Mapping the Affective Production of Cybersex: Notes for a Framework

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ABSTRACT: In this piece I sketch out a framework for examining Filipino cybersex using perspectives on affect. I discuss theories of affect that are most relevant to my project. Second, I trace intersecting discourses that mediate the phenomenon. I then outline the contours of this framework. In the concluding section, I reflect on the meaning and value of approaching cybersex as affective production.

KEYWORDS: Filipino, cybersex, affect, labour, production

What have you learned from cybersex?
— Many things … spelling …
You mean your boyfriend teaches you to spell?
— It's like this: when I look at what he types on screen, my thoughts
work faster … faster when I type. That's what I like about cyber-
sex, even if you say I waste money, it's almost like learning some-
thing in school. I learn English much more than 'yes', 'no', 'ok'. [1]

This essay offers a tentative framework for examining Filipino cybersex. It places theories of affect alongside interview data collected on cybersex labour. Cybersex is argued as involving the production and circulation of affects developing within intersecting material, historical and discursive formations. Integral to building this framework is an examination of how modes of control and governance, such as information technology policy and legal regulations specifically criminalising cyber-

sex, intervene in circuits of affect. The nature and dynamics of affect, how they get produced and circulated through different sites of corporeality, governance, monitoring and prohibition will be explored.

In the following sections, I discuss iterations of affect that are relevant to my project. I explain why I choose to work with affect to study cybersex. This is followed by a discussion of how cybersex could be theorised in terms of affective production. Next, I present a working framework for studying the affective production of cybersex. I conclude the essay by noting the significance of analysing cybersex as affective production.

Variations of Affect

My project is largely informed by Patricia Clough's (2007, 2010) study of 'affect itself' and the Autonomist Marxist perspective on affective labour (Hardt 1999, 2007; Negri 1999; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). These different but related streams of thinking draw on Baruch Spinoza's philosophy of ethics, which defines affect as 'the capacity to affect and to be affected' (Clough 2007, 2). This is the logic that compels states of potentiality (Massumi 2002, Clough 2007, 2010), or the moment that precedes emotions and rational thought, towards movement and action. In this perspective, affect is not limited to emotions, but also its capacities and consequences beyond reason or conscious thought (Clough 2007, 2010).

Clough integrates affective production into the global circuits of digital capitalism. Initially borrowing from thermodynamics and information theory, Clough's approach construes the individual as an organism whose affective capacities not only enable conscious or determined behaviour. The organism as an open system is also exposed, effected, and responsive to contingency. In this perspective, affect serves as reservoir of potential matter/energy for actions both determined and unintended, and as forms of intensities (Massumi 2002; Clough 2007, 2010). Clough also contends that the potential of affect and self-organisation cannot be realised without exposure to increasing information, complexity and turbulence. This exposure to, or even the propensity of affect towards indeterminacy allows for political possibilities, or individual capacities for self-organisation or autopoiesis.

Digitisation complicates affect in that it 'inserts a technical framing into the present, expanding bodily affectivity' (Clough 2010, 212). This means that 'the digi-

tal acts as a technological intensification or expansion of the non-lived, nonlinear complexity, or indetermination of bodily affectivity' (ibid). The notion of digitisation makes cybersex medium specific, and thus requires a careful examination of how the digital space actively intervenes in the exchange, distribution and circulation of sexed up images and texts, as well as, to borrow from Susanna Paasonen (2011), its carnal excesses.

Important, too, is the relationship of affect to financialisation, which marks Clough's (2007, 2010) distancing from Brian Massumi's more hopeful prospects for affect's potential. Clough is well aware of the coupling of digitisation and financialisation and the constraints against affective freedom. The merging of digitisation and finance into digital capitalism—a term denoting the latest stage of capitalism whereby the illusion of wealth materialises and overruns all aspects of economic life through networked exchanges of fiat currency and immaterial assets, such as information—is reinforced by the reliance on affects for the (re)production and maintenance of surplus values (Betancourt 2010). Clough (2010) argues that as forms of biopolitics and the surveillance of populations for new markets are intensified, affects are at risk of being fully subjected to processes of control and commodification.

Affect's potential for the subversion of capitalism is discussed and debated quite extensively in works drawing on Autonomist Marxist perspectives.[2] Following the Autonomist view, affective labour is a type of 'immaterial labour,' a term characterising forms of linguistic, communicative and knowledge work that generate surplus values under post-industrial, neoliberal capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000). Neoliberal capitalism, characterised by new economic arrangements engineered by the growth and expansion of financial systems and information and technologies, marks a shift from manufacturing and industry to service-oriented jobs such as financial services, day care or health care work. These jobs share one or more features: continuous exchange of information and knowledge; physically intangible outputs; organic, 'autopoietic' modes of cooperation; and most importantly, the importance of human contact, social relations and networks (Hardt 1999, Hardt and Negri 2000).

Affect assimilates cognitive elements as well as modulates other people's affects. Hardt and Negri make a fine distinction between affects and emotions, however, arguing that, 'Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects

refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking' (2004, 108). With this illustration of affect, the authors arrive at a simple definition of affective labour: 'Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects …' (ibid).

Affective labour is not entirely new, but in the post-industrial, neoliberal economy, affect is integral to, if not *the* product being (re)produced, exchanged and circulated. The centrality of affective labour is made more visible in the context of the digital economy, with development and growth of telecommuting (Huws 2003) and call centre work (Mirchandani 2012), as well as what came to be conceived as 'free labour' (Terranova 2000) or the provision of online content. Affective modalities of feeling, sensation and emotions, but also creativity and visceral exchanges running through digital networks coincide with changes in structures and conditions of work (i.e., feminised, flexible, and modal). What Hardt and Negri seemed to miss regarding affect's prominence under the current regime is captured by Clough's (2010, 221) interpretation:

> (T)he connection of affect and capital is not merely a matter of a service economy's increasing demand for affective labor or media's modulation of the circuit from affect to emotion. Rather, pre-individual affective capacities have been made central to the passage from formal subsumption to the real subsumption of 'life itself' into capital, as the accumulation of capital has shifted to the domain of affect.

Why Affect?

What draws me to these two approaches is how they confront questions of power—especially the power of capital—to intervene in the production process. More importantly, affect brings an ethical dimension to the various forms of productivity—economic, technological, and immaterial. These ethical concerns are political as well as aesthetic in nature. But Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's contribution outweighs other approaches on matters of ethics. Indeed, following Melissa Seigworth and Gregory J. Gregg's (2010) typology, Hardt and Negri's theory of affective labour would be one of the approaches that fittingly illuminate 'politically

engaged work', since it acknowledges that 'repetitious practices of power can si-multaneously provide a body … with predicaments and potentials for realising a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm' (ibid, 7). In Hardt and Negri's view practices of affective labour not only shore up fundamental questions about the human condition and social relations, but also suggest that these practices may hold, or at least open prospects for a political takedown of the post-industrial, capitalist system.

Why Cybersex?

In Philippine culture, cybersex is popularly known to be an illegal, underground activity that bears similarities to brothel prostitution (McGeown 2011) and in some cases, call centre work (Cordova 2011). Reports of cybersex in mainstream media feature adult (web)cam models, or ACMs, composed of youth and young adults working for cyber-pimps and cyber-madames that operate so-called cybersex dens. These so-called dens are anomalous businesses covertly operating in residential homes or behind legitimate store fronts. ACMs perform on webcams in commercial adult sites on the Internet to attract foreign male customers (Mathews 2010).

Conversations with former cybersex labourers for a research project[3] revealed that there is more to cybersex than the images reflected in media. Labourers may purposefully enter into an enterprising activity, or may be misled and somewhat forced into the business. With respect to their reasons, performers are motivated not purely by the promise of money, but also by the desire to provide for one's needs and those of dependents. Besides quick cash or sustained financial support for one's relatives, cybersex may lead to meaningful, lasting relationships as well as opportunities for self-development through education. But for some who are forcibly led into cybersex—their experiences, in effect, fall into the normative and popular perception—it could leave painful life lessons. A woman I interviewed, barely out of her teens, had a traumatic experience, but managed to escape abusive labour conditions in the cybersex den where she was originally recruited.

From a critical view, the popular representation of cybersex could function like myth (Barthes 1970, Wilson 2001). A myth relegates to the margins or silences other ways cybersex is experienced and made meaningful by its participants, thereby

reducing the subjective value and the complexity of human experience. Indeed, media has effectively conveyed the message to the public that cybersex is a new moral scourge, and is anything but desirable in Philippine society. The one-dimensional representations of cybersex in the media, framed as a 'thing' that needs to be extirpated, instantly caught the attention of legislation and law enforcement. For instance, development and mobilisation of efforts to curb the growing threat that is cybersex began as early as 2004 in Olongapo City[4], where my interviewees lived or worked. Initiatives to criminalise cybersex have been developing in national-level legislative chambers, coming to fruition when the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 formally took effect.

In contrast, my personal interviews animated cybersex through the reassembling of past experiences. The women articulated 'carnal residues' (Paasonen 2011) produced during periods of virtual intercourse, intense labouring, and most importantly the remembrance of kinship obligations and struggles. During the interviews their recollections were punctuated by 'fluid', visceral responses to those memories. Thus, cybersex, when informed by lived experience and tacit knowledge becomes not merely composed of intentional behaviours and practices. It produces emotions, body movements and excesses, risks, and chances over a period of time, in turn compelling responses, actions and movements from other entities in the social network. In other words, cybersex turns into something that involves the production and circulation of affects.

The Production of Affects: Discourses and Interventions

In cybersex, the production of affects means multiple and sometimes contradictory affective tendencies, capacities or feeling states. From fleshy, corporeal embodiments affects move through different sites in cyberspace; in trans-local circuits of digital capital; in governance institutions particularly in ICT policy, legislation, law enforcement and advocacy; and in geographically situated places of labour. The same set of affects derived directly from cybersex practices are also subjected to the disciplinary gaze of local and national governments. In this regard, performers confront the risks that come with institutional surveillance and policing (for which the women I interviewed admitted no longer practicing or participating in cybersex).

As consumers of bandwidth, the cybersex performer and their affects are also being made productive for digital capitalism. This network of digital capital includes the local telecoms industry that provides fees-based Internet services and the Internet cafes that offer paid public access. The productivity of affects goes as far as enabling the transmittal of money (and with it, the transformation from virtual to physical currency) and its circulation in local, physical sites. This includes personal or shared spaces of habitation and work such as cybersex dens, rented houses/apartments, and family residences. Even as cybersex exists outside the borders of the legitimate ICT economy, it also appears that capitalist surplus value morphs into generative, affective values—that is, it transforms into modes of care and support for members of the household or dependents within the kinship network.

As cybersex moves through new communication technologies and circulates on to offline environments, the State has been gaining traction in efforts to control and manage it. Philippine legislation has been keen on penalising sexual exploitation facilitated by digital technologies. In four years, it has enacted laws on online child pornography, video voyeurism and, with the approval of the anti-cybercrime law, cybersex. Before the law was established cybersex operators and performers have been apprehended by way of existing national laws on human trafficking and child pornography (McGeown 2011). In 2010, the Anti-Cybersex Act was approved in Congress and subsequently in the Senate. These legislative efforts eventually led to the incorporation of cybersex under the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, which after public deliberations and judiciary assessment finally came in full swing in February 2014. The law attempts to formally govern cyberspace by monitoring and penalising different forms of internet crimes. Under the statute, cybersex, "the wilful engagement, maintenance, control, or operation, directly or indirectly, of any lascivious exhibition of sexual organs or sexual activity, with the aid of a computer system, for favour or consideration," is classified as content-related offense (Republic Act 10175, 2012).

These anti-cybersex strategies in legislation and the criminal justice system coincide with State efforts to develop an information economy that would successfully lead the country's socioeconomic growth and development. Through the ICT Roadmap (Commission for Information and Communications Technology, 2006) and the Philippine Digital Strategy (Information and Communications Tech-

nology Office, 2012) the Philippine government ensures that the country's infor-
mation workforce is groomed to become the leading provider of cyber-services in
the international market. To achieve this, initiatives such as computational skills
and English language proficiency trainings are institutionalised and implemented
via the education sector.

Cybersex, as one writer claims, is the dark residue of this vision of an informa-
tion society, the success of which depends on the renowned communicative skills
of the Filipino call centre worker (Cordova 2011). I build on this point and contend
that cybersex and call centre work are two sides of the same coin. Both follow the
logic of communicative and semiotic exchange, although, obviously, cybersex is
more sexual and illicit. More importantly, the two forms of labour are molded by
the same technological medium, economic order, and material history (Cruz and
Sajo, forthcoming).

Other socio-historical, material discourses also run parallel to or even contrib-
ute to the emergence of cybersex: Prostitution, trafficking and the sex trade (Ofre-
neo and Ofreneo 1998, Truong 1999, Ralston and Keeble 2009), with links to femi-
nist activism (WeDpro 2010) and the American military-industrial complex (Enloe
1990, Ralston and Keeble 2009, Lacsamana 2012), and neoliberal policies in sup-
port of labour flexibilisation and service-oriented export labour (Parreñas 2011,
Rodriguez 2008, McGovern 2007, Bello et. al. 2004). These discourses intersect
with ICT policy and legal discourses on certain nodal points. For instance, some
civil society groups advocating for responsible, democratic use of ICTs also wage
campaigns against ICT-enabled violence against women and children – an issue
that resonates with the national government's crackdown on cybercrimes, includ-
ing cybersex. WeDpro, a feminist collective of several grassroots organisations in-
volving women, Amerasians, and LGBTQs in the Philippines condemns cybersex,
in any shape or form as exploitative and oppressive. The organisation's position
is that cybersex is a newly emerged form of gender violence (Torres-Cortes 2012,
Bulawan, 2012). Although legislation and law enforcement are unlikely to adopt
strong radical feminist views, they appear to be feminist allies based on a com-
mon belief that cybersex is morally offensive (especially to women and children, in
WeDpro's case) and thus should be controlled, if not eliminated. Generally speak-
ing, these intersecting discourses enhance, manage, control, redirect or cease the
circulation of affects through institutional provisions, mandates, mechanisms and

strategies that involve or are enacted by institutions and representatives of the state and civil society.

Before concluding this section, a note on the use of the term 'productivity' is warranted. The main reference here is Leopoldina Fortunati's (1995) Marxist feminist articulation of productivity in reproductive work, in which she examines housework and prostitution as representative forms. At the real (as opposed to the formal) level, reproductive work is productive in that '(a) it produces surplus-value even if not in terms of exchange value; (b) despite being posited by capital as a natural force of social labor it is non-directly wages work; (c) it is work that produces a commodity, labour-power' (ibid, 102).[5] This is merely provisional, however. Indeed, theories of affect and affective labour complicate this quite rigid notion of productivity since they recognise that the body's virtuality or mediatedness, its precariousness and in-betweenness, its capacity to move and be moved—produce forms of resistance to capitalism's capture, control and appropriation (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004).

Notes for a Conceptual Framework[6]

Conducting an empirical investigation of cybersex provided the opportunity to re-consider the concept and theory that started this project in the first place. Research, after all does not usually proceed in strict linear fashion; cultural and personal histories are too complex to simply corroborate or refute theoretical claims. In closely looking at cybersex my strategy was to allow the collected data to reflexively inform the theoretical perspective. The creative process enabled possibilities for a more concrete application of affective labour in the study of cybersex.

An outline for analysing cybersex from the perspective of affect, and specifically affective production is hereby proposed. First, cybersex should be understood in the context of a new economy engendered by neoliberal policies (McGovern 2007); in particular, an economy that privileges the creation of a Philippine information society and capitalises on outsourced IT service work. This economy, arguably enough produces affective value (Betancourt 2010).[7]

Second, there is a need to underscore the dynamic role of information technology in cybersex. Cybersex's ICT network introduces complexities that produce, modulate and circulate affects. This approach, then, emphasises the transforma-

tive role of ICTs in mediating people's sexual practices, which may lead to favourable and unpleasant outcomes. Additionally, such framing should acknowledge that technology, or rather its use, can never be neutral. The internet itself carries political and cultural caches that equally influence the circulation of affects.[8]

Third, the creation of values over and beyond financial and other commercial gains needs to be acknowledged and carefully pieced out in any analysis. As I learned from interviews with former cybersex performers, cybersex is characterised as a mode of human interaction that manipulates bodily, mental and feeling states often for financial exchange. This exchange, however, further opens up segments of capitalist and non-capitalist value creation.

Governance, control and surveillance are critical intervening factors in the production and circulation of cybersex. These apparatuses could be instruments of control and exploitation, as in the case of performers whose affective labours are subjected to oppressive labour demands in cybersex den operations. These could also be subtle and indirect strategies of surveillance, such as the elimination of private rooms or cubicles in internet cafes as part of the city's collective drive to control cybersex in the community (Gulanes-Perez, 2012).

Finally, cybersex's affective production ultimately provides knowledge not only of relations between bodies, sexuality and technologies, but more importantly, ethical concerns stemming from 'repetitious practices of power' especially foisted on subaltern bodies (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 7) in digital capitalism's local/global nexus. This is why in studying cybersex, the discourses of human trafficking and forced prostitution (Hughes 2002, Jeffreys 2009)[9] cannot be completely ignored. A framework for analysing cybersex should have the potential to illuminate structural iniquities that permeate the intersections of ICTs and sexualised labour, how these materially operate and create tensions and constraints in everyday relations (between clients/porn users and cyberpimps, between cyberpimps and cybersex worker, etc.), and what governance, advocacy, and policy measures are appropriate but also empathetic—that is, cognisant of the welfare and well-being of subjects/agents performing the affective labours of cybersex.

Concluding Remarks

Constructing cybersex as affective production offers a renewed perception of cybersex; that is, as sexual activity that (re)produces certain forms of value, perhaps

even alternative processes of valorisation (Allesandrini 2012). It allows possibilities of conceiving cybersex as contributing to individual households and to the local or community-based economy. At the same time, it feeds the wider digital economy dominated by large IT companies by contributing to the profitability of the traffic of sexual content and exchange in cyberspace. What I am suggesting here is that forms of value are being created as cybersex circulates in offline and online networks. These values do not necessarily fall in the realm of exchange values; nor are these values, as the epigraph above indicates, always deleterious in their effects. Importantly, performers make sense of and ultimately create value out of the experience for themselves and for their kinship networks, regardless of whether the outcome of their cybersex experiences did more harm than good.

The affective labourer is central to these value chains; in this case, the cybersex provider.[10] Affect accords some level of agency on the affective labourer, even while the labourer is moved to act or behave in certain ways by pre-conscious or pre-rational energies, or subjected to technologically mediated environments. Affect creates both opportunities as well as threats that the labourer learns to modulate and negotiate even when certain situations are beyond control. In some kind of twisted logic, the affective labourer could potentially achieve autonomy from forms of capitalist political and economic control only when affects are deterritorialised and circulated away from the subject. 'The value of labour', as Negri teaches us, 'resides in affect, that is, in living labour that is made autonomous in the capital relation, and expresses—through all the pores of singular and collective bodies—its power of self-valorisation' (1999, 79-80).

Endnotes

1   "Anita." Interview by author, translated and edited from Filipino. Digital audio-recording. Olongapo City, Philippines, August 2, 2012.

2   Autonomism is a school of thought as well as a social movement with a history than can be traced back in the 1950s. Autonomists, most of whom were students and intellectuals who joined the cause of blue-collar industrial workers, adopted principles based on workerist struggles and combined these with a revisionist account of Marxism. Central to Autonomist thought are Karl Marx's propositions in *The Grundrisse* on the relationship of technology and labour. The movement's main line of argument rests on the potential and value of socially necessary labour for the subversion of capitalism. For a comprehensive historical account see Wright (2002) and Dyer-Witheford (1999).

3   SIRCA-funded research project, "Cybersex and the Anti-Development State: Labor Poli-

tics and Life Histories." SIRCA stands for Strengthening Information Society Research Capacity Alliance, a research program of the International Research Development Center, Canada and the Singapore Internet Research Center. The program is on its second cycle year; hence, SIRCA II. The principal investigator is Elinor May Cruz, University Research Associate, University of the Philippines-Diliman. The project consisted of interviews of cybersex participants as well as key informants (sometimes referred to as stakeholders) representing the government, legislation, academe and civil society, and secondary data analysis. Research sites were chosen based on the publicised prevalence of cybersex in the area. I conducted my case study in Olongapo City, while Ms. Cruz conducted hers in Angeles City.

4   Olongapo City, Philippines, northeast of the capital Metro Manila, is a tourist town and was a site of a U.S. military facility prior to its closure in 1991, as a result of the non-renewal of the Military Bases Agreement of 1947. In 1999, the Visiting Forces Agreement between the Philippines and the U.S. was signed, allowing use of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority in Olongapo as naval station in aid of military deployments in the Asia Pacific.

5   To be clear, I am not equating cybersex with prostitution. I provisionally use Fortunati's definition since it is foundational to the Autonomist school of thought where affective labour is extensively theorised and debated.

6   Some of these points were tentatively proposed in Cruz and Sajo (forthcoming, 2015), "Cybersex as affective labour: Critical interrogations of the Philippine ICT framework and the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012."

7   Betancourt suggests that affective labour fundamentally supports fiat money-based capitalism. Applying his argument, by managing their affects, the affective labourer (for example, the call centre agent selling credit cards or troubleshooting computer problems) ensures that citizen-consumers are distracted by pleasurable pursuits and fantasies of wealth and economic security. Affective labour, in this regard, enables the continuous subjectivation of consumers to fictitious capital (real estate, stocks, derivative assets, etc.) and ultimately debt.

8   Rodriguez and Gonzalez (2003), for instance, assert that the Internet is a geopolitical tool of American imperialism, which in turn engender the circulation of racial desires or fantasies. Representations of Filipino bodies in cyberspace embody such cultural logic.

9   Hughes' (2002, 2003) work consistently explores the facilitative capacity of ICTs in sexually-related crimes against women and minors. Meanwhile, Jeffreys (2009) links online pornography to the global sex trade, arguing that as the sex trade develops at a global scale we see greater outsourcing of "risk" and "subordination", as evinced by Internet rape sites that utilise and exploit women and children from developing countries.

10 I refer to cybersex performers alternatively as cybersex providers here. Gleaning from the narratives of the women I interviewed, as well as accounts of working ACMs from Paul Mathew's (2010) study, it appears that the brunt of affective labour resides on the Filipino cybersex performer. Cybersex participants perform sexual acts as well as provide attention, care, presence and other affective gestures (Cruz and Sajo 2013).

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