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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hipfl, B. (2018). Affect in Media and Communication Studies: Potentials and Assemblages. *Media and Communication*, 6(3), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i3.1470>

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Article

Affect in Media and Communication Studies: Potentials and Assemblages

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Submitted: 10 March 2018 | Accepted: 24 May 2018 | Published: 11 September 2018

Abstract

After a general mapping of the different understandings of affect, this article focuses on two aspects of a Deleuze-Guattarian understanding of affect which are of particular relevance for media and communication studies. The first is understanding affect as *potential*. It is through the forces of encounter that bodies are affected and that these affections then can be turned into action, into their capacity to affect. The second is understanding the perpetual *becoming* that takes place through continual encounters between bodies; with each encounter, the body changes, however slightly and subtly. The concept of *assemblage* that allows one to grasp these dynamics and complexities is discussed as an approach towards a much more complex theoretical grounding for processes of agency and power. Working with affect in media and communication studies, a three-fold strategy will be presented: to analyse how media generate affects and capitalise on them; to analyse what media do—in the sense of mobilizing potential; to analyse phenomena of mediated communication as assemblages. The article ends with challenges and new paths for conducting research on affect.

Keywords

affect; affections; assemblage; communication; media; structure of feeling; virtual/actual

Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Turn to Affect and Emotion in Media Studies”, edited by Margreth Lünenborg and Tanja Maier (Free University Berlin, Germany).

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1. Introduction

Jennifer Daryl Slack has already reminded media and communication scholars that we “are living through an extraordinary moment”, a moment characterized by major transformations that change the conditions of our existence (Slack, 2012, p. 143). These transformations are produced by new forms of connections between structures, practices, materials, affects, and enunciations; challenging what has become accepted as key questions in communication studies—what Slack summarizes as transmission, modes, and media. For Slack, these conceptualisations are unable to grasp what emerges in these new arrangements of heterogeneous elements. She argues that we “must be willing to respond to changing conditions of existence with theoretical tools that both respond to and constitute communication in new ways, with new ways of conceiving its object(s) of analysis” (Slack, 2012, p. 143). Affect theory is such a theoretical tool. The recent ‘turn to affect’ in the humanities and so-

cial sciences is an attempt to theorize contemporary formations of the social (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). There seems to be broad agreement that one reason for the current turn to affect theory is due to the limitations of cognitive approaches. The ‘linguistic turn’, as well as the ‘discursive’ and the ‘cultural turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, resulted in constructivist and post-structuralist models of the subject. They displaced ideas of the unified, autonomous subject, whose actions are rationally grounded, with a more complex understanding of the contingencies of historic-specific subject positions and the interpellations of dominant discourses. However, anything else that was *not* socially constructed—that is the material, and the affective—had been left out (Bauer, Binswanger, Häberlein, Nay, & Zimmermann, 2014, p. 12; see also Hemmings, 2015, p. 147).

Clare Hemmings (2015, p. 147) sees a second strand of arguments which expresses doubt regarding “the methodological capacity of both quantitative empirical

approaches and textual analysis to account for the fullest resonance of the social world we wish to understand". Eve Sedgwick (2003, p. 17), for example, uses the term "texture" to characterise the embodied experience of the social world. This includes questions such as what moves people and what attracts them. Sedgwick is hesitant of the capacity of critical theory with its focus on structures of truth and knowledge—she characterizes critical theory as "hermeneutic of suspicion" and "paranoid theory"—which makes critical theory uninventive and not equipped for the surprising and enlivening texture of individuality and community (see Hemmings, 2005, p. 553). A third argument, according to Hemmings (2015, p. 148), is the doubt regarding whether or not binaries such as power/resistance or public/private are still appropriate for our understanding of social and political processes; there is a need for increased attention to 'structures of attachment'.

2. The Many Lives of Affect

To fully elucidate the different understandings and uses of affect/emotion, it is helpful to grasp what Clare Hemming calls "[t]he many lives of affect" (Hemmings, 2015, p. 147). The answer to the question "what is affect?" is rather easy in psychology and neurology: affects are about emotional states, sometimes this comprises every aspect of emotion, sometimes it only refers to physiological, bodily activities (such as blushing, arousal level, etc.) as differentiated from "feelings" as subjective experiences (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). In addition, there is another, 'wilder', broader notion of affect which refers to process and force in a more general sense as Wetherell (2012, p. 2), for example, points out.

Broadly speaking, there are two different approaches to affect. One is based on American psychologist Silvan Tomkins who places affect within the individual; that is embodied affect. The other is grounded in philosopher Baruch Spinoza and the ways in which his concepts have been used by Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and academics who draw on their work. This is a quite different understanding of affect as *apersonal*, as a force. In both approaches, affect is seen as the primary motivator and force in human life—but how this works is theorized and conceptualized differently.

Tomkins, who was strongly influenced by Charles Darwin, turns away from psychoanalytic approaches where affect is understood as acting in the service of drives (for a good overview see Hemmings, 2005, p. 521) and instead proposes "that affect is free from the constraints of both drives and social meanings" (Hemmings, 2005, p. 559). Affects have their own complex, self-referential lives. Affects can be attached to anything (things, people, ideas, relations, activities, other affects) and these attachments cannot be predicted (Hemmings, 2005, p. 559). According to Tomkins, we all develop complex "affect theories", which are the affective experiences that we remember in the moment of responding

to a new situation (Hemmings, 2005, p. 552). What is key for Tomkins is that he sees his concept as an alternative to social determinism, so that the individual is not just passively responding to cognitive and learned phenomena (Hemmings, 2005, p. 552).

For Tomkins, affects are innate. He proposes nine genetically programmed, universal affects, thus opposing positions which describe human affects as culturally specific. For the nine affects he used a range name to indicate their different intensities (influenced by system theory; see Angerer, 2014, p. 402). He also groups them in positive, neutral, and negative affects. The positive ones are interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy; neutral is surprise-startle; negative is distress-anguish, anger-rage, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, disgust (reaction to noxious tastes) and dissmell (reaction to noxious odours). In Tomkins' complex theory of the human affect, one of his basic assumptions is: "[a]ffects are the primary motivators of human behaviour. While drives and cognitions both have motivational power, it is only when they are amplified by affect that a human being is moved to act" (Frank & Wilson, 2012, p. 875).

Although Tomkins' approach has been used in different ways, I will just mention two in the context of media and communication studies, both of which strike out in very different directions. One is the reading of his work by Sedgwick. She is interested in the complex ways in which shame operates; this is a question that has become prominent in feminist and queer theory (e.g., Probyn, 2010), but which has also been used in media studies—for example in research on reality TV (e.g., Kavka, 2014).

The second way Tomkins has been used is by his student Paul Ekman, whose research focuses on universal recognition of affects. He developed the "Facial Action Coding System" and presents himself as an expert in "detecting micro expression", selling his tools to institutions such as the CIA, FBI, as well as anybody who is interested in training oneself "to catch the micro facial expressions of others" (Ekman, n.d.). Ekman is particularly interested in detecting lies based on facial expressions and body language. He was, for example, the advisor for the figure of Cal Lightman, who is presented as the world's most famous and successful detector of lies in the US TV-series *Lie to Me* (2009–2011, Fox TV). Ekman's work is also essential for 'affective computing', the creation of 'emphatic machines' that are capable of recognizing and adapting to the feelings and moods of humans (e.g., Picard, 1997).

For the second strand, based on Deleuze's reading of Spinoza (Deleuze, 1988), affect is not "simply a personal feeling" and not "'emotion' in the everyday sense" (Massumi, 2015, p. 3). Following Spinoza, "affect is the power/capacity 'to affect and be affected'" (Massumi, 2015, p. ix). These capacities are not two different capacities, they "always go together" because "when you affect something you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn" (Massumi, 2015, p. 4).

That means that this always results in a slight transition. This is how Spinoza understands bodies—bodies (not only human bodies but any bodies) are defined by their capacities, by what they can do (and these capacities change). So, affects are, to quote Massumi (2015, p. 6), “ways of connecting, to others and other situations”. Affect is here a force, “a force that things exert upon other things” as Matthew Tiessen (2013, p. 13) describes it. We can know them through their effects. As Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p. 2) point out, force does not always mean ‘forceful’, it also can be very subtle and go almost unnoticed in everyday life. Affect is what is found in the intensities that pass from body to body, in what circulates between bodies (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). These are visceral forces that are not conscious; they can drive us towards movement.

So, in that sense, affect is not individual, it is always relational; it is what happens in that in-between, in the event. It is pre-subjective; only retrospectively can it be ‘owned’ as the content of an individualized experience. It is also transindividual because it happens between individuals (Massumi, 2015, pp. 91, 94). This is more like an atmosphere, a cultural mood, an aura—what it feels like to be in a particular situation or moment. Massumi stresses that the concept of affect is ‘transversal’ in the sense that it cuts through realms that are usually seen as separate—such as subjective/objective, desire/what is given, freedom/constraint. Affect happens in the middle, the in-between; the two realms are like two facets of the same event (Massumi, 2015, p. 48). Affect is not the opposite of cognition. For Spinoza, body and mind are different attributes of the same substance, an idea that has become very popular with the publications of neuropsychologist Antonio Damasio (1999, 2003) who stresses the entanglement of rationality and emotion.

A Deleuze-Guattarian approach to affect is much more promising for our attempts to get a better understanding of contemporary processes in mediated communication. They offer a different angle that goes beyond the individualistic notion of affect dominating in psychology and neurology.¹ In particular, there are two aspects of this notion of affect which are of relevance when it comes to media and communication studies. The first is the understanding of affect as *potential*. It is through the forces of encounter that bodies are affected and that these affections then can be shifted into action, into the capacity to affect (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). This capacity of a body to affect is, as Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p. 3) stress, never defined by a body alone but by the context of its force-relations. However, it is important to point out that affect is not something that is positive or negative per se, rather it is the question of what an affect *does*, if it increases or diminishes the capacities to act, to connect.

¹ Because of my focus on a Deleuze-Guattarian understanding of affect, I will not reference research on emotions, which, using a different methodological and ontological approach, situates affect/emotion in the individual.

² In my discussion of key concepts, I do not refer to the original sources in Deleuze and Guattari, but draw on the elucidating work of scholars like Ian Buchanan, Claire Colebrook, Rebecca Coleman, Lawrence Grossberg, Tael Harper, Jessica Ringrose, David Savat, Gregory Seigworth, Jennifer Slack, and Macgregor Wise, whose attempts in making Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work approachable I find very stimulating for media and communication studies.

The second is the perpetual *becoming* that takes place through the continuous encounters of the bodies: with each encounter the body changes, however slightly and subtly. Here there is a much more complex theoretical grounding for what has now become common sense when talking about identity and subjectivity as always in process.

These dynamics will be elaborated on in the next part by referring to the actual and the virtual as two dimensions of the real, as well as by focusing on the concept of assemblage as an approach to explore and explain formations in the real.

3. Reality as Continuous Processes of Becoming

With an understanding of affect as forces of encounter and of flows, there also comes a specific understanding of the world, of reality. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987),² the world is highly complex, defined by its multiplicity, its openness and its being dynamic, with processes of becoming continuously taking place. ‘Becoming’ does not mean a process of transforming one thing into another (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 9); rather, it is defined by ongoing processes of “becoming otherwise than what it already is” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 3). It is important though, that this does not mean becoming better or progressive in the sense of developmental theories—because we do not know in advance what a body can do. This is a world which is not completely under the control of human beings (see Colebrook, 2011, p. 52; Grossberg, 2014, pp. 19–20).

To better grasp this complexity and dynamics, two Deleuze-Guattarian concepts are helpful: the concept of the virtual and actual and the concept of assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 1994). These concepts provide a deeper understanding of how particular configurations of reality are produced and how power relations work. But what makes them particularly useful is that they focus on dynamics and flows, on potentialities, the ‘not yet’, on what is to come. This article will focus on the concept of the assemblage because it offers a way to a more complex analysis of what is going on.

3.1. Virtual and Actual

Deleuze and Guattari speak of the virtual and the actual as two aspects or modalities of reality that co-exist together (Grossberg, 2014, p. 8). The virtual is not ‘virtual reality’ in the sense of computer-generated worlds; virtual should not be understood as possibility, rather as potentiality. Deleuze and Guattari refuse ‘the possible’, precisely because ‘the possible’ is something that is not real, it refers to anything you can dream of, as Grossberg (2014, p. 8) explains; whereas the virtual is reality

as becoming, as pure capacity, potentiality, as the openness of a non-enumerable multiplicity of actualizations; it can be creatively manifested (actualized) in many different ways. Thus, reality is constantly making itself, actualizing itself, producing particular actual realities out of and alongside the virtual as it were. The concept of the virtual problematizes common-sense notions of imagining what is possible as being based on the actual world, on something that has been actualized, such as, for example, the image of the ‘modern man’. Modern man then becomes the basis for thinking about possibilities and differences of human life, thereby being blind to see other not-actualized potentials for becoming as something that is quite different from the actualized world. The virtual gives credit to the potentialities that are not actualized, to what we might become that is entirely unprecedented, including the concept of ‘Man’ itself (Colebrook, 2002, pp. xxx, xxxiv).

Grossberg (2014, p. 8) compares the virtual/actual with quantum physics: we live in the quantum universe, but we also live in a particular organization/actualization of the quantum universe. The quantum universe can be actualized in many different ways, but it is always actualized. Similarly, the virtual is real (not a fiction) and also always actualized. It continues to exist as real, alongside any actualization. Any actualization can also be described and characterized as an assemblage, which will always contain its virtual potential. In their discussion of the face, which for Deleuze and Guattari plays a key role in organizing our world, Tael Harper and David Savat (2016, pp. 40–41) refer to the virtual and the actual: the face (the image) is virtual in the sense that it is a particular surface “that opens a particular universe of action” and “enables particular forms of experience to be actualized” (Harper & Savat, 2016, pp. 40–41). Such an understanding does not follow a traditional model of communication which focuses on questions of signifier/signified and representation; rather we are invited to think the other way around, asking what makes certain forms of communication possible. The concept, ‘face’, is, therefore, a multiplicity of changing surface forms, each with a capacity to be actualized; each with a capacity to affect and be affected by their surrounding environment; each carrying a certain force and intensity.

3.2. Assemblage

An assemblage is an arrangement of heterogeneous elements (such as structures, practices, materials, affects, discourses, ideas, etc.) where the parts are connected and form connections held together by flows of desire (DeLanda, 2011; Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 6; Slack, 2012, p. 144). The parts of such an arrangement do not belong to a pre-established plan (as is the case with elements of flatpack furniture), while at the same time, this is not a totally random collection. It is the contingent intersection of power relations and forces, and the material elements in a historic specific milieu that make

an assemblage possible (Nail, 2017, p. 24; Wise, 2005, p. 77). What defines assemblages is the relations between the elements which are the condition of an assemblage; it is the *connections* between the components that constitute any assemblage (Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 23; Nail, 2017, pp. 24–25) or, to quote Ian Buchanan (2017, p. 465), an assemblage “*is a relation*”. Harper and Savat (2016, p. 6) use the example of the Internet to illustrate that it is best to look at the Internet’s complexity as different assemblages of desire, which can be ‘plugged’ into, each of which works differently. Take, for example, the internet as part of a pedagogical assemblage where the teacher or the students use the internet for resources. Here the internet functions as a machine to produce information and data. The internet functions completely differently when it is part of an erotic assemblage. Whereas in both cases the internet is used for searching and appraising, its functions and contents are different in these two assemblages. Also, what it produces is different.

Assemblages are dynamic, always in process; the term is the English translation of the French term ‘agencement’, which refers to the process of arranging, piecing together (Buchanan, 2017, p. 458). What is important, is that the components of an assemblage are not fused together, they can be detached and plugged into other assemblages. So, it is the interaction, the connection between the parts which holds an assemblage together. If these components stop interacting or no longer are connected, the assemblage falls apart (see, for example, the huge investment of corporations in customer loyalty to keep the connections alive).

Assemblages are temporary arrangements, they contain the virtual potential of multiple actualizations. But this does not mean that assemblages can become anything. According to Deleuze and Guattari, there are different ways in which assemblages are arranged, and this is where the politics of assemblages come into play (Nail, 2017, p. 28). There is, on the one hand, society, or more precisely, the symbolic order with dominant formations such as neoliberalism and global capitalism which assign values to certain objects and behaviours (called processes of coding by Deleuze and Guattari) and operate to channel, regulate and control the flows towards certain connections. This can also work by addressing our desires directly through commodity culture and media. And, as we know from Foucault’s work on governmentality and self-technologies, we are willing participants. These processes are called processes of *territorialisation*, which try to stabilize the identity of an assemblage (e.g., Colebrook, 2002, p. xxii–xxiii). On the other hand, there are forces from the different components which Deleuze and Guattari call machinic (see Colebrook, 2002, p. xx), and unpredictable connections and events, which sometimes emerge as an effect of processes of territorialisation, which can change an assemblage. Here we speak of processes of *detrterritorialization*, which are followed by *reterritorialization*—continuous processes, where forces

allow for change while at the same time assemblages strive to persist (Buchanan, 2017, p. 463).

One dramatic example is the suicide of Mohamad Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, which was seen as the catalyst of the revolution in Tunisia and the Arab spring. Twenty-six-year-old Mouhamed Bouazizi was a street vendor selling fruit and vegetables to support himself and his family, who, after repeated mistreatment and humiliation by local police officers, set fire to himself on December 17, 2010. Bouazizi's suicide sparked and intensified the demonstrations against unemployment, poor living conditions and corruption as well as those for political freedom, which resulted in a change of government. The Tunisian state, a strongly territorialized assemblage, could not function the same way any longer.

When it comes to the energy that holds assemblages together, Deleuze and Guattari use the term 'desire'. However, their understanding of desire differs from the psychoanalytic understanding of desire as libidinal, as defined by lack (as that which I am not or do not have). They speak of a strive for survival that characterizes life in general; desire is "a fundamental force of production—everything that has life energy produces" (Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 8). Another way of characterizing desire is the basic fact of other-directedness (a kind of affective intentionality) of life itself, an energy of connectivity. Desire is productive, it is "something that we *do*" (Buchanan, 2008, p. 48, as cited in Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 27). As Harper and Savat (2016, pp. 8–9) point out: "[o]ur desire flows in an effort to produce and, as it flows, it forms connections, which give rise to assemblages, which distribute its affect". Manuel DeLanda (2011) uses conversation as an example for a strongly structured (territorialized) assemblage (which comprise of embodied persons, discourses, ideas, codes and rules, etc.), where the energy that keeps the assemblage together is attention.

Assemblages can emerge at different scales. We can talk about assemblages on large scales such as epochs or movements—as, for example, the Tunisian revolution, or Zizi Papacharissi's (2015a, 2015b) 'affective publics'. But, also subjectivity "can be viewed...as something that we actively assemble and maintain, as well as being assembled or arranged" (Harper & Savat, 2016, p. 22). As Macgregor Wise (2012, p. 159) stresses: "any assemblage we enter into puts us into a particular relation to the world—promises us particular powers, redefines who we think we are or could be". The concept of assemblages pushes us towards a thinking of relations and towards an understanding of bodies/subjects as no longer being homogenous, unified bodies but as something that is always in the process of becoming a particular body through specific connections. It is an expansion of the idea of 'articulation' (as a way of avoiding causal explanations) in Cultural Studies, as developed by Stuart Hall (e.g., Slack, 1996). Hall talks about discourse as the connection of different elements that *can* make a unity, but which also can be re-articulated in different ways because they do

not necessarily belong together. Other connections are always possible.

In media and communication studies, the concept of assemblages includes the materiality of communication and pushes us towards an understanding of media, technologies and users as no longer separate, stable agents and an exploration of how these heterogeneous components are woven together. What does such an assemblage *do*? What is its structure? What is produced or expressed? How does it shape the space around it? How are the flows and relationships regulated? Are certain bodies invested with more power (capacity to act, to affect and be affected) than others? Where are forces and relations at work that produce something new?

Following the concept of assemblage means to study media without being media-centric (Slack, 2012, p. 155). The concept of assemblages also offers a more complex understanding of power and enables us to do both, mapping what becomes stuck or fixed, what is of flux and inflow, and what emerges as new potentials (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 9).

4. Working with Affect in Media and Communication Studies

For media and communication studies, working with affect can take place on different levels. The next section will outline three levels which open up new angles for research.

4.1. Affects Expressed by Media

Firstly, we can focus on affects themselves, as expressed by media. "We appear to consume nothing other than affects", philosopher Claire Colebrook (2011, p. 51) points out. For her, media are prime examples where "affects themselves are marketed" (Colebrook, 2011, p. 45). Similarly, for Steven Shaviro, media are machines for generating affect and for capitalizing upon affect (Shaviro, 2010, p. 3). I call this 'affective work' that media perform (Hipfl, 2014): in a time where, following Deleuze, the modulation of affect has become one of the key means of sustaining power relations in contemporary so-called 'control societies'. Media can touch us, they can move us, they can make us feel. As Shaviro (2010, p. 2) points out, media "can give voice (or better sounds and images) to a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society".

Another way of describing this is that media can be seen as 'blocs of sensations' that according to Deleuze, consist of affects and percepts (Colebrook, 2002, p. 148). What does this mean? Whereas affections and perceptions are located in perceivers—we can say that one has a 'perception' of red or that one 'feels' fear—art and media create affects and percepts that are not located in a point of view. When we take the photograph *Migrant Crossing* by Vadim Girda (2017) that was awarded the second prize of the World Press Photo Award of 2017 as

an example, we understand that this photo is able to capture a particular quality of social experience and what it feels like to be in a specific situation. The image shows refugees crossing the Mala Reka river, near the Greek border town of Idomeni, expressing their pain and despair. We may not be depressed or terrified when we view this photograph, but it presents the ‘affect’ of depression or terror. Colebrook (2002, p. xx) uses the example of a novel that describes a certain light; we may not see the light, but we are presented with what it would be to perceive such light or what such a perception is regardless of who perceives it; this is a percept. So, media are expressive of these ‘blocs of sensation’, which is something Raymond Williams (1978) also discussed with his concept ‘structures of feeling’—his name for a collective feeling (not something private or idiosyncratic) that emerges and is being taken up and made palpable first by art and media. Williams illustrates this in his book *The Long Revolution* (1961), where he discusses ‘instability and debt’ as the collective mood that characterizes the conditions of existence of the middle class in popular fiction of the 1840s. This collective mood goes beyond and cannot be reduced to the ideals and values of that time, which were piety, thrift, and sobriety (Williams, 1961).

Following Williams, we are asked to not only analyze media representations but also what he calls “elements of impulse, restraints, and tone” (Williams, 1978, p. 132), those expressive aspects that reveal a certain collective feeling in media. Martin Barker, for example, discusses the cycle of films from 2003 to 2006 about the Iraq War as responses to the ‘Iraq crisis’ in the US (Barker, 2011). Deidre Pribram (2013) focuses on TV crime series which express certain structures of feeling that co-exist in the US. While *CSI* expresses a sense of speed, efficacy and rationality that results in a belief in a world we can still control, *Cold Case* produces an overall feeling of loss. Beverly Best makes the argument that reality TV expresses “responsibilization as the neoliberal common sense” and “individuality and self-expression” (Best, 2012, p. 200). In my own analysis of Austrian films focusing on migration, precariousness is one of the central structures of feeling expressed by the figure of the female migrant from Eastern Europe (Hipfl, 2016, 2018). In her research on Twitter as affective publics, Zizi Papacharissi is interested in “how structures of feeling are both rendered and reorganized by the soft and networked architectures of online media” (2015b, p. 5). All these examples illustrate how such media-generated affects can both consolidate and reinforce a particular collective feeling and articulate something new that is emerging.

There is a danger that this approach can result in “reading affect off of texts”, an approach Grossberg (2016, p. 1004) problematizes, since structure of feeling is, as he points out, “less a tool of textual analysis than of contextualization” (Grossberg, 2016, p. 1026). This may be an attempt to get an idea of the force of affects, but this does not yet include how affect as intensity impinges

on bodies, that is how we are affected. This leads us to the second level of researching affect in media and communication studies.

4.2. *Affections: Being Affected and the Capacity to Affect*

Everyone is able to recall experiences of having been affected by certain encounters with media (music, novels, films, YouTube videos, hashtags, etc.) which they have found moving, astounding, irritating, or which have created an impulse to do something. What happened then was a transition from one state of the body’s capacities to another. As Massumi (2015) points out, this transition is felt on two levels which are connected: the feeling of the quality of the experience and the increased or diminished capacity to act. Massumi (2015, pp. 60–61) also talks about affect as “microshocks”, which he describes as small changes in focus or attention (interruptions, ruptures). These ‘microshocks’ are happening all the time in our life. They can result in ‘microperceptions’—when something is perceived as being qualitatively different, but without it being consciously registered. It is the felt interruption, a cut in the continuity of relation that includes the potential of a re-relating with a difference (Massumi, 2015, p. 54). What happens in these ‘microshocks’ is that past occasions and experiences are fused or contrasted, resulting in certain tendencies of the body towards the future. Depending on these tendencies or habits of the body (when certain processes repeat themselves and function, and we are not very attentive to them) certain movements are “more or less acceptable, more or less ready to go” (Massumi, 2015, p. 50).

This is also an explanation for differences in being affected that exist in people when they are ‘shocked’ by certain events, encounters. They differ in their attunement, they are affected differently. At the same time, we can witness again and again emerging conformity in the attunements—often as effects of being targeted affectively and strategically (in politics, activism). Here, Sara Ahmed’s concept of stickiness (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 11, 13), where different elements (figures) are stuck together, can be employed: when certain emotions are attached to certain bodies, which then circulate in public space, this combination becomes more intense, blocks other connections and can even appear as a stable configuration. One of Ahmed’s examples is hate against asylum and migration, where migrants and asylum seekers become perceived as a national threat.

There is a growing body of work on affection in media and communication studies. Besides Papacharissi’s (2015a) impressive study on ‘affective publics’, Danish researchers Carsten Stage and Britta Timm Knudsen have been exploring, in particular, how we are targeted affectively and strategically by mediated bodily vulnerability (e.g., Timm Knudsen & Stage, 2015a, 2015b). In a current project, Margreth Lünenborg and Claudia Töpfer (n.d.) analyse the affection potential of reality TV formats.

4.3. Exploring Assemblages

In each assemblage, different elements are brought together in a particular way so that it expresses a character and creates a territory. Macgregor Wise (2012, p. 159) stresses that “any assemblage we enter into puts us into a particular relation to the world—promises us particular powers, redefines who we think we are or could be” (Wise, 2012, p. 159). Wise also points out that we have to ask what an assemblage does: “how it shapes the space around it, transforms behaviour, moulds attention, distracts, focuses” (Wise, 2012, p. 161). Every time, we use a device, such as a cell-phone, we also connect with other assemblages—when we post a tweet we connect with the assemblages of language and technology that make certain statements possible (in the case of Twitter, however, this is restricted to 140 characters).

We can approach, for example, the selfie as an assemblage, as Aaron Hess (2015) suggests. He discusses the selfie as an assemblage as an articulation of at least four elements: the self, the physical space (which can be a public or private space), the device, and the network. Starting with the photograph, Hess points out that selfies “accent the self” (Hess, 2015, p. 1632), they presume a sense of authenticity, even though they are staged performances. Selfies are taken with cell phones, which make use of filters, photo-shop or other digital means to manipulate the image. Selfies are perceived as spontaneously taken, even though they have to be choreographed and performed. Selfies are authenticating, they give a sense of, “this is me, right here, right now” (Hess, 2015, p. 1633). Selfies are also expressive of the relationship to space and place; more precisely, they are about the subject’s placement in a certain place at a certain time. According to De Souza e Silva and Sutko, this results in double perception of space, which is an example of what the selfie assemblage *does*: “[u]sers simultaneously see their physical surrounding space, plus a representation of that same space mapped on their mobile phone” (quoted in Hess, 2015, p. 1636). Users are invited to consider their composition in space for sharing in their networks. Taking a selfie also illustrates the connection of body and technology. Holding the device at arm’s length brings the material dimension into play: a certain angle and perspective are required to produce a selfie that will be well received by the audience. Another connection made is the articulation with the network: compared to photos taken with digital cameras, selfies are particularly easy to share via social networking sites. As Hess makes the point, when we upload the photo “we express a desire to be recognized at this material moment...and understood as members of a networked community” (Hess, 2015, pp. 1640–1641).

Hess’ last argument in his insightful analysis of selfie assemblages can be used to draw attention to the energy that comes from such desires. It is exactly these forces of desire that hold the assemblage together, preventing it from breaking down and dissipating. At the same time,

we cannot control what kind of new connections will be made. When selfies are uploaded, they are public and can become subject to appropriation, misinterpretation, and new articulations.

5. Challenges and New Paths for Doing Research on Affect

The overall argument of this article is that a Deleuze-Guattarian understanding of affect is productive for communication and media studies for two reasons: it shifts our thinking from well-trodden paths focusing on representation to a more complex approach that is better suited to grasp contemporary processes and phenomena of media-communication, characterized by connections and relations. It sensitizes us towards what is to come, to new potentials and openings. Notwithstanding, researching affect in media and communication studies certainly has its methodological challenges (e.g., Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; Timm Knudsen & Stage, 2015c). However, a Deleuze-Guattarian understanding of affect also leads us towards new paths for research. Here just two aspects are addressed which are of particular relevance. The first is the question regarding the methods that would enable us to grasp affect(ions), whereas the second points towards ethical concerns.

When researching affect(ions), we need methods that are sensitive to the dynamics, flows, and processes of becoming that characterize the world. John Law (2004) speaks of reality as messy and problematizes methodologies which try to convert this messiness into something smooth and coherent. This is, for example, the case with traditional forms of ‘coding’ in research, which are examples of territorialisation. They make cuts into flows to produce systems of meaning and order. According to MacLure (2013, p. 168), “things are frozen in the places allotted to them” by certain structures. We need to be aware that methods are performative, that they *do* something. Traditional coding does not allow for ‘difference’ in the sense that something emerges—the difference is only “represented in terms of static relations among already-formed entities that are described as different” (MacLure, 2013, p. 169). But there is always something that escapes and exceeds our coding (see MacLure, 2013, pp. 167, 169).

MacLure (2013, pp. 170–172) suggests one option, which is to follow Kathleen Stewart’s approach to pay attention to those phenomena that are often overlooked in qualitative research: the anecdotal, accidental, and contingent. This is a call to focus on those fragments of data that do not fit into neat and succinct codes, and also to listen to our ‘gut feelings’ and to ‘moments of disconcertion’. MacLure’s (2013, p. 180) recommendation is to change our understanding of coding towards “an ongoing construction of a cabinet of curiosities or *wunderkammer*”. Cabinets of curiosities were collections of all sorts of different things like strange objects, stuffed animals, mechanical toys etc., assembled by princes, scholars, and

merchants during the 16th and 17th century in Europe. As MacLure (2013, p. 180) points out, these cabinets exhibit the logic of an assemblage (the arrangement of heterogeneous elements) and are seen and discussed as a form of inquiry, as a form of ‘experiment with order and disorder’. Following MacLure (2013, p. 181), coding could be thought of as such an experiment, where provisional and partial taxonomies are formed but are always subject to change. This would then be an ongoing practice of ‘making sense’ which would include openings for wonder (as temporary points of indecision).

Such an approach allows us to take into account the actual and the virtual as two modalities of reality that co-exist. We are asked not only to capture what is going on in a specific situation but also what is beyond this situation. This is a requirement that is discussed as ‘inventive methods’. Rebecca Coleman and Jessica Ringrose (2013, pp. 7–8) give a good summary of the arguments of Lury and Wakeford, and Massumi, respectively. One of the ways in which social science might expand the actual by including the virtual as the openness towards a multiplicity of actualizations is an “attention to that which has conventionally escaped or troubled social science—the virtual, the affective, the ephemeral” (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 8). Following Massumi, an inventive methodology is to notice and bring about ‘more of the world’ and not ‘more of the same’. This means that we should be sensitive to the contingent openings where one actuality transforms into another. And that we are prompted to create research environments that allow us to explore the “unstablensness of everyday life” (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 28), the processes of territorialisation, re- and de-territorialisation which show us how power works by trying to stabilize and fix some assemblages, prevent the plug-ins of different assemblages, but also enable new conditions of possibility and the emergence of new connections.

Last, but not least, the ethical question needs to be addressed. Affect is not something that is positive or negative, per se, rather it is the question of what affects *do*. Do they increase or diminish the capacities to act, or to connect? This is a question which researchers are forced to ask themselves because as researchers we are entangled with the assemblages that we study. We are as researchers “one point of the relations within an assemblage” (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 6). As Karen Barad (quoted in Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 6) stresses, researchers are responsible for the ‘cuts’ they make in the practice of boundary making. And we need to be aware of what we are *doing* with our research. In which ways are the capacities of bodies that we are engaged with, diminished or enhanced through our research?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, Jan Jagodzinski, and the editors of this thematic issue for their helpful comments and suggestions. I would

also like to thank the open access funding by Klagenfurt University.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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