



Bodyminds Online: Digitally Mediated Selves in Regional Cultural Context

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Abstract: In this introductory article framing a special issue, we argue that embodiment matters for understanding social subjectivity that emerges through digital media in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. We offer the phrase *digital selves* as a way to consider subjectivities that are at once embodied and mediated. Because the social politics of the digital sphere are not disembodied, but rather, profoundly fleshy, they are shaped by the political dynamics of how human bodies are bound up in systems that pathologise, disable, gender and racialise some bodies and not others. We offer and define the concept of *bodyminds* as developed in disability studies as a useful lens to counter latent Cartesian dualism in theories of digital subjectivity.

In order to understand how postsocialist users come to act and create meanings online as embodied selves we theorise a departure from the notion of a ‘digital public sphere’ as a democratic arena in the spatial sense, opting instead for a more flexible notion of audiences interpellated through texts, drawing on Michael Warner’s notion of publics and counter-publics. We draw these concepts together to propose two novel concepts of complex embodied sociality that unfold at once on and offline in Eastern Europe and Eurasia: pixelization and mimetic activism. We proffer these terms to help conceptualise how digital selves are deeply informed by socialist legacies in the built environment and traditions of embodied protest, for instance, in the cases described in the articles in this special issue.

Keywords: bodyminds, subjectivity, embodiment, new media, postsocialism, digital

During the 2012 *mitingi* in Moscow protesting the manipulation of election results, the protestors gathered but then scattered, broken up by authorities.¹ Accounts written by protestors recall retreating to the subway when the crowd was broken up by police, only to reassemble at another metro stop, guided by social media posts (Leeds 2017; see also DI Is-

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sue 9). Others, afraid to attend protests for fear of retribution if documentation of their participation materialised online, watched virtually from home. In this way, the activist movement was neither cleanly online nor offline, but deeply entwined in both digital and material space. This pattern of social assembly in public space, orchestrated through and watched on virtual media livestreams, as well as traditional media, live social media updates and so on, continued to re-emerge over the 2010s, for instance during the Euromaidan (Lokot 2021), in the 2020 walks for justice in Belarus and in the 2021 Russian protests against the arrest of opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Aleksei Naval'nyi.

The images of protests that participants posted or that circulated in various media generated a secondary assembly, a digital public of those participating at home or work or elsewhere in the city or the world, consuming, interpreting, sharing and commenting through their screens. These embodied actions echoed the dynamics of digitally networked urban political protest occurring elsewhere in the world in the 2010s, yet, there was something specific about the Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian setting. The embodied habitus of protestors, the particularities of post-Soviet infrastructure in the built environment, local habits of digital media use and historically rooted ideologies about how bodies in space become meaningful in moments of action, all influenced the particular ways in which the bodies of social media users participated in person and remotely in mediated public life. These overtly civic activities unfolded in tandem with other embodied digital practices from Moscow public infrastructure designed to encourage selfie culture (Murawski 2020), to instagrammable latte art in Ukraine, to make-up tutorial videos and social marketing campaigns (see also: DI Issue 16). But what is unique about the embodied nature of digitally networked publics and selves in the post-Soviet and post-socialist context? What might paying attention to the embodied nature of digital life offer to area studies of Eurasia?

We argue here that bodies matter for digital sociality, and digital life matters for how subjects experience their own embodiment in our region today. And, in turn, the articles in this special issue highlight the ways that the specific histories of embodiment, ideologies of the body and self, and relations between the body and the built environment across the region influence how subjects enact their subjectivities in intermedial worlds. The social politics of the digital sphere are not disembodied, but rather, profoundly fleshy, and shaped by the political dynamics of how human bodies are bound up in systems that pathologise, disable, gender and racialise some bodies and not others. Moreover, we follow colleagues in a variety of interdisciplinary fields in observing that the ways that users engage mobile digital technologies and social media platforms are shaped by the ways that their bodies are made meaningful as symbolic objects and enculturated as acting subjects. We argue that historically rooted concepts of public and private acts matter for how bodyminds come together online. Attending to bodyminds online helps us understand the co-emergence of semiotic structures of meaning in digital and material spheres in postsocialism. And thus, how digital selves are semiotically expressed and called into being.

In order to make these claims, we begin by reviewing the concept of *bodymind* as theorised in anthropology, ethnography, feminist cultural studies and disability studies. We then turn to media ideologies in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, exploring the specificity of postsocialism through a consideration of the concepts of public and private. We conceptualise digital selves fluctuating between public and private roles and argue that the material and embod-

ied worlds of social media users interpellating digital publics and counterpublics matter in shaping social meaning. We draw together these various theoretical threads in proposing two novel concepts of complex sociality that unfold at once on and offline in Eastern Europe and Eurasia: *pixelization* and *mimetic activism*. Finally, we close with a consideration of how pixelization and mimetic activism are illustrated in the articles in the special issue.

1. Thinking with bodyminds online

We embark on the exploration of the body online from a critical, social semiotic perspective informed by anthropology, cultural studies, queer feminist studies and disability studies. While there are many possible ways to study the digital, we begin from the core recognition of the co-constitutive nature of digital platforms, audiences and creators. Users create content that shapes digital platforms, and users are in turn shaped by the audiences—actual and imagined—and social worlds of the platforms (Ross 2019, 362). Tracing the practices that emerge in relation to digital platforms allows scholars to theorise how these practices become meaningful. In this way, the question of the digital here is not only a subject for study, but, as anthropologist Tom Boellstorff asserts, a *technique*. Digital ethnography is adept at getting at, on the one hand, the ‘gap’ between the virtual and the real, and on the other hand, the co-constitutive and indexical semiotics by which the virtual and the real continue to ‘point at one another’ (Boellstorff 2012: 40). Digital anthropology seeks to uncover the actual use patterns and social worlds that emerge in diverse global contexts and recognises the imbalance inherent in the fact that much of the work on digital practice emerges in global cosmopolitan centres (Horst and Miller 2012).² Moreover, this approach recognises that, though emergent technologies create new spheres of practice, those practices soon become habitual, and new regimes of normativity emerge (Miller and Horst 2012: 28).

This ethnographic approach is complemented by a queer-feminist cultural studies angle that critically considers the production of cultural forms in the digital space. Already in the early internet era, feminist researchers like Donna Haraway (1985) pointed out that in creating digital worlds, users do not leave behind the dynamics of power that lead to marginalisation and exclusion of certain bodies in the material sphere. These normative forces shape their digital personas, interactions they have with other users and the very infrastructures within which their digital lives evolve. Haraway’s ‘cyborg selves’ live at once online and offline. Just as in the material world, the production of the self and the publics online unfolds in the context of multiple interlocking systems of oppression. Sexism, racism and classism are intersecting systems (Crenshaw 1991), along with ableism, colonialism and saneism (Schalk and Kim 2020). Moreover, the digital profoundly affects our understanding of the material world by introducing new meanings, for instance, by altering our understanding of categories of race (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012: 2). We carry these critical considerations about the intersectional identities and social systems affecting bodyminds into our analysis of post-socialist digital selves.

In theorising *the self* in our special issue’s eponymous *digital self*, we seek to complicate two commonly held assumptions about the notion of *the self*: (1) that it is necessary and cor-

² We had hoped to attract more articles chronicling rural and peripheral regions for this issue.

rect to distinguish between *bodies* and *minds* as essential and distinct elements of human selves; (2) that the self as a subject or entity of agentive action is always predicated on western individualism. We orient our overall discussion in relation to the term *bodymind*, coined by feminist disability studies scholars to name a vulnerable and non-Cartesian seat for the self. Such a formulation asserts that bodies and minds—in all their variation, fallibility, vulnerability—are essential to an understanding of selfhood. And moreover, that the culturally-contingent histories of bodies and minds in a given context matter for how human actors make use of socially networked technology to enact meaning.

The question of the relation between the body—a physicality—and the self—a psychic perception of the beingness of one's own mind—is an enduring philosophical question. At the core, the concept of self in the western philosophical tradition implies a distinct existence, the entity which produces the thought, 'I think, therefore I am'. In this tradition, self refers to a mental substance that carries the capacities of introspection and intuition; that is durational, extending over time, and natural, occurring without human invention; and the agent of knowing and doing in the world. In the Cartesian paradigm, self is located in the mind, and therefore, distinct from (even whilst located in) the body. The ontological distinction of bodily self and mental self pervades contemporary western commonsense thought. Yet, this concept of 'self' is historically and culturally specific. The western concept of self, anthropologist Clifford Geertz observed, is 'a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background' (Geertz 1984: 126). In so identifying this Eurocentric concept of 'self' Geertz sought to provincialise its primacy. Subjects fashion styles of being in the world through everyday embodied practice according to continuously unfolding classed and cultural ideas about what kinds of projections of self are desirable and appropriate (Bourdieu 1984, 2008). Scholarly work on non-western selfhood argues for provincialising the presumption that the individual body is equivalent to an individual self, instead observing that agentive action in other cultural systems may be attributed to social units other than the embodied self, or, that the social importance of individual action is subsumed in favour of collective action.

Feminist philosophers have argued against the theoretical supposition that a body and mind might *be two* separate things apart from one another, asserting that this body/mind binary is an artefact of European continental philosophy's patriarchal assumptions. Instead, in foundational works scholars Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz argued—albeit in different ways—for a rethinking of the relationships between matter and self (Cheah 1996). For instance, the feminist lens has afforded a new perspective on the mind vs. body paradigm by revealing the gendered logics that underlie this division. The feminist critique comes in part from a concern with the ways in which masculine and feminine traits have been parsed in Western patriarchal hegemony: '[t]he mind has been associated with positive terms such as *reason, rationality, and masculinity* whereas the body has been associated with negative terms such as *irrationality, nature, and femininity*' (Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 11, original emphasis). Therefore, challenging the binary framework of mind/body has stakes for feminist scholars seeking to dismantle patriarchy. Feminists sought to rehabilitate the body from its position as subordinate to the mind. This return to the body suggested that in fact the

very concept of the body (and each of its parts) is the artefact of semiotic processes, and that those cultural-historical concepts impact how it is that we might conceptualise, pathologise, categorise, attend to, ignore, abuse or honour the material being of our human bodies.

Extending the feminist critique of the Cartesian dualism, feminist disability studies scholars have critiqued the assumption of a separation between the body and mind as phenomenological fact. As we live in bodies affected by our mental state, and in minds shaped through our embodied experiences, departures from normativity never occur solely in a mind or solely in a body, but always in some intricate and deeply felt configuration of both categories. The insufficiency of these categories for describing experiences of pain, of racialisation, of neurodivergence has led disability studies scholars (Schalk 2018; Price 2015) to coin the term *bodymind*.³ In offering this alternative concept, disability studies scholars assert that one's self is never separate from one's body or from one's mind. Rejecting as inherently ableist the plentiful examples of texts that describe a mind 'trapped' in a disabled body, or the quest to cure a child of Autism, disability studies scholars assert that one's mind and body always already are one, and that Autistic selves are not themselves without the essential element of their personhood that is autistic (e.g. McGuire 2016). After all, self-as-consciousness cannot be separated from the physical body through which consciousness is experienced, even as the body is produced as a symbolic and material object in the world.

³ The term *bodymind* has a specific disability studies genealogy. In a 2009 scholarly article on psychosocial disability and autobiography, Margaret Price, a disability studies scholar and professor of English included the footnote: 'It is impossible to wade into the territory of mental disability without having to account in some way for the mind/body question. Put briefly, I consider them complexly involved and inseparable entities. A term used by some psychotherapists of trauma, which I find useful, is *bodymind*. The fact that I have a physical illness (an autoimmune disease) which sometimes impairs my mental functioning, as well as psychosocial disabilities which act on physical functions such as sleep, breathing, and coordination, has contributed to this view. In my world, bodies have minds *and* minds have bodies; I feel no urge to choose between the two propositions'. Price herself used the term again, and more prominently, in a 2015 article in the feminist journal *Hypatia*, where she set out to consider what a 'crip politics of bodymind' might entail beyond the original appropriation of the term from trauma studies as a convenient way to circumvent the need to always say 'body-and-mind' as Price puts it (here, *crip* refers to a particular theoretical tradition in disability studies focused on contestation and liberatory alterity). 'Bodymind', Price asserts, 'the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called "body" and "mind," is a materialist feminist [disability studies] concept' (Price 2015: 270). Extending Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's foundational concept of *misfit* (to 'fit into' the social or physical environment, or to be 'fit' to take part based on some standard of normalcy), Price argues the mind in *bodymind* cannot come after, but must be taken as part of the whole, and that doing so helps to support a theoretical vantage from which to conceptualise a disability studies approach to the question of pain—both psychic and physical, or rather, *always both*.

Taking up Price's term, Sami Schalk, a professor of Gender & Women's Studies who identifies as Black, queer, and femme, deploys *bodyminds* as a titular concept in her 2018 monograph to theorise the intersections of (dis)ability (as she styles the word), race, and gender in Black Women's speculative fiction. Analysing works by authors such as Octavia Butler, Schalk asserts that the way that black women authors represent disability matters. She argues that the concept of *bodymind* opens several useful opportunities in relation to both race and disability. Schalk extends the implications of the term, arguing that *bodymind* 'is particularly useful in discussing the toll racism takes on people of color ... histories of oppression impact us mentally, physically, and even on a cellular level' there is no physical stress that is not already psychic and vice versa. Moreover, to theorise from the position of a black female body, Schalk points out, means to reject commonsense cultural logics that have already written off the minds belonging to certain kinds of bodies (black, female) as less than, less capable, and less worthy (Schalk 2018, ebook locations 185–196).

We are not alone in tracing the origin of this term to Price and Schalk, as evident in similar citations in contemporary North American disability studies scholarship.

2. Detransitioning regional and postsocialist media ideologies

The post-Soviet transition throughout Eastern Europe and Eurasia persistently posited postsocialist subjects in terms of a deficit: lacking and needing to recover democratic institutions, civil society, public life and personal bodily freedoms. Critiquing this transition logic of the deficient postsocialist subject, scholars have sought to recuperate a postsoviet sociocultural habitus that recognises continuities with the past. At the same time, deep historical legacies of the Russian Empire continued to reproduce racialising paradigms of centre and periphery that created uniquely postsocialist structures of neocolonialist teleologies within the region (Todorova 1997; Gille 2010; Tlostanova 2017; see also Shatilova in this issue). Therefore, in studying digital selves in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, we consider the dual legacies of postsocialism and the Russian empire. Specifically, we argue that these legacies entail debates about the nature of private and the public in postsocialism, ubiquitous architectural elements in the built environment and traces of empire undergirding linguistic, social and cultural hierarchies in the region.

The mainstream logic of the Cold War era argued that socialism denied its denizens of a truly democratic public sphere wherein free speech might take place by replacing it with the official state sphere, while the private sphere was also curtailed by surveillance and other elements of domination under state socialism. In this climate, scholars of socialist and postsocialist societies developed alternative theories of private/public division that defied such uniform and exclusionary partitions of spheres. For example, Voronkov and Oswald (2004) propose a hybrid model: a third sphere that is neither entirely private, nor public, like cafés where intelligentsia circles regularly gathered. Anthropologist Susan Gal (2002, 2005) argued that while the predominant concept of public/private in the West opposes kinds of spaces, in the Soviet Union, the opposition between public and private was better understood in terms of public and private *roles* or public and private *people* (for example, acting in an official capacity, or in one's own interest). Alexei Yurchak's notion of living '*vnye*' (Yurchak 2006) offers a critical commentary on the sense of insincerity that public or 'official' speech carried in late Soviet discourse as public trust for institutions eroded and coloured interpersonal relations. Ilya Utekhin and colleagues (2008) considered the nuanced ways that shared space like the stairwells of St. Petersburg apartment buildings fell into disrepair in the post-Soviet period: no longer 'public' property in the Soviet sense, they became shared civic spaces belonging to all those who used the stairwell, but also to no one in particular, creating a problem for residents in terms of determining to whom the responsibility for these newly private semi-public spaces ought to fall.

The concept of public and private *roles* offers an important and often overlooked way to understand social and political life in the digital sphere, where private or personal social media accounts are often held apart from 'official' or corporate business accounts, and consumer-users respond with frustration to a mixing of those roles. Klepikova (2018) has previously argued against seeing Runet as a private or a public sphere and called instead for viewing diverse activities of users as instrumental in making uses of the internet legible as 'private' or 'public'. As she writes, 'The same user can be surfing the net privately at one moment and publicly just a few minutes later. Therefore, the designation of a private or public sphere does not stem from the platform or the website the user is on, but from the *way* he or

she is using it' (Klepikova 2018: 237). We can therefore think of the digital sociality as not precisely 'public' or 'private' but rather as a continuously unfolding interplay of oppositional roles, and, with the rise of the mobile web, as increasing the capacity to carry out private behaviour (sexting, commenting on a friend's thread, viewing a relative's photos) in public space, creating novel intertextualities of public and private behaviour.

The ideas that users have about what they are doing and on what platform matter: whether a social action is public or private depends on perceptions about the purpose of communication and the affordances of a given platform or a particular physical space. That is, it can be useful to consider the *media ideologies* that users hold about the technologies they use, defined by linguistic anthropologist Ilana Gershon as 'people's beliefs, attitudes, and strategies about the media they use [and] the assumptions that people hold about how a medium accomplishes communicative tasks' (Gershon 2010b: 391; cited in Ross 2019: 360). Thinking with media ideologies helps to parse the ways that a single user might present both a public and private 'self' online, neither of which is more 'authentic' than the other (Ross 2019).

This contextually-determined presentation of self online is exemplified, for instance, by the digital portfolio of Kseniia Sobchak—a famous Russian socialite and media personality⁴ who ran for President against the incumbent Vladimir Putin in the 2018 election. In the lead up to and during her campaign, her social media were flooded with political photo-ops, promos, and slogans that shaped her public persona, whereas after the campaign that she failed to win, she significantly reduced her digital appearance. Occasional posts that appear on her social networks after 2018 offer her followers an insight into her private life, with photos of family dominating the feed. Sobchak's shift from public to private presentation of the self, however, does not necessarily indicate a retreat from the political arena, but rather, is just a change of media strategy (though it may offer fodder for conspiracy theories that she was never a 'serious' candidate). Rather, we might reflect that a user may hold and enact multiple media ideologies on and within a single channel (Ross 2019). In Sobchak's case, this turn to the private sphere can be interpreted as a calculated move to offer her followers a more 'authentic' digital self. In the postsocialist context, the notion that the 'private' self is the 'authentic' self, while the 'public' self is a mask is deeply rooted in the Soviet-era scripts of seeing public personas as inauthentic, as using formulaic discourse void of actual meaning in the public (Yurchak 2006). Instead, kitchen-table conversations became the epitome of 'authentic' talk (Ries 1997; see also Gorny (2007) on parallels between Runet and kitchen-table talks), even in spite of surveillance in domestic spaces.

Moreover, genres of visual and written rhetoric emerge that are platform specific (Božović et al. 2014), with users demonstrating different communicative patterns on V Kontakte vis-à-vis Facebook, Instagram vis-à-vis TikTok, Telegram vis-à-vis Signal. Therefore, users navigate the affordances of digital media platforms to create spaces to express public and private selves. Each 'self' imagines a particular kind of audience or readership. Scholars

⁴ Kseniia Sobchak appeared as a TV presenter on the reality show *Dom 2* broadcasted by the Russian TNT channel (in the early 2000s) and went on to host multiple other reality TV shows around the 2010s. Following the Bolotnaia Square protests in 2012, she took on a prominent role as an interviewer and media personality with the independent online television channel *Dozhd'*. This complex background, as well as her family's elite status (her father Anatolii Sobchak was a major politician in the 1990s, held the position of the mayor of St. Petersburg and had a close relationship with Vladimir Putin), has led to much debate about her actual political motivations and affiliations.

have theorised the question of imagined readership (*chitateli* in Russian) through the idea of publics and the digitally mediated public sphere.

3. Postsocialist digital publics

The timbre of discussions about public and private in postsocialism harkens back to debates about democratisation in the immediate post-Soviet period of the 1990s, when formerly socialist nation states were called upon to ‘build civil society’. These calls, based on assertions by engineers of post-Soviet transition ideology, were predicated on the concept that authoritarian state socialism lacked a robust public sphere for democratic public debate and private economic enterprise in free markets. Thus, while digital scholarship in other regions engages in conversations about *digital publics*, the phrase has potential pitfalls when referring to our region. Invocation of the public sphere in the context of post-Soviet or postsocialist Eurasia must parse the concept of ‘digital publics’ as it circulates in media studies more broadly from regional disciplinary debates about civil society and the public sphere.

In the first iteration, the digital public sphere is understood as a virtual extension of the Habermasian public sphere—a kind of digital town square, where civil society unfolds online. The significance of civil society in the region is coloured by the idea that democratic conversation was precluded and repressed during the Soviet era in Eurasia through the rule of authoritarian regimes that made it impossible for citizens to speak freely in public, in either official or unofficial capacities.

One might easily think of several examples of how the digital public sphere concept might be mobilised in understanding political speech by citizens today. For instance, in the Russian context, there are multiple websites connecting citizens with government authorities, such as *RosYama* (RusPothole, <https://rosyama.ru/>), which enables users to more easily engage in civic action by entering official complaints about potholes in Russian public roads to the appropriate authorities (originally a grassroots effort later taken on by the Russian state), or sites like *Rossiiskaia obshchestvennaia initsiativa*, ROI—Russian Public Initiative (<https://roi.ru>)—which allows users to start and sign on to petitions that will be forwarded to public officials once they receive a requisite number of signatories. These examples of democratic civil public sphere online are straightforwardly political speech and do not favour any particular subculture or minority interest group.

However, regional considerations of public discourse online in the postsocialist region must contend with scholarly observations about the limitations of the concept of a democratic public sphere. The critique of the public sphere from regional and feminist scholars were manifold: the notion that the west ‘had’ something essential that was ‘missing’ in state socialism created a misshapen concept of a cultural vacuum that scholars criticised as deeply dependent on pathologising Cold War logics devised in Washington and London to posit the Soviet citizen as in need of training to ‘catch up’ with a supposedly teleologically superior western democratic (and capitalist) citizen (Lemon 2008; Sperling 1999; Baker 1999; Fish 1994). Moreover, this critique of democratisation or transition discourses operating as a sort of pseudo-colonial project in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s (Lemon 2008) emerged in parallel to a new turn in feminist political philosophy that criticised the masculinist assump-

tions underpinning contract theory's dependence on the independent rational actor as reductionist. Beyond the region, feminist theorists argued that liberal theories of the public sphere did not account for the uneven ways that some citizens have access to political participation in public, depending on dynamics of gender, race, age, class, ethnicity, religion and so on (see, for example Fraser 1990). Furthermore, other scholars argued that the configurations of the public sphere or civil society in postsocialism were not absent, but rather, differently wired and, that the feminist critiques from the West too frequently presume an underlying condition of liberal democracy not always in place in postsocialist contexts (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002; Kymlicka and Opalski 2001).

Carrying the critique of the public sphere into discussions of the digital public sphere, it is obvious that a digital public sphere cannot be uniformly accessible to the diversity of all users: marginalised voices must be arranged differently and employ different strategies than dominant voices, and the dynamics of social domination specific to geopolitical locations must be unpacked in considerations of who speaks as a normative voice and who speaks against the norm. In our region, the urban/rural divide and dynamics of centre and periphery are particularly salient. Thus, a recent headline in Russia noted the example of a young student who participated in online classes while perched in the branches of a birch tree at the outskirts of his village, in order to better catch a fleeting internet signal (Meduza 2020). The public sphere online is unevenly accessible to citizens and this unevenness is material and mapped onto or felt through the bodies of subjects seeking access. Moreover, from a disability studies perspective, the specific embodied capacities of users matter for access to digital platforms: as Hartblay (2019) and Mullins (this special issue) argue, moving to the digital does not alleviate problems of access, only renders them differently. While digital platforms may offer some benefits to people with mobility impairments, they may present barriers to people with sensory disabilities (vision and hearing impairments).

Considering the pitfalls of thinking about digital sociality with metaphors based on material space, we depart from the notion of the democratic public square, instead engaging with the concept of *publics and counterpublics* developed by Michael Warner (2002) and extended by others to consider digital publics and counterpublics. Warner's notion of the public is rooted in the consideration of the way that human actors create or author texts (in the broad sense, that is, including written, visual, audio and other forms of media) with an imagined audience in mind that comes into being through the very engagement with the text. Rather than direct communication, Warner argues, audiences are hailed by texts, and a public is a self-organizing group of readers or audience members who spontaneously come into being, perhaps never knowing one another, yet arranging their consumption of texts and subsequent self-styling in relation to the text. Counterpublics, Warner proposes, are those subcultural groups that form in the same manner around texts that offer an alternative to hegemonic publics. This concept of the counterpublic is especially useful to conceptualise how the subaltern or stigmatised identity groups develop subcultural ethos and aesthetics—often without ever having met one another, but existing digitally in what Madianou (2016) called 'ambient co-presence'.

In this idiom, for instance, any audience—large or small—that assembles around an online content creator can be considered to be a public. For example, Russian web comedy series *Vnutri Lapenko* [Inside Lapenko], an immensely popular YouTube channel, can be un-

derstood as interpellating a uniquely post-Soviet public through the specificity of its nostalgic humour. In contrast, videos by the disabled comedian Sergeich, following his appearance on the mainstream Russian television show *Comedy Battle*, continued to circulate for some time to a specifically disability-issue oriented counterpublic (see: Hartblay 2014), in spite of that comedian's subsequent efforts to continue to attract a wider audience. Both examples constitute specifically postsocialist digital (counter)publics.

We therefore urge a move away from a digital public square logic toward a concept of digital publics and counterpublics. One essential feature of drawing on Warner's notion of publics and counterpublics rather than a civil society public sphere model of understanding digital publics is that it foregrounds the way in which audiences are made and come to be meaningful. Media anthropologist Frank Cody (2011) offers a succinct way of understanding the politics of publics in the era of digital and new media. Publics, in Cody's definition, extending the usage coined by Warner, are 'political subjects that know themselves and act by means of mass-mediated communication'. Cody writes that for anthropology, 'recognizing that the very stuff of self-understanding is often produced through a dialectic of exchange with texts circulating on a mass scale required the development of new methods and new ways of theorizing the social', such that subjects come to know themselves in relation to the body politic through their engagement with texts as members of a public (Cody 2011: 38). That is, in Cody's examination, the political subject is defined by political subjectivity and concepts and imaginaries of the self that emerge in relation to mass media and mediated forms of communication.

For example, in 2013 in a small city in Russia, a group of five LGBTQ+ activists in their 20s planned a protest that could be quickly dissolved to avoid police attention but could still circulate online as a symbolic assertion of LGBTQ+ presence and advocacy via images taken during the event (*aktsiia*) itself. Activists printed stereotypes which they understood the general public to commonly hold about lesbian, gay and bisexual people ('all lesbians have short hair', 'gay men look feminine', etc.) on slips of paper, then attached the slips of paper onto helium-inflated balloons. On the streets of the city's centre, the activists invited passers-by to choose a balloon, read the stereotype attached, talk with the activists about why the stereotype was not true, then release the balloon to float away (or pop, if they preferred to avoid environmental consequences). Activists made plans about alibis (the balloons were part of a marketing campaign for a local business) and where to meet up if an officer appeared and the group had to quickly disperse (no officer appeared). Meanwhile, a member of the group took photographs of the event, which were subsequently circulated on social media, reaching a larger audience than the original event itself. The event played cleverly on the capacity of sharing photos online to reach more people than was possible on the street, where they risked exposure or arrest.

This happening asserts an incident of protest to a public without that public assembling in the material world, thereby avoiding the risk of arrest and other dangers of bodily proximity and protest. The atemporally co-present networked public gave rise to a new capacity for a timely assembly of audiences. The counterpublic has effects beyond the individual subject, and scholars observe that in Russia, as elsewhere, 'real-world and online communities are interconnected and influence one another, so that in-person social circles grow through online ties, and online networks grow through real life experiences' (Dokuka et al. 2015: 264). In

this way networked publics and counterpublics are distinct from but not separate from social organization in the material world.

Networked publics take on a special meaning as they often become the only or the preferred arena for political interventions into social and cultural norms. Specifically, for queer communities, often closeted in day-to-day life, social networks offer an opportunity for an otherwise private persona to appear in virtual public to a digital community, whether on a dating app or in a social network group that frames this identity (e.g. Barchunova and Parfunova 2010; see also Glenn in this special issue). Moreover, queer users often engage with digital labels assigned to them by online infrastructures in imaginative and disidentificatory ways that do not necessarily follow binary expectations of accepting or rejecting categories but allow for more agency in practicing their digital selves, as Lukasz Szulc has shown (2020).

For some members of the disability community, especially those with mobility impairments living at home, the virtual public sphere provided by digital social networks is an essential medium by which to find affinities, speak publicly and access variety and social interaction in daily life (Hartblay 2019; see also Phillips 2011: 37–38). The digital sphere offers a space to exercise self-expression, intimacy and sexuality for disabled users who may not have access to in-person outlets for intimate sociality; in this way the digital public sphere also becomes a place to act out the so-called ‘personal’ (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich 2020; see also, Mullins and Borodina in this special issue). Asserting sexuality in this way, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich (2020) argue, is a political act, in that it redefines normalcy and calls for recognition for groups that are often excluded by majority culture, thereby creating a domain of ‘intimate citizenship’. Thus, the digital space of social media offers an important domain for counterpublics to emerge.

4. The materiality of digital publics

So, what is the role of bodies and the material-built environment in mediating digital selves? The digital as a plane of sociality is intricately entwined with material social worlds, imagined communities, and the politics of space. However, even as material and digital networks foster human connection and undergird sociality in ways that are often mutually reinforcing, the infrastructures of connection act differently in digital networks than in physical space (boyd 2014: 10). That is, the enacted social roles and modes of meaning making on and off-line are inextricably linked, but they are not the same.

Images and videos of bodies out of place or acting out move across digital networks, and digital publics assemble to consume and engage. Bodies on display in digital form come into being through actions taken by physical bodyminds. Like the queer protest with balloons, subjects mobilise representations of bodies, while strategically protecting or temporarily shielding the bodies of activists from the Russian heteropatriarchal carceral state (responding to threats made evident in the cases of Pussy Riot, Aleksei Naval’nyi, and others). The specificities of embodied acts of protest in post-Empire peripheries and specific national contexts in the region are worthy of investigation in their own right—from self-immolation in Uzbekistan (Campbell and Guiao 2010), to queer and feminist protest in Kyrgyzstan (the GRACE 2021), to disability advocacy in the Czech Republic (Kolářová 2014).

In all of these iterations, human bodies are not separate from or irrelevant to material and digital infrastructure. Users of social media are content creators, and content creators are bearers of bodies, manipulating interfaces and cultivating digital social identities through actions and images of their bodies. In this way, we might consider the *people as infrastructure* (Simone 2004) of the digital web. People are the infrastructure that generate the content, interact with content and drive revenue through their actions. Users are the bearers of attention, a commodity that social networks seek to attract and retain in order to generate advertising revenue (Crogan and Kinseley 2012; Marwick 2015).

As one half of the interfacing paradigm in human-computer interactions, the human body itself acts in expected and unexpected ways. The specific embodiment of users creates diverse user needs, which influence the development of new technologies in digital infrastructure. Just as curb cut ramps on city sidewalks, originally designed by wheelchair users before becoming standard in architectural design and benefiting pedestrians with strollers and suitcases, so too video captions (once a specialised accommodation for hard of hearing and d/Deaf users) are now a new norm, with TikTok creators including captions in videos in anticipation of audiences watching videos with the sound off.

Users take material action to alter the ways in which their bodies move through geographical places shot through with networked spaces. For example, activists around the world develop and circulate tips to use cosmetic make-up and hairstyles to avoid detection on surveillance cameras: this activist project, while global, has also found popularity in Russia. With the city of Moscow increasingly adding surveillance cameras on its streets to police its residents, artists like Katrin Nenasheva and her students have taken it to the streets of the city with varied geometrical shapes painted on their faces to disrupt biometrical symmetries and make themselves illegible to artificial intelligence that analyses public surveillance footage (StrelkaMag 2020).

While mobile technology offers users the possibility of engaging digital sociality almost anywhere with a wi-fi or mobile phone signal, in fact, much of networked sociality takes place at home (and not only since the global pandemic). Domestic spaces and the architecture of the built environment therefore come to matter deeply in the ways that users cast their bodyminds online. Heather Horst, studying how users interact with networked publics in 2012 predicted that the home would become a new kind of site of sociality. After all, the infrastructure and geographic location of the home is one of the primary material spheres in which users engage digital platforms and audiences. ‘As social and cultural life is enacted in and through various screens that are situated inside homes and domestic settings such as cars, the locations and contexts of these activities often matter a great deal, even if the meaning-making may be located in networked and distributed communities’ (Horst 2012: 72). Today, creators on TikTok across Runet engage each other with images of their families conducting viral pranks on one another (a mug of hot chocolate that’s actually upside down) and games or challenges (dropping household object onto someone’s face narrowly protected by saran wrap; blind taste tests of cola or bottled water). In each of these challenges, users are streamed into the interiors of creators’ homes—often carefully staged—with kitchen appliances and Ikea furniture in the background (e.g. @kuzinatv, @yanadoga, @ofantalex). Yet, creators meld the ‘at home-ness’ with the global publics their channels create; one Instagram creator (@ira_yakobson) presented a series of live interviews with women psychologists on

subjects of selfhood, family and relationships—a common interest on her Instagram—and did not hesitate to address those viewing by welcoming them to the livestream with the same phrase—*v priamom efire* (live on air)—used by generations of Soviet newsreaders on official broadcasts. Meanwhile, the meaning and representation of ‘home’ is deeply inflected through regional specificities and postsocialism: the shapes of renovated *khrushchevki* (Khrushchev-era apartments), ubiquitous dual-tone walls of apartment building interior stairwells, exterior facades of *panel’nye doma* (panel houses) or village wooden houses appearing in streams of user photos place users in historically and culturally specific material worlds.

5. Spatial metaphors for digital co-presence: pixelization and mimetic activism

Conceptualising embodied subjectivity on new media requires a consideration of the spatial relationships between bodies, social participation and devices. In the first place, there is the relationship between the body and the device: the consuming body of the new media user is disciplined by the ergonomics of screened interfaces on mobile devices and home computers. As Hartblay has argued elsewhere (2019), the particulars of a given body—gendered, racialised, disabled—may limit movements in public space, even as users of mobile technology move through the literal public square as they use their devices. Yet, disabled subjects produce potent political critiques, as with the prominent anti-authoritarianism blogger known as Stalingulag, who revealed his disability after rising to public notoriety (Maheshwari 2019). With new media landscapes, a digital network offers access to the public sphere even while one’s body is ensconced in private space. This is illustrated well by the St. Petersburg disability activist hashtag for disabled users #AMyVsegdaDoma (ButWeAreAlwaysAtHome) that reoriented audiences to what it meant to stay at home during a pandemic in relation to disabled residents of the city who were already more habitually at home due to the inaccessibility of the city’s built environment (see: Mullins in this special issue). Drawing on ethnographic field work with people with mobility impairments, Hartblay argues that this creates new spatial metaphors for political action that challenge existing spatial metaphors of political empowerment that have historically been central to feminist thought. For interlocutors with mobility disabilities, digital media’s access to networked publics become an essential point of access to sociopolitical personhood. Hartblay dubs this reconfigured spatial-political metaphor *pixelization*:

Rather than imagining ableism in Petrozavodsk as a system of oppression that pushes people to the margins, we might examine how ableism pushes disabled people into the pixelated spaces of private family homes and other small spaces, which are separated from but adjacent to other social spaces and also digitally networked. Pixelization is about the possibility of networked interface between materially isolated spaces—dots that are at once separate and interconnected. (Hartblay 2019)

The pixel cells of the screen create a visual rhyme with the windows of apartment blocks lit up by embodied actors accessing the public sphere from private space. This description of participation in public life looks very different from metaphors of ‘decentring’, ‘marginalisation’ and other tropes of feminist political thought (see: Hartblay 2019; Price-Chalita 1994:

237–238). Rather than conceptualising social inclusion/exclusion in absolute terms, instead we find a more complex relation that cannot be parsed spatially as displacement, or insiders pushing outsiders to the margins, or any cogent ‘centre’ for reclaiming to speak of. Instead, embodied spatial political action is distributed, diffuse, and digital publics assemble sporadically, creating bubbles of truth, subcultures, interests and fandoms.

These altered spatial configurations of socio-political participation further depart from traditional conceptualisations of the civic sphere (the body moving through public space contemporaneously with others) in relation to the temporal characteristics of the digital. Online posts on social media are stickier than verbal communication, leaving lasting traces, attract engagement over longer spans of time as well as different distances. As ‘evergreen’ tweets and memes that ‘come back around’ resurfacing after several years only to go viral once again demonstrate, the resonance of entries and digital utterances on social media cannot be neatly predicted or controlled. For digital users ‘typing [and photographing and memeing and reposting] themselves into being’ (to borrow and extend a phrase from Jenny Sundén, quoted in boyd 2014: 37), the unique (impermanence) of representations of the body online, and the visceral reactions to social media posts create real and tangible reactions; networked publics feel social reactions to digital expression in embodied responses, and they seek to provoke embodied responses from others. As Svetlana Borodina argues in this special issue, one’s sense of self emerges through the telling and creation of narratives shared online. Narrative structure itself in turn becomes mimetic, and genres of tweets, TikToks and YouTube videos congeal and proliferate; this raises questions about how genre travels across cultural and linguistic contexts, for instance, in Clinton Glenn’s discussion of the genre of coming out videos on Runet in this issue.

Another emergent spatial phenomenon draws on the capacity of the viral meme to mobilize public sentiment. In these cases, digital advocacy bypasses spatial emplacement such that digital public audiences coming to ‘matter more’ than audiences rooted in a particular material location. These *mimetic activism performances* rely on the logic of ‘going viral’ and embrace the possibility of #hashtag activism (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) to capture counterpublics and mobilize political and social affect (Cody 2011).

For instance, Sarah Kendzior (2011) argues that for Uzbek dissidents in exile, photos of protests are more significant for evoking an affective response from dissident diasporas in diverse geographical locations when the images are posted online, than for the actual embodied protest itself. That is, the ‘truth to power’ and bodies-in-space concept of civic protest is subsumed by the capacity of digital images of political speech acts to mobilize political sentiment amongst other would-be allies, whether in Uzbekistan or elsewhere (see similar reflections by Przybyło in this issue).

The potential of mimetic activism is perhaps most famously demonstrated by the capacity of the Pussy Riot happenings to reach not only a national, but global audience, much to the consternation of the Russian state. Underpinning that action is a long tradition of public art performance as a mode of political protest that contemporary post-Soviet art communities continue to foster. For instance, before Pussy Riot’s performance and arrest that rose to public prominence, one member of the group had participated in previous happenings (*aktsiia*) by the activist art group VOINA in which the sexual bodies of the performers asserted a form of social critique witnessed by a small public that circulated online through blogged photos,

reaching broader digital publics. Specifically, several members of the group participated in an action at the Moscow Zoological museum in which they engaged in heterosexual sexual intercourse, naked, in public, in one of the rooms of the museum, and were quickly arrested (action *Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear!* [Ebis' za naslednika medvezhonka]). The happening stood as a critique of prudish politics regarding explicit discussion of sex and sexuality in the Russian public sphere, and also carried a specific critique toward then-president Dmitrii Medvedev. In another example, the artist-provocateur Petr Pavlenskii nailed his scrotum to the ground in Red Square, then the evidence of his subsequent arrest widely circulated and documented in both Russophone and anglophone press (e.g. *The Guardian* 2014). Networked publics have become a medium by which political action in the material world reach new audiences, both on and offline. Each of these examples draws specifically on post-Soviet and Russian historical cultural forms that use *avant-garde* art happenings that centre the human body to create new digital spectacles. For example, the artist Mischa Badasyan creates public installations and images for Instagram (@mischabadasyan) of human bodies in public spaces arranged and adorned in a manner that transgresses social norms about gender expression, touch, sexuality and social interaction; as an ethnically Armenian artist with Russian-language background working in Germany, Badasyan's work crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries and thereby puts in relief the unspoken norms of postsocialist heteromascularity.⁵ Artworks and images created with activist intent and mimetic potential circulate to audiences in the digital public sphere, as with the circulation of the 'Rainbow Madonna' image in Poland (Przybyło, in this special issue). Or, conversely, documenting the quotidian activities of embodied actors can itself emerge as a transgressive move countering sensationalist and othering discourses, as in the alternative war photography Instagram project by Alisa Sopova that she describes in this issue.

Thus, we have argued that thinking with disability studies and queer theory offers new possibilities for theorising postsocialist digital sociality, exemplified in the concepts of pixelization and mimetic activism. Throughout this introduction we have noted examples in which users do things materially, in their physical bodies, motivated by the possibility for what images of their bodily actions will come to mean in the digital sphere. We therefore suggest that the digital and the material continue to point at one another and become meaningful only in conversation and constant co-emergence. Human bodies in relation to one another on and offline are always already politicised, and fundamental to the ways that contemporary subjects establish not only identity, but agentive subjectivity.

At the same time, the scope of this special issue is not exhaustive, and the theoretical contributions that we introduce here have limitations. For instance, one line of inquiry that remains outside the scope of this issue but could be promising for future scholarship is the embodiment online of 'fake' users on digital platforms: those who are not who they say they are, or who are in fact non-human. What kinds of material bodyminds remain as yet unexplored? What human labour supports non-human artificial intelligence?⁶ Furthermore, while we had

⁵ We thank Simon Garibyan for bringing Badasyan's work to our attention.

⁶ The politics of 'users without bodies' remain deeply enmeshed in and informed by the materialities of the real world and merit a closer look. Some AI machines are designed to help users, like tech support bots on Telegram or other ubiquitous AI interfaces that facilitate our interaction with digital platforms. Others are weaponised to deliver disinformation, like the infamous Russian bots on Facebook and in the Twittersphere that have become an important tool of Russian foreign politics (Shane 2017). In each case, the 'behaviour' of these machines is programmed on the basis of specific constellations of gender, sexuality, race and disability norms. Thus, we

hoped to feature articles that considered the embodiment of labourers who work online and who work structuring the material hardware supporting digital networks, we did not receive submissions on this topic, but we see it as an important direction for future research in the region.

Moreover, many of the submissions that we received, and the articles presented here focus on social identity and the ways in which particular counterpublics assemble through digital platforms, especially liberatory projects promoting LGBTQ+ and disability inclusion. At the same time, in editing the issue, we observed that in fact, conservative populist and white supremacist counterpublics engage digital platforms, and that theorising only progressive social movements may miss elements of how embodied subjects come to understand themselves and the meanings of their bodies online. More attention to the unmarked categories is needed: how are ableism and heterosexism enacted and inscribed in digital publics? Contributions to this special issue depart from the ‘progressive’ focus in two instances. Shatilova’s piece on contemporary digital mobilisations around the cultural history of Finno-Urgic identity—a phenotypically Nordic minority group within Russia—raises complicated questions about the boundary between global indigeneity movements and European ethnonationalist claims to land and property. Przybyło’s contribution focuses on the transgressive expression of Polish LGBTQ+ movements through digitally-mediated artworks also in passing documents the emergence of ‘LGBT-free’ towns in Poland, which suggests that further research is needed to consider how populist heterosexist counterpublics are also mobilising through digital platforms.

6. Conclusion

Digital selves are subjectivities that are at once embodied and mediated. The ways users engage mobile digital technologies and the possibilities for advocacy and activism afforded by contemporary social media platforms are shaped by the ways that their bodies are pathologised, racialised, gendered or otherwise othered. In the context of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, this intertextuality of the material and the digital unfolds in direct connection to the legacies of Russian empire building from the Tsarist era to the Soviet anti-imperial global project, and the territorial and ideological traces that continue to undergird Eurasia today. This colonial project has produced symbolic orders of bodies throughout the region which persist in today’s socio-political hierarchies and influence access and privilege through the shape of built infrastructure. The psychic impact of these historical systems and the material configurations from which users connect to the digital world are co-emergent with digital social worlds.

We argue that in order to understand how postsocialist users come to act and create meanings online as embodied selves we need to leave behind spatial metaphors that rely on public/private distinctions. Rather than thinking of online postsocialist spheres that are private or public and into which digital selves arrive, we employ the concepts of public and pri-

might wonder what kinds of gender dynamics make ‘virtual helpers’ like Alisa (Yandex), Marusia (Mail.ru) or Oleg (Tinkoff Bank) possible on platforms offering certain types of services but not others? Or, what kinds of racial and gender ideologies inflammatory bots voice across platforms on foreign and local internets?

vate roles that subjects put into practice in the construction of social and political life in the digital sphere. This distinction is also instrumental in leaving behind the notion of a 'digital public sphere' as a democratic arena that the internet allegedly represents in neo-authoritarian societies of the digital age. Instead, informed by material realities of their everyday postsocialist existence offline, users enact their semiotic selves as layered, mediated iterations online, navigating manifold overlapping media ideologies. These digital expressions interpellate digital publics and counterpublics, mobilising social and political affect. The bodymind remains a site of multiple normalising forces, yet users mobilise affordance of viral memes and departure from spatial barriers in digital space to challenge normative structures of power.

In departing from a paradigm of public/private, we propose instead thinking with postsocialist spatiomaterial social configurations and historically-rooted scripts about material politics of the body. We propose two such examples of alternative epistemically-rooted paradigms to rethink the way that digital selves enact meaning in postsocialism. First, pixelization, wherein the spatial experience of marginalization manifests through isolation in family apartments, near to but separated from others, and digitally connected through virtual platforms, as in articles in this issue by Mullins and Borodina and previous work by Hartblay (2019). Second, mimetic activist performance, wherein assertions of the grotesque, amodern or otherwise nonnormative body in physical public space provokes a response of state violence, thereby demonstrating conditions of censorship, repression and dominant ideology, and creating proliferating secondary mimetic impact through digital images and videos. We find echoes of this tactic in the case of the Rainbow Madonna imagery described in this issue by Przybyło. While many of the case studies in this special issue focus on LGBTQ+ and disability advocacy (though works by Sopova and Shatilova do not), we think that pixelization and mimetic activist performance have potential as interpretive paradigms more broadly.

Writing this conclusion from the vantage point of the one-year mark of the global pandemic, our consideration of digital selves resonates with the experiences of many who found themselves at home (or on the front lines of essential work) during legally enforced quarantines. This pervasive global event casts an ironic light on Heather Horst's 2012 observation that in spite of the immense potential for mobile digital technology to bring social media into the street or the café, much of our digital social life remains at home, in domestic spaces. Our orientation in this article and special issue towards queer, feminist and disability experience brings to the fore the theoretical vantage point of social groups that have historically done their thinking, organising and advocacy from domestic spaces. With the post-pandemic world becoming ever more tangible as we finalise this issue, questions arise on the new designs of the fabric of societies around the globe that will carry the legacies of practising digital sociality under COVID-19. It will be the task of researchers to pay attention to the political economies of leaving certain digital options behind and embracing others, with particular focus on the class, race, gender and disability issues behind these choices the societies will have to make.

This special issue only starts to map the intersections between the new media and the body in the postsocialist space that are emerging and changing every day. We hope that this special issue, in highlighting new work that integrates queer theory and disability studies with digital studies of postsocialist Eurasia, sparks further innovation and productive re-readings that theorising from the vantage point of queer and disabled bodyminds make possible.

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