Groundhog Day: The Internet Destroys *and* Saves Our Mental Health

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On September 11, 2023, the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab (IERLab) at Curtin University hosted "Groundhog Day"—a one-day online-only open-access collection of roundtables on the cyclical nature of academic spotlights and hot topics, and some of the frustrations related to the ahistoricity of the discussions and moral panics. Over four panels, the event addressed the cycles, patterns, templates, and related fatigue on digital media discourse. Find out more at ierlab.com/groundhogday.

This article is an edited and truncated version of the highlights for panel three: "The Internet Destroys *and* Saves Our Mental Health." The panel was hosted and moderated by Dr. Natalie Ann Hendry, and features Dr. Clare Southerton, Tom Short, and Natasha Zeng.

Natalie Ann Hendry:
We have noticed how social media is seen to have a detrimental or harmful relationship with mental health or wellbeing, particularly for children and young people. But digital media is also positioned as a champion or savior for mental health—that we can fix digital media problems *through* digital media. Social media is framed as really harmful *or* helpful. For us, the question of media being good or bad takes us away from the messiness of the digital and mental health. This panel will be talking about the metaphors or framing that describe the relationship between digital media and mental health. What do these metaphors or frames hide? Can we think otherwise about this? What is emerging in your research?

Tom Short:
My research is on young people's experience of borderline personality disorder (BPD). The connection with social media often comes just before or after diagnosis. BPD gets thrown around in reductive and simplistic ways, and young people are often left to find out what it means for themselves, often going to social media and seeking help from Google searches. But you can also easily access whole workbooks of

very specific BPD therapies [that are usually only for clinicians]. You can also go to a Reddit page where people who have ex-partners with BPD discuss their experience of dating someone with BPD. You get a sense that social media is saving and destroying our mental health: it is both and neither—there is no clear relationship.

Natasha Zeng:
In my research, I see therapeutic culture as part of ambivalent and dissonant practices. I am researching how Asian Australians understand and manage their racial identities through digital culture. Racial identity is often narrativized through this idea of "the journey we're on." The logics of social media culture position race and identity as linear classifications with straightforward, achievable endpoints. But in reality, digital culture makes such negotiations extremely disorientating for people. Therapeutic culture comes through in the ways that race and "Asian-ness" have become something that participants feel they need to work on constantly. For many of my participants, being able to perform this lived experience, whether it is something like enjoying boba tea or having gone through strict parenting trauma, means that they are able to belong in certain places. They perform an idealized understanding of race and Asian-ness, sometimes through using Facebook groups as support groups and sharing intensely intimate details about their family. Or people will look for affirmation online, whether that is finding pleasure in what my participants call really hot Asian influencers or, like one participant, who paid $500 to do a therapy course about Asian-ness.

I want to give more depth to this idea that people "overperform" online or are too emotional, to be more considerate with people's practices, while maintaining criticality. The ambivalent positions that my participants face are about navigating that tricky position as racialized people who feel a lot of pain.

Clare Southerton:
I can see similarities emerging in my work and teaching, about how young people access information in digital spaces. I teach students training to be teachers. Metaphors about media emerge around trying to find language that can give people a concrete sense of the right thing to do. For many of the students, they ask why I cannot give them a quantitative way to determine what the right amount of screen time is or the right time for gaming. This speaks to that messiness—not wanting to be in the messiness and instead trying to find rigid, stable guidelines. Like Natasha and Tom, these complex, ambiguous experiences online cannot necessarily fall into being wholly positive or negative.

I really struggle with this as both a teacher and researcher—trying to resist the desire that people have for a neat, convincing, usually quantitative recommendation. It is hard for me to be seen as legitimate and convincing compared to someone who recommends two hours of screen time or another concrete answer. Yet unfortunately, the reality is that there is no concrete answer. That is what I come up against: the desire for a measurable quantity of what the digital is, how it works, and what the "measurable impact" of the digital is. Yet so many of our experiences show us that it cannot be measured.

I have also been interviewing young people aged 13 to 16 who use TikTok. In many ways I see the young people repeating these binary framings. Either they feel that TikTok is bad for their mental health or that it is beneficial, a supportive place. But I also find moments in these conversations where

they themselves try to reconcile that tension and that this sort of extreme does not make sense. It does not make sense to sit in either of these binaries because there are these ambiguous moments, experiences that cannot wholly be categorized as joyful or suffering. There is always something in between.

Conceptualizing Messiness in Digital Cultures and for Mental Health

Natalie Ann Hendry:
We can see that coming out in youth studies research too. Young people will share how awful social media is, that it is addictive or will ruin us, but then, when they are asked if that is their *personal* experience, their responses are far more nuanced. When we talk about this framing or metaphors, how does this messiness come through?

Tom Short:
An example I find interesting about this frame of "messiness" is how we talk about therapy and artificial intelligence (AI). Jacinthe Flore (2023) has written about how the first Internet chatbots were for therapy. For example, with Chat GPT, people use it for therapy where they tell ChatGPT their life story and ask to be offered Gestalt Therapy. Chat GPT responds to them *as* a therapist. But, and this is a point that many people have been making about AI and these techniques, they are not objective, and they are not ambivalent. There is bias coded into them and there has been from the start.

Natasha Zeng:
I remember the first time I recognized vulnerability practiced publicly online. I was ten, my friend was going through a break up, and he kept putting these really sad songs on MSN [Messenger]. There was the dissonance between friends during high school who would turn to Tumblr to speak to other people online about how they were depressed—that was very normal [on Tumblr]. But then someone from school would find their Tumblr. Suddenly, their vulnerability and feelings were made public in a way that was so intensely ridiculed. I still see that happening now. Therapeutic language has filtered down into the lives of people who might not be really embedded in these online spaces—I do not know if they welcome this language or are critical of it.

I also notice a lot of therapeutic talk on TikTok: therapists fighting with each other about evidence; influencers arguing that you do not have to give your friends space to share their problems, that you can set that boundary. Within popular culture, there is a sense of people getting excited when therapy culture and language is used in the wrong way. I am thinking about the Jonah Hill issue [when Hill's ex-partner Sarah Brady posted Hill's texts on Instagram, critiquing them of misusing "boundaries" and other therapeutic language]. People attached themselves to discussing the issue so quickly, with no acknowledgement of the broader context about this language.

Clare Southerton:
I think that the Jonah Hill incident is a beautiful example. It speaks to the way that we talk about digital spaces, as if the digital is primary and everything else going on is sort of secondary. [The Hill incident] is often referenced in news accounts as a kind of social media firestorm. There is all this social media

commentary when it is primarily a conversation about relationships, gender roles, and potentially abuse, depending on how you understand it. But this is what we are getting at: what are we really talking about? In all these different situations, we tend to focus on the technology, on the tool, on the digital thing and lose track of the things connected to it. I encounter this with my students, who ask, "Why are you talking about all these different social problems when we are supposed to be talking about technology? But they are all connected to the digital. The digital is not a singular thing in a vacuum; it is connected to all these other complex things. Unfortunately, you will have to learn a bunch of other stuff just to be able to talk about technology!

Tom Short:

Yes, thinking about broader social conditions in my research on young people with BPD too, BPD has become a popular topic on social media and much more commonly known. Much of that awareness is attributed to the pandemic and people being online more, but also Amber Heard, for example, and her very public diagnosis of BPD. Popular media is part of this awareness, but you can step back too—there has been an active push within psychiatry and psychology in the last decades to diagnose more and more people. That is part of the growing diagnoses of youth and more online discussion. It is messy and complicated. But how does this language about BPD filter down into the practices of young people on Tumblr or Reddit? It is not simply about "being saved by having a diagnosis" but is complicated by the realities of their everyday lives.

Natalie Ann Hendry:

It plays out too in how people talk about neurodiversity and how important that language is for making sense of their lives. In my interviews with people that have ever seen a psychologist or therapist, some had received an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnosis or were in the process of diagnosis. They used the language of "a journey"—like Natasha's participants—that challenged assumptions about ADHD and social media. For example, not just saying they have ADHD because they saw five TikTok videos but thinking about it, talking with friends, and then seeing how to potentially, but not always, obtain a formal diagnosis. They go back and forth across multiple, different spaces, people and platforms to make sense of their lives.

The Value of Criticality

Natalie Ann Hendry:

As critical researchers, sometimes it seems as if we just keep identifying problems with how digital media is framed. But what is the point of us being frustrated, ranting, or "whinging" as researchers and teachers?

Natasha Zeng:

I do not see it as "whinging." When I look at the binary in the way that my participants view therapeutic culture and its place in politics, it is important for us to be nuanced. I recall Clare Hemmings' (2018) suggestion that we need to confront the belief that politics can be completely knowable. I get frustrated because I do not see my participants as passive or stupid. They are highly aware of the neoliberal politics

of therapeutic culture and digital culture, but they also know they need affirmation and pleasure at the end of the day. How does that reflect the kind of social structures at play in their lives?

Tom Short:
I love to complain! But also complicating this is important because we get back to that point about the broader social conditions. We still refer a lot to the authority of psychiatrists and dominant clinical frameworks [when talking about mental health]. To your point, Nat, about people saying that they did not self-diagnose ADHD just because of TikTok, there are important things going on there. But that still relies on the authority of outside experts and the medical model. Talking about the media practices of young people and adding in nuance I think can work to erode the dominant power of psychiatry. How psychiatry often looks at people's experiences *is* quite binary and simplistic. While there are attempts toward change, often these frameworks are built on a biomedical model of mental health that crumbles in the face of nuance or, in a techno-positivist view, keeps promising that if we just get better at scanning the brain, we will figure it out at some point.

Clare Southerton:
I like a good whinge, clearly! But in many ways the strength of this complexity, sitting-in-the-middle-mess, is that these neat answers—whether that the Internet is the bad place that ruins health or it is a utopia or silver bullet—only offer disappointment. I am thinking about preparing students to go on to different professions, teachers in my case, and that [simple answers] are not equipping them to do their roles successfully. Ultimately, we set people up for failure if we give them only these two very limited options and often leave individuals as responsible for that failure. They might be feeling that if I cannot feel better by doing a social media detox or a digital detox, then there must be something wrong with me. Or if I cannot find salvation in digital spaces like I should be able to, then why am I having a hard time? It speaks to what we have been talking about, that it is more complicated, there are bigger social problems that always contribute to how we are feeling.

Natalie Ann Hendry:
Can we also speak more to the desire for a quantified, measurable response? Where does this come from?

Natasha Zeng:
For me, this question goes back to people's desire to just have information there for them. My supervisor, Akane (Kanai, 2018), writes about the classificatory imagination of social media. How, if you partake in these practices of organizing information in the correct way, that grants you access to some spaces—the same thing I see in my research. You learn about the cultural references, traumatic family story plots, and once you have that down pat, then you are Asian online, Asian in these spaces, you belong. I assume it is similar for quantification, where you just want to know if you spend only 25 minutes on this platform, you will be happy. Do 10,000 steps a day, you will be happy. I would love for everyone to tell me what to do, because I am so tired!

Tom Short:
In my work, when we are talking about mental health, it often does come from clinical, population health, or epidemiology literature. Much of that is positivist by design. The other day I was reworking my

literature review and working through some of this literature, and I got exhausted quickly. I could not stop thinking about this quote from Anatole Broyard. He is talking about his experience of diagnosis and the medical gaze, asking his clinician "to grope for my spirit as well as my prostate" (Broyard, 1993, p. 45). It was overwhelming interacting with that literature, like the humanity is just gone from it. It would be nice to have someone tell me that exactly 25 minutes a day on Instagram is the perfect amount. But also some days, I am hungover and two hours of Instagram is actually perfect! That quantitative impulse does come from health literature on mental health, but also the "tech bro" Silicon Valley discourses that often dominate social media.

Natalie Ann Hendry:
Folks in Silicon Valley are also championing these wellness practices, sitting in icy- cold water or biohacking on social media. At the same time, how they structure their life is in aid of capitalism, sprouting numbers (and dollars) about how many people's lives have been improved by this or that product.

Clare Southerton:
It is interesting to point out the growth of wellness industries grabbing hold of this desire for mental health care. There is the desire for a measurable response to mental health. But in the wellness response to mental health, what many people are seeking is to have their experience validated and recognized. If it is measurable, it is real; even in a perhaps dubious therapeutic context, they are still saying your experience is real. The mental health system has a history of not necessarily believing people or their experiences. I think the reason that quantification and measurement have such a hold is that we believe it to be more tangible, more real, less subjective—at a fundamental level we do not believe ourselves. Yet on another level, having something that we can count is extremely appealing. It is also how these wellness industries have been so successful—replacing the quantifiable with a personal connection that says your experience is real and valid, and I will give you a crystal or whatever to treat that condition.

Asking Different Questions

Natalie Ann Hendry:
To end, instead of being asked is social media good or bad for mental health, what questions would you like to be asked instead?

Natasha Zeng:
[I welcome questions with] more attention to ambivalence and dissonance. What can that actually tell us? I am speaking more in relation to politics and politics of identity here. There are large parts of the left who are just really reductive about this and just see it as narcissism.

Tom Short:
I am interested in the different entangled strands that come into media research and thinking about the material context of social media. Often we talk about the material of mental health as in brain chemistry. How can we instead displace the authority of psychiatry? Overall, I want more questions about context: in what ways are people using social media and why?

Clare Southerton:

I would be interested in more people asking how social media or digital spaces make us feel—feeling being interpreted broadly as our bodily sensations and emotions. We are often really interested causes and effects—is it bad or good? But we navigate digital spaces with changing emotions. I would be interested in people being more curious about feelings in digital spaces beyond the bad/good, to everything in-between. Why might you look at a picture and feel suddenly embarrassed? What does it remind you of? Being open to the incredible intensity of feelings that I find in digital spaces.

Natasha Zeng:

I change my question to that one, too!

Natalie Ann Hendry:

It is a beautiful way for us to wrap up today. How can we talk about "feels" beyond dopamine or harms? Emotions beyond [assumptions of] immediate contagion online?

Biographies

Dr. Natalie Ann Hendry (she/her) is a senior lecturer in youth well-being, in the faculty of education, at the University of Melbourne. Her interdisciplinary research draws on education, critical health, and media studies to explore how digital cultures shape health and learning. Natalie's current projects explore how therapy practices are entangled with social media use and how young adults engage with digital finance products and services.

Tom Short (he/him) is a doctoral candidate at RMIT University. His research examines the material-discursive experience of mental ill-health for young people diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. These experiences are inextricably tied up in systems that raise awareness as they stigmatize, validate as they deny, and care for as they alienate. Finding ways for young people to not just be listened to, but ultimately be placed at the center of discourses about their mental health is one of the core aims of Tom's research.

Dr. Clare Southerton (she/her) is a lecturer in digital technology and pedagogy in the School of Education at La Trobe University. Her research explores how social media platforms and other digital technologies are used for learning and sharing knowledge, with a specific interest in informal learning communities, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Her work has explored digital youth cultures, surveillance and privacy, digital health, and sexuality. Her research has been published in *New Media & Society*, *Social Media + Society*, and *Social & Cultural Geography*.

Natasha Zeng (she/her) is a doctoral candidate at Monash University. Her research explores how Asian Australians navigate race as spatial, temporal, and embodied through social media. Creating dialogue with intersectional feminist work on affect, phenomenology of race, and cultural studies and media, she argues individuals seek uncomplicated and simplified racial identities and certainties in order to feel and live more expansively. Natasha is involved in projects exploring digital feminism and ageing migrants' use of technologies and is an editorial assistant for the *Mobile, Media and Communications Journal*.

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