, Elinor Carmi has found that while people generally do not agree with their behaviour being tracked online over time, many more *do* agree to companies using their data to "personalize" their experience, without realizing that one necessitates the other (Feminist Publishing and Tech Speaker Series, 2021, 41:14). Abdelrahman (2021) refers to this discursive tactic as a "paradigm of caring," in which companies purport to be looking after the needs of either their workers (e.g. their "emotional health") or users (the "personalized" nature of their ad experience) in a way that obscures conditions of exploitation and tactics of manipulation.

Others have proposed using personalized 3D avatars, sometimes paired with augmented or virtual reality technology, as a possible solution to Zoom fatigue. The idea here is to add a

couple more degrees of distance or absence to videoconferencing by way of a proxy image/actor, typically created from a photograph of the user. If we think about our digital image as already a kind of proxy or stand-in for unmediated presence—one that sometimes takes on a life of its own by way of glitches and delays—then such technologies essentially just relieve the individual from using her own body as said proxy (Steyerl, 2019). This is a form of what Steyerl (2019) calls “absence management,” which allows users to go about their myriad “junktime commitments” without having to worry about performing their engagement (p.26). Abdelrahman (2021) explains that the 3D avatars that began to emerge a few months into the pandemic, such as those developed by startups LoomieLive and Spatial, track users’ voices and/or facial expressions and then assume the job of editing and presenting their affective states to others, either through a video call or through a VR/AR headset. Crucially, unlike the human users behind the avatars, they are able to simulate friendly engagement without limit. “What the avatar does is free individuals from having to sit behind the screen throughout the duration of long meetings and allows them to get up and move without being observed. Screen icons also help participants to choose the appropriate non-verbal action which they need to communicate such as cheerfulness or enthusiasm” (Abdelrahman, 2021, p. 11). In other words, the affective labour of providing inexhaustible presence, undivided attention and selecting “appropriate non-verbal actions” is relegated to a non-human simulator. This is illustrated perfectly in a promotional video by LoomieLive, in which attentive avatars nod, laugh and even scratch the occasional itch in a Zoom-like grid, while behind them, people eat, settle into their couches or interact with their children (Loom.ai., 2020). The promotional video prompts imaginings of the kinds of glorious glitches and disjunctures such software could potentially introduce—picture a smiling avatar in a pristine virtual office setting abruptly cutting to a woman attempting to distribute her presence

between remote work and childcare, as she tries to manage her child's meltdown—revealing quite literally the disorienting collapse of work/home and physical/virtual contexts. In illustrating the “problem” that such products are meant to solve, the LoomieLive advertisement shows how achieving a sense of virtual presence paradoxically relies on creating degrees of absence, by adding an additional layer between the virtual and the physical to compensate for the spatial, temporal and affective fragmentation that characterizes the digital ordinary.

These forms of simulated presence may be characterized in part by their vulnerability, in the sense that they are always subject to what Chun (2016) calls the “leakiness” of digital media, specifically social networks. This “leakiness” goes hand-in-hand with the promise of an “intimacy that, however banal, transcends physical location and enables self-made bonds” (Chun, 2016, p. 103). Yet with this promise comes a threat: the “threat of a security based on poorly-gated neighbourhoods” (p.103). It's worth emphasizing, however, that networked “neighbourhoods” are “poorly-gated” by design. As Chun (2016) argues, without these “leaks” or accidental connections, networks would not scale. In other words, the vulnerability is in-built.

Zoom-bombers are in the business of forcefully reminding users of this vulnerability, taking advantage of it to wreak havoc. Most often, this takes the form of subjecting meeting participants to disturbing, obscene and/or illegal content (e.g. hate speech, child pornography), as if to prove that there is no such thing as a safe space online. As a form of trolling specific to the video-conferencing platform, Zoom-bombing is particularly visceral and intrusive in the way that it weaponizes digital presence (or more specifically, digital presence as strategic absence).

Networks of trolls have formed around the practice, sharing Zoom links found on social media sites such as Twitter, often collected with the help of bots. The result is a growing collection of cases: a Holocaust memorial is crashed with anti-semitic content, an anti-racist arts workshop is

bombed with hate speech, an International Woman’s day event with graphic pornography (and countless others). Swastikas, racial slurs and misogynist themes tend to figure prominently. Reading about these, one can only imagine the disorienting, even (re-)traumatizing effects of such an incident. In a matter of seconds, the sense of affective co-presence, so painstakingly constructed, is shattered, its fragility irreversibly revealed. Our paranoia is confirmed: there are always lurkers and bots and trolls just around the corner. There is no safe space, no possibility of an untainted digital intimacy.

The phenomenon of Zoom-bombing shows us how presence relies on absence in another crucial way—namely, the absence of unwanted/unintended presences, which extends to both human and non-human actors alike. To feel present and connected, we must feel relatively secure, which requires strategically overlooking, or tacitly accepting, the risks and vulnerability that our digital presence entails. We cannot be fully present in an encounter if we are fretting about the potentially sensitive data we might be unwittingly revealing to trackers as it unfolds. Similarly, we cannot be present on Twitter without making ourselves vulnerable to bots and other forms of spam, the effects of which may very well follow us onto other platforms like Zoom (we might call this a “cross-platform leakiness”). In other words, we are often left with little choice but to accept the potential intrusion of unwanted presences in exchange for the very possibility of connection, of presence, in the first place. The result is a strange, multi-layered experience defined by dissonance: the dissonance between tacit trust and a persisting suspicion, between privacy and a networked publicness, between intimacy and potential exposure, and between presence and absence.

Proposition 2: The Digital Ordinary is invested in the production of profitable habits, tracking and capturing the circulation of feeling throughout the population.

Delete before posting: Modulating self-censorship for profit

“If unsent messages go against our Community Standards, they can still be included in a report.” - Instagram, February 2021

I receive this message as a pop-up notification, hovering over one of my group chats. Out of habit, I click “dismiss” (instead of “learn more”). Later, I puzzle over what this could mean—unsent as in typed out but not shared? Or unsent as in deleted after the fact? Either way, where do these ghostly messages go? I realized I should have “learnt more.”

On Instagram’s “Help” webpage, I find the following:
“Note that your Data Download file doesn’t include messages that you’ve unsent from your Instagram account.”

In other words, the “unsent” messages—which are in fact messages deleted after being sent—get captured by the platform, in case of a violation, but are ultimately irretrievable on the part of the sender. Where do these potentially transgressive messages go?

A quick google search (“Instagram deleted messages”) yields articles from *The Verge* and *Techcrunch*, published in August 2020, reporting that an “independent security researcher” had found photos and messages deleted more than a year ago after requesting his personal data for download. The platform awarded said researcher \$6000 for catching this “bug” (Whittaker, 2020).

Has this “bug” been reconfigured into a new security measure? Or is it the timeline that differentiates “bug” from governance technique—a year versus the typical 90 days of “delay” in data removal?
“Instagram didn’t delete my data even when I deleted it from my end,” says the researcher.

Only months later, the platform is now informing its users that this is in fact the norm, for the purposes of “upholding community standards.”

Like the question of whether one can truly disconnect from or leave digital social networks (and if so, how), the question of whether we can delete our data, or more simply, whether we have the agency to change our minds online, increasingly haunts user behaviour. Much research—both academic and corporate—has shown that “silent” and “negative” actions are just as valuable for interventionary and predictive purposes as is explicit engagement (Carmi, 2020). In other words, “passive” actions such as deleting and creeping, and forms of what Facebook calls “self-censorship” (changing one’s mind about sharing something), give platforms insights into how users moderate themselves (Carmi, 2020). These insights are particularly valuable because, as Gillespie (2018) argues, platform moderation (e.g. removal, filtering, suspension) is precisely the commodity that social media companies offer their users—it is what ensures an enjoyable and predictable experience (and guards against its devolution into a breeding ground of hate, porn and misinformation). Users are enlisted in the production of this commodity, and not only through explicit actions of flagging and reporting content (Gillespie, 2018). Rather, users are continuously “educated” on how to moderate, censor and configure their own behaviour in line with desirable modes of engagement and ultimately, platform profitability (Carmi, 2020). Platforms achieve this by way of tracking and intervening upon users’ self-moderating habits, and following closely the circulation of feelings such as regret, self-doubt and hesitation.

In a 2013 study, Savik Das and Adam Kramer (the latter of which would go on to co-author the highly controversial Facebook emotional contagion experiment) track what they call the “last-minute self-censorship” of 3.9 million Facebook users over a period of 17 days. Defined as the filtering of a post *after* it’s been “formed and expressed, but *before* it has been shared,” the authors note that last-minute self-censorship can be “both helpful and hurtful” to

social networking sites (Das & Kramer, 2013, p.120; emphasis added). The question, then, is how to distinguish between the two: when is this censorship a form of beneficial self-moderation, and when is it a barrier to content generation and engagement? With findings showing that approximately 71% of the sample self-censored at least once over the observation period, amounting to a loss of about 33% of all potential posts, managing and micro-modulating forms of self-censorship becomes both a huge and imperative task for social media platforms like Facebook.

Das and Kramer (2013) tie this phenomenon of preemptive self-censorship to how users perceive their audience and manage boundaries between the various communities in their network. Crucially, they note that “users who experience episodes of *‘regret’* for sharing content [emphasis added]” are likely to “resort to self-censorship” to avoid making the same mistake (p.121). While these regrets are typically basic social ones (e.g. diverging from the norms of a given community, presenting an undesirable self-image), they are also often specific to the digital—users might worry about “spamming” their friends’ newsfeeds, thus engaging in what is broadly categorized as “antisocial behaviour” by platforms (Carmi, 2020). This makes regret—in all its ambiguity—a specific point of interest from the perspective of platform design. In particular, platforms seek to understand when and why a user might foresee regret, and how this shapes their subsequent actions. Put differently, they hope to anticipate when users will predict their own regret, thus allowing them to adjust various features and functions to ultimately remain one step ahead. Indeed, Facebook’s “audience selector tool” (and other privacy settings) were created in response to Das and Kramer’s (2013) findings. As Wang et al. (2011) put it in their study on regret, in order to create a “sustainable online social environment, it is imperative to

understand these regrettable actions and, more importantly, *to help users avoid them* [emphasis added]” (p.1).

Wang et al. (2011) find that users avoid and cope with regret on Facebook in a number of ways, only some of which might be categorized as self-censoring. Users might opt to delay posting in case they reconsider the impulse (like a self-imposed account suspension), or they might simply go for it and apologize after the fact. The particularly cautious, on the other hand, might opt not to post at all, adopting instead a more passive mode of engagement with the platform (the authors call this the “read but not post” response). Others still will create “dummy accounts” in which they perform trial-runs of posts. And of course, there is the “self-cleaning” approach, in which the user prunes her profile of posts already shared (p.10).

In investigating *why* people make posts they come to later regret, Wang et al. (2011) found that the force of habit was crucial. One respondent described posting to Facebook as a kind of “involuntary” action, stating that “you feel something and you express that in Facebook” (p.6). In other words, expressing becomes synonymous with posting, just like passing time might become synonymous with scrolling. Similarly, the authors found that people tended to regret posts made in “hot states” (highly emotional states) or those in which they were venting frustration (p.6-7). Self-censorship, then, becomes a “protection mechanism” for avoiding future mistakes.

These studies show us that digital social platforms have high stakes in moderating patterns of self-censorship, discouraging it in some scenarios while encouraging it in others. Too many users adopting a “read but not post” response, deleting half of their existing data, or creating false accounts poses a definite threat. These problems have been accounted for in varying ways, one of which is Facebook’s “frictionless sharing” model, implemented in 2011

(Payne, 2014). By incorporating external applications (and users' activity on them), a significant portion of the work of "sharing" gets automated. As a result, "everything a user does is *automatically* at least potentially shared with other users in that network in real time" (Karppi, 2018, p. 31). This strategy makes engagement possible without explicit participation by rendering passive actions into active ones, thus reducing the need to prompt users to manually share content (Payne, 2014). In this way, users are forced to "participate in the processes of data mining and monetization of those data, whether or not they actively decide to do so" (p.31). On the other hand, "last minute" or "in situ" censorship, which occupies that volatile space between proactive (e.g. selecting appropriate audience, privacy settings) and reactive (eg. deleting, apologizing) self-moderation, represents a prime opportunity for managing the specific problem of self-censorship. As Chun (2016) would describe it, this is a moment of state change or crisis, a prime opportunity to influence or altogether change users' habits. It is an "exception" that demands a rule, that demands explanatory correlations.

On this note, Wang et al. (2011) suggest a "soft paternalistic approach" to future design solutions. "If we could build a tool capable of identifying posts that users are likely to regret, that tool might intervene with reminders or warnings," they speculate (p.10). Sentiment analysis would be central to this scenario, as the findings show that regretted posts often expressed strong negative sentiments. This approach would allow designers to "build tools to detect SNS content with strong sentiment and nudge users accordingly" (p.10).

Putting aside for the moment the ambiguity of what might constitute strong sentiment (the authors list swear words and words/phrases related to sex, religion and politics as examples), such design features and logics—which may seem harmless as mere "suggestion" mechanisms that users can choose to ignore—ultimately follow a logic that "educates" self-moderation for

profit all the same. These “educating” strategies rely on the observational and analytical work of capture systems, which break down behaviour to “create histories of past and future actions” (Chun, 2016, pp. 59–60). Capture systems are in the business of incorporating every possible exception into every possible projection (with the help of correlations); they are driven by the goal of “eradicating” the need for capture through its continued application (p.60). By imposing onto divergent behaviours a specific grammar, and thus breaking them down into discrete units for evaluation, “capture systems restructure what they allegedly discover,” often rendering their “predictions” performative (p.60; Rouvray, 2011).

To return to Wang et al.’s (2011) suggestions, we might then ask how, or according to which grammar or scheme, the “strength” or intensity of sentiment might be measured. This is another high stakes dilemma for platforms. Alternately phrased, it is the question of when sentiment is too strong versus when it is just strong enough (to secure engagement). This dilemma was brought into sharp relief by a recent Facebook experiment called “P(Bad for the World), reported on by *The New York Times*. Reporters Roose et al. (2020) summarize the experiment as follows:

The company had surveyed users about whether certain posts they had seen were “good for the world” or “bad for the world.” They found that high-reach posts—posts seen by many users—were more likely to be considered “bad for the world” (...) So the team trained a machine-learning algorithm to predict posts that users would consider “bad for the world” and demote them in news feeds. In early tests, the new algorithm successfully reduced the visibility of objectionable content. But it also lowered the number of times users opened Facebook, an internal metric known as “sessions” that executives monitor closely.

Roose et al. (2020) report that Facebook ended up going with an approach that did not result in reduced “sessions,” namely one in which a subset of “objectionable content” would be demoted “less strongly” and thus left in users’ feeds. This case demonstrates the fine, nearly nonexistent line between the kind of “intense sentiment” that drives interaction versus the kind that drives aversion.⁹ Noteworthy, too, is the deliberate ambiguity of the terms “good/bad for the world,” which demonstrates that the ultimate goal of the experiment was not to figure out what kinds of content users believed was “bad for the world” (causes) but rather how much negative affective responses to content drive engagement with the platform (correlations, namely between negative affects and user activity). Thus, we have a situation in which a negative affective response such as regret may be deemed undesirable, while certain levels of outrage or indignation may in fact be helpful in driving up engagement. In other words, one drives a particular kind of sociality, as defined by the platform, while the other inhibits it.

Not only does this experiment highlight how social media companies are constantly having to weigh social responsibility against profitability (the *New York Times* article is titled “Facebook struggles to balance civility and growth”), it also demonstrates their biopolitical governance logic—namely, the ways in which they govern in reference to a “field of possible events,” establishing a “bandwidth of the acceptable” in favour of outright prohibition of “objectionable content” (Terranova, 2015, p.113-114). This logic is characteristic of mechanisms of security, as defined by Foucault. By seeking to incorporate the circulation of ever more objects and affects, social media platforms such as Facebook micro-modulate the environment in which these things flow, controlling or “securing” engagement through ordering mechanisms that

⁹ Indeed, Facebook is showing us that the two are not incompatible—that they in fact tend to go together. In her October 2021 testimony to a US Senate committee, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed that the platform had “purposely hidden disturbing research about how teenagers felt worse about themselves after using its products and how it was willing to use hateful content on its site to keep users coming back” (Kang, 2021).

shape the field of visibility (Terranova, 2015). As such, platforms are engaged in the “prevention of insecurity, rather than the pursuit of any collectively identified common good,” which they carry out by statistically tweaking the field of possible action/affection (Rouvroy, 2011, p. 126). All this is done with the goal of anticipating, capturing and modulating the unstable, uncertain and idiosyncratic elements of user behaviour, or what Rouvroy (2011) calls the “virtual”—the individual ties, habits, moods, associations and motivations that shape user behaviour (Chun, 2016). As Chun (2016) has argued, the singular action no longer exists. Rather, it is always-already potential evidence of a collective pattern, waiting to be deciphered and analyzed through a mapping of statistical correlations (p.56). “Through the analytic of habits,” Chun (2016) writes, “individual actions coalesce bodies into a monstrosly connected chimera,” one that essentially dissolves “the difference between the individual and statistical body” (p.3, p.119). Foucault called this “chimera” the biopolitical population. Platforms call it their “user base.”

Proposition 3: The digital ordinary binds its inhabitants, making it difficult, if not impossible, to opt out or leave.

Periodic goodbyes: Leaving social media

“I’m leaving because I hate how much people know about my personal life.”

This comes mid-way through a tearful, self-revelatory narrative about this particular influencer’s¹⁰ (yoga, nature, spirituality) personal struggles, many of which she attributes to social media. The video appears on Instagram Stories, and is visible to the public and approximately 22,000 followers. The contradiction of the statement appears to go unnoticed. The narrative digresses, but generally points to a crisis in self-image and identity. The Instagram Story is later updated to reflect the influencer’s improved mood.

¹⁰ Instagram user @alyssabokovoy. Date of story post unknown.

She is laughing in a car, she is publicly thanking a close friend for their support. A few days later comes a regular post: the influencer tangled up in a series of complex yoga poses.

"My decision to leave had nothing to do with social media, but rather with the fact that I was and am going through an existential crisis. (...) Now that I've returned to doing things for myself again, I am excited to get back to sharing."

This comes halfway through another confessional Instagram video by a different influencer¹¹ (fitness, wellness, dance) posted after a month-long stretch of inactivity. Framed as a kind of personal brand reintroduction, the influencer speaks in platitudes about returning to doing things that make her happy online, having strayed in response to a moderate growth in followers (more specifically, the economic opportunities and performance pressure that came with this growth).

"If this is the end, I would hate to have left anything unsaid."

This potential goodbye comes on December 19th, 2020, the day before Instagram's most recent update to its Terms of Use (at the time of writing). While the platform claimed to simply be "updating the language" in the contract to better reflect their "community standards" on explicit content, many believed it was just another step in the platforms' longterm efforts to banish sex workers from the space. Explicit sexual solicitation and language would not be tolerated—indeed, they *haven't been* tolerated for at least 2 years. In any case, the update might make it harder for this particular influencer¹² to share their queer, BDSM-themed content, to do their regular brand sponsorships. *Could this really be goodbye?*

Two days later came another post: educational slides about sex work. The platform update, and the farewell address it prompted, ended up being little

¹¹ Instagram user @chilucchetta. Posted February 2nd, 2021.

¹² Instagram user @yaz.thehuman. Posted December 19th, 2020.

more than a positive branding opportunity, a chance to rearticulate the value of the affective intimacy they offer their audience in the face of restrictive platform governance. “I really do appreciate every single one of you,” they wrote.

Every goodbye prompts a reintroduction.

“Leaving” social media is part of the cycle of social media.

Such periodic goodbyes have become a recognizable genre on social media, part of our ordinary cycles of attachment and aversion with our platforms. Professional Youtubers make tearful confessional videos with titles like “Why I’m Leaving” and/or “Why I left.” Ordinary users and successful influencers alike lament the habits their platforms are designed to instill, announcing much-needed digital detoxes and mental health breaks (digital detoxes *as* mental health breaks). Paradoxically (but not surprisingly), these performances of departure often end up replacing the real thing. One might fade into the background of the newsfeed for a while, but rarely does this mean for good. The break is fraught and partial—it’s engaging *in the name of leaving, rather than actually disengaging*. Sometimes it’s as paradoxical as flocking to social media to voice one’s complaints *about* social media. Karppi (2018) writes that “disconnections, in our network culture, take different forms: a break, a manifesto, an act, a form of resistance, a failure” (p.2). But there is something to be said about the failure—the failure to opt out, to disconnect, to delete, to leave. The failure to negotiate and maintain the right boundary between self and network, self and platform.

Often, the symbolic leave (and consequent return) is prompted by a desire to reestablish the terms on which one engages with the platform/network. Quoting Ben Light, Karppi (2018) notes that (temporary) disconnection has become a “solution” to the “different problems of living with social media” (p.3). Implicit in this logic is the idea that one can bracket off the elements of social media that are assumed to be harmful and then stick around to enjoy its pleasures and

affordances—this might look like adjusting profile settings, culling one’s network, or using the time limit feature on various social media apps to avoid excessive scrolling. Alternatively, we might opt to change ourselves, our outlook on how social media fits (or doesn’t) into our personal lives, and return with new intentions. This latter approach is evident in the narratives above, in which the source of the problem isn’t always clear: is it us, or is it the platform? If it’s the former, maybe all it will take is a little time away. This inability to pinpoint the source of social media anxiety exposes our intimacy with our platforms, or the ways in which our identities, social lives and values get caught up in them. Either way, these attempts at negotiating platform connectivity tend to be tainted by failure—the commitment to authenticity and integrity so often iterated by professional influencers (itself a form of cultural and affective capital), no matter how earnestly, inevitably mutates into consumable performances of it—brand-friendly, audience-engaging, and pre-formatted for algorithmic visibility. Yet the simple act of leaving to return keeps these potentials alive for the user, at least for a while. When disillusionment eventually kicks in, the cycle is repeated. The periodic goodbye has become so common as to be mundane, just another post among others, another genre of social media content.

For Karppi (2018), disconnection from the milieu of platforms that mediate our social lives has come to represent an “intense affective force,” one which social media companies, by design, discourage at almost any cost, as each individual exit has the potential to incite a mass exodus. Writing specifically about Facebook, Karppi (2018) notes that the possibility to disconnect “is a question that exceeds nonuse,” entering “the regimes of social and affective power, knowledge production, and cultural practices” (p.19). This explains the ambiguous affect that marks a public refusal to reenter the scroll-like-comment-share cycle—particularly when such refusals are made via social media. Ideally, we might all be doing the same thing, striking

against the exploitation and surveillance (among other things) that goes hand in hand with our social media activity. Yet the context inevitably taints the affective charge of the statement (read as self-righteous or radical or somewhere in between), a charge that prompts further engagement, ultimately feeding right back into the cycle.

This is not to deny the potential losses that loom over the individual trying to decide whether or not to leave, of which there are many. One is the immediate loss of habit, of one's habitual sensory environment and source of stimulation (Chun, 2016; Karppi, 2018, p. 5). This loss points to the way a habit can become a dependency. Chun (2016) argues that digital media capitalize on this habitual dependency through constant updates, keeping users in a kind of perpetual race to catch up, to rehabilitate. At a more basic and fundamental level, however, the body must readjust its mechanics—that almost unconscious reach for the screen in the morning, or during an afternoon work lull. Karppi (2018) cites “phantom vibrations” as an example—the experience of hearing or feeling your phone go off when it is in fact nowhere in proximity (p.5).

More obviously, opting out of social media brings with it a whole host of perceived social losses. These are the kinds that social media platforms like to remind users of when they attempt to deactivate an account—Facebook, for example, proclaims “Your friends will miss you!” (Karppi, 2018). This is particularly salient considering the fact that our social networking sites have become “everyday spaces of congregation,” a place where users go to “hang out” (Senft, 2013, p. 347). Where to go for such potential bonding? Or more pressingly, where to do the endless “networking” and casual job hunting that late capitalism demands of the white collar worker, the freelancer (if not on platforms like LinkedIn)? Finally, there is the more perverse fear of a loss of agency, the “agency” to provide endless streams of data to corporate platforms and their “third parties,” to be exact. Chun (2016) calls this a kind of “programmed” agency, the

condition on which our online “freedom” depends. “Increasingly,” Chun writes, “user actions are like actions in a video game”— the variables are pre-configured and anticipated (p.79). But what if these pseudo-freedoms feel like all that’s left?

Leaving might also represent a material loss, namely if the individual’s social media presence constitutes their job, or accounts in large part for their career success. To leave would mean having to reinvent oneself, it would mean having to find a new language to describe one’s skill set (beyond engagement metrics, brand partnerships and the like). Then again, it also presents an opportunity for a ceremonious return. This calls to mind the case of Michelle Phan, arguably one of the most controversial (and cited) departures from Youtube (searching the phrase “Why Michelle Phan Left” on Youtube yields countless hits). After nearly a decade of being one of the most recognizable faces on beauty Youtube (if not on Youtube period), Phan quietly left the platform (and all other social media) in 2015. That same year, *Forbes* reported she was one of a handful of top-earning stars on the platform, having earned \$3 million from her videos (her net worth is now estimated to be \$50 million) (*Michelle Phan Net Worth*, 2020). As the story goes, many of her fans thought she had died. Four years later, Phan returned, citing the usual pressures of the job and a resulting “loss of integrity” for having prompted the departure. After doing some “soul-searching,” she has reclaimed her digital identity, hoping to share with viewers her “normal” life and interests, as opposed to a steady stream of professionally edited makeup content (as was the case before). This new, more “authentic” content includes partnerships with brands like Samsung (featured in a video titled “How to Side Hustle with Your Art”) and tours of her open-plan office, out of which she runs a company worth approximately \$500 million (Hou, 2019).

Yet beyond the habitual, social and material losses that leaving social media represents, the answer to the question “why does it feel so impossible to leave?” (or “why do I keep going back?”) remains murky. It’s clear, however, that this is by design. The central task of social media companies is to solve the problem of “how to keep value, attention and desires within the system,” in other words, how to capture all that tends toward escape (Karppi, 2018, p. 7; Rouvroy, 2011). *What’s alarming is that they have managed, to a certain extent, to capture even the desire to leave the system itself*, attested to by the ubiquity of rants about or against social media *on* social media. Perhaps a better question is whether it is even *possible* to disconnect completely, and if so, what would it take? Would this mean having friends delete their photos of you, their chat histories with you (Karppi, 2018, p.77)? Would it mean going off the grid entirely? Increasingly common partnerships between social media companies and state governments show us that it just might. Given that biopolitical regulation mechanisms increasingly function via data and algorithms, being a contemporary citizen implies existing simultaneously in myriad “databases, information banks, and other technomaterial assemblages” (p.78). This is the case no matter how great our efforts to stay offline—to have a legible, legal identity implies there is some digital version of you, no matter how partial, in existence somewhere. Thus, while we might try (and fail) to leave our social media platforms, avoiding the social web does not promise to shield us from their biopolitical

Conclusion

Each of the above vignettes illustrates a negotiation: whether between the individual user and the platform, the individual and other users, or the platform and its user base at large (or all of the above). Each case uncovers how the highly subjective, sensorial and affective intersects with the abstract, statistical and architectural. Furthermore, they point to the ways in which

control mechanisms are distilled into individual, mundane acts of self-regulation (e.g. through the “education” of users’ habits), and how a specific digital milieu (like Zoom) creates a de facto population out of its users—binded loosely by a particular, disorienting affective experience. Also evident is the insidious way in which the boundaries between the negotiating actors (platform, individual, population) are continuously blurred, with each defined in relation to the others.

In the first vignette, we see the affective and temporal fragmentation that characterizes the digital ordinary reflected in the phenomena of “zoom fatigue” and “zoom bombing,” and the biopolitical extraction, management and manipulation of workers’ vital energy via their remote affective labour—which proceeds with full force despite the ongoing pandemic. The value of the affective labour of such so-called “knowledge workers” is made evident by the fact that digital avatars are now being enlisted to fill in for labouring subjects when their capacity to provide this particular kind of labour value is used up. We also see how the disorienting affective experience of the digital ordinary impacts social relations—how establishing co-presence becomes more tenuous and more strenuous, which renders it more vulnerable, a vulnerability which is further exacerbated by the extractive design logics and in-built “leakiness” of the platforms on which we depend for connection. In the second vignette, we glimpse in platforms’ efforts to track and intervene in users’ habits, specifically their self-moderating practices, the distinctly biopolitical strategy of reorienting the population’s behaviour—via affective/environmental management—to align with predictable, desirable and profitable outcomes. Here, the value for platforms in what we might call particularly “impressible” affective states, such as self-doubt and hesitation, becomes evident as they are made into opportunities to influence or change user habits, thus shaping their future behaviour. Finally, in the third vignette, we see how platforms’ tendency to

subsume evermore objects and relations into themselves makes them so difficult to break with—to disconnect from, to leave. Furthermore, the difficulty of pinpointing the exact source of our social media anxiety—what it is that is prompting us to leave—exposes our intimacy with our platforms, or the manner in which our digital existence becomes entangled with our sense of self. As a consequence, disconnection assumes its own symbolic and affective force, a force which paradoxically tends to get subsumed by platforms as yet another source of engagement value.

Given the power differentials at play, these negotiations are in some sense always doomed to fail. In each “negotiation,” we glimpse the head-spinning contradictions that characterize the digital ordinary. When we leave social media only to return, or rather, when the very *desire* to leave social media is captured and turned into further fodder for engagement, we find ourselves in a kind of disturbing cul-de-sac. Similarly, attempting to strike a compromise by withholding or deleting personal information from our platforms, in an effort to create distance and to assert boundaries (or to walk back on the transgression of a boundary) inevitably leads to the production of *more* valuable data, *more* detailed behavioural metrics (e.g. self-censorship metrics) to be used for future priming and conditioning. In both cases, withholding or non-action are rendered variables to be controlled for in a field defined by engagement value. Deletion gets repurposed as a resource for strategizing its future obviation, while leaving becomes a strategy for staying, for living with and in the digital ordinary. And even when we use social media as a means to noble ends—for the sake of connection, intimacy, presence—we hit a wall: the more we try to simulate the real thing, the further away from us it gets. The more we seek to strengthen (digital) ties, the more potential threats to those ties we must accept.

Yet failure might not always be such a bad thing. In continuously trying and failing—failing in new ways—to negotiate the biopolitical terms and conditions on which we engage, we keep ourselves open to new lines of movement, to the potential of redistributing power or reappropriating the power we already hold. Perhaps it is not a question of opting out as much as it is one of how we live with the fact that we have already opted in—of what we *do* with this knowledge, which is at the very least as much an opportunity as it is a determination.

Conclusion: Impasse and the digital ordinary

In this thesis, I set out to explore what the framework of biopolitics, and the concept of the digital ordinary, might reveal to us about the impasse of the political present. I analyzed the biopolitical history behind, and configuration of, the digital ordinary, and examined the latter as unexpected evidence of biopolitics at work in the everyday. In the process, I turned to disparate, seemingly incommensurate sites, working from different positions and observing from different scales. Yet all of these sites, events, discourses and practices led me back to the notion of impasse—a kind of affective symptom of living under neoliberal biopower.

Lauren Berlant (2011) proposes “impasse” as the principal genre of the present, an affective structure that shapes diverse experiences in time and space. She describes the impasse as a “holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dog paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure” (p.199). Furthermore, “an impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity [emphasis added]” (p.199). An unbound delay, a limbo state—the experience of waiting for *something* for which we have no reliable affective expectations, no familiar genres, all while we frantically try to keep busy, conducting business-as-usual.

The notion of the impasse strikes me as being inextricable from political depression, a condition in which “customary forms of political response” are no longer viable, “no longer working to change the world or make us feel better” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p.1). It is shorthand for the feeling that any counter-hegemonic political effort, any exception to the norm, has always-already been predicted, accounted for, and preemptively incorporated. It is another word for neoliberalism, for biopolitics. Impasse is an exhausted political imagination; it is digitally-induced cognitive dissonance. It is perpetual adjustment in the name of survival

(Berlant, 2011), or better yet, perpetual gig work in the name of survival. It is junktime. Impasse is what happens when “the form of our involvement ultimately [inevitably] empowers those it is supposed to resist” (Dean, 2005, p. 61). It is what happens when we leave only to return; it is what happens when we are “free” to leave but cannot. Steyerl (2019) describes the impasse when she writes that “the present feels as if it is constituted by emptying out the future to sustain a looping version of a past that never existed” (p.17). An unbound temporality. Stuck on preserving or saving what never was, we are left with no energy to spend on what could be. And so we find ourselves at a standstill, even as we remain in perpetual motion. We glimpse this in the steady erosion of the line between (digital) activity and passivity, the collapsing of (digital) labour and leisure, the increasing indistinguishability between (digital) presence and absence, all of which is inscribed by social media.

The digital ordinary is thus constantly reflecting back to us this state of impasse—in the form of an unending cycle of crises big and small. Meanwhile, we find our capacity to respond reduced to the capacity to *react*, our social and political engagement rendered “Facebook compatible.” The cyclicity of impasse is itself symptomatic of the insidiousness of biopolitics—evident in the ways in which biopolitical discourse and epistemologies get naturalized and end up infiltrating social justice efforts, making it increasingly difficult to think outside of biopolitical terms (Schuller, 2018). Chun (2016) points out that digital networks feed on this unending cycle of crises—the impasse keeps us updating, checking in, reacting, responding and adjusting. This inscribes the “crisis-oriented sociality” spawned by neoliberalism, in which, as Massumi (2009) puts it, “the figure of the environment asserts its own normality, of crisis: the anywhere, anytime potential for the emergence of the abnormal,” and the attendant need to always be adjusting and controlling for it, to always be at-the-ready

(p.154). Foucault foresaw this in the proliferation of security mechanisms—by fixating on crises, the state makes crisis the permanent “background condition” of ordinary life. For Chun (2016), this justifies continual intervention, the ever-pressing need for bulked up security, for decisive action, for an indefinite state of exception. In this twisted way, crises begin to prevent change rather than incite it—to keep us in an active stasis, a continual state of suspension (Chun, 2016, p.3). This calls for a kind of frantic activity which leaves subjects caught in plottable and predictable affective circuits, with little room for alternatives. Keeping subjects in the impasse keeps them moving in place. Or, keeping users in the impasse keeps them engaged.

This thesis only scratches the surface of this dynamic. In its focus on the material and affective implications of contemporary biopolitics on our everyday lives, it misses out on all the modes of living and relating to one another that defy our restricted conditions, modes not captured by the concepts and paradigms that form the foundation of this thesis. Besides or in addition to all the ways in which social media users are lured into the impasse, for example, there are *also* the countless ways in which they resist and re-appropriate platforms’ methods of extraction and exploitation. Take for example the digital artwork *Sociality Today*, in which ordinary people are invited to oversee, track, flag and even ban algorithms, performing a kind of collective oversight of technologies designed to oversee us (as creator Paolo Cirio puts it). All this is to say that while I chose to focus on the strategies of biopolitical control, this in no way was intended to negate the resistance, allyship and meaningful connection that despite the odds, happens in its wake.

A major theme that lurks in the shadows of this text is that of care and care work, which raises a series of questions for future consideration. How do situations in which care is exploited and reconfigured as unskilled reproductive labour retain the possibility of mutual caregiving

outside of capitalist terms of exchange? How do we tap into said possibility? How is the calculation that distinguishes care as an inalienable human experience from care as labour that produces monetizable value a distinctly biopolitical one? Is the ordinary labour of social media users a kind of care work? And what is to be made of the increasing “automation of care,” and discourses thereof? What will the consequences of such developments look like, particularly when it comes to the ongoing exploitation and artificial cheapening of its non-automated, human counterpart? How can we think about political impasse through an analytic of care, as evidence of a kind of care crisis? While such questions lie outside of the purview of this thesis, they emerge from the very core of its subject matter, shaping both future engagements with its guiding questions and theoretical preoccupations, as well as with the text itself.

Collective attunement to the dynamics described above—both of exploitation and resistance—is the first step in finding new lines of flight, in finding movement in and through the bind of the impasse. Part of this process involves experimenting with epistemologies and engaging intentionally with vernacular and affective knowledges, in all their muddiness and contradiction—which is precisely what I sought to do in this thesis. Beginning in my comfort zone of theory, I challenged myself to ground my scholarly inquiry in my personal politics and ethical and intellectual commitments, both of which foreground the material and affective conditions that shape how we think about and move through the world. Such an approach to scholarship acknowledges that to work through unanswerable questions necessitates posing them differently, which in turn necessitates rejecting biopolitical hierarchies of knowledge and feeling. Furthermore, this approach is grounded by the belief that strong scholarship happens not only on the level of thinking, but also on the level of feeling—after all, we learn about and engage with the world as embodied beings, shaped by our particular histories and milieux. The idea is for this

experimentality to travel and gain purchase across disciplines and domains—not unlike the concept of biopolitics itself—encouraging a kind of playful creativity in the face of impasse, as it invites us to engage with the present in ways that are at the very least a little more affectively tolerable. Baer et al. (2016) observe this playful impulse at work in digital feminist performance art¹³, which mobilizes form, aesthetics and digital temporalities to intervene in “feminist impasses and neoliberal circularities.” They observe that the artists achieve this by dwelling intentionally on the binds that define their present, by mobilizing “delay, deferral and disappearance”—like the social media users in our vignettes—to rejig the relations between past, present and future (p.9). Here, the impasse is treated as a potentially productive “space of stoppage and recalibration” from which new political forms and modes of relation might emerge. As Lauren Berlant put it, “Who is to say what a stuckness is and what an arsenal is and when they are the same (Helms et al., 2010)?”

¹³ Specifically the work of Noah Sow, Chicks on Speed and Hito Steyerl, respectively.

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