Postdigital Intimacies: Gendered Perspectives on the Blurred Boundaries of Private and Public in the Digital Age

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In the context of an era increasingly being (re)defined by our relationships with and through technology, intimacy has emerged as a figure, a concept, and a practice in need of constant reassessment and feminist interrogation. Indeed, the last decade has seen increasing work on gender, the (post)digital, and forms of relationality and intimacy opened up and foreclosed by technology – a phenomenon which we now perhaps take for granted as being simultaneously embedded in both the public and private spheres. To be sure, intimacy has always been somewhat technological, but it now seems to be everywhere, and all at once, and there is something unique to *this* 'post' moment – 'an era of social networking, virtual domestic assistants and smart homes, artificial intelligence and consciousness, the body-machine assemblage, and our obsession (stronger than ever) with viruses and immunity, on and off our screens' (Balfour 2023). In short, intimacy is thoroughly enmeshed in the (post)digital, and was coextensive with the emergence of the digital over time, but it is also singularly historical in its need for attention at this moment.

In positioning this issue, we are building on the notable contributions of others in the field, including explorations of the relationship between platforms, intimacy, and labour (Hurley, Evans, forthcoming 2026), the concept of intimate strangers or forms of strange(r)ness (Balfour et. al. 2025), digital intimate publics (Dobson 2018), 'virtual' intimacies (McGlotten 2018), the 'networked public-private' (Evans, Ringrose

2025), and platform intimacies (Rambukkana, Matthews 2024). These contributions, and more, have exposed the relationship between intimacy and the (post)digital as a complex relational force and a disruption of the dichotomies traditionally associated with the public and the private. This includes a blurring of inside(r) and outside(r), 'real' and artificial, embodied and disembodied, public and domestic, human and machine, digital and analogue, and visibility and invisibility.

Postdigital Intimacies: Gendered Perspectives on the Blurred Boundaries of Private and Public in the Digital Age takes these disruptions as a point of departure, recognising, appreciating, and, at times, exposing the risks of a blurred distinction between the public and the private, particularly as such a blurring occurs across the often gendered thresholds of the body and the home. This issue places emphasis on what is happening at the boundaries or borders of these distinctions, where they overlap and intersect, the contradictions and paradoxes of each coming together, and these liminal and transitional spaces as routes in and through conflict, but also in some cases bringing conflicts of their own. We situate the contributions that follow within this transitory and at times contradictory space, acknowledging the ways in which the public and the private operate in complementary and productive ways, encouraging dialogue and new ways of being together, and being apart, but also recognising the ways in which the promise of new intimacies collapses into a misuse of technology, violence, surveillance, and disconnect.

Intimacy and the postdigital

Our use of 'intimacy' and the 'postdigital' is informed by the above thinkers and, of course, bolstered through the work of Lauren Berlant, particularly their idea of 'living in the ellipsis' as a general state in which one is left with questions rather than answers (2016). Berlant's work is instrumental in shaping how we understand affect, emotion, and desire to transverse the public and private spheres. Indeed, the concept of an 'intimate public' is now widely applied to exploring the ways in which digital cultures in particular no longer distinguish between these realms. Digital technologies make it more possible than ever to experience intimate and private moments in profoundly public and social scenarios – for instance, having an intimate conversation over text message while on a crowded subway platform. For Ali Azhar and Megan Boler (2023), 'digital media scholars have used these conceptualisations to study novel forms of community online and the contradictions these utopic and optimistic forms of intimacy encounter'. In a similar vein, we extend the notion of digital community to include the relations that are initiated, sustained, and foreclosed by a myriad of technologies across multiple media forms. In doing so, we ask a series of questions:

1. What are the mechanisms of the gendered design of the digital (including virtual assistants and other 'smart' home tech, apps and platforms, algorithms, surveillance, stalking, and tracking), and how do they influence our notion of 'private' and 'intimate'?
2. To what extent do gendered digital domestic technologies assuage/exacerbate technophobia and anxiety?
3. What alternative futures and hopes is digitalisation bringing regarding gendered domesticity?
4. How are gendered relations of technology and its impact on the private/ public dichotomy represented in social and cultural discourse (i.e. product marketing, popular culture, etc.)?
5. What is the relationship between digital technology and gendered violence?
6. How does the digital challenge our notions of inside/outside, foreign/familiar, public/private?

In what ways does the digital erase women and other marginalised communities from social life or – on the other hand – foster their visibility and empowerment? In responding to these questions – or, following Berlant, asking more questions – we also acknowledge the extent to which the digital has become something so entangled with the experience of living that it is impossible to separate it from the non-digital. Technology, information processing, data, and digital media now inform, and indeed create, all aspects of public and private life, from politics and education, to household shopping and chores, to childcare and intimate health. Just as the public and the private intermingle in irrevocable ways, so, too, is the digital now indistinguishable from the analogue. In sum, we follow Evans and Ringrose (2025) in their conceptualisation of postdigital intimacies:

> the *intimacies* in *postdigital intimacie*s is interested in how subjectivities are shaped by particular intimacies and relationalities between humans and non-human actors, which can include smartphones, apps, and other machines, while also attending to the power of intimacy as both a regulatory force and radical potential. However, what is added to this account of intimacy by the prefix of 'post' is the folding of and amalgamation of digital and non-digital within our notion of the intimate.

Power at the threshold of public and private

This special issue takes as its focus the complex intermingling of private and public and how digital technologies and their gendered design, use, and impact are enact-

ed in what we consider the domestic, intimate, or personal sphere. The contributions here include original research articles, case studies, policy analyses, and theoretical contributions that challenge the traditional private/public dichotomies from a gender perspective and look into what role digital technology plays in re-conceptualising the notion of personal, intimate, or domestic in a contemporary digitalised society. As a contribution to feminist thought and scholarship, we emphasise the blurring of boundaries in particular in order to resist the capitalist and patriarchal construction of binary thought and to make visible the multiple and intersecting forms of intimacy created and sustained in feminist articulations of the home, the body, and the public sphere.

In the past several decades, contemporary societies have undergone rapid techno-social transformation, with a significant increase in the use of digital technology, which now penetrates our work, social, and personal lives. No longer a domain separate from the private and intimate spaces of 'home', the digital is now integrated into our behaviours, activities, and relationships across the borders of public and private, but in such a way that traditional notions of gender remain at the fore. Still, these relations are taken for granted and are so deeply embedded in our lives, relationships, work, and practices that we rarely question their construction or the relations of power within them.

Here, we have sought to present a balanced approach, acknowledging the ways in which the digital has encouraged new modes of relating to and caring for those both known and unknown to us. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic not only exposed the extent to which we rely on communicative technologies, but also how essential the digital is, as it was the digital that sustained vital support services such as education, healthcare, grocery shopping, and community building when face-to-face or brick-and-mortar services were out of reach. We recognise, too, the extent to which the digital has facilitated cross-cultural engagement, access to news and information, and grassroots movements and entrepreneurship. For gender and intimacy in particular, digital culture has afforded opportunities for collaboration, community, and resistance to both traditional and technologically-facilitated forms of surveillance, misogyny, and gender-based violence. This issue therefore calls attention to the potential of the digital for emancipation *from* the domestic sphere, the ways in which digital technologies enhance visibility in the *public* sphere, and the opportunities created for harm reduction within technology, including phenomena such as digital interventions that support anti-violence or visibility to those who have historically been excluded from the public dialogue.

Still, the risks of technologically saturated forms of intimacy remain. In cases of technologically-facilitated violence in particular, the boundaries of public and private are blurred, as tools such as GPS tracking, Bluetooth location sharing, and 'find my device' features are increasingly being used to track women and other marginalised

identities from the public sphere into the domestic (Henry, Flynn, Powell 2020). Despite a body of research that now recognises the ways in which women are disproportionately targeted for online harms (Backe, Lilleston, McCleary-Sills 2018), more work needs to be done to explore the extent to which technologies integrated into our homes and private lives, in seemingly benign or taken-for-granted ways, often reproduce patriarchal notions of gendered labour, surveillance capitalism, sexualisation, or erasure. While the Covid-19 pandemic certainly revealed important affordances of technology, the increased use of digital technologies also contributed to the deepening of existing social inequalities (Blomberg et al. 2020; Zhen, Walsham 2021), such as the 'digital divide', and exposed the capacity for misuse. Specifically, the pandemic also shed light on the often invisible impact of unpaid care responsibilities at home or gender inequalities in the public domain (such as representation and decision-making), as well as the extent to which the rapid spatio-temporal changes of Covid-19 led to the deconstruction of the home as a space rendered subordinated to the public space.

Just as physical touch can be a source of pain or pleasure, the forms of intimacy enabled in the digital sphere open new possibilities of being together in the world, but they also risk eliding the very real and material consequences of the digital gendering of labour, surveillance, and power, not to mention the myriad of ways in which even virtual intimacy is often unwanted, non-consensual, and a corollary of violence. In short, what occurs in the digital sphere is a reflection of what happens in our physical world, and it is in these blurred boundaries that more feminist interrogation of the postdigital public-private is needed.

A synopsis of the articles in this issue

The contributions to this special issue collectively interrogate the complex entanglements of intimacy, gender, politics, and digital technology across diverse contexts, scales, and methodological approaches. Each article engages with the central concern of this issue – the destabilisation of public/private boundaries in the postdigital era – by offering situated analyses that foreground gendered experience, technological mediation, and the possibilities and limits of digital agency.

The issue opens with Júlia Karpova's article, 'This Feeling of Multidimensional Disease', which offers an intimate and critical look at how Danish women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) engage with self-tracking apps and social media. Through semi-structured interviews and drawing on the logics of care vs the logic of choice (by Anemarie Mol), Karpova demonstrates how these technologies mediate the experience of illness across the public-private divide. While self-tracking apps often reinforce capitalist and individualised models of health, social media emerges as a space

of collective sense-making, care, and solidarity. This article foregrounds the limits of technocratic health interventions and the reparative potential of online communities in articulating new forms of intimate care.

Next, Vojtěch Gerlich and Mohazzab Abdullah turn our attention to a different kind of mediated intimacy through their ethnographic study of participatory radio in Northern Uganda. In 'Empowerment on Air', they explore how radio campaigns addressing gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and women's entrepreneurship unsettle normative distinctions between the public and the private. Their work reveals how radio, as a mass yet intimate medium, facilitates feminist consciousness-raising and deliberation, creating what they term an 'intimate public sphere'. The study underscores both the emancipatory potential and the limitations of media-based empowerment, especially in contexts where women's access to technological and institutional resources remains unequally distributed.

Shifting to digital feminist activism in Central Europe, Veronika Valkovičová and Zuzana Maďarová explore how digital activists in Slovakia and Czechia use Instagram to raise awareness about sexual violence and harassment amid rising anti-gender rhetoric and political hostility. Drawing on interviews, the authors examine how digital activists navigate public/private boundaries and the platform's affordances and constraints – balancing visibility, emotional labour, and algorithmic pressures. While Instagram enables the creation of personalised feminist publics and offers an accessible space for awareness-raising, it also exposes activists to hate speech, surveillance, and platform governance that limits sustained collective action. The article highlights how digital feminist subjectivities are shaped at the intersection of political resistance and corporate control and reflects on new forms of feminist praxis.

Building on this regional focus, Karin Holosová's contribution, 'Visible on Our Terms', continues the examination of Slovak digital feminism by attending to the affective and infrastructural labour of the feminist presence on Instagram. Eschewing the spectacular modes often associated with online activism, Holosová introduces the concept of 'ethical endurance' to theorise the slow, relational, and emotionally demanding work that sustains feminist visibility in algorithmically governed environments. The article provides a powerful counterpoint to the assumption that digital activism must be loud or viral, instead offering a nuanced view of what it means to persist in the face of platform logics that often undermine political critique.

While distinct in method and medium, the final contribution shares the issue's core concern with how gendered intimacies are shaped, surveilled, and contested through digital technologies – extending the inquiry from lived practices and activism to cultural imaginaries that illuminate the domestic tech-mediated life. AJ Castle turns to the genre of horror cinema to theorise the emotional landscape of domestic surveillance and artificial intelligence. In 'Let's Play Surveillance', Castle analyses *Child's Play* and

M3GAN to propose the notion of 'panoptic affect' – the unsettling feeling of being constantly watched without knowing by whom. These films serve as cultural critiques of AI technologies and their infiltration into intimate domestic settings, especially in ways that intersect with maternal roles and children's autonomy.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue chart a diverse yet interconnected landscape of postdigital intimacies. Whether through the use of social media for health and activism, the gendered affordances of broadcast technologies, or the cinematic imaginaries of surveillance, each contribution demonstrates how digital technologies both shape and are shaped by the gendered reconfigurations of intimacy, care, and politics. Importantly, these insights are grounded in a rich array of feminist-informed methodologies, including qualitative interviews, ethnography, and film analysis. Several articles privilege the voices and experiences of women and feminist actors navigating digital spaces, while others foreground the symbolic and affective dimensions of postdigital life through cultural and narrative analysis. This methodological heterogeneity not only reflects the complexity of the themes addressed but also affirms the value of multi-scalar, interdisciplinary, and reflexive approaches in the study of intimacy, gender, and technology.

Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue illuminate the deeply gendered and power-saturated nature of postdigital intimacies. Across diverse geographies, media forms, and methodological approaches, the articles map the ways in which digital technologies not only traverse but reconfigure the boundaries of public and private life, often reinscribing hierarchies of gender, race, and class within these blurred thresholds.

This issue was conceived as an intervention into the binary thinking that underpins dominant technological narratives – particularly those that separate intimacy from politics, the personal from the public, and digital life from material consequence. By centring gendered experiences and feminist methodologies, we sought to foreground the often-invisible labour, vulnerability, and care that define our digital entanglements, while exposing the structures of surveillance, extraction, and violence. While the contributions here are grounded in theory and an intellectual critique of the binary dimensions of power and gender, they are resolutely praxis-oriented and argue for radical and re-energised ways of thinking through the relationship between gender and technology, while highlighting the 'real-world' risks of postdigital intimacies and simultaneously attending to their emancipatory potential.

The analyses here underscore the urgent need for a more activist scholarship that not only interrogates the mechanisms of power embedded in digital technologies

but also participates in imagining and enacting alternatives. Whether through subtle acts of feminist endurance on platforms designed to undermine them, or through reappropriations of media and cultural forms, the authors in this issue point to the political possibilities that emerge from within and against digital infrastructures.

As Big Tech continues to consolidate power – constructing worlds through extractive data economies, opaque algorithms, and the arrogance of 'tech bro' futurism – this issue can hopefully portray a different future. One in which intimacy is not instrumentalised, where the private is not a site of exploitation, and where digital spaces become terrains of resistance, care, and collective reworlding. In these entangled, often uncomfortable zones, we find not only critique but the radical hope of[for] a postdigital feminism. As Pedwell and Stowe (2024) remind us, this ellipsis (Berland 2016) prompts us to ask questions, to reaffirm intimacy with and through the digital, to undo the binary thinking that forecloses justice, and to 'tune into the affective glimmers of alter-worlds which might offer hope for an otherwise'.

In a time of overlapping crises – of war, displacement, ecological collapse, and the erosion of democratic freedoms – the role of digital technologies in shaping intimacy, agency, and gender is more urgent than ever. These are not remote issues; they permeate our classrooms, our research agendas, and our personal lives. As scholars and practitioners, we must confront the complicity of digital infrastructures in surveillance, militarisation, and the commodification of care, while also resisting the lure of neutrality in the face of violence. We are called on not just to critique the world as it is, but to participate actively in imagining and building the world otherwise – to foster technologies and relationships rooted in solidarity and justice.

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