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Mediating the presence of others: reconceptualising co-presence as mediated intimacy

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Mediating the Presence of Others: Reconceptualising Co-Presence as Mediated Intimacy

> People consent to trust their desire for "a life" to institutions of intimacy.
>
> —Lauren Berlant (2000: 1)
>
> Ordinarily all of us take it on trust.
>
> —Paddy Scannell (2013, *Q&A*)

When Lauren Berlant wrote that '[t]o intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures' (2000: 1), she was not speaking about texting and Twitter, Instagram and emoticons. The historical, cultural and political analysis of intimacy that has developed in the humanities tends not to address the media communications practices and technologies that increasingly shape social, cultural and political activity. Meanwhile, the theoretical lens adopted by many studies in media and communications tends to ignore the broader historical study of intimacy as a defining feature of social life. In this article, we draw on Berlant's deeper theorisation of intimacy as the cultural equation of 'having a life with having an *intimate* life' (Berlant, 2000: 2, emphasis added) in order to show intimacy's usefulness as a *problematic* for media studies. We are interested in Berlant's critical and historically specific notion of intimacy as a 'public mode of identification and self-development' that is tied to the divisive 'relation between public and private', sustained and reconfigured within neoliberalism (Berlant, 2008: 3). The mass uptake of instant messaging, Twitter, Instagram and other "social media" suggests more than a coincidental relation between contemporary media practices and intimacy's 'quality of eloquence and brevity' (p. 1). In this article, we examine this non-coincidental relation: we examine media practices in terms of their public

modes of identification and how these relate to the intimate organization of social life. In so doing, we elucidate how contemporary media practices *mediate intimacy*.

This article addresses the data gathered by Ofcom's qualitative study, Adult's Media Lives (Ofcom, 2005–). While the participants in the empirical sample we took from the study did not mark themselves as gay, straight or otherwise, but instead assumed a heteronormativity, we suggest that the link between queer theory and the theorisation of mediated intimacy remains nonetheless important. That the empirical data does not lend itself to, for example, a comparative analysis between the intimacy of queer and straight couples in their practices of mediated intimacy, means that we will not be analysing in what follows the articulation of sexual difference that queer theory allows. However, we aim instead to hold on throughout to a critical awareness of the gendering of media practices, which acknowledges unmarked heterosexuality as both the *institutionalisation* and *effect* of mediated intimacy. What queer theory has taught us is that heteronormativity shapes what can appear to us *as* 'intimate' even in settings where questions of sexual identity are typically *not* articulated as such, given the heteronormativity of broader public culture that does not tend to talk about sexuality explicitly in terms that would *allow* heteronormativity to be recognised. There is no mediated intimacy that is untouched by the long-term history of heteronormativity in shaping everyday life.

In one sense, media scholars have long recognised the role of media in intimate life. In the earlier days of television studies, scholars wrote about the relationships between media, home and family (e.g. Morley, 1992: Silverstone 1994), though without attending to intimacy in the historical, analytic sense just described. More recent research has linked television to the neoliberal discourse of intimacy specifically, for example, through locating television as an object of classed, raced and gendered cultural politics (e.g. Skeggs and Wood, 2012). Feminist scholars have also addressed the ways in which generic conventions both educate us

about intimate life and communicate *with us* in intimate ways (e.g. Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006). Meanwhile those taking an ethnographic approach to Information Communication Technologies have described how people use media to *seek out* or *refrain from* intimate living (e.g. Gregg, 2011; Hjorth and Khoo, 2016). Such work builds on earlier studies of mobile media as technologies, which found that among friends and couples mobile email produced an ambient virtual co-presence (Ito and Okabe, 2005). These studies discussed the role of mobile media in sustaining co-presence between people at a distance (Licoppe, 2004) and can be retroactively positioned as a call for a deeper understanding of intimacy as the historical context that situates digital media practices. In short, while many studies of how to 'get things done' with media have avoided intimacy as a critical term, there is a longer momentum behind today's substantial and growing interest in media-related intimacies (e.g., Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Kavka, 2014; Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

This article examines intimacy as the *cultural context of media practice*. We are interested in how communicative practices render mediated contact intimate *to us*, even when no prior intimate relation is necessarily at stake. The article focuses on a corpus of video interviews archived by the UK media and communications regulator Ofcom. The longitudinal nature of Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives project makes it possible to examine how people's media practices change over time. Participants' descriptions of their practices with media in intimate settings (i.e., at home) offer clues to the *social dynamics* of mediated intimacy. We are particularly interested in the gendered characteristics of these social dynamics. This reflects not just the well-established feminist research of media audiences, but also the less frequently recognised point from queer theory, that the dominant institutions of heteronormativity work in part *through* institutionalising intimacy in the form of gendered intimate relations in the media domain. We therefore take the gendered characteristics of

media practices as key to the way in which communications and media *become* intimate to us.

With the rise of digital and mobile media, we increasingly incorporate transactional communication technologies within our intimate relationships with others, regardless of questions of sexuality. Both feminist and queer theory show us that intimacy is always already mediated—by constructions of 'privacy', 'heteronormativity', 'home' etc.—but how do *specific media practices* mediate these mediations? The concept of mediated intimacy, understood in the more richly historicised way required by queer theory, requires us to understand the relationship between specific media practices and the intimate *and* gendered dynamics of communication, as something deeply constructed within much longer histories of institutionalization and disciplinary control. The result, we argue, is to enrich approaches for interpreting everyday media practice in interesting ways that speak to the place of media practice within 'the modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy' (Berlant, 2000: 2).

Method

Following an invitation from UK regulator Ofcom, over several months in 2015 we watched and analysed multiple digital video-recorded interviews[1] from the qualitative data archive Adults' Media Lives.[2] The objective of Ofcom's ongoing study is to produce a longitudinal study of media literary.[3] Through these annual interviews, Ofcom has created a record of media practice, beginning with 5 participants in 2005 and growing to 19 in 2015. Entering the process of data analysis we composed a series of questions about people's (1) uses of media within the everyday, (2) types of attention paid to and in relation to media, and (3) the spatial and temporal habits that characterised people's media practices. Through these questions we sought to elucidate how generational or biographical factors facilitate change to media practice. Often from their armchairs or a seat at the kitchen table, respondents contemplate

questions about their media habits—have they changed their subscription to Sky or Virgin? Have they bought a new mobile phone? Have they used Internet banking? While the interview questions relate mostly to issues of marketing and regulation, these annual partly-structured interviews have generated a rapport between the market-research company interviewer and the interviewees.

To gain an overall sense of the video archive we watched the interviews of all participants for at least 2 years, before narrowing our focus to a sample of four participants—Beth, David, Jenny and Mark. Watching and analysing all recordings was well beyond our means.[4] We chose the participants on the basis of maximising generational contrast (together they spanned the 20s, 30s, 50s, and 60s) and foregrounding substantial change in life stage: cohabiting for the first time, and separating (David and Mark), becoming a parent (Mark), watching the eldest child finish school (Jenny), and losing a life-long partner (Beth). The participants also reflect diverse positions of socio-economic status: Jenny works in a steady part-time position in the public sector, whereas Beth had recently retired from a public body. After graduating from university David quickly progresses upwards in the banking sector, whereas school-leaver Mark shifts between insecure, low-paid jobs, in various locations that entail a combination of commuting, living back at home, and moving out again.

Intimacy as the Presence of Others

Before moving onto our empirical data, we will review in this section the literatures that help us grasp the significance of practices of mediated intimacy. We have known for some time that media are intimate to us, and in an ordinary way. Yet what is 'ordinary' about this intimacy is also historically unique. Mediated communication has transformed the scene of social relations, augmenting the emotional and affective quality of how we interact. Devices increasingly 'communicate with' us as well as mediate our communication with others. We

take the reliability and workability of these communication technologies 'on trust' (Scannell, 2013: n.p.),[5] while we also *entrust* media as institutions of intimacy with our 'desire for "a life"' (Berlant, 2000: 1). The intimate ways in which we live with media now can be understood in terms of *intimacy* because of the mass-mediated 'demand for the traditional promise of intimate happiness to be fulfilled in everyone's everyday life' (Berlant, 2000: 2). Beyond the association of 'the notion of the democratic public sphere' to 'collective intimacy [as] a public and social ideal' (p. 3), intimacy can be 'portable, unattached to a concrete space' through the various 'kinds of connections that *impact* on people' (p. 4). An example would be what Larisssa Hjorth and Sun Sun Lim (2012) call 'mobile intimacy', which is the cumulative effect of the intersection between 'various forms of mobility' and 'intimacy' that are 'spearheaded by the increasing role of personalization by mobile media' (p. 478). On this understanding, intimacy is the discursive and affective context by which media mediate social relations.

Our entrusting of media with the desire for a life reflects the '*ethereal*' quality of media that Amy Villarejo (2014) associates with the medium of television and its passing. Digital media function as an *apparatus*—a 'complicated temporal and spatial system' (p. 5) that captures the imagination. This process of capture is both ethereal and short-lived. The flow of media images we 'assimilate and dissimulate … cultivate and repress' is *ephemeral*, plagued by imminent disappearance (Manning, 2003: 6). As an apparatus however, TV has for decades communicated the hierarchy of social experience through playing upon 'the differences in mindfulness' that characterise the 'social experience of people who watch television' (Lembo, 2000: 99). It is only more recently that the medium has been claimed as '*a technology of intimacy*' (Kavka, 2012: 20). This technology has also been understood as the effect of a new political economy that links media to the 'economy of personhood' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 131), evident in the example of reality television.

The shift from "mass media" to a broader media environment blurs the distinction between institutional and interpersonal communication. Mediated intimacy takes on particular significance in the context of this blurring, as the formation of a new social dynamic that emerges when mass media and interpersonal communication no longer constitute distinct spheres of social life (Hjorth and Lim, 2012). This transformation has generated other concepts too, such as 'ambient co-presence' which seeks 'to capture changes in the sphere of *personal* communication' (Madianou, 2016: 5, emphasis added); indeed the 'architecture' of Social Networking Sites is structured 'around the *public* articulation of personal networks' (p. 5, emphasis added). In mobile media contexts intimacy in a broad sense is 'no longer a "private" activity but a pivotal component of public sphere performativity' (Hjorth and Lim, 2012: 478).

One way to reconceptualise the significance of intimacy for media practices is to stress their role in the formation of attachments. This involves thinking about the mediated presence of others as *a form of mediated attachment*. We mean here attachment in a broad sense that goes beyond particular intimate relations to encompass the 'palpable integration' of media practices 'into our daily lives' (Silverstone, 1994: 3). It is through attachments that we constitute 'our worldliness, our capacity to be in the world' (Silverstone, 2007: 26). Indeed, that mediated worldliness is a precondition for specific attachments, with the result that since media environments keep changing, so too do the forms our attachments take. The 'peripheral, yet intense, awareness of distant others made possible through the ubiquity and affordances of polymedia environments' (Madianou, 2016: 16) is a phenomenological experience of 'the integration of technology, social practice, and place in an integrated technosocial framework' (Ito and Okabe, 2005: 259). This experience expresses the construction of social value through the stimulation and simulation of intimate attachments.

Rather than begin, as Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe earlier proposed, with the 'technosocial situation' in which social interaction is situated within 'technology-mediated social orders' (p. 259), we prefer to follow the anchoring practices that are 'part of the social "structure" itself' (Couldry 2004 p. 122) in which media use occurs. We recognise intimacy as the cultural context of the specific media practices that 'anchor, control, or organise others' (Swidler cited in Couldry 2004: 122), and as the condition of our interpretation of those practices within their longer institutional histories. This means, for example, thinking not only about how mobile messaging extends 'co-presence' across time and space (Ito and Okabe, 2005), but how historically shaped notions of intimacy define the *quality* of that co-presence. Ofcom's study itself points to the assumed intimacy that corresponds to the institutionalisation of the media audience (Ang, 1991). This correspondence illustrates how, in turn, media research (ours included) contributes to the institutionalisation of intimacy— whether or not with reference to the wider dynamics of this institutionalization as explained by queer theory.

Our concern in this article is therefore the two-way relations between the social dynamics of intimate life and the organization of participants' media practices. By media practice we refer as well to the role of media *aesthetics* in the production of intimate subjectivity and the privileging of the *intelligibility* of a particular organization of social life. If 'media are engaged for affective and embodied ways of making the home "feel right"' (Pink and Mackley, 2013: 678), it matters what *type* of feeling this 'feeling right' is. Feeling right, or having the right kind of feelings, is at least in part a 'truth-effect' of the social imperative to become heterosexual. Finding the right feeling can just as equally come about as a result of a queer or non-heterosexual intimacy (Cefai, 2015). As things stand, the dominant discourses about 'media audiences' pursue a 'neutral' stance towards sexuality: Ofcom's study does not mention sexuality yet prima facie all of its participants adopt

heterosexual frames of reference in their discussions of media practices. *In any case*, the use of media to modify 'both the way the home is made and "feels"' (Pink and Mackley, 2013: 687) invokes forms of intimacy that historically originate in the hetero-intimate institution of marriage, not *other* relations. It is *this* distinction in our understanding of intimacy's origins in the mediation[6] of a foundational heterosexuality that draws on Berlant's politicization of the term.

Heteronormativity refers to the hierarchal relation of social value that is produced by the assumed, foundational status of heterosexuality. The resulting 'familial model of society' (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 549) is reproduced in 'institutions of intimacy' (p. 553). It is these institutions, including those of marriage and procreation, that are understood to *contain* the particular possibilities of 'personal life' within heteronormativity (p. 553). Understanding the institutionalisation of intimacy as a heteronormative social enterprise is key to considering the particular forms that mediated intimacy takes. We put forward the dual concept of *mediated intimacy* to describe both the cultural context that compels our intimacy with media (devices, images, communication etc.) and the biopolitical intervention in intimate life made possible by mediated communication.

Mediating Relations with Others

We now turn to the detailed data from the Adults' Media Lives project. When participants in Adults' Media Lives reflect on their media practices, they reflect on their relations with others. The interviews with Beth[7] provide a clear example. Year on year, Beth, a grandmother in her 60s, reflects on her media practices in terms of her relations with others, particularly her immediate family members. "Now my husband was like that," she said, comparing her husband's television viewing to the time her grandson spends on the Xbox, computer or the mobile phone. Beth recalls speaking to her daughter: "I used to say, you

know, [to her daughter] 'he's getting angry because of that computer.' He's not an angry child. But he was getting … if anybody interferes with his wee world, he was getting angry." At various points Beth herself becomes visibly angry, remembering herself saying to her husband "for goodness sake it's only a television." She interprets her frustrations through a gendered lens: "But I think, is it a man thing? Their toys. 'Don't touch them! What are you doing?'"

Beth worries about her grandson "getting aggressive." She observes his media practices and the interest he expresses in media devices that don't interest her. Beth associates the medium of television in particular with her husband, whose pleasures and compulsions elude her. She tells the interviewer that her husband spent a lot of time with the television, particularly towards the end of his life. She associates the medium with accompanying him. "That was his life," she said, years after he died. It is only in the most recent two years of the study that Beth shows more of an interest in digital television and the computer; by 2014, her frames of reference change beyond her immediate familial circumstances and she shows enjoyment in speaking about her new media habits.

Beth's word choices often suggest that *a* world is at stake in people's media practices. Midway through the study, when the interviewer proposed that we might "live in a world where the Internet was available to everybody all the time," she responded: "I'm a people person. It would be sad." The world does not 'open up' by virtue of going online or using a mobile phone. Rather, it is through Beth's encounter with the worlds of her family that media enter her frames of reference: what 'intervenes immanently' in Beth's 'own circuits of value' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 175) are the media practices of her familial others. This account places media in full view as an intimate practice: Beth's experience of her husband's practice of watching television anchors her other experiences, such as her encounters with her daughters' and grandchildren's uses of media. Although media devices cannot be 'intimate'

with us, our intimacy with them betrays their attribute as a proxy for others. It was years after her husband died before Beth finally took in her daughter's old desktop. With growing confidence and enjoyment in computing, a year later she replaced this with a new laptop. In this process, we witness the time it took for Beth to develop new practices after the anchoring practice of her late husband's TV viewing had been displaced.

Mediating the Appearance of Others

As we have seen through our discussion of Beth, the mediated presence of others can be ephemeral and ethereal, as well as concrete and material. The mediation of how others appear to us and how we appear to them invokes perceptions of presence and distance. The co-presence of others is not limited to encounters in the course of direct mediated communication. Cumulative media practices create an affective milieu that orients people towards or away from the presence of others. Even though Beth is not inundated by Skype or Facebook messages, she gives the impression of an 'increased awareness of the everyday lives and activities of significant others through the background presence of ubiquitous media environments' (Madianou, 2016: 1). Participants' media practices are part of an 'aesthetic training' (Berlant and Seitz, 2015: n.p.) in emotional expression. The increased awareness of others linked to new media environments is a sensory and emotional awareness that is linked to the tangibility of media and *media devices*. Within a training in intimacy, the tangibility of media can provide affective confirmation of the tangibility of others.

Common to Beth, Jenny, Daniel and David is the use of media to create a sensory environment linked to the specificity of the *human* voice—a voice that is culturally familiar, but not automated. Beth remarks explicitly on this: "because it's background music, it's quite nice to sort of background, or *someone talking* in the background". Moving in with his girlfriend, David, in his late 20s, comments:

I used to listen to the radio almost as company like … you hear that in the background but rarely did I used to listen to the radio to listen to the radio … living with somebody that you're around all the time changes that because you don't need that kind of company.

David associates what appears in the 'background' with *sociality*. Listening to the sound of a mediated human voice is, in this sense, a social action. This sense of company is built into the sense of being home.

David finds sociality through watching the TV with his girlfriend. After they break-up, he finds himself back at his parents' house watching episodes of television series back-to-back on the Smart TV. The criteria for David's viewing choices shift from something to spend time on with his girlfriend, to something that "satisfies." Streaming TV series, David often looks things up on his iPad or uses his mobile phone. The sociability of David's viewing turns towards mediated communication. Although even the diminished sociality of his media practices bears some relation to 'the traditional promise of intimate happiness' (Berlant, 2000: 2) in that his associations with the medium aspire to its intimate promise. David does not refrain from viewing or move beyond its domestic habituation—on the contrary.

For two decades Jenny, a part-time social worker, shared her home with her self-employed husband and their two children. When Jenny was in her late 40s, her daughter started to go to college and Jenny found herself at home alone, missing the *sound* of her children. She says, "it was a form of noise and it's no longer there". She also notices changes to her media habits:

I've just suddenly realised why—it's just come to me—it's because I'm seeing *people* on a screen. Because I'm so used to having [my family around]. It comes back to coming in [from work] and being [alone]—nobody being here. So I think that's why.

And I've probably done that subconsciously—not realised [that I put the TV on]

because I'm actually looking at people.

In the absence of intimate others, Jenny sees television *faces* as a comfort; they reflect

something into the home that resonates with the home as Jenny sees it.

The media practices of having the television and radio on in the background socialise

the home because they create the *impression* of the company of others—sociality as an

ambient sense. The sound of the human voice, or the sight of a human face, personifies

affect. To hear a person's voice is to be touched by them—by the '*as if*' of their embodied

proximity. When Jenny gets home from work, it is *as if* there are people in her living room.

When David and Beth put on the radio, it is *as if* others are around. This virtual presence

could be understood as a *personification of affect*. Like the TV characters who create an

impression in the viewer's 'melodramatic imagination' (Ang, 1985: 78), this capacity for

personification is a source of identification. The presence of others is mediated to participants

through their being touched by the "*as if*" of affective media voices:[8] an absent presence that

takes the form of a *mediated* touch.[9] It is within this virtual realm, within the "*as if*" of

someone's touch, that heterosexuality potentially delivers its promise—of recognition, desire

and social belonging.

Sounds and images carry the impression of company and in so doing communicate a

sense of the social—in the case of the participants, this sense is imbued with the capacity to

change the quality of 'home'. By rendering the presence of others tangible, ambient media

transform a living room, an office, or a car into spaces of social interaction. These virtual

social interactions contribute to processes of spatial differentiation, including the gendering

of a particular room, or the spatial inscription of a sense of home. That is, media practices

'disclose the space-time of an "expressed world"' (Anderson, 2009: 79) within a longer

history of institutionalization.

Refraining from Encounters

At one point, Beth told how when her husband was seriously ill the anticipation of his death profoundly shaped her media practice: "I, I can't watch um serials, because, I never know what's going to happen. You know or maybe we'll be watching something one week and the next week he's not there or whatever." Because the television serial anticipates the real time of the future (Geraghty, 1981), Beth refrains from encountering the loss of her husband by avoiding an encounter with this process of anticipation within the television programme. Towards the beginning of the study, Beth also associated her uncertainty over buying a computer with this impending loss. The computer was for doing things that she cannot, any more, do: "you would be booking holidays, you'd be doing do do do whereas I'm not doing that."

Not all participants' comments allow for such nuance in our interpretation. Over the years, participants' suspicions towards digital media platforms, such as online banking or shopping, largely subside. The interviewees reflect what Sherry Turkle (2012) in *Alone Together*, calls the 'robotic moment' (p. 9) of interdependence on mediated technologies, but interpret it less as the appeal of an escape from responsibility, and more in terms of an anxiety over the emergence of new responsibilities—particularly those that they might not fully know or understand. All 4 participants repeatedly refer to 'switching off,' 'saying no' and 'clicking the cross' as tactics of avoidance in a context of continuous pressure. While these tactics do not always produce the desired result, the exponential growth of contexts in which we *have to refrain from* 'communicating' modulates our general ways of encountering others.

Participants mention certain technologies, such as Caller ID, that are designed to give media users more *control* over their sphere of personal contact. Caller ID compels people to

"screen" phone calls—people respond to a call in the knowledge of who is calling. Each new platform that expands the possibilities for contact introduces a mechanism of control over how we appear to others. Screens affect us as well as externalises us—rendering us 'elsewhere' in relation to others. Mediated communication here becomes a site of *control over* the presence of others in our lives, as well as a modulation of our presence in the lives of others. For example, although Jenny gains confidence with media devices, buying a laptop and then a tablet, she continues to prohibit mobile phones from the dinner table: "If it's a nice family meal, you're taking away something very personal from that." But others admit to allowing technology in. After years of "saying no" to a computer at home, Beth finally acquiesces: "So I was forced into it. I wasn't forced at gunpoint but, um, that's the way life is now." In this phrase, Beth evokes mediated intimacy as what Raymond Williams (1977: 128) might have called a 'structure of feeling'.

Mark, a school-leaver and casual worker in a number of different jobs, keeps his Facebook account active to keep track of how people in his social milieu "post", particularly in relation to his daughter. Mark wants to be able to "check in" on the attention that others give to his daughter, particularly once he separates from his daughter's mother. The media practices of his daughter's mother continue to enlist his attention, until the most recent year of the study, in which Mark tells us that he has "deactivated" his account. We can interpret this "deactivation" as a retreat from an imposed form of mediated intimacy that privileges the visible performance of identity or 'the presentation of the self'. From his first interview on, Mark speaks about his discomfort with Facebook and describes being agitated by the frames of reference that others, through their use, impose on him. In his interviews, Mark describes how he wishes to avoid encountering the whole social field of encounter that Facebook presents.

The Tangibility of the Social

By linking media practices to the mediation of intimacy, we can think about the social implications of media choices beyond the horizon of people's interpersonal relationships. This would also potentially be a way of figuring heteronormativity as a social structure that is mediated by the things people do with media. Hetero(or otherwise) mediated intimacies are the worlds of capacity, constraint and power brought about by the media-related practices that are linked to the mediation of intimacy. We can hence analyse being-in-the-company-of-others not just as an experience of mediated intimacy but also as a complex *social effect* of media practice. It is as a social effect that mediated contact is *rendered* intimate *to us*—when strangers and intimate others alike appear within shared registers of social interaction. Through this repeated investment, media practices mediate the tangible presence of others and that anchor and give rise to the *tangibility of the social*.

The duality of mediated intimacy (the use of media devices to mediate relationships with intimate others, and the intimacy with media devices that serve as a proxy for intimacy with others) transforms the way that people give attention, through media, to others. The mediation of intimacy thus transforms people's encounter with the social world. In this sense, media become an arbiter of the boundaries of the social, a process that is increasingly managed by media users' own selective media practices. In this third part of the article, we discuss three detailed processes that shape mediated intimacy: first, the formation of a discourse of intimacy; second, the practice and meaning of paying attention and; third, the mediation of time. Each of these dimensions of social life is entangled in the mediation of intimacy, affecting respectively our capacity for interpreting the social world *as such*; our capacity to attend to something or someone; and our capacity to organise time around differentiated tasks and activities.

A Discourse on Mediated Intimacy

Participants' descriptions of their media choices intermittently evoke images of the media practices of others: "even other people are complaining about it," remarks Beth on the use of mobile phones on trains; "it's a big part of people's lives now," says Mark, worrying about Facebook; "it's the image it had amongst most people when the Internet first started," says David, reflecting on Internet dating; "I think there is always a certain fear of you've got so many different providers now," says Jenny, reflecting on British Telecommunications and "people in our age group." These comments form part of a broader discourse that situates media practices through notions of media etiquette.

Social media were, unsurprisingly, a focal point in the participants' discourse on mediated intimacy. Thinking about his young daughter, Mark worries: "other people can speak to her without me knowing, and influence her without me knowing about it." Concerned about bullying, Jenny sets up her daughter's social media account for her, supervising her daughter's interactions. David keeps a social media account so that he is "contactable," although what he calls the "potential benefit" of being contactable could also be an anxiety about 'missing out.' The participants vex over what it means to 'be online' in the context of their familial relations—they vex on behalf of others as well as on behalf of themselves in their relations with others.

Participants' new experiences of frustration, enjoyment and uncertainty in their mediated relations with others are brought to the fore by a desire for clarification. This desire is expressed in the production of discursive distinctions between, for example, appropriate and inappropriate contact, which attribute value to different forms of mediated contact. We can understand these distinctions as discursive because of the way in which they reify existing categorisations of media and governmental power, and because of the way in which such categorisations correspond to the myth of *natural* collectivity (Couldry, 2015): the "we"

to be governed. For instance, the participants refer to the social value of 'public information' as a moral compass that differentiates 'right' from 'wrong'. The notion of public interest and authority also articulates a call for responsibility. David captures this call when he says: "People should be responsible for things that they put in the public domain." Or, when Beth says, "once something's said it can't be taken back … and some things can be hurtful." By invoking privacy and publicity as terms of social value that also ascribe responsibility, participants translate their anxious affects (e.g. an anxiety over the consequences of mediated contact) into moral judgements (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). This suggests that anxieties and uncertainties are key to the way in which the discourse of mediated intimacy constructs the notion of 'media' as a public, common concern to be controlled by a moral authority.

As well as differentiating public from private, participants also distinguish the tangible from the intangible, and the tangible from what is "real." Mark comments on the ambiguous tangibility of mediated communication:

> [I]t's easy to say something over a computer to someone whereas if you say it face to face, half the people who say this over the computer wouldn't say this to people's faces … you're not speaking to some real person, you know?

The virtual nature of media platforms takes relating away from the purview of perceived control and traffics in the *intangible.* Mediated communication is only tangible to an extent:

> *Interviewer*: Do you see people who you think are over-connected now?
>
> *Mark*: 100% mate, 100%. About 80% of the people who I work with are. My girlfriend is totally hooked on the Facebook and the Internet. She could, she wouldn't move her phone from her face if she didn't have a daughter.

For Mark, Facebook negates his presence to his girlfriend. Interpreting Facebook as a platform of communication that *lacks* social value, Mark states: "[I]f my real friends want to contact me they can ring me." In the same year, David exhorts: "anybody that you'd consider

your real friend" should "just text … or call." Despite pronounced differences in class, Mark and David both problematize the capacity of mediated communication to enrich and enliven real social life, critiquing how platforms *qualify* ways of communicating (for instance, making what was 'private', public). David describes this qualification as "sometimes quite a subtle thing", with implications:

> I think it warps people's feelings on the real subject … [the dating app Tinder] gives individuals the feeling that there's an endless stream of potential girlfriends or boyfriends out there, and when you're able to think that way it probably changes your approach to the whole situation and the way you behave in that situation and that's not really indicative of real life.

Elsewhere, the intangibility of media *technology* underlies the lack of trust in mediated communication. David says of his parents: "they have no real grasp of what it is, they understand the words but not the concept." After going on a date with an industry insider, David feels much the same of his own disposition in "a whole world that you know is there but you don't really know is there." The intangibility of media technology can also be linked to the gendering of anxiety. Mark repeatedly genders his relationship to his daughter's relationship with media technologies: "it's much more harder to grow up as a girl with all the pressures that girls have got on them these days, with Facebook, and forty-year-olds pretending that they're sixteen." In these examples, we can see how the capacity of media to socialise us subjects us to gendered and generational anxieties about social relating. The discourse on mediated intimacy translates these anxious thoughts and feelings into a desire for control over mediated contact.

Spheres of Attention

Phenomenal spheres of attention are augmented by 'locative media' (Hjorth, 2012: 239) that articulate how we attend to things, how we orient ourselves and encounter one another, as well as how mediated interactions are accorded social value. We can understand media practices as locative not by virtue of the functionality of 'location-based services' (p. 238) alone, but in reference to the broader spatial and temporal apparatus of media-related practice. Media practices orient attention around the presence and absence of others. Social actors located in physical space increasingly co-ordinate their actions in relations of interactivity with the information space of digital media. This interactivity transforms 'what produces the attention and what patterns the reaction' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 184).

Mark's complaint that his girlfriend doesn't "move her phone from her face" is a complaint that his girlfriend values something less tangible than him. Years later, a new girlfriend encourages Mark to reactivate his old Facebook account: "she wants to, like, look into my background … [amused] it just brings up arguments from times ago when she didn't even know me." Not only is Mark, like the other participants, frustrated by the non-reciprocity of the mediated intimacies of others, he observes how their media practices invite an otherwise intangible past to interrupt the present. These concerns typify a frustration with the new interlinking of previously discrete social spheres. Mediated intimacy can in turn provide opportunity to de-link spheres that were previously connected.

Whereas the television or radio join together otherwise discrete spaces of social action, digital media platforms tend to filter interactivity, creating distinction. As Silverstone (1994) observed in relation to television, media open a 'potential space' (p. 9) in which the subject 'plays' with their perception and explores the dynamic interface between self and other, subjective and object, virtual and real. The growing presence of media devices increases the complexity of these potential spaces. Viewing practices are increasingly accompanied by the use of mobile and tablet devices to search and "look up" information:

"Having the access to look up anything you wish to look up at your fingertips is, is brilliant," says Jenny. Looking up information ('searching') has become a social activity—a site for the performance of intimacies whose patterning reflects their institutional and familial forms. The flipside to this patterning is that screens demand our attention—they place a new demand on us. The examples presented by the participants highlight the insertion of these new demands within the familial context.

The Mediation of Time

The organisation of time is a key social dynamic of media practice: media practices either take time or accompany the passing of time. Whereas participants' reflections on how their attention is shaped by media indicate the phenomenal horizons of media practice, the mediation of time is shaped at the interface between attention and practice. Participants might encounter the "external" factor of time through their experience of a felt pressure, a value judgement, a sense of inadequacy, or an accomplishment. Mediated intimacy is contingent on the external factor of time in a number of ways. This section distinguishes between the organisation of time, time as a social value, and speeding up the multiplicity of time.

Media are associated with the temporal structure of the everyday and as such it is no surprise that participants' media practices relate to the organisation of time. The distinction between work and home is key, as are the specific activities and relationships in which "home" and "work" are manifest—"coming home," "dinner time," "waking up," "going to work," "spending time with my girlfriend," and so on. Time therefore is a social value that informs participants' media choices, but is also a value that is shaped by participants' uses of media. Different media practices change the quality of time in relation to other things, such as the quality of time spent with others—social belonging has also been understood as a quality of time and hence is closely linked to the temporal organisation of people's media practices.

The use of tablets for childcare, or the radio for bedtime, or (in an earlier era) the television in the living room for shared entertainment are examples of media practices that link the organisation of time to the social quality of work, rest and the familial division of labour into configurations of practice that enact intimacy in highly structured ways.

Participants distinguish between media practices that are in the foreground of their experience—those that *take* time—and those that are in the background—that *accompany* the passing of time. This reminds us of the centrality of time to *attention*. At some point in every interview, Beth vexes over "time wasting" and having "no time"; she enjoys listening to the radio as it allows her to do other things. Jenny makes a point of letting the interviewer know that she enjoys watching YouTube videos that facilitate new activities. Making a generational contrast, David iterates a narrative about the "best use" of time. Reflecting back on his university days, David states: "The Internet's not so much a thing I use to pass time. I think for me now it's more functional."

Often media are not the primary object of attention but still mediate how people pay attention to things. Specific media devices are perceived as enabling a better use of time: the Freeview box, for example, can "condense the programme to a quicker time," says Jenny. This perception of time might lead participants to imagine that control over media enables control over time. The fast changing, superabundance of telecoms is the context for domestic economies of media consumption. In place of one connection to a landline is the need to make a whole plethora of decisions. As such, we could consider media as a new type of work and citizenry responsibility that itself takes time. The moral anxiety about 'wasting time' is replaced by a focus on the frustration with the time that media take. Jenny is even frustrated by flicking "through channels" on the television. Time is taken up: "with all these fantastic modern gadgets that we've got, we should have loads of spare time, but I feel as though we

cram more and more into our time." Modern technology "should allow us more freedom," but enjoyment is not necessarily accompanied by feeling free.

These concerns about how media intervene in time suggests the emergence of a new type of domestic labour—a form of labour that is enfolded within media practices that reinforce the "capacity to work" as a source of moral value. Media facilitate a speeding up of time and an increasing social expectation of immediacy. Mark exclaims: "everything has to be done ASAP, as quick as possible." Despite the eroding distinction between home and work, the *gendering* of housework remains a key factor underlying the use of time (Gregg, 2011). The increasing expectation that multiple tasks should be undertaken at one time only compounds the gendered structure of domestic labour, because the costs of multitasking are not evenly distributed between genders (Wajcman, 2014). For example, the participants link time pressure to parenthood, although David, the only participant without children, also senses a "squeeze," claiming: "You're almost trying to leverage as much as possible out of one point in time."

Media Ontologies

In conclusion, we want to relate our reflections to the longer history of work on the moral and affective resonance of media practices. In the 1990s, Silverstone (1994) positions television as a transitional object whose primary social effect is to deliver 'ontological security' (p. 5). Television was hence positioned as an object of *attachment*. In modernity, the 'dialectic of space and time' (p. 7) restricts social experience to the confidence one has 'in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens, 1990: 92, cited in Silverstone). This restriction places attention on objects of attachment, but also configures relations of social attachment via people's attachment to such objects. In other words, the modernity of media is linked to the capacity

of our attachments to media objects to attach us to a broader world—to a word in which we are through media connected to others. Our ways of relating to such objects perform an attachment to society, and constitute a way of staying attached to *a* social life.

While fostering social attachment to media, modernity's space-time 'distanciation' (Giddens, 1990) increases our *reliance and dependence* on institutions and organisations of mediation—notably the media—to mediate the everyday *to us*. In so doing, media are engaged in 'the dialectical understanding of anxiety and security' (Silverstone, 1994: 16). In the digital age, and when we look closely at the detail of people's media-related practices, ontological security could be retroactively reclassified as *a key feature of the sociology of mediated intimacy*. Our *trust* (defined as the confidence one has in the continuity of something) is equally a condition of this mediation. The trust that we place in media on an everyday basis is the condition upon which threat, risk and danger become the coordinates of political action (Beck and Levy, 2013). With this in mind, a further study might consider how the tangible presence of others through media gets appropriated by *political* discourses of 'otherness'. For now, we have traced the salience of the notion of mediated intimacy, as understood by reference not just to practices of media use, but also the unmarked contexts of heteronormativity that have shaped particular forms of mediated use as intimate practices. In as much as digital social media force us 'to be *ourselves*' (Lovink, 2012: 13), and to enact our intimate lives in ever closer entanglement with media and with others, and to reflect on ourselves as the "we" that is the seat of social action, our analysis of Adults' Media Lives shows how mediated intimacy is an important concept for grasping the social dynamics of mediation in terms of both agency and constraint.

<div align="center">Endnotes</div>

[1] With the help of our Research Assistant Helen Trail, we watched around 60 interviews.

[2] Located in London, Ofcom is the communications regulator in the UK (http://www.ofcom.org.uk). We liaised with the Media Literacy Research team at Ofcom. While the videos that we analysed are not available for public viewing, links to the reports published by Ofcom are available here: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/media-lives. We are grateful to Alison Preston of Ofcom for organising our access to the Adults' Media Lives archive. This article represents our views alone.

[3] The first year of complete recorded interviews to which we had access was 2008. Many of the study's 19 participants were recruited in 2005 and 2006.

4 We viewed all respondents over two complete years of the collection—the earliest and the latest years of digitally recorded interviews—as well as randomly sampled the whole collection, in order to select 4 participants whose accounts became the focus of our analysis.

5 During a "Question & Answer" session, Scannell (2013) spoke about "the unfathomable complexity of the care structure" that is inherent in communication technologies. He claims that the trust in technologies is "a pragmatic effect of the reliability of the workability of things and of the world." Also see Scannell (2014).

6 Our use of the term 'mediation' in conjunction with the term intimacy is consistent with understandings of mediation (and indeed mediatisation) that emphasise the dialectical processes involved in media use (see for example Couldry, 2008 and Couldry, 2012). Our emphasis here remains the local transformation of intimacy through the *direct* use of media, hence the appropriateness of the term 'mediation' here.

7 To protect the anonymity of participants we have used our own pseudonyms and removed reference to specific dates. We have only minimally edited the quotations.

8 See Melissa Gregg's *Cultural Studies' Affective Voices* (2008).

9 There is a vast literature on media and touch. See for example Laura Marks (2000).

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