Abstract

The notion of presence conceptualises the aesthetic and affective dimensions of digital experience. It describes the phenomenally experienced quality of being-there and being-with other(s) – not merely knowing or ‘imagining’ a digital multitude, but a sense of imposing my presence on others, and equally, feeling the presence of others upon me. Presence problematises and complements visibility as a dominant, rational-technical mode in which we theorise questions of digital sociability, publicity and political participation. The concept of presence seeks to re-organise our knowledge of different lived experiences of online connections under a coherent conceptual umbrella. How are we more visible, and yet more anonymous than ever in digital space? How do the embodied aspects of visibility work in digital space – such as its ability to provoke powerful emotional responses? What does it even mean to be ‘visible’ qua the body in the age of big data and predictive analysis? Presence provides a unique perspective to these enduring questions by connecting the affective-aesthetic dimension with critiques of algorithmic power.

This essay articulates presence as an aesthetic-affective lens, and demonstrates its analytical utility, through three short cases: (1) our speculative, felt senses of sufficient and probable visibility on Twitter; (2) distant and digital communication of embodied political presence, exemplified by contemporary acts of self-immolation; (3) data mining and the emergence of ‘trace-bodies’ composed of data, where the key paradox is that I know my data (self) is being exploited, but I often do not feel the presence of my own trace-body – an affective alienation