110 irreconcilability in the digital: gender, technological imaginings and maternal subjectivity

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abstract

Drawing on empirical research from two focus groups, this article investigates the narratives and discourses that emerged around pregnancy, technology, birth and motherhood. In so doing, the article engages in some long-standing debates within feminism around embodied and maternal subjectivity, agency and identity. Seen here, the focus groups serve initially to remind us of the pervasiveness of gender inequality and the continual ambiguity of, and anxieties around, maternal subjectivity. The focus groups reconfigure these issues through a technological lens, which in turn seems to offer new spaces where agency can be (momentarily, problematically) claimed. This in turn extends existing debates in new directions through the particular framework of *technology* that is variously figured here as an object, as information and as imaginary digital space. All of these constructions, however, become problematic as they—despite their promises—nevertheless ultimately and profoundly return the women to an emplaced, embodied subjectivity that has been at the heart of feminist debate for so long.

keywords

technology; pregnancy; maternal subjectivity; narrative; identity; embodiment

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introduction

Drawing on empirical research from a project that investigated digital engagements in relation to public sector organisations (2012–2013), this article investigates the narratives and discourses that emerged within two focus groups around pregnancy, birth and motherhood. In so doing, the article engages with some long-standing debates within feminism around embodied and maternal subjectivity, agency and identity (see, e.g., Lazarre, 1976; Kristeva, 1980; Irigaray, 1985; Hirsch, 1992; Adams, 1994). As many feminist theorists have noted, drawing on Foucault's *Birth of a Clinic* (1973), the contradictions and tensions at the heart of female (and in particular, *maternal*) subjectivity can be traced to the medical turn of the eighteenth century, where the body became an object to be directly investigated, read and 'excavated' (Shaw, 2012, p. 112), rather than understood through a portraiture of symptoms and signs. This in turn constructed the body as *both* an object of medical knowledge *and* an embodied, lived subject, a tension that has increasingly been discussed as oscillatory, irreconcilable or multiple (see also Timmermans and Berg, 2003; Mol and Law, 2004; Hockey and Draper, 2005; Latimer, 2013). For the pregnant body in particular, these oscillatory, irreconcilable or multiple subject positions are doubly exacerbated by the wider and long-standing discourses of maternal subjectivity that always already configure female identity as relational, embodied and emplaced (Hirsch, 1992, p. 252).

These long-standing debates around identity and subjectivity powerfully (re)emerge in the focus group narratives, as the women discuss pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood in two key ways. The first is in relation to an embodied and lived experience, where their accounts offer parallels with much feminist research around maternal subjectivity (including medical anthropology and sociology). Here, their experience sets up a range of dichotomies between mind and body, lived and technocratic, subject and object (to name a few). The second is through the creation of an alternative 'pregnancy' space that is located in the digital realm. Here, the women source information, choose advice and navigate platforms, asserting agency that is bound up with wider discourses of the imagined individual user of technology, and articulations of 'choice' similarly voiced in the wider discourses of post-feminism and neo-liberalism. In a similar vein to the discourses of post-feminism *per se* (see, e.g., Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009), however, the notion of choice that underpins their construction of the digital world is similarly revealed as a 'liberal fiction' (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 208) and the claims of and towards (narrative and digital) agency for the women represented here become increasingly tenuous.

In relation to the focus groups, then, contradictory and negotiated subject positions emerge through their articulations of the pregnancy and motherhood experience *per se*, but they also emerge through their articulations of *technology*. Seen here, the technology moves from an alternative space of pregnancy where agency is possible, to a reliable object of information delivery, and then finally to a deeply ambiguous and anxiety-provoking entity that through its mediations reveals and returns the women to the long-standing tensions and emplaced, embodied subjectivity of maternal identity. Starting with a brief introduction to the focus groups themselves, the article discusses the two spaces of maternal subjectivity offered by the women, which could be (loosely, problematically) labelled as embodied on the one hand (lived, medicalised, corporeal) and technological (information-rich, imaginary, malleable) on the other.[1]

[1]In structuring the article in this way, I am in no way suggesting a dichotomous relationship between corporeal and virtual. Indeed, as many theorists have noted, this is unrepresentative, unhelpful and deeply problematic (e.g., Grosz, 2001; Walkerdine, 2007; Thornham and McFarlane, 2014).

If the first space offers powerful reminders about the pervasiveness of gender inequality and the continual ambiguity of maternal subjectivity and the female form, the second, it seems, works to implicate technology, information, knowledge and digital culture into these issues. Finally, using examples of the childbirth narrative as a framing device for the forced encounter between embodied subjectivity and agency, I return to the central themes of the article in order to elucidate the emergent tensions around technology, maternal subjectivity and narrative as they emerge through the research.

focus groups

The two focus groups represented here were part of an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)-led Research Council UK (RCUK) study into digital public engagement and expertise that took place between June 2012 and February 2013.[2] The focus groups took place in August 2012, as part of a wider mapping of everyday experiences of digital technologies across Leeds (in the United Kingdom) that is ongoing. They were one element of a three-pronged research project (see Coleman *et al.*, 2013), which included a study of public sector organisations such as local councils, museums and galleries; a study of communication technologies and cultures; and a study of Leeds residents. The methods used were a combination of semi-structured interviews, analysis of materials relating to practices (policies, websites, social media, pamphlets, leaflets) and observations of practices in the contexts in which they occurred. These combined methods were designed to elucidate key insights into perceptions, practices and contexts, and the negotiated tensions between these elements.

The participants represented in this article were recruited through a baby yoga facilitator who brought together a number of women from her classes across Leeds. All the women were either on maternity leave or full-time mothers with babies under the age of six months who they brought to both the focus groups and baby yoga classes. In a similar vein to the other focus groups used in the wider research—which included retired groups, young 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) people, University of the Third Age (U3A) groups and working adults—their understanding of the technology and what was meant by digital public engagement was framed by what we might call wider social, cultural, political, economic signifiers. Each group (perhaps unsurprisingly) constituted technology and their mediations with it in different ways, while at the same time drawing on normative public frameworks to initially sketch out their relationship with technology. Indeed, for baby yoga participants, what was immediately noticeable was that their initial relationship with the technology was articulated through embodied and temporal experiences of both pregnancy and early motherhood, wherein access to the 'correct' information at the right time was absolutely crucial. This impacted on how technology was imagined as inherently powerful in particular ways: on the one hand a supportive mechanism that fit to the particular schedules of early motherhood, and on the other as uncertain, contradictory and anxiety-provoking in terms of the 'authenticity' of the information itself.

In extracting two focus groups from the wider cohort, the article does not make any claims towards representational significance. Indeed, these are middle-class women, of relative financial stability, in their late 20s to early 40s, who can afford, and have transport to attend, baby yoga classes during their maternity

[2]The final report (Coleman *et al.*, 2013) was fed back to Leeds Council and circulated by the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association.

leave. Positioned as two focus groups within the complete range of focus groups we conducted, they offer one particular construction and experience of technology and technological engagement filtered through and shaped by, as I note above, wider socio-cultural signifiers. The extracts are cited here in order to function as a springboard to discuss a number of issues as they resonate with wider feminist and feminist new media theory. Indeed, although more recent engagements with NEET teenage mothers enhance rather than undermine what is presented here, these women offer a particular experience of technology, pregnancy and birth that is notably middle class and endemic to their particular socio-economic and age-related demographic. The focus groups were each over two hours in length, and consisted of rich and sustained debate around key issues that were close, personal, political and lived. The analysis of the content, both in terms of how the discussions fit with the overall research project and the specific interpretations offered here, is facilitated through the critical and conceptual frameworks drawn on to understand the discussions. The article should not be read as offering definitive empirical findings of the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, but as a wider investigation of the issues that the focus groups brought to light.[3]

surprises, interruptions, ambiguities

As many theorists have noted (Battersby, 1998; Baraitser, 2009a; Tyler, 2009a, 2009b), maternal subjectivity is far from homogenous, not only because it encompasses a range of embodied relations (pregnant body, birthing body, mothering body), but also because it is bound up in the embodied female form with its inescapable and inevitable promise of ambiguity, contradiction or mutation through its reproductive capabilities. Within feminist theory, this ambiguous state has been critically discussed in relation to terms such as 'fleshy' (Shaw, 2012, p. 121), 'inconsistent' and 'paradoxical' (Battersby, 1998, p. 11), 'intra' (Barad, 2009, p. 170) and 'abject' (Westfall, 2006, p. 264; Tyler, 2009a, pp. 77–78), which together work to highlight the anxieties caught up in the wider popular imagination around female reproduction (see, e.g., Kristeva, 1980, p. 237). The ambiguous or fluid body is both a familiar representational and conceptual trope of female subjectivity, then, precisely because, as Battersby (1998, p. 16) and Tyler (2009b, p. 2) have noted, female subjectivity is always already defined in relation to its proximity to, and potential for, giving birth.

While maternal subjectivity has been discussed within feminist theory, the *lived* experience of it remains a topic that is relatively under-discussed within wider culture. There are a number of complex and contingent explanations for this within feminist theory, including, for example, traditional public–private dichotomies (e.g., Baraitser, 2009b; Hadfield, 2009), wider policy and economic ideologies (e.g., Tyler, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Leite, 2013), popular representations of maternal and pregnant bodies (e.g., Kristeva, 1980; Pollock, 1987; Mulvey, 1989; Felski, 2000; Thornham, 2013) and wider constructions of femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009; Gill and Scarff, 2011; Thornham and McFarlane, 2013). These theorists all point to a clear unbalance between over-saturated, cultural representations of pregnant and material bodies,[4] and at the same time, a lack of open and transparent discussions about the lived subjective experiences that accompany maternal subjectivity.

[3]We are currently working with a wider cross section of women in relation to their experiences of the digital transformations brought on by the changes resulting from Welfare Reforms in the United Kingdom. Maternal and gendered subjectivity are key facets shaping their experiences. And while they are not discussed in this article, they nevertheless shape the critical and conceptual frameworks drawn on to understand the discussions. For more information about these projects, see *http://www.communitiesandculture.org/projects*.

[4]Seen more recently in the rise of what has been called 'mommy lit', 'motherhood memoirs' or 'new momism' (Di Quinzio, 1999; Frye, 2010; O'Reilly, 2010).

Perhaps it should come as little revelation, then, that for the focus groups the most prominent expression in the discussions about early pregnancy was of initial and paramount *surprise.* Surprise in terms of their relationship with the medical profession, and in relation to what Mol and Law (2004, p. 3) have called (albeit in relation to illness) a newly ambiguous 'emergent body':

> And they don't even look—they don't touch you or see. And as you go through, your expectations change a lot because you discover that you are not actually in control at all! [laughter]
>
> I went to the doctors expecting a nice little test, but they didn't do anything—they just made me fill in general medical forms! So I was like: 'Nobody will confirm that I'm pregnant! Am I pregnant?' [laughter] It was only when I had the twelve-week scan that anything was actually, you know, *properly* confirmed.
>
> You don't know what to expect, and obviously there are so many people and so much information, it's difficult to *know*. I left thinking, 'am I pregnant?' because you do want some sort of conversation, some sort of confirmation, you're right—you want them to look at you and you know *feel* or something! And they just don't give you that.
>
> To be honest, any question I asked them, they skirted around, they didn't want to actually answer. They had this list of questions to ask me …. They had the thing where you explore and find the answer yourself. So that's what I did! (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

While there are a number of ways to interpret these comments, I want to suggest initially that the expressions of surprise contained in the extracts above (suggested by the comments 'they don't even look', 'they didn't do …' 'you want them to …') could be read as an indication of a lack of open and transparent discussions about the lived subjective experiences that accompany maternal subjectivity (see also Baraitser, 2009b; Hadfield, 2009). They could also be read in relation to what Baraitser (2009a, pp. 68–69) has called 'maternal interruption'—a punctuation or disruption that reveals the 'taken-for-granted background of experience' (*ibid*., p. 69). I also want to suggest that this feeling of surprise has parallels with wider sociological and anthropological accounts of the medicalising process, suggesting perhaps that this is also a far wider issue about corporeal-medical experiences *per se*. The notion of interruption has also been appropriated by medical sociologists, discussing the way the 'self's narrative of the body' is changed through the direct intervention of technology or medicine that forces a reconceptualisation of both identity and narrative (Westfall, 2006, p. 264; see also Young, 1990; Martin, 2001). Frank (1995, p. 6), for example, writing about illness and narrative, has also discussed the process of seeking medical intervention as a form of 'narrative surrender' because of the way the body becomes subject to an alternative narrative structure that fixes the body into it. These accounts are concerned with the changing power relations that locate power with the medical and technological/technocratic process, and position the ill/pregnant body as acted on, emplaced and fixed by these processes. Such constructions have also emerged, to a certain extent, in accounts of childbirth gathered immediately after or during the experience (e.g., Akrich and Pasver, 2004).

The second issue I want to explore in relation to the comments above relates to the way their expectations of engagement with the medical profession are not met and how this, in turn, seems to reveal something about knowledge and expertise being caught up in a visual or tactile confirmation ('they don't *touch*', 'you want them to *feel*'). This latter issue of course resonates with early discussions within feminist theory around investigating or excavating the body within the medical world (Mol and Law, 2004; Hockey and Draper, 2005; Shaw, 2012), but it also draws a comparison, if not tension, between the lived and embodied experience of the women and the discursive nature of the initial meeting.

Finally, the comments also raise questions about the *kinds* of acknowledgement, information and knowledge that are simultaneously expected and not forthcoming, which seems both long-standing (particularly if we consider the body of work in medical sociology or anthropology) and particularly pervasive in the digital era. What strikes me about the comments above is that the women want acknowledgement and confirmation that they are pregnant, but they are far from certain in terms of how that acknowledgement might materialise, or the form it should take. In other words it is in part their relationship to knowledge and information *per se* that contributes to their feeling of surprise and ambiguity. This seems to me an enduring epistemological issue and one that has particular resonance in a digital age, and worth exploring further.

technology, information and agency

The women construct their medical encounters in a range of different ways that suggest ambiguity and surprise on a number of levels (e.g., in terms of subjectivity, corporeality and information/knowledge). This experience of ambiguity was also exacerbated by a second construction of an alternative space for their pregnancy hinted at in the last quote cited above. Indeed, what was notable from the focus groups was the construction of two spaces of pregnancy, of which the medical encounter was only one. The second space was the digital environment, and it is here I now turn, not least because the focus group participants similarly discuss their expectations upon becoming pregnant, but with entirely different consequences:

> When I found I was pregnant I went and sought out a lot of information, I had a lot of time to read a lot of stuff, so I did a lot of that kind of reading, I read a load of websites, books, message boards and all that sort of stuff, just because I found it interesting. Because sometimes you don't know what's going on 'in there' and you just want to feel like things are progressing don't you? So you want to read about what's going on. (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

If pregnancy is an 'internal system that can be potentially monitored and controlled' and the pregnant body 'becomes a thing to be known, an object of a discourse' (Shaw, 2012, p. 127) then the extract above seems to suggest that the online environment provides an alternative space of information, through which the pregnant body can be monitored, known and objectified by the women *themselves*. To a certain extent, this construction of her pregnancy returns us to the medicalised processes discussed at the start of the article, where the body is a site to be read and excavated in order to be known. The main difference of course is that it is the woman herself rather than the medical 'gaze' objectifying her. The second issue to note is that this process of seeking information facilitates an *individual* agency, control and mobility that is in direct contrast to maternal subjectivity that is constructed 'only in relation to her own child' (Hirsch, 1992, p. 252). Finally, the experience of finding out information is described by the women as empowering—the women below talk about being 'in control', and compare this experience to their encounters with their midwives, which they find slow, ambiguous and unsatisfying. By comparison, online information is unambiguous, straightforward and fast. And these qualities are *valued* by the women quoted below as contributing to their construction of the technology as supportive facilitator for their own agency:

> I ended up finding out a lot of information from books and just the weekly Googling on the Internet to see what stage I was at [in the pregnancy] and what was happening to me. It made me feel more in control, just having that information.

> I think one of the massive things is just Googling stuff. Any question that you've got, you put it into your phone and you've got an answer in five seconds. Not like the midwife, who never gave me a straight answer [laughter]. (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

In constructing this alternative digital space, and themselves as active, mobile agents of it, the women of the focus group bring together a range of discourses around long-standing constructions of the user of technology, which in turn draw on wider discourses of neo-liberalism, individualism, post-feminism and the gendered imaginary of technology (to name a few). While I will briefly recount some of these below, it is worth noting from the outset that this construction is always already inherently tenuous and precarious. Indeed, for the women represented here, it ultimately works to force an encounter whereby the discourse of 'choice' in particular is revealed as a myth, and any notion of agency emerges as the preserve of the pre- or non-maternal body (see also McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009; Thornham, 2013).

In the first instance, the construction of the mobile active user of technology is bound up in the discourses of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005; Jenkins, 2006) whereby the technology is constructed as the supportive facilitator of the user's needs (see also Rheingold, 1992; Östman, 2012). As many theorists have argued (Grosz, 2001; Thornham, 2011), this not only locates power with the user, who is able to direct, navigate and discern the online spaces; it also constructs the online environment in passive, transparent and open terms—ready to be penetrated and made known—which, as many feminist theorists have noted, returns us to a gendered dichotomy of subject/masculine and object/feminine (Grosz, 2001, p. 158; Thornham, 2007) whereby the user of technology is the fantasised whole subject, exploring and acting onto and through the technology.

The second issue to note is that the construction of the user as active and mobile is not only bound up in the discourse of the technology (as supportive facilitator), it is also bound up in the wider discourses of neo-liberalism and individualism (and therefore also caught up in class, age, geography, ethnicity), where the user is the powerful agent able to direct navigation through the various spaces and technologies on offer (see also Castells, 2009; Fenton and Barassi, 2011). Here, it is the ability to move through space(s) that is deemed important; implicated in these constructions is also the notion of *choice* as a key facet of agency. As many new media theorists would argue (see, e.g., Barbules, 2002; Van Dijck, 2009, 2011; Gillespie, 2010; Kember and Zylinska, 2012), this undermines and negates the *technology* as a framing, meaningful or powerful actor, constructing it as a malleable if not passive space to be moved through. It is interesting to note that this construction emerges in relation to *pregnant* maternal subjectivity, but seems less possible (as I discuss later) for a mothering subjectivity.

The third issue relates first to how online information is *valued* by the women (in relation to speed, a lack of ambiguity and clarity) and second to how these conceptions of information conflate with something we might call knowledge or expertise. There are a number of ways we can think about this. The first is in relation to the wider construction of information as offering an automatic syllogism (to borrow Fenton and Barassi's term, 2011, p. 189) that sees the plethora of information as straightforwardly producing/offering knowledge or expertise (see also Bassett *et al.*, 2013; Thornham and McFarlane, 2014). This relates to the construction of information as straightforward (and we could add terms like transparent, unbiased and 'truthful' here too), which fails to recognise the power relations or labour embedded in technology/algorithms that come to make visible such information on the interface. It is, as many theorists have noted (see Kennedy, 2012; Andrejevic, 2013; Van Dijck, 2013), precisely the assumptions around information-as-straightforward that enable the slippage between information and knowledge. Related to

this is the way that this construction of information produces the individual as agential, discerning, empowered, and feeds into neo-liberal, post-feminist discourses not least because in a plethora of information, *choice* becomes the powerful and discerning action. Seen here, expertise or knowledge is not about ownership of information but instead about a particular positionality/relationality to that information that has consequences for imagined and lived subjectivity. The data works here in particular ways: it is constructed and imagined as offering a sort of epistemological gravitas that in turn shapes and enables the user.

Finally, moving from ubiquitous information to technology 'itself', these discourses all contribute to not only the construction of technology 'itself', but also the way the technology is imagined and conceived, as inherently and problematically gendered (see also Cockburn, 1992; Walkerdine, 2007). As Anne Balsamo (2011, p. 32) has argued, technology is inherently gendered, not because of an overt gendering of technology *per se*, but because the 'technological imagination is considered to be without gender' and therefore, conversely, *inherently* gendered because of what this means in terms of what is valued, enhanced and negated. Indeed, if the technological imagination is valuing a neo-liberal mobile subjectivity, then, as Grosz (2001, p. 42) reminds us, this is also valuing the 'transparency, dispensability or redundancy of the body', and figuring these dichotomies as both normative and gender-free.

The desire for agency and control that is expressed by the women above—in their search for information about their own pregnancies—should be read as deeply ambiguous. It arguably works to return them to a maternally embodied subjectivity that, as Thornham (2013) argues, is fundamentally irreconcilable 'with traditional philosophical conceptions of the free and autonomous subject' that are also embedded in the wider construction of the user of technology. Moreover, the desire for agency and control is also deeply ambiguous and highly contested because it reveals that the *very constitution of agency* in terms of the values afforded it (individualism, neo-liberalism), practices associated with it (choice, mobility) and positions associated with it (the dichotomy between mobility and embodied subjectivity) is similarly, historically and deeply gendered. Taken together, this works to construct what O'Reilly (2010, p. 208) has termed a 'liberal fiction', and it is here that I now turn.

post-feminism, choice and technology

For O'Reilly (2010, p. 208), the 'liberal fiction' of female agency and autonomy is bound up in a fundamental contradiction of post-feminist discourses of 'choice' (see also Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009) and maternal subjectivity (see also Di Quinzio, 1999; Frye, 2010)—which are also of course equally caught up in signifiers such as class, age, ethnicity and geography. This long-standing contradiction has more recently re-emerged with the advent of 'mommy lit', 'motherhood memoirs' or 'new momism' (O'Reilly, 2010). While I do not have the scope to enter into a discussion of the literature itself, the central contradiction at the heart of this genre is deeply relevant to this article and worth detailing:

> Central to the new momism is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here's where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only true enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a 'real' woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a 'mom' and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism. (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p. 5)

Seen here, the agency articulated by the women represented above in relation to sourcing digital information is always already problematic insofar as their agency relies on the fundamental contradiction at the heart of new momism: they have already 'chosen' to have a baby and this in and of itself works to fix and locate their identity as both embodied and relational (with their child). The agency they do express, then, as also suggested above, is contingent on them being, as Thornham has suggested, a *girl*:

> This self-fashioning individualised female subject who is thus identified with 'capacity, success, attainment, entitlement, social mobility and participation' (McRobbie, 2009, p. 57) is a *girl*, or at the least a pre- or non-maternal woman. (Thornham, 2013)

Drawing together the range of discourses around technology, users, post-feminism and maternal subjectivity discussed in this article, then, there seem to be strong correlations between the normative construction of the user of technology discussed above and the discourses of post-feminism and individualism that promote the adolescent girl as agential. Given that both these subject positions undermine or negate issues of embodiment and corporeality, it is perhaps hardly surprising that when juxtaposed with maternal subjectivity, these constructions become increasingly untenable (though perhaps no less desirous). The contrast between the adolescent girl/user of technology and embodied emplaced maternal subjectivity is thrown into stark relief through (of course) experiences of childbirth.

(re)turning to questions of embodiment

Indeed, for the women represented here, the tenuousness of their claim to agency and control is violently revealed as a 'fiction' through their experience of childbirth. I want to use the extracts below to make a simple point about the inescapability of subjectivity as insistently embodied before considering how this experience comes to frame later (post-birth) constructions of technology and information. In the experiences recounted below, their attempts to assert control over childbirth (through the construction of a birth plan, decisions on pain relief, knowledge of own body) are similarly revealed as a 'fiction', and the notion of choice, so central to the discourses of post-feminism and their constructions of their own agency during pregnancy, is absolutely and irretrievably denied to them:

> You find out all this information, you become the expert about your own body, you make all these decisions about how and where you'll give birth, and then when it comes down to the actual birth, no one listens to you, no one consults with you. Everything we were talking about before [in relation to pregnancy]—the [National Childbirth Trust] classes, the huge amount of information you find, how you want a natural birth or no pain relief—all just kind of falls down at the point of birth. (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

The two accounts above are less about the actual experience of childbirth than a reflective commentary on what the experience of childbirth did to their conception of their own agency. The notion of everything 'falling down' at the point of birth explicitly relates to the arguments above with regard to the irreconcilability of individual agency and maternal subjectivity that is thrown into sharp relief through the act of childbirth. In the more detailed accounts below, the women nuance this with an articulation of some of the other factors shaping this moment, such as the role of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) groups or midwife:

> I wanted a water birth and I'd written out a whole birth plan but I ended up being induced. It really wasn't pleasant, I had an awful time, and then I had problems breastfeeding as well! And then we had a NCT catch-up when she was about seven

> or eight weeks, and the lady came and was asking us all our experiences, and I was like, 'Oh, I was induced.' And she was really quite, 'Why? Well, why did you let them do that?' And she was like sighing and, 'Oh, they shouldn't have done that.' And I was like, 'This really isn't helpful!' [laughs] And then she told me I needed trauma counselling! [laughs]
>
> It was only when I had the baby I found out that actually, they don't listen to you, because I was like, 'I need to push.' She [the midwife] was like, 'No, no, you don't.' I said, 'No, I do, I need to push,' because I'd got three minute contractions. She never asked me about my first pregnancy, how quick it was, and they literally had to rush me across the corridor and I nearly had her in the middle of it. And I thought, 'well, you're not listening to your patients', so it's very much a tick box, it feels like it, and *I* don't give that kind of care, but I can imagine to others how it does come across. (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

Filtering through these birth stories are real uncertainties, anxieties and suggestions that the birth itself was at best frustrating and unpleasant, and at worst horrendous and alienating. The notion of childbirth as an alienating experience (see Akrich and Pasver, 2004, pp. 78–79) in and of itself returns us to many of the dichotomies already discussed in the article. In relation to this, what is interesting from the narratives above is that it is not just the experience that becomes alienating, but the previous inclusive environments like the NCT class or the professional identities of the women themselves. The final extract quoted above, for example, is from a woman who worked in a maternity unit, and claimed knowledge of both pregnancy and the medical world, which she inhabited. The moment of childbirth, contrary to her expectations of being consulted or at least informed as a medical professional, instead positioned her as a 'patient'. While she does attempt to regain some sense of agency through her critique of this process, it is clear that her sense of professional expertise, which buffered her experiences of pregnancy, is deeply unsettled here.

In keeping with the arguments above, we could interpret the childbirth narratives as the transitional point from pre-maternal to maternal subjectivity, and, seen in this light, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the women become fixed and embodied and lose whatever sense of agency they previously claimed. As Di Quinzio has argued:

> Individualism and essential motherhood operate together to determine that women can be the subjects of agency and entitlement only to the extent that they are not mothers, and that mothers as such cannot be subjects of individualist agency and entitlement. (Di Quinzio, 1999, p. 13)

The main point I want to make here, however, is that ultimately, these experiences seem to return the women to an embodied and located site of subjectivity, repositioning their identity as relationally entwined with their new child and introducing a whole new set of discursive signifiers around embodied encounters (breastfeeding, sleeping, nappy changing).

(re) turning to technology

The second and tangential point I want to make relates to the subsequent construction of the technology: post birth, the technology too, becomes reconstructed—no longer as a source of information that the women can traverse and navigate, but in the first instance as a routinised supportive engagement, and in the second instance as a further site of (and for) anxiety, as the information is juxtaposed with the authority of the health visitors, becoming untrustworthy, unsubstantiated and too ubiquitous:

> iPads should come as standard issue with a new baby so you can actually access the information!

> I have an app on my phone and it gives weekly updates, but then you can access it as and when you like. And I found that really useful, I just used this app, probably most days I'd use it.
> I signed up for Bounty, but I like the 'What to Expect' better, and you get the weekly updates, and then it says what you should be doing, what you've got to look out for. I had one the other day, 'How to control temper tantrums'.
> They send you an email, 'now your baby is three weeks old …' and then they'll highlight four different things maybe—it could be from like coping without sleep and like stress in a relationship to like, you know, just changing a nappy and that kind of thing. But then it'll have links and then that goes in-depth into the website and the website seems to have copious amounts of information and you could just go on for hours clicking through. And it seems quite comprehensive and good, that resource, yeah. (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

These accounts of technological engagement continue to position the technology as a useful tool and resource, but something has clearly shifted by comparison with the accounts quoted earlier in the article. Indeed, if the earlier accounts placed emphasis on the users' ability to source information and find things out, these accounts construct the technology as *the* powerful source of information, offering crucial advice to the women who are the recipients. The technology—either through its accessibility that can be fitted to the routines of early motherhood, or because of the targeted information that is similarly fitted to the experience of motherhood—is a directive and essential tool. But unlike the earlier accounts, it is no longer malleable: the information is not disputed and the women themselves are doubly positioned by this resource first as mothers and second as recipients of (uncontested, undisputed) information. These accounts re-emphasise the construction of information 'itself' as powerful along the same lines as discussed earlier—as uncontested, straightforward, fast (see also Bollier, 2010, p. 12; Boyd and Crawford, 2011, p. 5), and return us to the issues raised earlier around the power information and data are afforded here, and how they, in turn, shape and frame the user.

The second way the technology is talked about is as a further contributory factor to anxiety, a lack of agency and a subject position that is continually oscillatory. Indeed, the accounts below locate the digital environment not as a space where agency can be exercised and demonstrated, but as one element within a whole set of other (often contradictory and conflicting) information sources:

> I think online forums and stuff are a good source of advice and it's a really easy way of finding out what other people's babies are doing … but it does also make you panic much more, [laughs] 'Why isn't mine doing that?'
> When I told the health visitor, I got told off for Googling too much! She gave me a really hard time and then I didn't know what to do after that!
> I spent a lot of time on websites. It's good just to see other people's experiences, but it just made it worse: have I got mastitis? Yes. Great. Now what do I do? [laughs] Should I stop breastfeeding? Yes … no. It just made me more confused. You have the midwife and then the health visitor coming out, and they tell you one lot of information, your family tells you another, Mumsnet or What To Expect tells you something different—everyone tells you what to do. And you end up not knowing what to do at all [laughs].
> You've all got information from very different connections, but very different resources, like Mumsnet or the NCT stuff, or like local sites or friends or newsletters, so you're getting information from a whole range of different places. (Extracts from Baby Yoga Focus Groups, August 2012)

What is notable from the extracts above is that the choice of information no longer contributes to a sense of control: the women are no longer empowered to choose which information to follow. Instead they become ossified, fixed into a position of confusion and unable to discern which information may be

valuable and which information may not be. This produced an overwhelming sense of guilt for the women, who continually expressed the sense that they *should* be doing something that they were not.

There are a number of ways to think about this transition. The first relates to the conception of technology —which differs in the accounts above from technology as useful object, to technology as information, to technology as anxiety-inspiring—and I want to briefly explore this in relation to agency and choice. The second relates once again to the contradictions of maternal subjectivity, this time filtered through the lens of technology and digital mediation, which I want, finally, to return to as concluding thoughts.

objects and information clouds

What is notable for me in the various constructions of technology detailed in the section above is that *how* the technology is imagined seems to relate to the power it is afforded in relation to women in the focus groups. Technology-as-object locates the technology in a useful relationship, where it can function within the frameworks of that relationship. The discussions that figured technology as an iPad, an app or a smart phone, for example, continue to position the technology as a powerful force that nevertheless fits to the quotidian routine of the women. If technology-as-object prioritises these women's routines, it also, of course sits within a more traditional notion of embodied maternal subjectivity, where the routine of the child takes precedence. This traditional, popular construction of motherhood as nurturing, caring and self-sacrificing (O'Reilly and Porter, 2005) re-emerges here, and technology is repositioned within this framework insofar as it usefully fits. Its use and effect is therefore framed within this narrative, and the technology itself is constructed as a fixed resource that can be turned to.

Technology-as-information upsets the relationship between user and the digital, because what is understood as 'technology' becomes both invisible and more akin to something resembling information 'itself'. In the accounts above that construct technology as information, the object of technology is subsumed into the actual data that stands in for or replaces technology. This means not only that technology 'itself' is disappearing; it becomes, to use Caroline Bassett's (2013, p. 212) terms, 'increasingly hidden in the cloud'. It also means that the relationship between the user/mother and the technology is more fluid, unfixed and not fit to the routines of motherhood; technology is no longer malleable, it is penetrative and encroaching. Bassett has argued that the invisibility of technology has produced something more akin to a 'problematic' and 'quasi-evolutionary' form of 'affinity' (*ibid.*), where the positions of user and object become blurred through the mediatory acts of engagement. Either or both of these constructions are problematic for the women, who have first been returned to the emplaced subject position of maternal subjectivity through the experience of childbirth and pregnancy, and then second, been seemingly ossified by the multiple discourses of medical professionals, health visitors, technology, and family and friends, until their own agency becomes untenable.

Whether we take these constructions of technology to this extreme or not, it is clear to me that how the technology is imagined is central to the power it is afforded. Indeed, the move away from technology-as-object to something we more broadly conceptualise as digital culture or ubiquitous computing repositions the *imaginary* as central to the construction, practice and mediation of those technology engagements. The focus groups represented here all discuss something that is both an object *and* an imaginary. While the

object may be the interface or means through which information is gathered, news is shared, discussions are enacted, it is the potential and possibilities of the technology that really emerge through their discussions, through discussions of what is offered, the information 'itself', and the initial potential of the technology to provide an alternative space of/for pregnancy.

maternal subjectivity, reconsidered

Finally, then, I want to conclude by asking about what the three axes identified in the article—of technology, embodiment and maternal subjectivity—might offer each other. Of course, final remarks are necessarily framed by caveats relating to the size of the focus groups and their particular class make-up. Nevertheless, it seems to me that what is interesting about these findings is the way they resonate with wider feminist research. Similarly if we were to take the particular theme of class further, it would be to note that the resonances detailed below occur despite (or indeed because of) middle-class privilege and its particular signifiers. Furthermore, we could note the prevalence of certain discourses around neo-liberalism, post-feminism, 'new momism' that emerge through the focus groups that are also, of course, embedded in and produced through notions of class. Perhaps unsurprisingly, technology does not disrupt these discourses, but seems to support and refigure them.

The first thing to note, then, is that to a certain extent technology has always been bound up in and as a 'gender relationship' (McNeil, 1987, p. 5), which includes the social, material, the lived and the imagined. In some senses, then, the framing of technology by the women in the focus groups is both unsurprising and highly problematic, given that their accounts resonate so strongly with the earlier work of feminist scholars (see also Cockburn, 1992). When we add the embodied experiences of pregnancy and motherhood to these long-standing debates around technology and gender, we are offered in the first instance a reconceptualisation of *technology*, where the particular relations of medicine and technology reconfigure the latter as both heterogeneous (and embedded within and/or disappeared into other human and non-human relations) *and* stabilised at key moments, when the conflation of technology and medicine is felt 'on' or 'through' the body (Michael and Rosengarten, 2012, p. 4). This means that technology is a highly ambiguous, formative, dispersed *and* direct and active force in terms of constituting both gender and the body 'itself'. Furthermore, these two configurations, as I suggest above, are not only felt in relation to the medical process (as Michael and Rosengarten, *ibid.*, argue). They also emerge through the construction of technology by the women represented here as either ubiquitous, invisible (heterogeneous) information or object.

In the second instance, we enter into a state of *déjà vu* whereby the body becomes once again the site on which such relations (e.g., around technology, power, embodiment) are played out and felt, as well as a central signifier *for* those relations. Gender and the body are familiarly and inherently entwined with particular consequences for both. Michael and Rosengarten (2012) writing about medicine, politics and gender argue that a key aim of recent work around embodiment and medicine has been to situate the body as an active and 'agential' (Barad, 2009) force within a complex set of relations, rather than as an object of enquiry, which can then ultimately be 'excised from view in the process of its study' (Michael and Rosengarten, 2012, p. 3). Here, medical processes and discourse are a means through which technology is felt on and through the body (both heterogeneously and in a direct way), constructing the body as a site

of 'intra-action' (Barad, 2009) entangled in and 'intra' to those medical and discursive (and, I would add, imaginary) processes. This is not only a different account of technology, then, that constitutes it through mediatory processes and relations, whereby the effects are nevertheless corporeally experienced. It is also an attempt to intervene in the construction of the ill/pregnant body, by reconceptualising it as emergent from, rather than subject to, power relations. The central question here, then, is not only about the emergent body (asked in relation to the discourses outlined above), but also, crucially, the emergent *technology*, which is similarly forged through and within these relations.

If the discourses around technology form one axis, then, and em/bodiment forms another, the third axis that emerged here relates to discourses and narratives of maternal subjectivity. In thinking about the way identity is articulated and narrated by the women in the focus groups, we moved from embodied experience to normative (middle-class) and negotiated articulations of that experience, complete with wider discursive framings such as (notably, here) post-feminism and neo-liberalism as they are reconfigured around motherhood. This in and of itself produced contradictions, not least because, as Frye (2010, p. 189) has argued, the notion of articulating or narrating *motherhood* is 'still largely perceived to be mutually exclusive, particularly because of the relationship mothers have to discourse and to cultural authority'. Indeed, to reiterate Hirsch (1992, p. 252), the fact that the identity of the mother is constituted relationally through her child means that 'she cannot be the subject of her own discourse'. With the advent of post-feminism, and more recently what has been termed 'new momism' (Di Quinzio, 1999; Douglas and Michaels, 2004), these frameworks have shifted, on the one hand inviting claims of and towards agency through the discourse of 'choice' and mobility, while on the other negating that subject position through the ultimate choice of having children, which returns the women to a site of embodied subjectivity.

In the end, then, it is *this* position that the women ultimately inhabit, and their accounts of pregnancy, childbirth and technology work to exacerbate rather than intervene in this positioning. The temporary and tenuous claims of and towards individual agency that are momentarily inhabited through the narrative agency or through the construction of technology seem to 'fall down' (to use the terms offered by the women) through the act of childbirth. Indeed, as Frye argues:

> This idea of individualism … has additional hazards as it underpins a number of binaries that have forestalled feminist inquiry; self and other, mind and body, public and private, nature and culture … because both of these views of selfhood are inadequate to constructing maternal subjectivity, the task itself becomes virtually impossible. (Frye, 2010, p. 190)

Following this, the recourses towards agency that are claimed by the women here—through a precarious narrative agency or imagined space of technology—seem entirely contingent on reproducing the long-standing binaries detailed above. In the end, then, it is the embodied, alienating, even horrendous experience of childbirth that becomes *the* central signifier through which they understand their subsequent technological, narrative and embodied relations. It seems that, despite the advances of feminism and contradictory discourses of post-feminism, despite the possibilities of technology and the constructions of the user, it is this embodied, lived event that is revealed as *the* powerful interventionist and disruptive force, revealing and returning the women once again to the long-standing tensions and lived engagements of maternal subjectivity, which are always, as Battersby (1998, p. 16) and Tyler (2009b, p. 2) remind us, understood in relation to their proximity to, and potential for, giving birth.

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