

Theorising the Present:
Digital Media, Pre-emergence and Infra-Structures of Feeling

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Abstract

Digital media are frequently described as producing a ‘real-time’, ‘live’, ‘always-on’ temporality. While seemingly referring to similar processes and experiences, these descriptions indicate a temporality that is diverse, multiple and changing. This paper proposes that it is necessary to develop theoretical approaches to this temporality, and that it is productive to understand this temporality in terms of *the present*; a temporality that is both ‘now’ and on-going. It sets out one framework for theorising the present and conceptualising the temporal qualities of digital media, drawing on Raymond Williams’ influential work on structures of feeling and the (pre-)emergent qualities of media culture. It focuses on Williams’ definition of a structure of feeling as attending to the ‘active’, ‘flexible’ ‘temporal present’ (Williams 1977a: 128), and the importance he places on pre-emergence in grasping this present. Discussing various examples including social media platforms, devices, streaming services and apps, I suggest that pre-emergence is an especially prevalent quality of today’s media culture. I develop Williams’ notion of structures of feeling to offer the concept of *infra*-structures of feeling. This concept helps to account for the amplified significance of pre-emergence, its affective quality and how digital media work across each other in complex architectures of texts, textures, platforms and devices. To flesh out this concept, I analyse the present temporalities that are produced by and productive of the social networking site Twitter, and the streaming service Netflix. I argue that these media produce the present differently; creating a real-time, live, connected present in the case of the former, and a suspended or expanded present in

the latter. These distinctions are significant; however, in both pre-emergence is central. The paper therefore concludes by inquiring into whether pre-emergence may define today's structure of feeling and, if so, what this implies for a politics of the present.

Keywords

temporality; present; structures of feeling; affect; Netflix; Twitter

Digital media are often described in terms of a ‘real-time’, ‘live’, ‘always-on’ temporality. As such, they are also often argued to be changing our experiences of time, for example by reducing spatial and temporal distances through immediacy and connectivity, cultivating awareness of ‘the now’, and/or creating a seemingly endless flow of text, image and data. This paper suggests that such a temporality requires further attention, and that it is therefore necessary to develop conceptual frameworks to explore the kinds of temporality that digital media produce and organise.

To do this, the paper discusses a range of digital media examples, including social media sites and platforms, devices, streaming services and apps, examining how they describe themselves in terms of a ‘real time’, connected, interactive and constantly available temporality. In particular, it suggests that this temporality be understood in terms of a *present* temporality; that is a temporality that is focused on the now and immediate, and is also on-going and open-ended. This is therefore a temporality that is not unified or cohesive, but rather is multiple, diverse and changing. The paper is therefore concerned with unpacking the multiplicity of the present, arguing that it is important to examine the similarities and differences between how various digital media produce the present. Do ‘live’, immediate and ‘always-on’ media produce the same kind of presents, for example?

As I note below, while recent research in the social sciences and humanities has attended to the past and future, consideration of the present is less evident. I thus set out one framework for theorising the present and conceptualising the temporal qualities of digital media. I draw on social and cultural theories of temporality, and especially those that theorise the future in terms of anticipation, pre-emption,

prehension and pre-mediation, some of which focus explicitly on digital media, big data and the mediation of everyday life, and which understand temporality as affective and felt. I argue that while these theories are productive, their concern with the ways in which the future is brought into the present means that the present itself is somewhat neglected. I turn to Raymond Williams' influential work on structures of feeling and especially his definition of a structure of feeling as attending to the 'active', 'flexible' 'temporal present' (1977a: 128), and the importance he places on pre-emergence in grasping a structure of feeling. Pre-emergence refers to that which is in the process of emerging, and hence is felt, but is 'not yet fully articulated' (1977a: 132). While Williams identifies this quality in the media texts he discusses, I argue that it is amplified in digital media, and is important to the present temporality that they are involved in producing. I develop his notion of structures of feeling to propose the concept of *infra*-structures of feeling. This concept helps to emphasise the significance of this pre-emergence, its affective quality and how digital media work across each other in a complex architecture of texts, textures, platforms and devices.

To expand this framework further, I move from a discussion of digital media in general to concentrate on two examples: Twitter and Netflix. Given my concern with how digital media are *described* in terms of liveness, immediacy and real-timeness, in this paper I concentrate on promotional materials from these two companies, enabling an analysis of how they explain their services, and see themselves as producing particular kinds of temporality. These two examples are selected because they are popular instantiations of how digital media produce a present temporality, and because they are different types of digital media; a social networking service and a streaming service respectively. Hence, they help to demonstrate the scope of the

significance of a present temporality to digital media. This focus also allows me to begin to examine how particular cases produce the present in similar and different ways.¹ I argue that while both create a present temporality that works in terms of pre-emergence, these media nevertheless produce the present differently. Twitter creates a real-time, live connected present, while Netflix produces what might be understood as a suspended or expanded present. These distinctions are important, and demonstrate how the present is produced and experienced in multiple and diverse ways. The present is not a static or homogenous temporality but rather it is (capable of being) stretched and condensed, expanded and contracted, sped up and slowed down, in various ways. However, as it is central to both examples, I conclude the paper by asking whether pre-emergence may designate a structure of feeling today, and if so, what this implies for a politics of a cultural theory of the present.

Digital media and the present

Digital media can be understood as producing a particular kind of temporality.² Consider, for example, Twitter's current (July 2014-time of writing) tagline: 'Connect with your friends – and other fascinating people. Get in-the-moment updates on the things that interest you. And watch events unfold, in real time, from every angle'. Snapchat describes itself in the following terms: 'Snapchat lets you talk easily with friends, view Live Stories from around the world, and explore news in Discover. Life's more fun when you live in the moment!' The streaming service Netflix highlights the ability of viewers to watch television programmes and films 'anywhere, anytime' and to 'cancel [subscriptions] at any time', and other broadcasters emphasise that their services are available 'on demand'. Apple explains the development of 3DTouch on the iPhone 6S on which these platforms and services may be accessed as

‘letting you do all kinds of essential things more quickly and simply. And it gives you real-time feedback in the form of subtle taps’.³

Such developments are discussed in mainstream media and popular books as fundamentally shifting how humans encounter, experience and embody technologies. In the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, a plethora of articles ask, ‘Is binge-watching bad for your mental health?’ (Karmaker and Sloan Kruger 2016) and whether, in placing emphasis on accessing relationships quickly and perhaps temporarily, Tinder is ‘the shallowest dating app ever?’ (Baxter and Cashmore 2013). Similarly, the *New York Times* has featured an article addressed to ‘Facebook addicts’, with the headline, ‘Facebook has put a spell on you’ (Kerstetter 2016), while *The Australian* writes that ‘Nomophobia, the fear of not having a mobile phone, hits record numbers’ among adults aged under 30 (Mitchell and Sheppard 2013). Self-help books such as *Calm* (Smith 2015) are predicated on the notion that ‘Modern life is hectic and relentless: trains delayed, endless emails filling the inbox, kids squabbling before bedtime... There has never been a more important time to rediscover your pause button’ and to ‘turn off your phone for five short minutes’ (Smith 2015). Mobile phone apps such as The Mindfulness App promise to ‘help you become more present in daily life’, and internet blocking software, including Freedom and SelfControl provide restrictions on access to websites over set periods of time. Since 2014, a ‘Space Out Competition’ has been held in a public space in Seoul. Young people’s heart rates are monitored in a contest to see who is the most chilled-out during a 90 minute event where mobile phones, talking, checking the time and dozing are banned. The organiser of the event – who sees it as a piece of performance art as well as a

competition – came up with the idea as a way to address anxiety and burnout from overwork and information overload.

These examples are clearly wide-ranging, disparate and distinct. Twitter and Snapchat are social media platforms that enable different kinds of visual and textual communication and connectivity, streaming and On-Demand television services such as Netflix are websites or apps where media is available to watch according to the viewer's schedule, and the iPhone is a device on which such platforms might be accessed and engaged with. Popular articles and self-help books, apps and software and Space-Out competitions take various positions on them and enable them to be engaged with differently; from celebratory accounts to contributions to moral panics re-producing technological determinist arguments about the effects of new technologies to offering ways in which media and technology creep may be halted, permanently or momentarily.

My aim in introducing them here is not so much to unpack their nuances and distinctiveness but rather to point to how they indicate – in different ways and with different aims – a contemporary concern with the production and availability of media content in the now, across potentially geographically dispersed places, and with the ways in which temporality may be produced and experienced.⁴ Academic work has dealt with such issues. For example, in her work on work on auto-affection which focuses on the shift from broadcast to digital television, Patricia Ticineto Clough argues that television operates as a circuit or machine that is constantly available – 'always on' (2000: 96). More recently, Clough, Karen Gregory, Benjamin Haber, and R. Joshua Scannell have attended to the salience of data in the contemporary cultural

and social world. Arguing that it is not only the scale of ‘big’ data that is of interest but also ‘the speed at which data can now be collected’ (2015: 146), they describe how ‘technology is felt to move faster and differently than institutions and humans’ (2015: 146). Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond describe Facebook as a ‘like economy’ in which ‘social interactivity and user affects are instantly turned into valuable consumer data and enter multiple cycles of multiplication and exchange’ (2013: 1349), while Anne Kaun has also examined the proliferation and acceleration of media production, distribution and consumption, produced in part through social media. She argues that ‘the character and principles that guide dominant media technologies, namely the constant flow, immediacy and newness, have implications for our temporal experiences and meaning production’ (2015: 222), including ‘an annihilation of time towards presentness and immediacy’ (2015: 237).

Taking up these analyses, my focus in this paper is in exploring further how digital media are understood to be re-working time, or, put another way, are involved in the production of a particular kind of temporality.⁵ Clough *et al*’s work points to the speed of digital media, Gerlitz and Helmond’s to the potentially instantaneous circulation of affect, and Kaun’s to the ‘nowness’ of flows of media(tion). In understanding this temporality in terms of the present, I conceive of digital media as both on-going and open-ended (the continuing cycles of data exchange or social media flows for instance) and ‘live’ and immediate (the emphasis on speed and ‘the now’ for example) (see e.g. Back and Puwar 2012, Back, Lury and Zimmer 2013, Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz 2014). These terms draw attention to the multiplicity of the present; immediacy and liveness indicate the animation and vibrancy of ‘the now’ – the present is active – and on-going and open-ended to how

the present is processual and difficult to draw boundaries around – the present involves movement and flow. Thus, while Kaun suggests that presentness and immediacy involve ‘an annihilation of time’, I propose an alternative understanding, where time is not so much extinguished but is intensive, active, changing⁶. I argue that the present of digital media is dynamic and supple, capable of stretching and contracting to involve multiple and diverse temporalities, so that pasts and futures may be implicated and engaged. Indeed, in the examples outlined above, ‘the present’ refers to specific practices (archiving and predicting), different temporal encounters and experiences (availability, connectivity, instantaneity), as well as to binging, pausing, and suspending.

In concentrating on temporality and the present, I am both contributing to a recent resurgence of research on temporality, and drawing attention to a lacuna in work specifically on the present (for some exceptions, see Berlant 2011a, Massumi 2002, Pedwell 2016). While temporality is increasingly being theorised (e.g. Nowotny 1996, Adam 2004, 2013, Coleman 2008, Bastian 2014, Wajcman 2015, Burges and Elias 2016, Grabham 2016), and work on the past, particularly in relation to memory, has consistently been of interest to social and cultural theory (e.g. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999, Grosz 1999, Lury 1998, Ricouer 2004), more recently attention has focused on the significance of the future in contemporary Western socio-cultural experiences (e.g. Anderson 2010, Amoore 2013, Adkins 2009, 2016, Adams *et al* 2009, Coleman 2012, Coleman and Tutton 2017). Broadly speaking, one strand of this work seeks to examine how temporality is not only a linear progression from past to present to future but also involves the future being anticipated, pre-empted and oriented around so that it is brought into the present. For example, in an analysis of how girls become

enrolled in biomedical practices, Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy and Adele E. Clarke argue that anticipation ‘names a particularly self-evident futurism in which our presents are necessarily understood as contingent upon an ever-changing astral future that may or may not be known for certain, but still must be acted on’ (2009: 247). Similarly, Brian Massumi’s concept of pre-emption seeks to account for how, ‘[r]ather than acting in the present to avoid an occurrence in the future, preemption brings the future into the present. It makes the present the future consequences of an eventuality that may or may not occur, indifferent to its actual occurrence. The event’s consequences precede it, as if it had already occurred’ (2005: 8). Both of these examples demonstrate how the future is not necessarily a temporality that is distinct from the present (or past), but is assembled with and felt within the present.⁷ Temporality is thus non-linear, messy, complex and multi-faceted.

Such work has also focused on how futurity is involved and engaged in digital media and practices of mediation. In their discussion of big data introduced above, for example, Clough *et al* argue that big data algorithms operate via prehension, where they attune to emergence and novelty to grasp a series of possibilities (2015: 154). Louise Amoore’s research on the securing of geographical borders analyses how algorithms ‘incorporate the very unknowability and profound uncertainty of the future into imminent decision’ (Amoore 2013: 9). She designates a politics of possibility (rather than a politics of risk) and, echoing Massumi, argues that this ‘acts not to *prevent* the playing out of a particular course of events on the basis of past data tracked forward into probable futures but to *preempt* an unfolding and emergent event in relation to an array of possible projected futures’ (2013: 9, see also Coleman 2012). Richard Grusin poses premediation as characteristic of post-9/11 ‘mediality’, where

‘the future has already been pre-mediated before it turns into the present (or the past) – in large part to try to prevent the media, and hence the American public, from being caught unawares as it was on the morning of 11 September 2001’ (2010: 4, see also Hands 2015). Grusin defines premediation as ‘the remediation of future media forms and technologies; as the remediation of future events and affective states; and as the extension of socio-technical media networks into the future’ (2010: 6). At stake in all of these different but overlapping definitions of premediation, then, is the bringing of the future into the present.

These theories are helpful in making links between digital media, temporality and affect, and in understanding what I am proposing is the present temporality of digital media, as I will discuss below. However, what they also require is a more detailed explication of the present. This is to account for the present itself, rather than seeing it as a space-time into which the future is conveyed and assembled with. To begin this work of examining the kinds of presents that digital media are described here as producing, Raymond Williams’ well-known notions of ‘structures of feeling’ and residual, dominant and emergent culture are productive starting points.

Structures of feeling: The present and pre-emergence

In his essay ‘Structures of Feeling’ (1977a), Williams argues for an understanding of culture and society as processually structured, and for a mode of analysis capable of attending to the ‘active’, ‘flexible’ ‘temporal present’ (1977a: 128) rather than ‘fixed forms’ (1977a: 129). For Williams, such an approach is necessary because of what he sees as the tendency for analysis to express society and culture in a ‘habitual past tense’ (1977a: 128), fixing, finishing and making into form the processual, moving

and changing present. A consequence of this tendency is a separation of the social and the personal. The social is solidified into what is recognizable and can be articulated, that is, finished, in the past; and the personal or 'subjective' is in contrast, 'this, here, now, alive, active' (1977a: 128). Williams' concept of structures of feeling 'emphasise[s] a distinction from more formal concepts of "world-view" or "ideology"' and proposes an approach 'concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt' (1977a: 132).

Williams' work focuses on how a particular structure of feeling is generated by textual forms. In the essay, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel' (1980), he describes how the novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century both attest to and create a specifically 'Welsh structure of feeling' (1980: 221) that comes from the physical characteristics of Welsh industrial areas and the social relations and historical events that have come to constitute its working life (1980: 221-2). He tracks the development of this genre of writing, explaining how it moves from the *experience* of mass industrialization in Wales to its *observation*. It is only when it is able to observe, rather than experience or internalize the situation, that it becomes a coherent genre. Important in Williams' argument is that the beginnings of the Welsh industrial novel as a textual form can be understood as part of what he calls an emergent culture; a 'not yet fully articulated' image or idea that hovers 'at the edge of semantic availability' (1977a: 132). Crucially, even before they are delineated and defined, such emergent cultures inform, limit and direct experience and action, constituting a structure of feeling that works in relation to residual and dominant cultures (1977a: 132).

In the essay 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent' (1977b), Williams defines dominant culture as hegemonic (1977b: 121), and residual culture as that which 'has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present' (1977b: 122). While some aspects of residual culture may well be incorporated into dominant culture, 'certain experiences, meanings and values' remain distinct from, and may be oppositional or alternative to, it (1977b: 122). His understanding of emergent culture is also elucidated:

By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture (and in this sense 'species-specific') and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel. Since we are always considering relations within a cultural process, definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant (1977b: 123).

The purpose of thinking dominant, residual and emergent culture together is to account for both continuity and change. If culture is processual, what endures or persists, what dominates, and what develops or transpires (both as novelty and change)? In this quotation, Williams sees dominant culture as central to making sense of continuity and change, because, as hegemonic, 'epochal' and 'effective' (1977b: 121), it occupies the position of a 'fixed form' to which the activity of the residual

and emergent can be compared. In this sense, while it itself changes in its incorporation (or not) of the residual and emergent, dominant culture can be understood as the fixed and finished form that Williams sees as problematic and hence wants to complicate. The emergent and residual are thus an attempt to theorise the dynamism of culture, and indicate the possibility of socio-cultural change⁸.

For Williams then, emergent culture indicates (the potentiality of) activity, flexibility, and liveness. More specifically, Williams distinguishes between ‘evident emergence’ and that which is pre-emergent:

What matters, finally, in understanding emergent culture, as distinct from both the dominant and the residual, is that it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form. Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named (1977b: 126).

Above, I have suggested that one of the ways in which digital media have been theorised is in terms of their future orientation; that is, they are directed towards a premediation, prehension, or pre-emption of the future. What such theories do is complicate a linear model of time, seeing the future as that which may be brought into, oriented around, felt and embodied ‘within’ or as the present. In some senses, Williams’ understanding of residual, dominant and emergent culture operates according to linear progressive time in that they refer to the past, present and future respectively. However, in defining each cultural stage or phase, Williams also

complicates linear progression: there are hence productive connections to be made between Williams' work and the arguments concerning futurity introduced above. For example, in his definition of residual culture, he explains that while an activity or practice may have been 'effectively formed in the past', it 'is still active in the cultural process [...] as an effective element of the present'. Similarly, emergent culture indicates a future temporality (it is novel and nascent) that may be both 'confidently named' in the present and 'hovers' at the edges of it; *the pre-emergent*. In this sense, while the dominant may be present, it is potentially in the process of being replaced with or overtaken by the emergent, and hence made past.

Crucially for the argument I am making here, Williams places particular emphasis on the pre-emergent, arguing that, '[i]t is to understand more closely this condition of pre-emergence, as well as the more evident forms of the emergent, the residual, and the dominant, that we need to explore the concept of structures of feeling' (1977b: 126-127). Williams' conceptualisation of pre-emergence – that which is 'at the edge of semantic availability' and hence is not and cannot yet be 'fully articulated' – can be productively put into dialogue with the concepts of premediation, prehension and pre-emption outlined above. All of these concepts seek to attend to that which is at once gestured towards and yet not fully graspable in or by the present; the activity and flexibility of the 'temporal present'. Further, in different ways, they all understand such a condition as affective. Indeed, as Clough, Amoore, Massumi and Grusin argue (differently), one of the primary ways in which digital media are experienced, embodied and engaged (with) is through feeling⁹.

A question that is raised by making these connections, then, is whether pre-emergence designates not only a structure of feeling at the time at which Williams was writing, but also a contemporary structure of feeling. Indeed, if digital media work in terms of affect and a sense of that which is not quite yet, is pre-emergence especially significant today? Such questions draw through Williams' point that to understand a structure of feeling, close attention to pre-emergence is crucial. It also considers the ways in which digital media are argued to be altering both how humans encounter and experience the world through their involvement in the (re-)making of temporality. In the rest of the paper, I address this question through taking up the notion of pre-emergence in more detail, and in particular through the development of the concept of *infra*-structures of feeling.

***Infra*-structures of feeling**

Williams' notion of a structure of feeling is, as I've discussed, an attempt to understand culture as moving and adaptable, and as affective; culture is felt and lived out, and it is capable of change. Hence, he understands structure as itself flexible. On this point, one of the ways in which Williams' defines structure is as:

a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emerging, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies (1977a: 132).

In this explanation, Williams connects the social and the personal, to avoid the former being seen as finished and fixed and the latter as active, alive and now. He thus designates structure as ‘a set of internal relations, both interlocking and in tension’, and as ‘a social experience which is still in process’. There is, then, both form and movement, organisation and process, the socio-cultural and personal, subjective and embodied. Moreover, as I have outlined above, the processual character of Williams’ understanding of structure is intended to take account of the intangibility or inexpressible quality of feeling, particularly in its pre-emergence. My argument is that, while Williams identifies pre-emergence as significant to the media culture he analyses, with digital media pre-emergence becomes even more salient. Digital media function in terms of the processual and affective qualities of the present; it is a temporality that is always in flux. In order to account for this emphasis on pre-emergence, pushing Williams’ definition of structure a little further, towards the concept of *infra*-structure, is helpful. It brings into focus, first, *an expanded architecture* of texts through which a structure of feeling might be produced and organised and, second, it elaborates the relationship between structure, feeling and *affect*.

In terms of the first point, Williams’ explication of how a structure of feeling may be identified and how it operates is through a particular genre of literature or series of artworks; for example, through the Welsh industrial novel. Digital media, however, function not so much as discrete genres or texts, but across a range of platforms and devices. Twitter updates, for instance, can be simultaneously posted to Facebook, and Netflix can be watched on television sets via PlayStation, Xbox and Blu-ray players, on any computer, and on the go on Apple, Android and Windows phones and tablets.

It is therefore necessary to examine how a structure of feeling is generated through and operates across an architecture of different texts; as Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (2015) among others describe, digital media works in terms of networks of ‘encounters, connections, and disconnections’ and ‘rhythms of communication, thought, entertainment, and information management’ between humans and non-humans (2015: 3). In this sense, the term *infra-structure* draws attention to the technological and institutional linkages or systems which are often overlooked but are central to the organisation and functioning of social and cultural life (see e.g. Graham 2010, Harvey and Knox 2015, Lakoff and Collier 2010). Or, as Jean-Christophe Plantin et al (2016) put it in a discussion of the utility of infrastructure studies to understand digital media, infrastructure ‘refer[s] to structures that underlie or support something more salient’ (2016: 2). For these authors, infrastructure is a helpful means of recognising how digital media platforms ‘are *designed* to be extended and elaborated from outside’ (2016: 6); in other words to not be distinctively bounded texts or genres but to attract users, links and developments from other platforms and sources. My suggestion is that the present temporality that is produced, in part, through digital media occurs through symbolic and material systems or linkages that involve a wide range of analogue and digital media, devices, and objects, and that operate in terms of the set outlined by Williams above.

Second, the term *infra-structure* of feeling is intended to account for the systems or linkages via which the affectivity of the present is encountered, experienced and arranged. This is to pick up on the point that the present – and pre-emergence more specifically – is affective. Indeed, the term *infra-structure* has recently been mobilised to refer not only to technological and institutional connectivity, but also to the

affective dimension of culture and society. For example, Lauren Berlant (2011b, Berlant and Greenwald 2012) has examined the affective infrastructures that bind people together and are involved in the formation of collectives, which may never quite come together in stable ways. Infrastructures, she argues, are both ‘symbolic’ and ‘practical’, ‘straddl[ing] the conceptual and material organization of life’ (2011b), and they ‘organise nextness and vague senses of the projected out future’ (2012). Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox point to the promisory and enchanting capacity of roads in Peru as infrastructures, indicating that they serve not only a practical purpose but also involve affective and political investments and experiences; they ‘hold competing and often quite divergent hopes and expectations together’ in sometimes temporary and changing ways (Harvey and Knox 2012: 522). Here, then, understanding the present in terms of infrastructures of feeling is not to evacuate futures (for example, ‘nextness’ or promises), or the past; to return to Williams’ argument, (pre-)emergence exists alongside residual and dominant cultural experiences and situations. In these senses, the concept of *infra*-structure of feeling takes up Williams’ definition of a structure in terms of a set in that it attends to both organisation and what is in process and hence might not be ‘recognised as social’.

For example, importantly, for Williams ‘the social’ had become associated with fixity and pastness and his development of the notion of a structure of feeling sought to account for (pre-)emergence and change. This idea has been developed in recent social and cultural theory by Clough, who argues for an attention to the *infra*-empirical – that is, as I’ve discussed, how the ‘activity of our world today to a large extent takes place at time-space scales far finer than those of human perception, at the probabilistic scale of affect’ (2009: 54). For Clough here, the social today operates not

so much in terms of ideological interpellation, or subject formation, but through ‘affective modulation and individuation’ (2009: 50). This is a social modulated through ‘affective capacities’ (2009: 50); at the edges of perception and consciousness (2009: 44).¹⁰ In this sense, as noted above, the term *infra*-structure of feeling is designed to indicate that Williams’ identification of the significance of the (pre-)emergence of the cultural and social is amplified or intensified today. That is, while Williams identifies feeling as beneficial in understanding how media texts and genres are structured and experienced, my suggestion is that affect, or that which is felt but might not quite be grasped, has become more significant in terms of how digital media function, connect together and attract viewers and users. The concept of infra-structures of feeling thus seeks to attend to *and develop* how Williams’ concept of structure of feeling designates affect as significant today. What I am proposing here with the concept of infra-structures of feeling then, is twofold: an expansion of the scope of what may come to constitute or hold together (however temporarily) a structure of feeling, and an attention to the affectivity of the condition of pre-emergence in how digital media produce the present.

Real-time and suspended presents on Twitter and Netflix

In order to consider how this concept of infra-structure of feeling both materialises out of and seeks to understand the pre-emergence of digital media, in this section I focus on two examples: Twitter and Netflix. These two examples are distinctive. They differ in terms of the services they offer and the ways in which users interact with them. They are selected in order to indicate how the present is produced through a broad range of digital media. I analyse how these platforms are explained in their own promotional materials, and the kinds of temporal experiences of the present they are

described as producing. The aim here then, is to consider these as distinctive examples of different media that produce divergent experiences; that is to examine their similarities and differences, and in so doing to flesh out the concept of infra-structures of feeling. In particular, while attending to their differences, I also seek to highlight further the significance of a present, pre-emergent temporality to digital media.

On its homepage (25/10/16), Twitter asks, 'What's happening?' This encouragement of its users to create content by commenting on events, thoughts, opinions and feelings as they occur and unfold underscores its description of itself as a connective, real time media platform. A typical Twitter stream consists of a page of Tweets from those the user follows (written, and still or moving images), which are updated as new ones are posted. Users are alerted to new Tweets at the top of their page, and there are also Notifications of when their own Tweets have been re-Tweeted, liked or responded to, and when they have been directly (privately) messaged. The affects/effects of this format is a constantly moving, (a)live page, with multiple modes of connecting with other Twitter users, and multiple notifications of these.

Twitter can therefore be understood in terms of the concept of infra-structures of feeling introduced so far. It is a social media platform where the social is, in Williams' words, a 'set, with specific internal relations' (notifications, connections with other platforms, specifically formatted Tweets), which is in process (always updating). It is an infra-structure in its operation across these different, and moving, internal relations. It is also an infra-structure in its affectivity: that which might, temporarily, hold together potentially diverging symbolic and material aspects of

everyday life, and which is emergent and changing. Furthermore, Twitter can be understood as affective in generating and organising specific feelings. For example, one of the ways in which Twitter arranges Tweets is as ‘Moments’, where Tweets from different users and on different topics are brought under specific themes, one of which is Fun. Another example is how campaigns collect together under specific searchable hashtags, many of which mobilise affects and feelings, including #IlovetheNHS in support of the UK National Health Service, #ihatemondays, and #sadface. Twitter has recently tried to facilitate the sharing of positive feeling – a good deal of disconcertion was generated when they changed the symbol that represented a user ‘favouriting’ another’s Tweet from a star to a heart (see e.g. Meyer 2015, Parkinson 2015). This shift can be seen in terms of what Gerlitz and Helmond, in the context of Facebook, describe as a Like economy, ‘facilitating a web of positive sentiment in which users are constantly prompted to like, enjoy, recommend and buy as opposed to discuss or critique’ (2013: 1362). However, high profile cases of misogyny and sexism, racism and homophobia demonstrate how Twitter is not only experienced in terms of positive sentiment, and how the affective experience of Twitter is distributed unevenly. Indeed, some of those at the hard end of such harassment report anxiety and depression and close their accounts or take Twitter breaks.¹¹

These different senses of how it works as an infra-structure of feeling indicate Twitter’s specific temporality – a flexible, temporal present. Indeed, to explicate the question Twitter asks of its users, this draws attention to ‘*the happening* of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency, and sensuousness’ (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 2). The ‘happening’ of Twitter is a temporal present of ‘real-

timeness', where '[r]eal-time experience is no longer limited to the elimination of a perceptible delay between the request, processing and presentation of information; instead, it informs modes of engagement, interaction and the speed at which responses to one's own actions are being shown' (Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz 2014: 129). In its constant updating, notifying and connecting of users and platforms, Twitter can be understood as creating a present that is at once live and immediate and on-going and unfinished.

The streaming platform Netflix also highlights its flexibility and accessibility – users can 'Watch anywhere. Cancel anytime' (Netflix homepage, 25.10.16) – and emphasises its ongoingness – 'See what's next' (Netflix homepage, 25.10.16). The emphasis on the next – or what is pre-emerging – points both to the arrival of new films and television programmes (which are usually deposited as an entire series rather than as individual episodes) on the site, and to how the next programme within a series automatically begins playing without the user having to select it (a convention that other television-on-demand services, including BBC i-Player, have recently adopted)¹². Here, then, while both Twitter and Netflix create a connected and real-time present, Netflix also produces a different sense of the present. Of significance to an attention to the present, the flow of Netflix can be seen to create a temporality where the progression from past to present to future is suspended, and nextness or pre-emergence becomes absorbed within a kind of stretched or expanded present.

Such a present is captured in Netflix binge-watching, where rather than watching one episode a week as with traditional broadcast television, viewers watch multiple episodes of a television series in quick succession. Netflix themselves discuss the

phenomenon of binge-watching, describing it as a mode of viewing that their platform facilitates and noting that, ‘while binge watching is clearly the new normal, not all series are enjoyed the same way’ (Netflix Media Centre, 2016). Analysing the time taken to complete viewing of the first series of over 100 serialised television programmes across more than 190 countries between October 2015 and May 2016, Netflix found that viewers watch around two hours per day, and that different television genres are consumed differently. They suggest that ‘[w]hen organising series in relation to this benchmark [of just over two hours viewing per day], interesting patterns emerge, ranging from high energy narratives that are devoured to thought-provoking dramas that are savoured’ (Netflix Media Centre, 2016). They describe how some genres, including horror and thrillers, ‘go straight for the gut’ and ‘make it hard to pull away’, while ‘complex narratives, like that of *House of Cards* and *Bloodline*, are indulged at an unhurried pace’ (Netflix Media Centre, 2016). Their Netflix ‘binge scale’ (see Netflix Media Centre 2016) indicates that irreverent comedies and political dramas are watched less than two hours per day, with horror and thrillers at over two hours per day (Netflix Media Centre, 2016).

In commenting on the binge scale, Vice President of Original Content at Netflix, Cindy Holland notes, ‘Netflix helps you to find a series to binge no matter your mood or occasion, and the freedom to watch that series at your own pace’ (Netflix Media Centre, 2016). Binge-watching is here linked with affect and feeling. According to Holland, programmes are selected by viewers according to their mood. And according to the binge scale, different genres affectively engage viewers differently, patterning the amount of time per day they watch them, and whether they are savoured or devoured.

There is then a reciprocal relation between programme and viewer, which can be understood in terms of the concept of infra-structure of feeling. For example, as a flexible, temporal present, binge-watching on Netflix constitutes the kind of ‘happening’ discussed above, in that it is an open-ended, contingent and relational present that is arranged and facilitated according to a set of internal conventions and techniques. Furthermore, Netflix binge-watching is a sensuous experience. While in many ways they seem to be distinct activities, in terms of the affective sensations and temporalities they may constitute and be constituted through, there are productive connections to be made between binging on television and binging on food. Berlant (2011a) contextualises the ongoing obesity crisis in Western nations in terms of contemporary capitalism that involves ‘speed-up at work’ and ‘time organised by the near future of the paying of bills and the management of children’ (2011a: 116). While not discussing binge-eating specifically, Berlant argues that ‘food is one of the few spaces of controllable, reliable pleasure people have (2011a: 115), and that eating provides ‘ordinary and repeatable scenes of happiness, if not health’ (2011a: 116). Taking up this characterisation of eating, binge-watching might be understood as such an everyday and repeatable pleasure or happiness. The link between watching and eating may be made further by taking into consideration how Berlant goes on to describe eating as ‘add[ing] up to something, many things: maybe the good life, but usually a sense of well-being that spreads out for a moment, not a projection toward a future’ (2011a: 117). In disrupting a progression towards the future, the binge-watching that Netflix facilitates and that viewers repeat and pace out, emphasises and exists as a ‘spread out moment’, a flexible temporality where the present is at once

moving (on) – to the next episode in a series, for instance – and suspended or expanded – by bracketing off the speed of life and the near future¹³.

Both of these examples constitute specific presents that are simultaneously connected and always-on, and on-going and processual. My suggestion is also that within each of these platforms, the present is constituted and experienced differently: Twitter highlights the creation of a live, real-time present, while Netflix suspends or expands the present. As such, as indicated above, the present temporality produced through digital media is not necessarily unified or cohesive but rather may be diverse; the present is not one kind of temporality, but may be multiple and different. This point is important because it complicates – or better, demonstrates the variation involved in – descriptions of digital media as ‘live’, ‘immediate’ and ‘always-on’. In this way, as Williams argues, the present is active, flexible, elastic. Different digital media platforms may elongate or shrink the present and may create different experiences of the present – from what might be a sense of keeping up with the constant flow of information (as in the case of Twitter) to a pausing or dwelling in the present (as in the case of Netflix).

At the same time, while distinctive, these presents are in some ways produced and work through similar techniques and conventions that are embedded into the media platforms. In particular, in both cases, pre-emergence is crucial; in Twitter in terms of the constant updates of Tweets which mean that it is always happening, and for Netflix the flow of the next programme in a series, or another recommended series to begin. Here, Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz’s conception of pacing as how ‘freshness and relevance create different paces, and that the pace within each engine

and platform is internally different and multiple in itself' (2014: 135) is helpful. Importantly, they argue that '[m]edia do not operate in real-time, [instead] devices and their cultures operate as pacers of real-time' (2014: 127). What this argument draws attention to is how temporality may be constituted differently through different media devices and platforms, rather than time existing beyond and outside them (which suggests that time is in some way a static backdrop – linear and progressive, for example). While Netflix and Twitter are both involved in the creation of the present through techniques that emphasise pre-emergence, at the same time, this pre-emergence takes on the qualities of distinct presents. What remains to be unpacked, then, is both the implications of the significance of the production of a multiple and diverse present temporality, and how pre-emergence is involved in this.

Presents, pre-emergence, and infra-structures of feeling: A politics of cultural theory

In devising his concept of a structure of feeling, Williams argues that,

what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. The relations between this quality and the other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs, and beyond these the changing social and economic relations between and within classes are again an open question: that is say, a set of specific historical questions (1977a: 131).

Here, Williams points to how, in addition to understanding the relations between the social and subjective, a structure of feeling is an attempt to designate the ‘particular qualities’ that might characterise a specific ‘sense of a generation’ or historical period. As with his conception of the flexible boundaries between dominant, residual and emergent culture, he sees the designation of a structure of feeling not as that which can be made static or defined in a finished manner, but rather as ‘an open question’, or ‘a set of specific historical questions’. As I have discussed, the openness and specificity that Williams identifies here is in part due to the emphasis he places on ‘pre-emergence, as well as the more evident forms of the emergent, residual, and the dominant’ (1977b: 126-127) to understanding a structure of feeling.

Such an emphasis on the pre-emergent of any culture is necessarily difficult, given that it requires an attention to that which is not quite yet and which cannot quite yet be articulated. As noted above, my proposal here is that, while Williams identifies pre-emergence as central in understanding how media texts and genres constitute a structure of feeling, pre-emergence has become increasingly important in contemporary digital culture. In the cases that I have discussed for example, pre-emergence is essential to the flow of Twitter, and to the suspension of time that Netflix may produce. This intensification of pre-emergence again indicates why I have augmented Williams’ concept of structures of feeling with infra-structures of feeling: the intention is in part to draw attention to the affectivity of digital media. If then, the quality of pre-emergence is central to contemporary media culture, the difficulty of attending to pre-emergence may be made even more difficult. That is, if pre-emergence is both the condition that is essential to understand a structure of feeling in general, and is the quality that itself defines *today’s* infra-structure of

feeling, how is cultural theory to perceive of, make sense of and – perhaps – critique or intervene in it?

In the spirit of Williams' specific and open questions, one possible response to these concerns is to see the development of the concept of structures of feeling to infra-structures of feeling as an attempt to account for how what is in a state of pre-emergence, what 'hovers at the edge of semantic availability', is increasingly what the social and cultural 'is'. An infra-empirical as Clough argues, a 'sensate empirical' as Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury (2009) call it, what Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (2012) term a 'live' social, or, with a focus on processes of mediation, what Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinksa (2012) coin the 'liveness' of media. This is to recognise and develop Williams' point about the Welsh industrial novel; that it is only when the genre moves from experience or internalisation of the situation to its observation that it becomes a coherent genre. If pre-emergence is a defining quality of contemporary media culture, this suggests that it is necessary to develop approaches to grasp the non-coherent, flexible and changing, where the emphasis is on nextness, happening, and what is in the making. As such, there may be productive avenues to develop that consider Williams' emphasis on pre-emergence alongside the concepts of premediation, prehension and pre-emption discussed above. In all of these instances, there is a concern with the 'pre' – that is, with the just-beforeness that is nevertheless an integral aspect of the present.¹⁴ In its attention to the affective, the concept of infra-structure is designed to take into account this 'pre', not least in terms of a further consideration of the debates that surround the affective turn concerning whether and how affect is pre-cognisant.

A further potential utility of the concept of infra-structure of feeling is to consider how, as I have also begun to indicate here, this pre-emergence is produced, arranged and accessed through particular techniques, conventions and interactions. In this sense, how pre-emergence is designed, encountered and experienced in specific empirical instances is important, and attention may be paid to how these specific empirical examples both develop and deviate from previous historical qualities and periods. In other words, infra-structures of feeling may constitute a conceptual framework through which empirical research on temporality as a particular structure of feeling may be researched. How, for example, do those who design, manage and promote particular digital media platforms understand the kinds of temporality they produce and regulate? What kinds of temporal experiences do those who use these digital media have? What kinds of methodologies are required to study a temporality that is in flow?

At this point, a further open question is posed. Williams' work is concerned not only with tracing change and continuity, but also with explicating their politics; what might be termed a politics of cultural theory. I have indicated above that the production of a present temporality through digital media is important to study, in order to pay attention to how this particular temporality is becoming significant, to analyse the specificities of this present and to explicate how the present – as well as the past and future – requires conceptual and empirical research. Such a project is perhaps more straightforward to develop in a case where dominant culture is hegemonic and (pre-)emergent (and residual) culture offers the possibility of resistance and social change. In a situation where pre-emergence may be coming to constitute dominant culture, such a politics is more challenging to identify and realise. For example, nextness and

pre-emergence on Twitter and Netflix are means for the companies to collect data on users that are both used to pre-empt future relationships with these brands and other organisations (the continuation of the rolling month-to-month payments to Netflix; targeted advertising on Twitter, for example). The happening of Twitter is also, as I've indicated, unpleasant or hostile for some users, particularly those identifying as other than a white, masculine, privileged norm. It is difficult to see the radical potential of pre-emergence in such instances.¹⁵

However, at the same time as it tracks the workings of power, Williams' work has also been crucial in establishing cultural studies as a practice that is attentive to the everyday, ordinary, experiences of media and culture. Taking up this aspect of his work points to how, simultaneous with pre-emergence constituting a dominant culture, it may also be experienced as a means of making spaces and times for conviviality, pleasure and positive affect. This is to return to the sensuousness of the expanded or suspended present of Netflix binge-watching, where, for example, the pacing of how programmes are watched allows viewers to affectively indulge or splurge on programmes, composing repeated scenes of positive affect. It is to take seriously the connectivity and exchange of ideas that can occur on Twitter, and how live events may unfold 'in real time' and from multiple perspectives. Again, how such qualities, affects and feelings are organised and experienced, and whether and how they hold together, however temporarily, as an (infra-)structure of feeling is an empirical question. It is to understand both of these senses of pre-emergent temporalities – 'at once interlocking *and* in tension' – and the multiple senses of what 'politics' involves – tracking, predicting, pre-empting *and* suspending and enjoying –

that a task of conceiving of the production of present temporalities by digital media may be oriented.

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Notes

¹ This paper is the first step in a larger research project, which seeks to examine the present temporality produced by contemporary media through close analysis of promotional materials, platform conventions and techniques and interviews with users and designers/managers of different digital media platforms ('Mediating Presents:

Producing ‘the now’ in Contemporary Digital Culture’, funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, 2018-2019). The focus on promotional materials of Netflix and Twitter in this paper is therefore a first step in beginning to develop an account of the present and how it is produced similarly and differently in these two case studies. Furthermore, this paper concentrates on proposing a conceptual framework for understanding the production of the present, which may be further developed through more detailed empirical research.

² While I recognise that the majority of the examples I discuss in this article are digital media, it is also important to note how analogue and broadcast forms of media work together with digital media to constitute an infra-structure of platforms, devices and content. I develop this idea below.

³ These quotations are taken from the official websites of Twitter, Snapchat, Netflix and Apple respectively, accessed 1st November 2016.

⁴ It is therefore not my aim in this article to conduct a close analysis of these different examples. Rather it is to point to how together they may indicate the significance of the present temporality and, as I discuss below, a particular kind of structure of feeling.

⁵ It is important to note that here I indicate that media is involved in the production of a present temporality. This is to avoid the kind of technological determinism that Williams critiques where technology is seen in a vacuum and as the driver of social change.

⁶ For similar arguments that refute the idea of the annihilation of time through a focus on the future, see Adkins (2016) and Coleman (2016b).

⁷ For more detailed discussions of these temporal modes and registers, see Coleman (2012, 2016a, 2016b).

⁸ Indeed, in this essay, Williams develops his argument about emergent culture in terms of class consciousness and identity, and the possibility of a change in the social order.

⁹ For the purposes of this paper, I am not distinguishing between affect and feeling. In this sense, the connection that I make here between Williams' cultural materialism and what might be called new materialist research deviates from the argument made by Joss Hands (2015). While noting some links between the two traditions of cultural theory, and identifying what he terms a 'digital structure of feeling', Hands sees the new materialisms as failing to account for the social and cultural contexts in which technologies emerge (which Williams' argues for). He also makes a distinction between affect in the new materialisms as pre-conscious and feeling in Williams' work as sub-conscious. My point in this paper is that in both Williams' and more recent approaches to the temporality of media, sensation and sentiment are identified as important, and that pre-emergence is a productive means of exploring them. The resonances and distinctions between pre-emption, prehension, premediation and pre-emergence and the significance of the 'pre' to understanding the present are beyond the scope of this paper, but I aim to explore them in further publications.

¹⁰ Although their approaches are articulated through different vocabularies, it is worth noting here that both Clough and Williams posit the affectivity of pre-emergence in contrast to ideology, preferring to focus on the embodied and sensory living of/with media.

¹¹ Examples of celebrities doing this in 2016 include Leslie Jones, the Ghostbusters 2 actor who left Twitter in July 2016 following racist abuse, non-binary transgender food blogger Jack Monroe who has taken multiple breaks after homophobic, sexist

and right-wing abuse, and Normani Kordei from American pop group Fifth Harmony, due to racist abuse from fans after reports of a rift within the group.

¹² While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into further detail, Williams' work on television and 'flow' is important here, not least in terms of his argument in the 1970s that there has been 'the replacement of a programme series of timed sequential units by a flow series of differently related units in which the timing, though real, is undeclared, and in which the real internal organisation is something other than the declared organisation' (1974: 87). The question of whether, and the extent to which, on demand and streaming services involve a further organisation of temporal flow is necessary to address.

¹³ There may also be a productive connection to be made here between the sensuality of binge-watching and sex. Originally describing the act of binge-watching after a hard day or week, more recently the term 'Netflix and chill' has become an euphemism for sex (see Urban Dictionary).

¹⁴ Indeed, this will be the focus of the larger research project mentioned above.

¹⁵ These ideas regarding data, pre-emption and nextness are beyond the scope of this paper, but will be explored in the larger research project.