Digital Intimacy and its Metadata: Rethinking Populism: Rolien Hoyng

(Abbreviated version of the keynote speech “Digital Intimacy and its Metadata: Studying Data Publics in Closed Contexts”)

Introduction

The video streaming application TikTok has taken Turkey by storm, and the hype involves, among others, video-making by soldiers fulfilling military service. While the footage from the barracks is punctuated by nationalist and militarist symbols, what prevails is everydayness and silly, occasionally carnivalesque performances in front of an intimately present camera. Does such video production lend voice and creative expression to conscripted youth? What kind of togetherness is showing itself here? Does the affective intimacy merely reproduce a nationalist body politic and its exclusions? Or, if it appears rather nationalist now, can it become something else, nonetheless? And, if social-media platforms play a role in facilitating and organizing such communication, how does it relate to state power and macropolitics?

In this talk, I look at digital intimacy discursively, aesthetically, and infrastructurally in order to think about the possibilities and excesses of digitally mediated populism. I am especially interested in how digital intimacy reconfigures—or displaces—populism, which works through the affective and intimate mediations of a popular body. To this end, I explore the intersection of what José van Dijck (2013) has distinguished as the connectedness of human relations at the front-end of social media and the connectivity of data infrastructures and algorithmic processing at the back-end. Connectedness covers the lateral exchanges of intimacy animating front-end publics. Deploying reiterative memes and hashtags, users indicate their participation in such publics and extend connectedness among a “like-minded” crowd, or to sound less Cartesian a “like-vibed” crowd. Connectivity involves the affordances of back-end infrastructures and computational “gazes” of trackers, platform algorithms, and, possibly, surveillance technology. My overall objective is to think through the relation between the micropolitics of affect, digital infrastructure, and state power. Many, especially journalists, have already written about authoritarian populism and the “strong leader,” but the challenge I set for myself is to focus as little as possible on the figure of the leader and instead highlight the agency of the crowd as well as of mediating infrastructures. These are commonly reduced to respectively “dupes” and “tools” of the strong leader. I will start with a review of narratives of the crowd and intimacy. The further discussion draws on examples of digital intimacy from Turkey. These examples involve social-media campaigns taking place in the context of the referendum in 2017 that consolidated regime change; the mobilization for a military operation in the Syrian city of Afrin in January-March 2018; and the economic crisis that started to deepen in the same year.
Narratives of the Intimate Crowd

The first narrative I want to discuss involves the liberal fear of the “irrational” crowd. Drawing on Le Bon and Freud, the narrative of the irrational crowd revolves around the lack of individuality and therewith rationality: “any congregation of individuals will serve only to weaken the rationality of each of its constituent members, who will find themselves easily swayed either by random suggestions or by charismatic leadership” (Gilbert 2014, 52). The irrational crowd is assembled only thanks to the image of its charismatic symbolic leader, who is the meta-individual, the super-ego, with whom the members of the crowd identify (Gilbert 2014).

The second narrative involves the intimate crowd as counterpublic. Challenging the exclusions of the liberal public sphere, feminism and sexuality studies have been spearheading the celebration of public manifestations of intimacy and affect. They draw the attention to counterpublics that mobilize more intimate styles of communication, forming contestations of the Habermassian exclusive public sphere with its constitutional outside. I am referring here to the work by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner and their uptake in media studies. This work also builds on Lauren Berlan’s thesis (1998) on intimacy as a pre-stage of publicness, where the formation of subjectivity takes place before it enters the public sphere (i.e., reading at home). In order to go beyond “proper,” recognized intimacies that keep in place dominant institutions and ideologies from which ‘others’ are excluded, Berlan hails more transgressive and “unconstrained,” minor (in Deleuzian sense) intimacies.

The third narrative involves the affective crowd as democratic expression. Henry Jenkins has used the idea of “voting naked” for a democratic culture that does not impose thresholds for participation and welcomes vernacular expression. Writing about “connective logics,” Bennet and Segerberg’s (2012) widely cited article holds that participation revolves around personally expressive content that is “shared with, and recognized by, others who, in turn, repeat these networked sharing activities.” As Shiftman (2014) has argued, memes exemplify imitation but also adaptation and deviation, which differentiates them from virals. A post-liberal take on affect runs through the radical theory by Hardt and Negri on the multitude, which became a common reference around the years of the Arab Spring, Gezi, Umbrella, and Occupy uprisings. This type of work rejects the notion of the atomistic individualistic subject and it has been influenced by a line of cultural theory, including Spinoza, Tarde, Simondon, and Deleuze and Guattari.

Simondon’s idea is that a pre-individual reality connects us all, prior to our status as individuals, and this reality can be “individualized.” The pre-individual is a reservoir of potential—a “general field of relations and potentialities” (Gilbert 2014, 111)—from which collective individuation can emerge. The latter process does not involve separate “individuals” now forming a group, but a psychosocial transindividual being. In Hardt and Negri (2005), the transindividual involves a radical potential for transgressive commonality and love by the “multitude,” which as a collectivity does not pose an identity on its constituents.

However, in the years following the aforementioned uprisings, with the outpouring of intimacy on digital networks, we see a revived discourse of the irrational crowd in rejections of
populism as well as a return of the defense of normativity, especially in response to fake news. And then there is the fear of authoritarian leaders, to which mediated affect is key, especially hatred, anger, supremacism, racism, and sexism. Critical scholars who rejected rationality and standards of civility in public life as exclusive, dominant norms are now at pains to argue that “this” (fake news, hatred, loss of civility) is not what they defend either.

Simultaneously, digital intimacy literature has had to deal with the fact that the current social-media environment does not just invade privacy but governmentalizes intimacy. Intimacy online comes together with its datafication, and, therewith, its governance, its grammatization, and its exploitation. Where does this leave our discussion of digital intimacy and the crowd? Post-liberal theories imply that affect and desire do not originate from the individual as subject (pace Freud and Lacan), but from lateral relations of imitation among proximate bodies. Even without appealing to Simondon’s ontological philosophy, crowds seem more lateral and decentralized. But also, intimacy seems always already social due to digital infrastructure’s mediating relations. This complicates existing narratives, both of the “active,” emancipatory crowd of uprisings and of the “passive” crowd that is a tool of the populist leader. If affect/intimacy is not individual but always already social, the crowd is not “scary” for lacking individuality. Surely, a crowd can be scary. But how does it come to be so? And how do we distinguish between different formations of crowds, of populisms?

**Connectedness and Intimacy**

I want to take the example of manifestations of digital intimacy in the context of regime change away from parliamentary democracy toward The Executive Presidency in Turkey. During this time, social-media users shot intimate confessional videos, reminiscent of a challenge meme. These videos are typically shot in personal settings, in close-up frames, and they come across as the first self-recorded videos shared by these users. After declaring their support for regime change, the users then hail a personal contact, inviting them to make their own video. These performances cite an intimacy with the leader and among a national or socio-spiritual body often sealed with tropes of the family: the nation as intimate family and its leader as simultaneously “one of us” and the “true/authentic us.” However, rather than taking for granted the Leviathan identity and consolidation of “the people” only thanks to their individual identification with a representative “leader,” we could try to understand the role of contagion and imitation in a more horizontal fashion. Populism thrives on bottom-up processes and the lateral relations among the imitating and inventing crowds: the crowd is not sheepish or entirely homogeneous; imitation or repetition comes with difference. Interestingly, in the above performances support for the national leader Erdoğan is exchanged for support for Turkey, and, more so, for city districts and hometowns that these people identify with, and eventually for relatives and loved ones. Hence, the articulation of local to national scales of belonging is in question.

Such slippages do not mean that the intimate crowd is not populist, or that “leaders” do not exist. Instead, macropolitics is composed of micropolitics. Yet tapping and controlling the lateral relations and affective energies of the imitating, inventing crowds is not easy. For one,
there are slippages in which the intimate becomes the private or personal in yet other senses. Take the scribbling on the Howitzer shells deployed by the Turkish military to target the Syrian city of Afrin in 2018. These shells themselves have somehow emerged as fetish objects because they are produced “100 percent locally and nationally.” Yet the messages on the shells include personal business promotions, greetings to friends or to the local mayor (always good to have personal connections...), and, in other instances, celebrations of preferred soccer teams.

Moreover, while the “closed context” is commonly understood in terms of censorship and the prohibition to speak, we should not overlook the pressure to speak, but to speak in a certain way on certain terms, and digital intimacy can be surprisingly prevalent next to censorship. Often confessional culture in the closed context involves the display of the inner self in order to show to oneself (one’s neighbor and the government) that one is fully aligned with the populist body. This is not just an expression of the public self, but the display of one’s “entire” soul so that nothing remains unknown. Yet in this process, intimacy turns into a performance of a recognizable repertoire of stylized acts. As such, intimacy also becomes a formula lending a mask: it can be copied (and this is literally what happens in digital ecologies of copy/paste). Hence, there is no end to suspicion, panic and mistrust.

Last, a transindividual body once in place can be repurposed and new campaigns do build on previously rendered affective connectedness. In response to the economic crisis and increasing costs, there currently is an electricity bill campaign, in which self-identified government supporters vent anger about the steep rise in prices. Affiliated videos are intimate displays because they take place in the privacy of the living room, show everyday life and emotion, and the personal details often disclosed to guarantee these are “real people” like you and me, not trolls or paid actors. Here people who are rather sure of themselves that they count as the people who belong and are entitled, vent their anger and frustration, even going as far as cursing President Erdoğan.

**Connectivity and Populism**

At the backend of computing, data bodies exist in the infrastructural and computational “gazes” of sniffers, trackers, platform algorithms, and, possibly, surveillance technology such as Deep Packet Inspection. How do we relate the infrastructural back-end to questions of populism and state power?

Key is to realize the state is not simply successfully availing itself of the resources of digital data and Artificial Intelligence (AI). For instance, the Turkish state’s desire for control over the national “data body politic” is clear and the argument that data fall under national sovereignty underlies proposed initiatives such as assigning an email address to each citizen by birth, developing a local search engine replacing Google called e-Çelebi (after the 17th-century Ottoman travel writer), and a more recent attempt to create a national alternative to Whatsapp, called with reference to the national telecom institution of the past “ptt messenger.” These services are about techno-nationalist pride but also about ownership of data. The opening of the Turkcell Data Storage Center was touted to be an important step towards storing digital data in
Turkey (a Turkcell representative said that 99 percent currently is stored abroad). The minister in charge of communication emphasized the importance of Turkey becoming a country that can store its own data and that Turkey should become a data center market.

However, in practice Turkey lacks sovereignty over citizens’ digital data as well as the capacity to process it, in the way China or USA have. Like most others, it is a “have-not” state for data and AI. By consequence, next to alleged use of surveillance technology, there is extensive reliance on crowdsourcing for data, again deploying and exploiting the lateral relations of the crowd, with the goal to eliminate or incapacitate supposed threats. But one consequence of peer surveillance initiatives has been that the police force is overwhelmed by irrelevant information provided by overeager informant citizens or citizens motivated by private matters and personal feuds.

Big data approaches to governing data bodies seem to be in an initial phase only. However, a state relying on big data tools might find itself on slippery grounds, as it draws on technologies developed initially for marketing. For instance, the affordances of technologies in micro-targeting and neuromarketing may interfere with the nature of state politics and statecraft. In Weapons of Math Destruction, O’Neill describes the longer history of microtargeting (starting with direct mail). Such fragmentation and multiplicity of the public hardly translates into coherency of the message from the populist leader that consolidates the body politic (Andrejevic 2013; Maly 2018; Baldwin Philippi 2018). Whereas both Democrat and Trump campaigns have turned to such means, my point is: let’s not forget that technological adaptation generates transgressions and contradictions; our human and social complexities are not reducible to the patterns that network science proudly presents (though the failure to be accurate might not be less scary); and the concrete futures of digital intimacy and algorithmic populism are undecided.

Conclusion
On the one hand, twenty something years after the defense of intimacy and affect in the public sphere, intimacy appears displayed, shared, and rendered governable through technological mediation. Yet the idea of our transindividual connectedness allows us to challenge the narrative of the crowd being “scary” and dangerous due to loss of individuality and rationality; as well as the narrative of a homogeneous, sheepish crowd following top-down authoritarianism. Rather than the loss of “rational” individuality, the question is in what ways and to what extent affect and intimacy are (technologically) captured, exploited, and articulated into projects of authoritarianism and othering. How does affect translate into other scales and forms of power, such as the box office? And what are the inherent weaknesses, where affective vectors can constitute a “line of flight,” resulting in new bonds and solidarities? Can the micropolitics of affect also become more than or less than an aggregation represented in supposedly “immediate” fashion by the sovereign leader?

Let us reconsider intimate publics in terms of inclusivity. Gilbert (2014) argues that “What distinguishes a democratic politics from any other is the fact that it does not try to regulate the inherent complexity of human relations” (129), which Arendt calls boundless action.
and refers to infinite relationality. Rather than making social relations simpler, it “strives to give expression to their full complexity and the creative possibilities which this entails” (130).

Building on this, I want to propose that what makes the crowd dangerous is not its connectedness undermining liberal, “rational” subjectivity but its disconnections and erasures. Digital media play a role in creating and sustaining such disconnections through re-articulations of public/private spheres, censorship, as well as algorithmic filtering. Discussing the affective registers of networks, Wendy Chun (2018) turns to homophily (love of the same) to explore algorithmic pattern discrimination by recommendation algorithms, which leads to phenomena such as echo chambers and filter bubbles: “Homophily (love as love of the same) fuels pattern discrimination. The fact that networks perpetuate segregation should surprise no one because […] segregation in the form of homophily lies at their conceptual core” (62). From this perspective, the populist crowd is not excessively connected (i.e., undermining individualism), but rather not connected enough (i.e., homophilic in Chun’s sense)!

References