

#### Research Article

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# Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0048 Received June 1, 2018; accepted November 3, 2018

**Abstract:** In an era of "frictionless" digital environments, this article proposes a queer analysis of the "lossy" materialities of mediated encounters. Building on recent scholarship on media failure and media infrastructures, it will argue that moments of disruption and deterioration commonly experienced by users reveal the failure of overlapping social and technical infrastructures to ensure lossless transmission of normative fantasies of subjectivity and mediated relationality. Highlighting the queer instability of material assemblages, it will pay close attention to how the articulation of bodies, objects, and spaces in particular scenes of lossy encounter generates unplanned affective intensities which may disorient and undo the consuming subject. Borrowing the concept of lossy file compression and adapting it for this purpose, the article's broad aim is to offer a queer critical framework for inhabiting the contingent, emergent, and dissipating energies of media encounters beyond the capital-driven instrumentalisation of agency and the neoliberal imperatives of update culture.

Keywords: media materiality, queer theory, infrastructure, affect, habit

## Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure

Everyday encounters with media are queerly articulated. Regularly, web pages fail to load, GIFs stall, online videos splutter and freeze mid-stream, and digital images are transferred in disappointingly low resolution. We struggle to watch a film in a room with too much light, we strain to hear dialogue over the engine hum in an aeroplane, and we are frustrated as we mistype an SMS on jolty public transport. These disruptions are among the mundane realities of media use, occurring, ironically, without fail. They are embedded in our media habits, and we improvise and form new habits to work around them. In fact, ideal conditions for viewing, listening, reading, and interacting with media may not exist most of the time, if at all. Meanwhile, the current techno-utopian marketing rhetoric of digital media platforms promises a seamless or "frictionless" user experience (Payne, *Promiscuity of Network Culture*). This promise depends on an imagined ideal of *losslessness* in which the infrastructure supporting the medium remains not only fully functional but invisible. It's just you and your device and your experience in perfect, intimate union.

Like ideology, infrastructure reveals itself more clearly when some element of its support function is challenged or breaks down (Starosielski and Parks; Wilson). As media scholars have recently begun to discuss, moments of material restriction, disruption, and deterioration—whether theorised as "glitch" (Cubitt; Sundén), "error" (Nunes), "lag" (Starosielski), or "buffering" (Alexander)—act as crucial counterpoints to the promise of seamlessness. Media failures of these kinds provide insight into claims of functionality, and, especially, into the promise of the infrastructures upon which media consumption depends. When the seams start to show, we begin to realise how the fabric was put together, and we confront how the fact

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of fabrication has been concealed. Unseen layers of design, production, and distribution come into view. According to Lisa Parks, inhabiting moments of restriction, disruption, and deterioration has the capacity to open up an "infrastructural disposition" ("Stuff You Can Kick" 357). Parks proposes that "when viewing/ consuming media we must think not only about what they represent and how they relate to a history of style, genre, or meaning but also think more *elementally* about what they are made of and how they arrived" ("Stuff You Can Kick" 357). Moreover, Ara Wilson writes that examining infrastructure "provides a way to identify conditions, channels, and constraints as 'real' without reproducing problematic modes of describing the real" (27). Wilson recognises how infrastructures "assemble knowledge, regulations, and things" in ways that may reinforce normative arrangements of our lives, right down to the most intimate interactions with objects and each other (19).

This article supplements studies of media materialities and infrastructures by arguing for the inherent queerness and the generative critical potential of unexceptional encounters with infrastructural failure, that is, ordinary moments of media use that are characterised by un-promised restrictions, disruptions, and deteriorations. From a queer theoretical perspective I aim to trouble understanding of how subject positions are constructed around media use and articulated to media systems by proposing that we learn to recognise and inhabit the queer materialities of everyday media encounters where queer materialities refers to the indeterminacy, instability, and contingency of how things come together as the sociotechnical assemblages in which encounters happen. In doing so, I will address three categories of things coming together. The first includes material objects like computers and mobile devices, as well as furniture, architecture, and space, but also human bodies—our own and those of others near or remote. The second category includes the complex infrastructures operating invisibly or silently to animate these assemblages, such as cables, servers, and distribution systems working somewhere behind the scenes, as well as the social and political imaginaries they are built to embody. The third category includes the affective intensities bouncing off and around and among all of these elements which, we feel, make the moment of encounter what it is, while it lasts, and as it continues to resonate after.

As this suggests, in addition to engaging closely with the emerging literature of media materialities, infrastructures, and failures, my discussion will draw from the rich tradition of queer and feminist interrogations of the cultural and political force of affect and emotion (Ahmed; Freeman; Stewart). In particular, I take inspiration from Kathleen Stewart's acute sensitivity to "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected" that are immanent to how ordinary social scenes are animated and can be inhabited (1). Accordingly, I offer the reader a selection of scenes drawn from personal experience to illustrate queer encounters with media and the infrastructures governing them. These narratives span geographical and historical location, aiming to gesture to the variety and the singularity of forms of deteriorated media experience. Stewart's concept of "ordinary affect" provides a template for their composition and selection:

Ordinary affect is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It's transpersonal or prepersonal not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water (128).

So too, my use of pronouns in these narratives intends, like Stewart, to name "not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact" (5). In organising discussion around these narratives, then, I aim not to presume particular authority or, least of all, universality but to evoke shared structures of feeling for how to reimagine the normative arrangement of ordinary material circumstances.

My broader claim in bringing these theoretical and methodological threads together is that by paying closer attention to what happens materially, affectively, and promiscuously in the indeterminacy, instability, and contingency of scenes of media use, something other than totalisation or capture by normative discourses and systems of capital comes into view; something other than pure human agency as an instrument of neoliberalism emerges; and something other than pre-constructed relations and algorithmic identities becomes conceivable. The experience of what I will call lossiness provides the critical impetus for this article's queer approach to media infrastructures. For it is in the intensities and unexpected intimacies

of our encounters with unstable and deteriorated media that we may come to inhabit a particularly queer opening: when technological and social infrastructures fail to ensure the lossless transmission of their reproductive fantasies of subjectivity and mediated relationality. The queerness of this approach is therefore influenced in equal part by Halberstam's recognition of failure as "a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power" which can also "exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (88), and by Freeman's related call for queer critique "to jam whatever looks like the inevitable" (173).

What follows is organised around discussion of each of the layers of media encounter identified above—materiality, infrastructures, and affect—and each section opens with a narrative to illustrate the ambivalent articulation of media consuming subjects with the material substrates of experience. The queerness of lossy media experience renders subjects inarticulate, I argue, and so a final section will consider the role of habit in the subjective orientation and, ultimately, the queer critical potential of disorientation.

## Materiality

Like many Australians born in the 1970s, he grew up in a home with a single television set, which was located in the living room, where most of his family's social activity took place. Primetime TV viewing was aligned closely with family power dynamics, and more often than not they resulted from outright acquiescence to patriarchal authority. Sports programming often trumped other kinds of content, but in addition to gender their viewing was framed by class as his parents' tastereflexes favoured the ABC, the state broadcaster modelled on the BBC, with its high quota of British comedies and "quality drama." Once he was a teenager and allowed to stay up late after his parents had gone to bed, a new plane of opportunity appeared in the margins of primetime—after hours, beyond family scheduling. A new freedom could also be found on a different TV channel—the other state-funded, "multicultural" broadcaster SBS with its high quota of European cinema. "Bringing the World Back Home," its jingle promised. SBS was known, at least among his school friends, to be a hot-bed of uninhibited sexual content. (One friend singled out "Swedish lesbians" as the high point of his SBS discovery.) Every week, he pored over the TV guide for programme descriptions that hinted at homoerotic themes. He learned how to sniff out content that might be worth the delicate planning and anxious execution of a clandestine after-hours mission. The ratings code "Adult Themes" was usually reliable. He learned to be hyper-vigilant of parental intrusion—the car in the drive, keys in the front door, footsteps on the stairs. Terrified and turned on, this practice of radical distraction—of being split between two worlds at once—hindered any chance of complete absorption, despite being almost literally attached to the screen. Divided attention was a mode of survival.

I begin with ordinary objects and familiar spaces: a boxy television set with dials, an antenna, and staticky image; a programming guide, printed on newspaper; the living room in a suburban home. We might be able to imagine the furniture in the room and how it is laid out to enable certain social formations and to manage intimacies. The TV set might be a focal point of this arrangement, and we can probably tell where each member of the family normally sits according to the kind of furniture and where it is placed. Perhaps we can picture the layout of the house and its spatial configuration of family routine. There is a lived temporal calculus, also, in how the body of each member of the family moves through this layout. In this moment, the teenager has come to partially appropriate the spatial configuration of one room through the temporal rhythms of patience, trial and error, and happenstance.

In his uncannily familiar account of furtive adolescent viewing, British media scholar Andy Medhurst wonders whether "this was where we [queers] learnt to cruise, scavenging through the schedules, scouring and decoding . . . for the slight but telling clue" (81). For Medhurst, too, gaps in family scheduling were a precious opportunity to revel in forbidden, queer content: "conscious that [my parents] might return at any minute," he recalls, "I sat about six inches from the screen with one finger on the 'off' button, drinking in every second as if my life depended on it—which, of course, it did" (82). In their radical distraction between two inhabitations of the domestic setting, both teenagers' queer poaching of objects and spaces remains contingent, incomplete, and above all precarious as their improvisation teeters on the edge of dissipating entirely into dominant domestic habitus. And yet a structure of intimacy which binds them across time and space transcends these material limits and endures (Freeman).

The complex materiality of the circumstances of consumption has been relatively under-examined in

media studies, and the conditions of media consumption sometimes taken for granted within everyday routine and habit. In recently proposing a critical shift to stronger accounts of materiality, Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot note that media texts, producers, and audiences have long held the focus of scholarly attention, rather than material artifacts themselves (2). It is worth recalling, however, that one quite strongly materialist tradition of media scholarship dating back at least to the 1990s has paid significant attention to the role of gender and class, in particular, in constructing acts and spaces of media consumption, including use of media artefacts, as forms of sociopolitical contestation. Among this tradition's major texts is Ien Ang's Living Room Wars, which analysed the everyday gendering of domestic scenes of media consumption. In a chapter co-written with Joke Hermes, Ang proposed a critical concept of articulation to demonstrate how media consumption practices are conjoined with gender relations, among other social forces. But rather than claiming that gender is constructed or confirmed or brought to finality in these practices, Ang and Hermes argued that "only through their articulation or specific interlocking in particular situations do media consumption practices acquire meanings that are gender-specific" (122-3). Not unlike the critical language of intersectionality emerging around the same time, the concept of articulation offers a helpful image of how specific social dynamics mutually form and influence one another in everyday practice and should not be imagined as analytically separate.

This account of the sociopolitical dynamics of consumption, including the differential rhythms and inhabitations of "family life," takes us part of the way to recognising how consumption is embedded in complex material configurations. The domestic materialities that are both patterned by and reinscribe the heteronormative configuration of family in the narrative above range from style and placement of furniture and media devices to the temporal parameters of consumption that help contour the domestic space. And each of these ramify out to a range of cultural, political, and economic externalities, for instance, the state regulation of broadcast content; in turn, the function of regulation articulates with the ideals of nation-building which, oddly enough, motivated the delivery of queer European cinema to suburban Australian households after hours. This article will proceed, then, from the assumption that all scenes of media consumption are unstably configured by the shifting and sometimes unexpected articulation of material and immaterial elements objects, bodies, rhythms, and spaces, but also discourses, temporalities, and political forces.

In the scene narrated, the specific articulation of materialities provokes reflexive and emergent queer practices: the adolescent squats opportunistically in heterofamilial space and time, attaches obsessively to fragments of images and textual marginalia, and comes to wear shame and desire as layers seared into his flesh. Adding a more strongly material edge to Ang and Hermes's concept of articulation allows a clearer view of how things that appear ontologically distinct become conjoined in systems or assemblages, like heterogeneous, interlocking limbs of bodies in a continual state of becoming. Drawing on Star and Strauss's analysis of work ecologies, Steven J. Jackson describes articulation as "the art of fitting": practices that support "the smooth interaction of parts within complex sociotechnical wholes, adjusting and calibrating each to each" and "sorting out ontologies on the fly" (223). Articulation in this sense is a radically de-essentialising practice of improvisation and contingency, and one which might not always result in a functioning system if some parts cannot be fitted together smoothly.

The systemic functionality of bodies, technologies, and social structures is not just about the smooth assembly of parts in neat articulations. The fit of things is also a question of feeling, affective politics. Moreover, functionality itself may presuppose a normative arrangement of parts that only recognises certain articulations. Minoritised subjects are often made to feel inarticulate in the specific sense of how they fail to articulate within normative systems, both by feeling disjointed and struggling for expression in the systems' representational logics. These faulty articulations may lead to friction generated by parts

<sup>1</sup> See also David Morley, who insisted that the basic unit of television consumption was the family or household, rather than the individual, thereby opening up important questions about how consumption is shaped by power relations both internal and external to that unit (131). Similarly, Roger Silverstone recognised the need to interrogate the symbolic and political construction of the home as a space and an idea, in order to understand the complex and contestatory cultural work of television consumption.

<sup>2</sup> For an historical account of the cultural politics of SBS TV's national mandate, see Ang, Hawkins and Dabboussy, The SBS Story. UNSW Press, 2008.

that do not fit together seamlessly. Systems that are not articulated frictionlessly and seamlessly may fail to live up to the ideals of their own design. Their output is deteriorated, or perhaps it bugs. It is this reduced quality of output that I will describe as *lossy*.

#### Lossiness

His family bought a VHS machine sometime in the mid-1980s, and this innovation shifted the balance of forces a little around their domestic media consumption. Now, it became possible to tape-record one TV programme while watching another at the same time. Moreover, programming the VHS recorder allowed him to approach some extra-familial TV viewing missions more calmly than before. He could set the machine to start and finish recording after everyone was asleep. No one would know. The morning after, he would return the tape to the shelf with the others but leave it unlabelled and slightly out of reach, hidden almost in plain sight, stored for a safer moment. Late-night programming was notoriously unpunctual, so he learned to allow a margin of error in recording before and after the scheduled broadcast time. Even then, he watched recordings back anticipating awkward jump-cuts to whatever was already on the same tape and often frustrated by narratives cut short. The baseline anxiety of being discovered watching something illicit was amplified by the projected disappointment of missing the most illicit scenes. Months and years of layering recordings on top of each other had progressively disastrous effects on the tapes, and recordings would start to whine and flicker during playback. They eventually had to discard the tapes, and so his ephemeral queer archive dispersed entirely.

The deterioration described above is one of the processes through which technologies remind users of their material presence. Not to be taken for granted as merely the channel to a promised experience, media devices demand attention differently when they start to break down. The promise is withdrawn. In the scene above, the technology's materiality comes to betray the teenage viewer who had come to identify so profoundly with its claim to facilitate a virtual space beyond the surveillance of the family unit. Lucas Hilderbrand's study of the aesthetics of video tells us that "we recognize videotape as tape through its inherent properties of degeneration" (6). When recordings start to whine and flicker during playback, as when they have become an archive of multiple, repeated recordings, "the technology becomes a text, and such recordings become historical records of audiences' interactions with the media objects" (Hilderbrand 15). Hilderbrand outlines how the circulation of copies of audiovisual material on videotape "creates a new kind of aura that references the indexicality of analog reproduction and sensuously suggests the personal interventions that made [each] copy possible" (176). Interventions, including actions like freeze-framing, progressively degrade the tape's materiality; it becomes lossy.

In this sense, the "disastrous" materiality of lossiness acts as analogue for the viewer's disrupted identification, also characterised by "awkward jump-cuts" and "narratives cut short." But the layering of personal interventions may also be understood as generating a collective, ephemeral archive of sensuous experience that imaginatively connects users across time and space as they come into contact with each other's intimate imprints. For our teenage viewer, though, unable to abide the *actual* circulation of the audiovisual record of his furtive practice, its lossiness generates a *virtual* affective bond—a shared structure of feeling that will only make itself apparent as "queer community" later in life.<sup>3</sup>

"Lossy" is a term used in computer science to describe a kind of digital file compression that involves a loss of data, commonly interpreted as a reduction in file quality. Lossy compression involves removing a proportion of data or information *deemed unnecessary* to the file's ability to represent its content, such as when a digital image file is compressed for transfer and comes out in perceptibly lower definition. To the viewer, the image may appear pixelated or grainy after lossy compression, which is to say that decompression of the file after transfer "yields an imperfect reconstruction of the original image data" (Bhaskaran and Konstantinides 61). Compression that does not reduce a file's representative capacity is said to be "lossless." Lossless compression may be favoured when "the original data of a source are *so important* 

**<sup>3</sup>** Elizabeth Freeman offers the concept of "queer hauntology" to consider forms of queer collectivity not bound by normative frames of temporality, or "chrononormativity." She analyses Nguyen Tan Hoang's video artwork *K.I.P.* (also referenced by Hilderbrand) in this way because of how it stages an intimate encounter between the artist and the erotic interventions of earlier viewers of a pornographic video whose collective freeze-framing deteriorated the tape. See her introduction to *Time Binds*.

that we cannot afford to lose any details" (Pu 6-7; my emphasis). Lossy compression may be preferred to facilitate more efficient transmission, depending on the channel used.

My appropriation of this terminology is more figurative than technical.<sup>4</sup> While I am interested in how users experience the results of literal cases of lossy compression of digital files, this interest is mostly phenomenological and extends to a broad range of experiences of deteriorated media that lossy compression metonymises or metaphorises. As will now be clear, my discussion is not limited to digital media technologies; instead, it is motivated by a desire to question whether digital and analogue media encounters should be distinguished categorically if we recognise how they take place phenomenonologically and affectively in conditions where this distinction may not register. In all cases, though, if the figure of lossiness is to help generate queer insights into how media infrastructures are programmed, then it will be crucial to interrogate the selectivity with which literal or figurative data is removed to prepare content for transmission, as outlined in the technical definitions above.

We might begin with this question: what is not so important that we can afford to lose some detail, some definition? This calculation depends on the capacities of the infrastructure delivering the content and to which the format of the content is thereby adapted. But it also depends on prior expectations of how that content is to be used and on what basis it is understood to make meaning. For Jonathan Sterne, writing on the imperative to compression in media, a major criterion of selectivity has historically been the "dominant paradigm" of verisimilitude in which technological change is "imagined as progress in terms of greater and greater definition" (35). As a result, Sterne argues, many discussions of media experience misstep by seeing technologies as "diminished instantiations of an imaginary ideal" rather than starting from the "finitude" which necessarily frames their everyday use (48).

Accordingly, in my broader, figurative usage, lossiness names something of the experience of media encounters where an ordinary event such as signal failure or network disruption brings about a loss in the perceived quality of that experience, or where the accumulated deterioration of media objects denies the user what was promised or imagined. Like circumstances of dissipated signal energy or low resolution, lossy experiences involve working around or making do with reduced quality or definition. Experienced as unplanned and emergent, they have the potential to generate affectively rich modes of improvisation and reflexive habituation. Frustration might explode into exasperation and anger or settle into confusion, amusement or resignation, even boredom or indifference. No matter the affective intensities in the moment, I am arguing that inhabiting states of lossiness can productively align with a queer disposition that is unconcerned by perfect resolution and definition and open to promiscuous material and affective configurations rather than faithful reproductions of content.

My intervention comes in the context of an emerging critical literature of material failure, breakdown, delay, and deterioration that often operates under the sign of the 'glitch.' This corpus builds on a broad understanding of how moments of low performance or media malfunction provide privileged insight into the assumptions guiding the functionality of technical systems and the social norms that govern them. Nicole Starosielski, for instance, describes an "aesthetics of lag" as characterising the inefficiencies of digital transmission. Similarly, on the digital phenomenon of buffering, Neta Alexander notes that experiences of disruption and delay betray the contemporary discourse of digital immateriality as an illusion (6), and even, following Berlant, a form of cruel optimism as users continue to "encounter endless disruptions and still put our faith in an invisible digital god" (23). Using the language of "glitch," Jenny Sundén's take on digital media failure makes an explicit case for an analogy between technical malfunction and marginalised social subjectivities. From Sundén's posthumanist feminist position, glitch shows up the normative composition of media systems and political economies—but also of gender as a fundamentally flawed and failing technology. She writes:

it is in the crack, the break, the glitch, that the inner workings of gender reveal themselves. This is not to say that there is a "truth" of gender to be reached through failure. Neither is there a truth to be had about the inside or the depth of (other) machines through their technological vulnerability. Nonetheless, something important may be bared or disclosed, something which we can get a glimpse of in moments of failure, yet never fully grasp or understand (Sundén).

<sup>4</sup> Like so much of my work, this article owes a debt to Melissa Hardie who first introduced me to the term "lossy" in her article "Remediating the Closet."

As is the case with lossiness, technical and gender glitch are inarticulate in the sense of being unable to be cleanly articulated—either as expression or as adjunct—within systems whose normative functioning aims to produce "truth." Pushing further, Sean Cubitt argues that glitch signifies the limits of mastery and the troubling presence of otherness that is made to signify only to be ejected from systems of control—from gender to colonialism, to the "pure unity of perfect communication" demanded by market capitalism (21). Glitch is "the irreducible accompaniment to the production of communicative order" (Cubitt 23).<sup>5</sup>

These claims help to position lossiness as registering more than a disruption to effective communication between sender and receiver, as is implied by the concept of signal noise. Generating more than noise to a quantitatively or qualitatively known transmission, moments of malfunction, disruption, and deterioration are lossy because they identify the queer otherness that haunts the circuits of representation, interpellation, and identification inherent to some models of media consumption. When they occur on the digital formats mastered by platform capitalism (Srnicek), they mess with the seamless, predictive integration of users and user activity that is central to the design of digital networks of data capture and aggregation. So loss is also incurred to the possibility of identifiable, traceable, and measurable media subjectivities. And above all, as is implied by the theories of media failure sketched above, lossiness registers the deterioration of an ideological fiction—the failure of infrastructures to losslessly deliver the resources and normative values they envision. It is, in a sense, off the grid; an instance of grid failure.<sup>6</sup>

My permissive application of the language of infrastructure aims to draw attention to the discursive as well as material organisation of systems designed to support delivery of content and resources. Parks defines media infrastructures as "the material sites and objects involved in the local, national, and/or global distribution of audiovisual signals and data" ("Stuff You Can Kick" 356). A focus on the material means of distribution serves partly to disperse or fragment sites of agency, given the breadth of interconnected systems that comprise media infrastructures. In this sense, media infrastructure studies can be seen to take up some of the theoretical principles associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT), notably that analysis of actions generated within sociotechnical configurations should not automatically prioritise human agency, when other material elements may also play active roles. As Bruno Latour has written: "An actor is what is made to act by many others," and many others here may include non-human materialities as well as other humans (46).

Nonetheless, just as ANT destabilises assumptions of human agency and ontology, the complex and unpredictable relationality of sociotechnical assemblages means putting critical pressure on the ontology of other material entities, too. We see this in a range of new materialist feminist and queer studies. Using Karen Barad's language, we might argue that media objects, spaces, and users *intra-act* with each other rather than *interact*, which is to propose that none of these elements exists in fixed form prior to their mutual encounter (qtd. in Graham 107). The contingency of *intra-action* generates the properties and boundaries of material things, not the reverse. For Graham, who takes up Barad's position, such is the queerness of material things: their "performative, provisional, and indeterminate" quality (104). By queerness, Graham also means how things "continually gestur[e] beyond themselves to their, often disavowed, constitutive outsides" rather than being stable and essential singularities (104). Graham's imperative is therefore to refuse deterministic or essentialist accounts of human and non-human materiality and the normative regimes of truth that such accounts enable. He writes:

If regimes of the (hetero)normative expect and enforce an alignment of qualities (most usually identified in queer theoretical writings as sex-gender-sexuality) and localise them to bodies understood to occupy a specific place (like objects), then on closer inspection matter in general and things in particular regularly fail to live up to normative expectations (Graham 104).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Nunes makes a similar claim about current economic imperatives to unending communicative flows: "in the growing dominance of a network society, we are witnessing the transcendence of a social and cultural system that must suppress at all costs *the failure to communicate*" (4).

<sup>6</sup> For an extended analysis of the queerness of grid failure, see Payne, "Grid Failure: Metaphors of Subcultural Time and Space."

Material things are queerly disobedient and unruly: they do not simply do what they are programmed to do. They articulate with one another and with social practices in shifting intimate assemblages of uncertain functionality.

Despite the fundamental questioning of the location and meaning of agency in this literature, the ways infrastructures concentrate power should not be overlooked. In the scenes of media consumption narrated in this article, a range of technological systems (TV broadcasting, video recording, print journalism, product and furniture design) intersect with social systems (nation-building, family, patriarchy) which themselves function as technologies of power. Attending to these systems as articulated infrastructures means examining not only how they function and how consumption depends on their distributive functions, but also how certain expectations of life may be built into them. As Berlant writes, infrastructures are "the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure" (393). So infrastructures are the materialisation of political visions, too. This insight emerges strongly in the recent anthropological turn to infrastructure. Brian Larkin writes that as projects designed to deliver improved social and economic futures, infrastructures embody fantasy and desire. They are communicative—a kind of promise, a form of "political address" (Larkin 333). It is crucial, however, to consider how that address may not be coherent, that is, lacking articulation, and might engender tensions and fragilities, even forms of violence (Anand, Gupta and Appel).

The narratives above illustrate the improvisational practices that emerge from lossy media experiences as ways of working around or making do with deterioration and failed fantasy: creative modes of endurance amidst unstable objects and faulty systems. Emergent bodily affects contribute greatly to how such practices come about as queerly and critically generative, so by considering the messy circuitry of feelings, sensations, and corporeal responses that animate and exceed our encounters with media, we can better acknowledge the complexity of how we are oriented to and disoriented by infrastructural imaginaries.

#### **Affect**

You're on any long-haul flight you've ever taken. You're flying home or moving home, or heading away on an exciting trip. You're with a partner or leaving a partner, or leaving behind a holiday romance, or perhaps hoping for one. You're looking forward to filling the time with two or three movies you never got around to seeing, or to revisiting old favourites. You're in your comfy flying clothes, you've covered up in an airline blanket, and you've knocked back two mini- bottles of wine, or maybe gin without much tonic. But the plane is unbearably crowded. You're wedged between the window and another body. There's too much light from the windows across the aisle and the reading lamps overhead, so the image on your tiny personal screen is drained of most colour and contrast, plus the seatback in front of you is only centimetres from your face. You find you have to press the headphones to your ears in order to make out the dialogue over the constant, dull hum of the engine. Sometimes an announcement from the pilot cuts in, garbled and distant, the word *Announcement* redundantly blocking the image on your screen. Or it's a flight attendant selling duty free or warning you about turbulence, speaking too close to the microphone and jolting you back to discomfort. But soon you go back to being so absorbed in the movie which you feel guilty for watching and so moved by its gestures to generic satisfaction that you gasp, and you guffaw and you laugh too loudly. And then, as the film enters its third act, you start to cry. You cry so freely that you don't quite recognise yourself, and you feel a little ashamed. You tell yourself it doesn't matter because nobody on the plane knows you, so you surrender to the moment. Later, when people ask about your flight, you tell them which movies you watched, but you don't mention the crying.

The intensities of affective experience occasioned by a media encounter may work not to confirm subjectivity but to complicate or undo it; not to align subjects but to disorient them. Crying while watching in-flight entertainment is this kind of lossiness. The air traveller is neither the sum of their conscious in-flight viewing choices nor the product of how viewing options have been selected, packaged, and marketed to them—or to "people like them." Something else happens—something in the mix, something in the moment, something in the air. We lose ourselves in the strange physics of the in-flight environment, suspended in time and space, in between here and there, temporarily possessed by the energy of other bodies and other journeys. The experience is a promiscuous convergence of forms of physical and emotional intimacy that are familiar but oddly disconcerting (Groening). Things feel askew, queerly articulated. And more than

in many other scenes of media consumption, the air traveller is noticeably affected by the multisensory presence of infrastructures at every stage: the inescapable sight, sound, and physical pressing down of electronic and aeronautical systems, and constant forms of address in the name of brands, security, and cosmopolitanism. The in-flight experience aims for complete enclosure in these articulated infrastructural fantasies, while in-flight entertainment is packaged as an escape from needing to recognise these fantasies as such; they are naturalised as simple material and affective truths. "Just sit back and relax," they tell us.

Discomfort and compromise *and* exuberance and amplification are among the contradictory affective modalities that index the instability of material encounters in flight. Here, bodies, objects, and spaces are articulated in peculiar ways that disrupt conventional accounts of the media consuming subject. Despite the precise configuration of bodies and choreographed rhythms, no-one really fits. Our selves come loose and we are undone, besides ourselves. But other selves become briefly possible, unimagined on the ground. In the scenes narrated earlier, the teenager learns to develop improvisatory viewing tactics in the cracks of the *dispositif* of sex, gender, nationality, and class that has crystallised around how his family inhabits the materialities and temporalities of suburban domesticity. Theses are scenes of queerness coming about not through interpellation, and not exactly through an askance reception of content (a "queer reading"), but in the fitful rhythms of trying to inhabit the liminal spaces where transmissions fail—poring, cruising, hoping for the best. Unpredictable but ordinary affects form a crucial element of these queer encounters. Sometimes the unpredictable *becomes* ordinary, where experiences that unsettled how we expected a scene to play out then settle into queer routine or habit.

As Stewart's narratives of ordinary affects make clear, friction is created when matter encounters other matter in ways that allow us to recognise that something eventful has happened—"something that feels like *something*" (2). The intensities Stewart foregrounds are at once ephemeral and concrete, ordinary and eventful, "elusive yet visceral" (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 11). They are registered in or on the body, but how they register is not contained by any one body as its property. Nor are affective encounters simply about sensations moving from one body to another, whether human or non-human, as if each body has distinct properties and boundaries that form baseline conditions for encounter. Rather, the body "is as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in its relations," formed by the very affective composition of relations (Gregg and Seigworth 3).

In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions circulate socially in ways that shape "the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish between an inside and an outside," including the supposed inside or outside of the feeling body (*Cultural Politics* 10). There is a cultural and political economy in how the circulation of emotions reifies objects as things towards which we *already* have an orientation when we come into contact with them. Our orientation naturalises the objects we encounter as the causes of our emotions. Having an orientation, whether spatially, politically, or sexually, is framed normatively. It is a question of "facing the right way" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 51). And when we face the right way, some objects more than others come into view as approachable and desirable, and some relations feel more viable.

In the language of assemblage established above, orientation is about articulation or fit, and the ways things can or cannot be articulated is a political question. Ahmed interrogates how "fit" presupposes a selective framing of how it feels to be comfortable. In the encounters a body has with objects and spaces, she writes, the level of comfort that is felt in the body—the sense in which the body feels *a fit* or that it *fits in*—is a function of how the shape of those objects and spaces has already been formed by prior encounters with bodies like it:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish between where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 148).

To be heterosexual in a heteronormative world is to be "a good fit," Ahmed continues, like sinking into a comfortable armchair: one's body is allowed to fit into spaces and fit with objects that already feel comfortable because they have "already taken [its] shape." By contrast, queer subjects "when faced by the 'comforts' of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable": "out of place, awkward, unsettled" (Ahmed,

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Cultural Politics 148). Elizabeth Freeman reminds us that queer subjects might experience feeling out of time, too: their "failure or refusal to inhabit middle- and upper-middle class habitus appears as, precisely, asynchrony, or time out of joint" (19; my emphasis).

If a queer affective politics seeks to disarticulate bodies and sensations from normative configurations and to generate a richer imagination of bonds and intimacies, across existing articulations of time and space, then the opportunity and the challenge of lossiness is to imagine how to inhabit the full range of affective dispositions incited by media encounters that don't play out as we were told—especially those that feel disorienting.

### Habit

He's watching Game of Thrones on a laptop in the next room while I'm in the kitchen cooking dinner. I'm listening to a podcast with earphones but I can still hear the frequent, gruesome sounds of bodies being hacked up, and this disturbs me. I had tried to buy him a DVD box-set as a gift so he could binge-watch the show in his own time, but the store had sold out. Anyway, our DVD player stopped working months ago. So now he streams the show online through unofficial channels. Or rather, he gets me to find a streaming website and to make sure the video starts to load, but it only does so after we panic to close a whole spasm of pop-up windows, some of which flash pornographic images and others which emit a piercing alarm and claim a virus has been detected. We use my laptop for this procedure because his can't handle it, and anyway I find his laptop almost impossible to use. It's clunky and slow, and it feels foreign to my touch. Sometimes, somewhere in the middle of an episode, I hear him moan or swear and call for my help because the stream has frozen or the screen has suddenly gone blank, and he doesn't know how to fix the problem but he hopes that I will. We usually have to start again—load-time, pop-ups, and all—and I realise that the fragility of the whole situation makes me anxious and annoyed—and I'm not the one watching the show. I grumble that this wouldn't be happening if the streaming service we subscribe to had bought the rights for the show in the country where we live, and then I remember not to complain because I saved 75 euros by not buying the box-set.

Habits signal our continued orientation to objects, other bodies, and spaces; new encounters may be disorienting until new habits can be formed around them. The foreign touch of an unfamiliar computer might be disabling, or I might feel lost when trying to navigate a different operating system. Perhaps my very sense of self as a media consumer comes into question when services I habitually use, and which had promised me an endless stream of content, prove to have limits. The desperate shift to other, unknown channels feels initially like a betrayal, and I might tell myself I am being punished while I stare at the endlessly spinning "pinwheel of death" on my frozen screen. In this feeling of disorientation comes the recognition that I had been oriented, and that what I had hoped to believe about my agency and control as a consumer was an illusion.

The habits of media users have long been among the most highly prized commodities for media industries. What we do with our media, when, where, and how often has been inventively translated into new forms of capital through successive methods of marketing and advertising which attempt to orient consumers around access to a desirable experience. Strategies for instrumentalising users' media habits have formed a connecting line across media formats, in the measurement of patterns of behaviour, choice, preference, attention, and other categories of engagement. Wendy Chun has recently argued that one of the things that makes current media new is a new relation to habit. More precisely, recent networked media are structured by a new relation to newness itself as habit-forming—a structure of dependency. "Things and people not updating are things and people lost or in distress," Chun writes "for users have become creatures of the update" (2). Whether giving updates to our network of "friends" or updating ourselves through consumer practices or endlessly updating our devices and software within cycles of planned obsolescence, the update "habituates us to constant change" through coerced renewal of dependencies (Chun 10).

<sup>7</sup> Neta Alexander also asks whether buffering is a punishment, perhaps delivered by gods of the church of "on demand" (1). By contrast, in his essay "Fidget Spinners," Jason Farman urges users to embrace waiting (while digital interfaces buffer and load) as a way of valuing the relationships these interfaces make possible.

The cycle of dependency Chun describes is also a relation to futurity. Digital capitalism's update mechanisms constitute an infrastructure that embodies and delivers a future fantasy, but one lived in a continuous present tense without a past. For, paradoxically, while each update enforces the loss of that which has just been updated, no loss can be registered affectively in this fantasy. There is no turning back. And yet the detritus of this fantasy lives on, *lost or in distress*. As I struggle to reorient myself amidst stalling websites and a frenzy of pop-ups, I am marked as a casualty of the productivity drive who did not make the cut, my habits turned against me and rendered uninhabitable. More lossy than lost, I am what is left behind in the drive to perfect, lossless *reproduction*, too: that which is deemed inessential to the representation of future outcomes and expendable in the quest for efficient transmission. So learning to inhabit lossiness is a queer art of failure: "the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming" (Halberstam 88). It is not just a "stubborn lingering of pastness" that Freeman identifies as a "hallmark of queer affect" (8). It is more fully a rearticulation of the body and its affects beyond their instrumentalisation "by changing tempos, by remixing memory and desire, by recapturing excess" (Freeman 173).

#### Conclusion

Infrastructures "become part of 'force-relations' as people's encounters with them in everyday life generate rhythms, moods, and sensations" (Parks, "Infrastructure," 107). More than material assemblages that organise how resources are distributed, infrastructures communicate a selective promise. The scenes narrated in this article illustrate ordinary encounters with media where something happens to unravel the promise of taken-for-granted infrastructures, generating unplanned rhythms, moods and sensations—as well as shifty subjectivities. In the expedient technical procedure of lossy file compression I have proposed an image of the deterioration of the idealised imaginaries of media systems and the discourses of nation, gender, family, and capital to which they are articulated. Beyond the technical loss of quality deemed necessary for certain communicative transmissions, lossiness indexes the queer failure of the ideological fictions of lossless productivity and reproductivity with which operating systems like capitalism, nationalism, heteronormativity, and homonormativity are programmed.

We dissipate and deteriorate, too, if we are measuring ourselves against the aggregate versions of consumer subject that ever-updating instruments of neoliberal capitalism construct us to strive to become, or against the fictions of algorithmic citizenship and non-citizenship generated by the surveillance state (Cheney-Lippold). One very dark side of this fantasy has recently come into scandalous public view after revelations about the possibly illegal data mining practices carried out by company Cambridge Analytica in conjunction with Facebook. Reports claim that a massive cache of personal data may have been misused in order to influence the Brexit vote and the most recent US presidential election. As many Facebook users may struggle to separate corporate manipulation from their own complicity with an ingenious data-generating business model that capitalises endlessly on user affect and habit, what has come most glaringly to light is the unprecedented frictionless articulation of digital, social, economic, and political infrastructures. Against this backdrop, it is surely urgent that we insist on seeking alternatives to a media ecology that habituates us to branded, recorded, and affectively pre-formatted encounters as the only viable norm.

To be clear, this article is not a rallying cry for us all to embrace obsolete technologies or refuse software updates as ways of protesting against the relentless onward march of platform capitalism and its sinister adjuncts. Rather, in recognising the inherent queerness of media materialities, it is an invitation to imagine what uninstrumentalised affective relations, intimacies, articulations, and subjectivities we can start to generate or recuperate if we refuse a world that frames deterioration primarily as individual loss to be overcome or as individual failing to be punished. Perhaps as a result we can hope to construct new futures not foreclosed by the violence of infrastructures of inequality.

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