

The Ethical Sensations of Im-mediacy: Embodiment and Multiple Literacies in
Animal Rights Activists' Learning with Media Technologies

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Abstract

In this article, I consider a social movement for animal rights as a site of learning about a particular form of ethics. I use a multiliteracies framework, which emphasizes critical consumption and creation across a range of media forms, to consider how learning unfolds using a different kind of medium: the affective body. Activists in this study learned to read the signs of their embodied encounters with nonhuman animals as a privileged mode for understanding their ethical truth. Then they used other forms of digital mediation to produce and spread the feelings of being present with animals for others. I discuss social media memes and virtual reality as two examples. I employ the term “im-mediacy” to emphasize both the affects of feeling present and the sense-making involved in mediation and its ideologies. What counts as good strategy in multiliterate organizing for social change is shaped by ideologies about media and the world beyond. These findings suggest the need to consider the affects produced in learning environments that bring bodies in proximity to one another, or that use technology to mediate feelings of proximity, as well as what I describe as embodied literacies for sensing the needs of others and responding with care.

Keywords: affect and emotion, embodiment, multiliteracies, media technologies, social movements

Practitioner notes

What is already known about this topic

- The idea of “multiliteracies” suggests that learning to critically consume and produce across media forms is an important aspect of civic participation in contemporary society.
- Social movements are sites of learning that transform movement participants while also aiming to produce learning changes at larger scales.
- The use of media technologies is governed by “media ideologies,” implicit and socioculturally situated understandings of media forms, their affordances and limits.

What this paper adds

- We can enrich our understandings of media technologies for learning by considering bodies and their sensate capacities.
- Animal rights activists’ learning includes learning to “read” the signs of their encounters with nonhuman animals.
- They also learn multiliteracy strategies for using other media forms to reproduce feelings of presence and connection for others.

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Technologists, media creators, and educators should consider how engaging with media technologies for learning makes us feel, as those feelings are part of learning.
- Learning arrangements that bring bodies together, or produce feelings of proximity, have ethical implications, and practitioners should consider how to help learners respond to one another with care—a form of embodied literacy.

Introduction

In this article, I use ethnographic methods to consider the use of media technologies by activists in an animal rights group called Direct Action Everywhere (DxE). Analyzing the stories of activists' encounters with nonhuman animals, I show how embodied understanding develops for radical activists. In this context, immediacy—a “direct” encounter between human and nonhuman bodies—was strongly valued for its ethical effects but difficult to produce on the massive scale of social transformation the activists sought to achieve. I then examine two digital media technologies activists used to overcome this challenge, social media memes and virtual reality (VR) experiences. Each provided different affordances for the activists' ethical and political project, and the activists had to learn to use them to greatest effect. I draw on critical multiliteracies perspectives, supplemented by conceptualizations of embodiment and affect, to argue that being literate in the use of these media technologies requires an understanding of how they can be used to cultivate the sensations of ethical im-mediacy—that is, the feeling of being present with the needs and suffering of others' living bodies. I conclude with a discussion that moves beyond this specific social movement to the concerns of learning researchers, designers, and educators more broadly.

While an animal rights activist group may not closely resemble a classroom, it is certainly a learning environment that can inform discussions in education about the relationships between learning, media technologies, and social change. Learning researchers have increasingly turned to social movement settings for examples of learning (e.g., Curnow, Davis, & Asher, 2018). On the one hand, teaching and learning occurs among activists themselves. On the other hand, social movements are explicitly aimed at making a difference beyond their membership. Jurow and Shea (2015) use the concept of “scale making” to indicate how learning in social

movement activity can “create and disrupt flows of ideas, practices, and people across spatial and temporal orders” (p. 288). In the remainder of this introduction, I explain my approach to affect and emotion, and then I explore the role that im-mediacy can play in the learning that social movement participants strategically design for others.

Affect and emotion

Affect and emotion are critical to this learning. They define our political horizons (Gould, 2009) and shape our perceptions of “us” and “them” (Ahmed, 2004). As aspects of our ethical learning, affect and emotion help us perceive the experiences of social others, make judgments about what is right, and act with wisdom in the world (Silverstein & Trombetti, 2013).

My perspective on affect and emotion is informed by approaches from the “affective turn” (Clough, 2007) in the humanities and social sciences. “Affect” has often been used to denote the felt aspects of embodied life that exceed symbolic representation and meaning, whereas emotion marks “the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of experience” (Massumi, 2002, p. 28). As Leander and Ehret (2019) point out, affect theory challenges scholars to rethink the role of “meaning” in literacy research. They ask, “How is the life and energy of the poem, lived out in relation to energies all around it, not captured in a representation of the poem (e.g., the words on the page), but in its lived movements or continual becomings?” (p. 7). Seen in this way, the “texts” of literacy are not just representations, but also things that come together with people and other actors, to make a felt difference in what the world can become. This potential is never foreclosed *a priori*.

At the same time, as Anderson (2016) argues, the emergent potential of affect is always in the process of being captured, mediated, and made meaningful in particular ways. The

meanings that cohere as “an emotion” in lived experience are highly contingent and contextually dependent, and they are subject to the dynamics of power, norms, and ideology (Hochschild, 1983/2012). Who feels, and how, in relation to what object is thus a matter of political contestation. The representational forms that contestation takes are also a matter of *matter*—of materiality: Leander and Ehret (2019) point to the “violent potentials” of representations, such as texts and discourses, to affect bodies in visceral ways (p. 10). For Anderson (2016), the notion of “encounters” highlights the inherent relationality of affect as a bodily capacity to affect and be affected. In this article, I focus on relational configurations between humans and nonhumans. I also trace what happens when media technologies join those configurations. As other kinds of bodies, they have affects beyond their representational content.

Multiliteracies and the strategies of im-mediacy

Scholars of multiliteracies in education have emphasized how learners should become literate in the critical consumption and production of “texts” in multiple media forms, from the written word to multimodal and interactive digital environments (The New London Group, 1996). Recognizing technological mediation as an important site for the expression and reinforcement of ideology and power relations—but also potentially for their transformation—scholars in this tradition argue that students must become literate in “creating multimedia texts designed to challenge the thinking of the world around them” (Garcia, Seglem, & Share, 2013). For Penuel & O’Connor (2018), the appropriate metaphor for the kind of equitable social transformation multiliteracy pedagogies promise is not “design” but rather “organizing.” Organizing foregrounds the relational work that people do together to define equitable visions for the future and to build connections across scales to put those visions into practice.

As scholarship on multiliteracies shows, written language is one media technology among many, and all of them play a role in the discursive and material shaping of the political world. However, attending to affect and emotion foregrounds another form of mediation relevant for learning to organize social futures: embodiment. Studies of multispecies encounters have explored how humans come to read the signs of nonhuman bodies, learning to become responsive as a matter of ethics (Warkentin, 2010), collaboration (Laurier, Maze, & Lundin, 2006), or safety (Parreñas, 2012). Semiosis, the making of meaning with signs, turns out to be much broader than the human use of symbolic language. While representational logic and a focus on semiosis “risks unrealizing the very real lives and movements [that discourses] affect” (Leander & Ehret, 2019, p. 11), strategic reading and mediation of animals’ bodies in animal rights activism is aimed precisely at protecting those bodies by *intensifying* the reality of their suffering. As a case, then, animal rights activism poses an ontological and epistemological quandary: How can we take seriously affect theory’s lesson that representations are never merely representations (they also have material effects/affects), while acknowledging that representational logics are not just academics’ inventions but are in active use among the educators and learners with whom we study?

Representing encounters between humans and animals is something that the animal rights activists in this study do *in order to* produce affects that can be channeled into a particular vision of an ethical future. They mix tropes of affect and semiosis in ways that defy supposedly firm theoretical boundaries and demand an ethnographic accounting. They make use of affect’s potential while attempting to capture and organize that potential into specific forms of emotional discourse that support their strategic goals. To understand this work, I introduce the notion of “im-mediacy” to describe feelings of direct encounter that are produced through media practices.

As an extension of multiliteracies, I consider encounters broadly—encompassing contacts with skins and screens and beyond. I borrow the term “im-mediacy” from Mazzarella (2004), who invoked it in a derogatory sense, as nostalgia for the intimate and the local that obscures the constant work of mediation in contemporary life. In learning with technology, I contend, it matters both how people learn to work with media *and* how the sensation of being im-mediate propels learning along.

Feeling im-mediate has crucial implications for the development of ethical relations in contemporary life under conditions of mass digitization. In his analysis of morality in the age of television, Boltanski (1999) argued that the possibility of moral commitment in response to a “spectacle of suffering” is determined by a “conjunction of the possibility of knowing and the possibility of acting” (p. 8). Being proximate to suffering, or at least the means to address it, is a condition for moral involvement. This challenge leads to what Mazzarella (2017) calls the “affect/ethics impasse”: humans’ affective capacities of empathy may be of limited radius, but they are nonetheless called upon by societies “to have an ethical relationship to people we will never meet” (p. 200). Contemporary media forms complicate these matters significantly.

People develop pragmatic strategies for using media to make others feel closer, to draw them into an ethical relation with others. Hartman (2000) described the practices used in producing the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, started in 1979. A fixed camera focused solely on the survivor as ‘talking head’ within a sparse studio environment. This setup was chosen as a way to support “intimacy” between testimony and viewer (p. 11). Hartman characterizes this arrangement as a “lack of” technique (p. 9). The anthropologist Kunreuther (2010) analyzed how FM radio became a symbol of democracy in Nepal in the late 1990s and early 2000s, through stylized “liveness” that played up informality and technical mishaps and

gave voices a feeling of directness (p. 339). Jones (2009) examined how self-wounding in performance art was documented in photography to enhance the wound's ethical effects. In the words of artist Ron Athey, "The artifice makes the orifice iconic" (cited in Jones, 2009, p. 49). Film and media scholar Rangan (2017) points out that "documentary" film, coined by Scottish filmmaker John Grierson amidst the horrors of World War II, was founded on the idea that cinema could reveal the urgency of humanitarian concerns in a "direct, immediate, and didactic fashion" (p. 3). She uses the term "immediations" to label the self-effacing "aesthetic, formal, and narrative tropes" that documentary film uses to generate feelings of humanitarian urgency (p. 4).

For me, exploring im-mediacy is a way of taking two things seriously at once: the strategies of critical media production and the ineluctable sensations of directness those strategies may produce. The hyphen connects a rhetorical assemblage between mediation (including its semiotic strategies and sense-making potential) and affect (including the ineluctable reality of feeling nothing in-between). It insists that validating one term does not inherently necessitate suspicion of the other.

In this article, I present a case of learning and scale-making with im-mediacy, alternating between an emphasis on the reality of feelings and the strategies that (re)create them. As I will show, in DxE the im-mediate sensation of presence between bodies was upheld as the ideal mode for ethical learning about nonhuman animals. DxE activists drew close to nonhuman bodies as a way of uncovering what they saw as the ethical truth of animal exploitation. Activists argued for the value of in-person witnessing as a form of im-mediate understanding (knowing without the interference or distance imposed by a medium). Skin touching skin brought together the possibility of knowing animal suffering and the possibility of acting to remediate it. To scale up

the encounter to include others, activists turned to digital forms of mediation, learning to use their affordances to produce sensations of im-mediacy. I argue that affordances are not innate to one medium or another, but rather are examples of “media ideologies,” lived understandings of “both the communicative possibilities and the material limitations” of mediational forms (Gershon, 2010, p. 283). In this study, activists made sense of how certain kinds of text and imagery could make social media memes feel like a direct connection to an animal, how certain uses of VR could create an im-mediate “experience” of a factory farm that exceeded mere representation. The case of DxÉ is a case of how bodies and other media technologies come together in action. An embodied multiliteracy in DxÉ shaped learning about both the ethical status of bodies themselves and about what media technologies can do in scale-making projects to secure that ethical status in the world. Here, learning in scale-making involved both an affective ethics and a set of strategic practices aimed at eliciting and ordering affects in particular ways. Feeling im-mediate with animals led to sense-making about media, which led to making others feel im-mediate, and so on. Scale-making in DxÉ involved using media technologies to materialize a growing zone of proximity—a mediated space of felt presence understood as fundamental to becoming ethical in response to suffering.

Context and method

This research was conducted with the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of DxÉ, an international animal rights activist network. Founded in 2012, the group uses direct action tactics and media technologies to push for “total animal liberation,” an abolitionist stance toward the instrumental use of nonhuman animals in food agriculture, fashion, medicine, and other industries. During the period of this research, the group organized various opportunities for

interaction between members and nonhuman animals. These opportunities included volunteer workdays at animal sanctuaries; the creation of “microsanctuaries” with small numbers of animals at people’s residences; “slaughterhouse vigils,” where activists converged at meat processing plants to temporarily delay truck deliveries of live animals; and “open rescue” operations, in which activists entered animal agriculture facilities, used multimedia recordings to document conditions, and removed individual animals deemed to be severely sick or injured to receive veterinary care. Documentation of open rescues was publicly released in coordination with press outlets and was used to tell the stories of individual animals.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of DxE, both in-person and through internet-based media (Hine, 2015), between December 2014 and May 2015 and again between October 2016 and July 2017. Ethnographic vignettes included in this article are drawn from my fieldnotes from participant observation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) and formal, open-ended interviews with 20 current and former activists.¹ In this fieldwork, I identified as a non-member whose goal was to understand learning processes in the group. Learning researchers have used participant observation and ethnography to understand the perspectives of learners in communities of practice (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002), to trace experiences of learning across settings (Jackson, 2011), and to document long-term developmental changes (Roth, 2001). My personal interest in animals shaped the selection of this research context, the rapport I formed with my interlocutors, and my analyses. One example of this shaping is in my focus on the ethical dimensions of activists’ media ideologies and practices. However, rather than argue a position on animal rights, this article focuses on what the case of animal rights activism can reveal about mediation and affect in the use of learning technologies.

¹ The names of individuals have been changed.

In the following sections, I present representative vignettes that aim to capture how feelings get read as signs of ethical obligation in body-to-body encounters between activists and nonhuman animals. Then I examine how activists use digital technologies of social media memes and VR in attempts to make other people feel those obligations too.

The learning of embodied and affective literacies

In this section, I show how an embodied understanding of ethics develops for animal rights activists by examining two vignettes of encounters between humans and nonhumans. In the first, an activist named Carlos describes an experience of communing with a goat at an animal sanctuary, an experience unlocked by his willingness to perceive communication beyond human language. In the second, Roxy, another activist, describes coming face-to-face with turkeys during a nighttime investigation of a farm. In these cases, im-mediacy is a feeling generated by bodily techniques. Knowing how bodies feel up-close is a prerequisite for using digital technologies for affective scale-making.

“It’s just a lot of feeling”

I first met Carlos at an orientation event for new activists in the autumn of 2016, shortly after he had been introduced to DxE. At that time, he had been vegan for three years but had recently become interested in animal care. He joined the DxE Animal Care Working Group to learn more about farmed animal sanctuaries and how to care for nonhuman animals. By the time I interviewed him in mid-June 2017, he had just graduated with a bachelor’s degree and was exploring the possibility of working in animal sanctuaries full-time. He had recently attended a

conference at an sanctuary in California, where over the course of about an hour he became acquainted with Nigel, a goat who had been born on the sanctuary.

“I feel like I bonded so much with this one goat,” he told me as we ate vegan Mexican food in a sunny parking lot. “The way this goat looked into my eyes. The way this goat interacted with me was in a way that no human can interact with me. Communication in a way that no human—maybe not couldn’t but I haven’t had with a human.” I asked Carlos to tell me more about their interaction. He said:

He was interested in me, and I’d feed him leaves and he was pushy! He’d want more leaves so he’d nudge me with his horns. “All right. Fine. I’ll give you more leaves.” We’d kick it. I don’t know. There’s something about being able to be physically very close to someone and very calm with them that helps you bond with anyone. Literally we just had our heads up to one another, for like half a minute to a minute, just resting them. Every once in a while pushing a little more, one to the other. [...] It’s hard to explain. Because with a person you can say things that they said or things that you did. With an animal it’s just a lot of FEELING, you know what I mean?

Carlos’s hour with Nigel was an intimate encounter involving the interface of bodies, responding to one another. When Carlos said, “He’d want more leaves, so he’d nudge me with his horns,” he was describing his reading of the signs of their interaction. At first Carlos struggled to explain their interaction to me. Unlike with a human, Carlos said he could not simply report back to me what Nigel said. Rather, “it’s just a lot of FEELING.” Carlos told me how they took turns scratching Nigel’s itch, having a kind of embodied conversation. Where Nigel left off, Carlos could pick up again, reading the signs of Nigel’s horns to attribute his intention, his interest in being scratched in a particular place. At points, in order to translate this interaction for my

human ways of making sense, Carlos used English words in Nigel's "voice," an attempt to make legible in human language that which he had earlier "sensed" in feeling.

Crucially, this way of interacting with Nigel, Carlos believed, was not automatic or innate in humans. "It's something weird to say that not everybody can bond with a goat, and I can," he told me:

For me it's the kind of thing like there's this willingness in thinking that you can communicate with a goat or you can relate to a goat that allows it. Once the willingness is there, then it will come, I feel like. You could put the same goat in front of a person every day, but until something [He snapped his fingers] sparks this willingness, not even an interest in this goat, but this ... I don't know. That's kind of my story.

Put another way, one has to become sensitive to the feelings of bodies in interaction. Attending to the signs of a goat's desire to be scratched is a mode of critical literacy that puts a spotlight on nonhuman agency and asserts the ethical standing of nonhuman needs and desires. The sensation of im-mediacy is what enables this political reading by Carlos, but it is predicated on two conditions. First, particular bodily techniques make it possible. Second, its meanings are organized by Carlos's intentions as an activist (his "willingness in thinking") and the context of a sanctuary conference. A media ideology of what bodies can do shapes, and is reciprocally shaped by, Carlos and Nigel's touching of heads.

"It's something about their skin"

In 2015, DxE activists investigated a certified humane supplier of turkeys to an upscale grocery chain. Roxy, one of the activists who participated in the investigation, told me about the

experience, her first open rescue. She had been a lookout, and she waited outside the barn for the other activists to come out:

[I]t was just so heartbreaking. ‘Cause I was outside, and I was like, just watching to make sure that nobody shows up and stuff. But like, I was looking at the turkeys too. ‘Cause they could see me through the screen thing. And we were just making eye contact, and it was just so sad. How do I turn away from you?

There she was, in the middle of the night, pressed up against the side of a barn, terrified that the headlights of passing cars from the road nearby would give away her team. And then she made eye contact with the turkeys through the ventilation screen. “I felt like they were looking at me, just terrified, just being like, ‘Why, why are we here?’” Roxy read their moment of eye contact to try to understand the turkeys’ point of view. The feeling of im-mediacy stopped her in her tracks: “How do I turn away from you?” It called her to take up a position of ethical responsibility for their situation, which organized her feeling into guilt at knowing most of the turkeys would be left behind.

Eventually, Roxy’s friends came back outside carrying a turkey, whom they passed into her arms. She explained that sometimes, once back in the car, they would give the animals “fluids if they need it.” I asked her how you can tell. She explained that she was not as experienced as some of the other activists, “but it’s something about their skin. I think it’s similar to... I don’t know. This is what I would do.” She demonstrated by pinching the flesh on my back between my shoulder blades. “It’s similar to a dog, like you pinch it and try to tell.” Detecting the need for care is an embodied, felt practice. For Roxy, it was difficult to put it into words, so she used the interface between my body and hers to show me how it is done. Roxy’s critical

embodied reading was also a political statement that nonhumans' felt signs deserved to be read and responded to.

Summary: Embodied and affective literacies

Like other media forms, embodied encounters are something one learns to read. Embodiment as a medium provides felt knowledge that builds up over time, as people learn to read its signs. Reading with bodies can provide opportunities to experience the desires and sensitivities of another embodied being, as Carlos learned with Nigel. In this sense, a feeling of im-mediacy supports an ethical orientation toward nonhuman life. Yet such readings are also mediated from beyond the bodies themselves. Carlos's interaction with Nigel took place in a setting explicitly created by animal rights activists to perform the individual dignity of its nonhuman residents. Roxy's gut-wrenching reading of her eye contact with the turkeys in the barn is suffused by her belief, already made strong, that every animal deserves freedom and care. For DxE activists, an ideological position on the ethical standing of nonhuman animals both informs how feelings feel in their reading of animals' bodies and is further produced by the encounter itself.

Re-mediating the ethical sensations of im-mediacy

Every affect has an effect. For DxE activists, one effect was being compelled to spread the affects—to keep the embodied moment moving. While being “present” with nonhuman animals proved to be a deeply affecting experience for DxE activists, it was simply not possible for everyone to have this experience. The use of mediation technologies was therefore necessary to spread these experiences more broadly.

In this section, I consider the technological mediation of encounters between humans and nonhuman animals in DxE as a particular genre of multiliterate production that accomplished ideological work for DxE activists. To ensure that their work had the desired political effects in the world, DxE members had to learn the literacy strategies of communicating their commitments to a wider public. This entailed particular uses of language as well as particular techniques of multimodal representation that communicated the affects that the activists experienced in interfacing with the bodies of animals. Two media forms activists in DxE became literate in using were memes on social media and VR experiences. A multiliteracies perspective draws attention to the ways in which particular media forms can be used strategically to produce political affects and effects, to persuade or to bolster or disrupt a particular ideological configuration. DxE practices in the production of memes and VR experiences demonstrate individual and collective learning about those strategies. A media ideologies perspective adds a focus on the social and historical contingency of those affectively textured strategies, shaped by the discourses within DxE and beyond regarding both the technologies themselves and the subject matter at hand, animal rights.

Social media memes

Much of DxE members' interaction with each other and with the organizational structure of DxE took place on social media platforms, particularly Facebook. The overall network had a Facebook page with more than 260,000 likes as of May 2018. Individual chapters also maintained Facebook pages or groups. Facebook served as an important hub for promoting DxE events such as meetups and protests. The stream of updates from organizers included DxE news items, videos of events and open rescue investigations, and animal rights memes. I learned from

my interlocutors that Facebook was a crucial channel for recruiting new activists. Many of the activists I interviewed had themselves learned about DxE by engaging with the group's content on Facebook. Additionally, the San Francisco Bay Area chapter included an Outreach Working Group and a Design Working Group, whose members produced content for the main DxE page and interacted with potential new members to encourage them to participate in, or even launch, local chapters.

Crucial to the social media ideologies of DxE activists and organizers was the notion that Facebook and other social media platforms were good for mobilizing potential activists, but perhaps not so good for changing the minds of nonvegans. DxE activists frequently explained to me that the true audience for their protests was not the bystanders in the restaurants or grocery stores where protests took place, but rather the online audience which included many vegetarians or vegans who did not consider themselves activists. Organizers believed that to shift the social norms around the use of animals, they needed to produce a groundswell of activists out of inactive but potentially interested everyday people. It is in this mix of affinity targeting and recruitment that the production of memes took place.

When I interviewed Ilana in 2017, she had recently joined the Design Working Group in DxE to learn about how to use graphic design more effectively for the cause. Though she was a novice designer, she took on small tasks like producing memes for Facebook. When I asked her what makes a good meme, she said:

Something that's catchy, maybe? Like something that can really touch you. When... if it's like animals, like something where you can see their eyes. You know, so maybe feel like what they're feeling, and then put some text in front of the picture and they can really

explain what they're going through. So people will see it and be like, "Wow. That's so powerful." But I'm learning.

Practicing alongside more senior members of the Design Working Group, Ilana learned that a meme for animal liberation needed to be "catchy" but also "powerful." In this visual form, representing the animal's body was important. Paradoxically, it had to "really touch you" without relying on the skin's sense of touch. One strategy was to present the animal's body so the viewer "see[s] their eyes," creating an affective connection that could make the viewer "feel like what they're feeling." Translating bodily affects into human language can also help, and this was done by putting "some text in front of the picture" to help the animal "explain what they're going through."

A meme in DxE need not do the work of convincing a meat-eating public of the correctness of DxE's cause. A single image with some text was unlikely to change minds, but it could produce a "powerful" affective encounter between the individual animal pictured and a vegan browsing social media. If a meme succeeded in "really touching" the viewer, that viewer might be reminded of the ethical sensations behind the everyday practice of vegetarianism or veganism. Amid the networked milieu of activist opportunities that populated DxE's social media feeds, feeling what a suffering animal was feeling might affect one to take further action.

Virtual reality

In May 2017, at an international conference organized by DxE, a panel discussion featured the CEO of a VR production company, and Rachel, an activist from Canada. Rachel had become a proponent of conducting slaughterhouse vigils in the animal rights movement. In these vigils, activists went to slaughterhouses to "bear witness" to what was occurring there. Together,

the panelists discussed the importance of bearing witness firsthand to the suffering of animals. “The first time I bore witness and looked inside a truck” pulling up to a pig slaughterhouse, Rachel said, she was surprised by “how much they’re asking you to help them.” It “draws you in,” she said. “They’re pleading.” The CEO, a former war photographer, found connections between his previous experience in warzones with his more recent forays into animal rights. He said he attended his first slaughterhouse vigil in Los Angeles. Looking into the holes in the side of the truck, he said, changed everything for him. “That eye contact is just profound.” He emphasized the im-mediacy he felt in that first encounter. “It is so important to have that direct connection with an animal,” to touch them, to give them a little bit of water on their last day on Earth. Both war and factory farming, the CEO told the crowd, “can so easily be abstracted.” VR technology, with the capability of recording 3D and 360-degree video, held promise for bringing people into places “that need to be experienced,” he said. He explained that even with early-stage VR technology, the human brain interpreted the media as a form of “presence,” so a “VR experience is the next best” for people who cannot enter a factory farm themselves.

DxE and the VR company had launched a partnership, and the first project was “Operation Deathstar,” a VR experience of an open rescue investigation conducted by DxE at a Smithfield farm in Utah. After the panel discussion, I tried out one of the VR headsets, loaded with a preview of the 360-degree immersive video, which was later released publicly on YouTube a couple of months later (Direct Action Everywhere, 2017; Strom, 2017). The video begins with drone flyover footage of the farm, followed by a scene of a group of activists receiving a briefing from an organizer about what they are about to do. He asks his team if they are ready to go. Then he turns to the camera: “You ready to go?” he asks us.

Then, darkness. Night has fallen, and the activists' headlamps reveal a dumpster outside the farm. Inside the dumpster is a "mother pig," surrounded by dead piglets. Moving my chin down, I can peer into the dumpster with them. The organizer narrates, "When we just got here, we could still hear the blood dripping from her body." Cut to an interior room, where he stands in front of a closed door. There's a mechanical sound in the background, like the churning of a thousand rusty gears. He tells us we are about to enter. Then he identifies the sound: "We can already hear the screams of the mother pigs inside in their crates." As he opens the door, the sound grows louder and more distinct. I can make out the squeals of individual sows, along with a metallic clanging sound. The room is pitch black except for the organizer's headlamp, which flashes over rows and rows of crates that seem to stretch out in every direction. Kneeling in front of one of the crates, he explains the clanging sound. The sows, he says, are so desperate to get out that they slam themselves repeatedly against the metal bars. He points out what he says is swelling on the face of the pig in front of him. In another scene, the camera is positioned low at the rear of a sow. Her skin is filthy from an apparent mixture of feces and blood, and she is surrounded by a mess of dead piglets, whom we are told were probably crushed or smothered as a result of confinement. For me, the scene is arresting, and I catch my face furrowing into a wince as I examine their bodies, then turn my head to take in the surroundings. The activists select two piglets, whom they carry to the car. The video ends on a sunny day at a sanctuary, with the piglets frolicking in a kiddie pool filled with sawdust. The organizer says, looking into the camera, "If you were moved by what you saw today, please, share this story."

In this media example and the discourse that surrounded it, an ideology of animal rights and an ideology of virtual reality come together to delineate what critical literacy looks like in this medium. The "direct connection" the CEO felt affectively as he made eye contact with a pig

through the holes in the side of a delivery truck both emerged from and reified an ideology of ethical responsibility toward nonhuman animals. Being present, just inches away from the pig at the slaughterhouse entrance, was interpreted as an antidote to the tendency of abstraction in thinking about where food comes from. It is in this context that the media ideology of VR's affordance of "presence" becomes ethically meaningful. At the same time, the sensation of "presence" cannot be achieved by the technology of VR itself. As Gershon (2010) explains, media ideologies "are reflections of people's strategies at the same time as the ideologies feed into those strategies" (p. 284). Sensations of im-mediacy were actively produced in "Operation Deathstar" in ways that can be seen to further support the ideology of presence that discourse on VR often displays. For example, the organizer who also served as narrator in the video spoke directly to the viewer on the other side of the camera lens, as if the viewer was a member of the investigatory team ("You ready to go?"). The narration also filled in sensory details that may be difficult to grasp through the VR technology itself. The organizer narrated the sound of dripping blood from the sow in the dumpster. This narration actively connected the ideology of presence in VR with the ideology of ethical im-mediacy in animal rights, drawing explicit attention to suffering and struggle, as in the organizer's explanation of the sows' clanging against the bars of their crates. In this way, the literacy strategies for the effective use of VR in DxE were not mere effects of the technology, but rather were strongly shaped by sociocultural context, ideological commitments, and particular ideal visions of the future.

Discussion

In addition to engaging in practices that were more readily recognized within multiliteracies' focus on critical consumption, production, and organizing with media

technologies, DxE activists learned to take up a form of literacy in a medium that is often overlooked: the affective body. By considering the active signification of bodies in interaction, I argued that activists learned to read the signs of multispecies engagement as a crucial form of multiliterate practice. Attending to the affects that arise in human and nonhuman bodies when they come together reveals how ideologies of animals and media converged in sociocultural context. In their efforts to overcome the distance that their strategies of re-mediation engender, DxE activists relied on a range of semiotic-affective strategies to make others *feel*, to make them read the signs of multispecies engagements in the same way they did. Targeting affect in the creation and spread of media forms then was a practice of scale-making, of organizing a different vision for the future. These practices challenge theoretical dichotomies between semiotics and affect in productive ways. Whereas a focus on semiotics may be problematic when it emphasizes the slipperiness of interpretation over the materiality of bodily harm, here the semiotic practices of activists are directed at intensifying feelings about the material conditions that nonhuman animals regularly endure. While acknowledging the emergent potential of affect, I also aimed in this analysis to make an ethnographic account of how activists as learners and educators attempt to channel affect into particular systems of meaning that are pertinent to organizing an alternative future.

The dynamics of im-mediacy have implications for understanding informal learning in the churn of digital social life and politics beyond the case of animal rights. Consider the video, posted to Twitter in January 2019 that appeared to show a crowd of teenagers in MAGA hats jeering a Native American protester on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (@2020fight, 2019). The shaky handheld camerawork felt to many so raw, so im-mediate, that the truth it carried seemed self-evident. The high school student pictured face-to-face with Native elder

Nathan Phillips was quickly cast as the latest image of White supremacy in the United States, and outrage rippled out across the internet (Mervosh, 2019). Then came additional video recordings and news analyses arguing that the encounter was “more complicated” than first appeared (Miller, 2019). Whether the outrage was justified, however, is a secondary concern compared to the issue of the incident’s *affects*. Many distant spectators were viscerally hurt by what they saw. A key theme that emerged from the aftermath was the familiarity of the high schooler’s cool smile as he stood unmoving before Phillips. “You know that boy,” one commentator wrote. “The steady pale face, the curved lips, the confidence dripping from the eyes” (Martin, 2019). “It’s the familiar gleam of a zealot,” tweeted @MarkHarrisNYC (2019). Twitter user @JessicaValenti (2019) wrote, “I honestly haven’t stopped thinking of that MAGA kid all day – in part because I think so many of us have been on the receiving end of the face he was making.” To be moved by a viral video is to feel real bodily affects that exceed one’s autonomous control. The feelings of im-mediacy can shape a national conversation and bring new collective futures into view. Yet at the same time, to be moved in this way is also a semiotic act, a contingent interpretation that relies on personal history, past encounters, and ideological configurations that come in from beyond the frame of the image. We do “make sense” of affects, even if that ordering and capture of potential can never be given in advance.

Acknowledging the “lexes” (Mazzarella, 2004), or strategies of reading and creating, entailed in interpreting embodied encounters also reminds us to consider the ways in which the sensate body is always present in uses of media technologies for learning. How learning technologies engage the body—how they make us feel, and the forms of knowledge those feelings can produce—is an underappreciated dimension in learning research. More broadly, learning environments often put bodies in proximity or mediate bodies in ways that are sensed as

proximate. Such arrangements have ethical implications, including the sense of responsibility participants may feel toward one another. Especially in learning that involves navigating potentially sensitive social topics, how might learning environments help learners become adept at reading the ethical signs of their embodied interactions? Appropriate pedagogical practices might include guiding conversations about noticing the signs of one another's discomfort or pain and using those signs to correct course or respond with care—a form of embodied literacy.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrated the importance of feeling present for the development of ethical responsibility in a case of animal rights activism. Vignettes of activists' embodied encounters with nonhuman animals revealed affective potentials that were “read” ideologically as evidence of a need for care. As part of their project of scale-making, activists developed strategies for using the affordances of social media memes and VR technology to spread the affective potential of embodied encounters in ways that exceeded mere representation. At the same time, activists' multiliterate productions also evinced intentional semiotic moves to order affects into formations compatible with their particular vision of an ethical future. The notion of im-mediacy provides a way of taking seriously both the material reality of feeling directly connected with others and the capture of sensemaking involved in multiliterate practices. As a contribution to the field, this notion provides an analytic bridge between approaches that emphasize affect with those that emphasize sense-making. While these dimensions are often dichotomized, both may be involved in a single case of learning, with implications for the ethical design of learning technologies and their analysis.

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Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

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