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Tucker, I.M. & Goodings, L. (2017) *Digital atmospheres: Affective practices of care in Elefriends*.

Sociology of Health & Illness, 39, 4, 629-642

**Digital Atmospheres:  
Affective practices of care in Elefriends.**

**Abstract**

This paper develops the concept of *digital atmosphere* to analyse the affective power of social media to shape practices of care and support for people living with mental distress. Using contemporary accounts of affective atmospheres, the paper focuses on the impact/s on feelings of distress, support and care that unfold through *digital atmospheres*. The power of social media intersects with people's support and care seeking practices in multiple ways and not in a straightforward 'accessing/providing support' model. Indeed, we find that the caring relations that develop through social media often need caring for themselves (Schillmeier, 2014). The paper draws on online and interview data from a larger project investigating how practices of care and support are (re)configured in the mental health-related social media site Elefriends. Users have to negotiate the disruption of transitioning support online, as well as potentially become subject to a fragility in care, in which caring for oneself can become bound up in the ambiguities of caring for others. We argue that understanding how experiences of distress are shaped by social media is essential for highlighting the implications of increased digitisation of mental health care.

**Keywords**

**Social media, mental distress, digital atmosphere, affect, Elefriends**

### **Acknowledgement**

**The authors would like to thank the EPSRC Communities and Culture Network + for providing funding support for data collection, and to Seaneen Molloy-Vaughan (Mind) for the considerable support she provided in relation to data collection.**

### **Main Text**

#### **Mental distress, social media and affect**

The experience of mental distress is increasingly shaped by social media (Bauman & Rivers, 2015; Aboujaoude & Starcevic, 2015). The proliferation of social media in the digital age has led to the development of a range of mental health-focused social media, designed as tools for support for people suffering ongoing mental distress (see Hamm et al, 2013 for useful review). This paper focuses on the use of one social media site as a digital 'space' that facilitates peer support. We aim to explore the affective experience of using the site Elefriends and the dilemmas/challenges that are produced in the act of co-constituting distress (and responses to distress) via an online platform. The concept of *digital atmosphere* is developed to analyse the individual and collective forms of affective experience emerging in and through social media. This will build on the growing literature on atmospheres that has developed within affect studies (Anderson, 2014; Brennan, 2004). The use of atmosphere allows us to address the experiences of distress through the encounters between bodies and social media (as technological objects) as well as the idea that social media provide a digital 'space' for interaction. Such encounters involve the transmission of affects that come to inform and produce individual feelings of distress.

Affect is frequently distinguished from emotion, with the latter considered as personal, individual experience, and affect as the forces that usher in, produce and give rise to such experiences. Affects cannot necessarily be 'seen' or 'known' in advance, but only when they actualise in individual experience. This is why affects are commonly thought of as non-conscious and pre-personal, as they are antecedent to individual conscious experience (e.g. Brown and Stenner, 2001; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Clough, 2007). This can help us think 'beyond the body-as-organism' (Blackman, 2012: 5), as the power/s of affect to influence and shape individual experience manifest as relations 'between' bodies. This idea emanates from Spinoza, who defined affect as the 'continuous variation' that constitutes the 'power of existing' of bodies. It is variation because of the seemingly endless potential for new affective relations to form as bodies pass through the social worlds that constitute everyday life (e.g. Tucker & Smith, 2014; Brown & Stenner, 2009; Tucker, 2010).

The increased digitisation in mental health means that social media are increasingly becoming the technologies that people connect *with* and *through*, and as such can be thought of as having powers to affect (Chun, 2016). This troubles the traditional view that technologies as merely tools for human use. The affective relationships between technologies, bodies and affect have come under considerable scrutiny in accounts of *digital* or *networked* affect, often seeking to disabuse the notion that technologies are either passive tools for human use or agents in and of themselves (Ash, 2015). Sophisticated accounts have emerged that describe the intricacies of technologies' affective impact on human activity and how the latter can be enacted (although not determined) by the former (see Ash 2015 on 'inorganically organised objects' and tinnitus). Affect is conceptualised as a way of following the unfolding of life through milieus that are

always-already embodied, technological and affective (see Hillis et al, 2015 for a useful summary).

### **Affective Atmospheres**

Atmospheres are commonly understood as the *feeling* or *sense* of a particular space (e.g. people often report how the atmosphere of an event felt). In affect studies the term has been used to refer to the ways that bodies come together to form a collective feeling in a given setting, with bodies and objects deemed to carry an affective load. This load does not emerge neatly from individual bodies and objects but as intersectional forces, whose precise form cannot be known in advance. An atmosphere does not have a fixed singular identity defined by some form of generic feeling or experience shared by all, but is subject to continuous variation. Whilst atmospheres operate as patterns of intensity that shape the 'feeling potential' of space, they are not always visible, corporeal or indeed, material (Blackman, 2012). Atmospheres direct attention to the unfolding of collective affects, as Anderson notes when stating atmospheres help to understand "the problem of how collective affects become conditions that shape without necessarily determining capacities to affect and be affected" (2014: 137). Atmospheres are claimed to make possible various forms of subjectification, through their specific *character*, namely "the way in which it communicates a feeling to us as participating subjects" (Böhme, 2013: 2). In atmospheres subjectivities are not deemed to emanate from within individual bodies, but to unfold through the relations between bodies and objects that come to constitute a particular atmosphere. As Anderson notes, "atmospheres are, on this account, always in the process of emerging and transforming. They are always being taken up and reworked in lived

experience - becoming part of feelings and emotions that may themselves become elements within other atmospheres" (Anderson, 2009: 79). Atmospheres are imbued with the power to *transmit* affects, which can elicit bodily modifications (Brennan, 2004: 1).

Atmospheres do not afford the same feeling/s for all, as individuals can experience the same atmosphere in different ways (Ahmed, 2004). Think of the feeling of a room at the performance of a children's drama group. For the children performing the room may induce feelings of anxiety and nervousness; for the parents watching feelings of excitement and pride arise, whilst for the siblings of children performing the room may induce feelings of jealousy and boredom. Atmospheres are emergent and non-determining. The notion of an affective atmosphere has become popular, included in a range of studies from surveillance (Ellis, Harper & Tucker, 2013); public transport (Bissel, 2010); memory (Brown & Reavey, 2015) to mental health recovery (Duff, 2016).

We seek to explore, in relation to mental health, how social media are experienced as atmospheres (i.e. spatially), even though they are not spatial in a traditional sense. Common descriptions of social media use are littered with spatial metaphors, e.g. going online, chatroom. As such, the feeling of using social media is often a spatialised one, as people experience 'entering' the online environment, in which they will encounter other people. We argue that social media can be thought of as atmospheres that transmit affects. Moreover, social media involve technologies as actors, not as objects in a traditional sense but as co-emergent elements of atmospheres. We develop a concept of *digital atmosphere* to illuminate the role of affect in people's experiences of using social media for care and support. We are not suggesting that atmospheres *are* spaces. Indeed, as Böhme notes "we are not sure whether we should attribute

them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subject who experiences them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze" (1993: 114). Social media provide opportunities for people to 'be-together', which, following Sloterdijk (2005), is a core characteristic of atmospheres (Anderson, 2014).

We argue that multiple possibilities for the operation of collective affects emerge through social media, which exist as the ongoing collective encounters between bodies, even if bodies do not enter social media in a physical sense but most commonly through the mediums of discourse and images. Online communication should not be thought of as *flattened affect* as it is no "less rich or intense" (Paasonen, 2015: 31) as in-person communication. The concept of atmosphere is valuable for understanding the implications of the increased social media use in mental health. Care for mental distress often occurs in individual relationships (e.g. between patient and doctor). Social media require a more collectivist experience where users have to acclimatise to *being* in an online environment populated by many. Undertaking care and support in this environment is very different to more traditional in-person settings. We argue that the concept of digital atmosphere helps us get analytically close to the experience of being an individual seeking care and support in an online collective environment, with considerable affective forces potentially at work.

### **Elefriends**

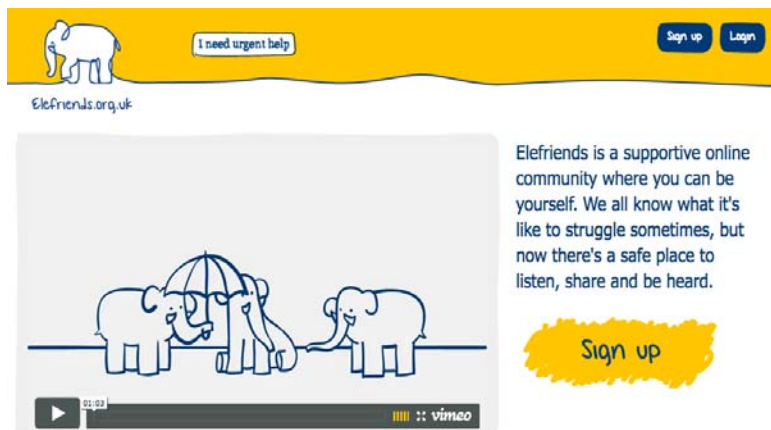
This paper draws on some empirical material from a broader project focusing on Elefriends ([www.elfriends.org.uk](http://www.elfriends.org.uk)). Elefriends was launched in 2013 by the UK mental health charity

Mind and it is an online community that facilitates peer support for people experiencing mental health problems, and is one of the most prominent mental health-related social media sites in the UK. The site is organised via the 'Ele' (short for elephant), and there are approximately 30,000 registered users (as of December 2015). Communication is managed through a personal profile, which is customisable with a photograph and biography. Figure 1 shows the login page to Elefriends. Users can 'post' to the 'activity feed' (a feature which is similar to the 'wall' on other social network sites), which carries the option to respond either with a written response or by clicking on a number of buttons that display an icon illustrating 'I'm thinking of you', 'I like this' or 'I hear you'. Users can also send private messages to each other. As communication focuses predominantly on distress, forms of support that emerge are different to those in other social media (e.g. Facebook). Typical conversations in Elefriends might involve speaking about a recent experience of medical intervention, a difficult period of distress or more general conversations about a range of mental health issues. Elefriends is moderated by a dedicated team of staff (although not overnight). Elefriends, and similar sites, are indicative of the way that mental health services are becoming less tied to institutional settings (McGrath & Reavey, 2015).

In terms of digital 'spaces' such as Elefriends, the concept of atmosphere can be used to denote "that which is beyond discourse...but also as that which comes to matter through discourse, the way the announcement of a particular sense of place, not just represent what is there, but constitutes such as embodied presence" (Billie et al, 2015: 36). Communication on Elefriends is largely constituted through discourse, and yet is indelibly connected to the ongoing embodied concern/s of living with mental distress (e.g. medication) (Tucker & Goodings, in press). Whilst the majority of online communication is conducted through discourse, to reduce the *experience*

of social media activity solely to the level of discourse is to miss additional affective layers that act as heterogeneous elements of *digital* atmospheres. The concept of atmospheres directs us to think of affect as materially bound up in the experience of using social media. In this paper we focus on the discourse of online communication, but do so with a theoretical lens that incorporates the fact that it is fundamentally bodies experiencing distress that are using and experiencing social media. And whilst social media do not physically bring bodies together in a particular place, the experience of using such technologies is one of *feeling* connected to others. The feelings made possible by social media are shaped by the atmospheres that emerge through assemblages of bodies, social media and discourse.

Figure 1. Elefriends' Home Page



## Analytical Approach



The data analysed below comes from a larger project that collected data from 157 profiles (posts and comments) in Elefriends over a one-month period (March 2014), and from interviews with users of the site. Participants were recruited via a post on Elefriends that could be 'clicked through' to access details of the study (including participant information and informed consent). The project received ethical approval from the University of East London's Research Ethics Committee. The user base of Elefriends is predominantly female (around 70%), and located around the UK (with a noticeable proportion from the South East region). Online posts were analysed directly while the interviews needed to be recorded and then transcribed. Standard ethical procedures for qualitative research were put in place to ensure the protection of the participants (e.g. all participant information was anonymised). Registration is required for the site so the data are not publically available.

The data were categorised according to the following research questions: how are ongoing experiences of distress shaped by Elefriends?; b) what is the role of affect in online care and support practices?; and c) what new practices of care and support emerge through digital atmospheres? The data were coded in relation to these questions, prior to a process of theme development. This involved repeated 'checking' of emergent themes in relation to existing codes, changing where necessary, prior to a set of final themes being configured. Here principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were drawn upon. Some key theoretical points guided the analytic process throughout. These were: a) distress is manifest in social-material environments that constitute everyday life (Goodings & Tucker, 2015; Brown & Tucker, 2010; Brown & Reavey, 2015); b) social media are 'objects' that facilitate new encounters, both with other people and technology itself (Tucker & Goodings, 2014; Hayles, 2012); and c)

atmosphere is a useful concept for illuminating co-producing practices of distress between bodies and technologies (i.e. Elefriends) (Hansen, 2006; Tucker, 2013). As such, analysis focused on distress as unfolding through socio-material practices that were always-already embodied, technological and affective. The analysis below does not represent an analysis of the dataset in entirety (due to space constraints) but rather presents prominent examples from key themes, which are indicative of broader issues in the data.

### **'Entering' digital atmospheres**

The following section focuses on the ways that distress is grounded in participants' experiences of using Elefriends for care and support. This facilitated understanding of the ways that users were exposed to support online, and the conditions of that transition. This approach enabled us to focus on times when the reality of experiencing one's distress through Elefriends was particularly marked. Times of entry are points at which people have to adjust to a new form of care through connecting with other people, who, at least initially, are strangers. Developing new networks of support is the purpose of Elefriends, and analysing a user's narrative of entering the site allows us to identify some of the issues associated with this process. In the second half of the analysis we focus on the impact of people moving away from the site. The impact on existing support networks of users leaving unexpectedly is seen to focus on specific issues of risk that manifests as a potential spread of collective anxiety.

One of the immediate things to note in people's descriptions of using Elefriends was the intensity and complexity of the experience. Social media are often referred to as easy, immediate and straightforward in terms of facilitating instantaneous communication with others (Baym, Zhang & Lin, 2004; Walther, 1996). With Elefriends this does not appear to be the

case. In the following extract of an online post, Amy, describes how her need for support led her to Elefriends, and the concerns regarding the digital exposure of her distress to others were obstacles to establishing supportive networks:

Extract 1.

*Amy: "Wow! One year ago today I joined Elefriends. I will never forget that time. It was truly truly horrendous. I was completely and utterly alone. My therapist was away for a long time, my medication had been changed and wasn't suiting me at all, and the doctor told me to cope on my own. It was the time when I had no one to turn to and no health professionals were listening to me. I was searching and searching every day for some kind of support to get me through. Eventually I found this place. It wasn't easy for me to begin with. I worried so much about posting the 'wrong' thing and it coming back to haunt me later on. But slowly, slowly, I got used to the idea and it has been a real lifeline for me. Somewhere safe to say how I feel, without fear of judgement and without worrying that I'm letting people down. I can't believe how far I've come since that dreadful time one year ago, my complete rock bottom. I'm still up and down, I still had bad days, but it makes such a difference to be able to get my thoughts out of my head on here. Thank you Elefriends for always being there xxxx"*

Amy's post is a reflection on her first year of using Elefriends and highlights a process of *acclimatisation* to the digital atmosphere of the site. Firstly, this involved trying to manage existing distress brought about by a lack of offline support at the time ("I was searching and

searching for some kind of support to get me through"). Secondly, it involved dealing with the affective implications of entering the site. As Teresa Brennan notes, "the "atmosphere" or the environment literally gets into the individual" (2004: 1). Amy notes she was unsure how to 'act' at first, as it was a new atmosphere that she had not *felt* before. This is the key challenge for Amy for trying to work out how to *use* Elefriends for support. She entered a *virtual* space, which required some kind of 'performance' for others, which was very different to her existing experience of seeking help in traditional offline spaces (e.g. therapist, doctor). Amy's task was made more difficult by the fact that she could not 'see' the other people on the site, so could not rely on visual non-discursive social cues to ascertain how the atmosphere operates. These concerns manifest as a delay in seeking help as she acclimatised to the atmosphere of Elefriends. Although Amy did not enter a space with other people present, she *felt* as if others were present, and that what she wrote would become a permanent part of her identity on the site (*I worried so much about posting the 'wrong' thing and it coming back to haunt me later on*).

For Amy a tension existed between the desire/need to seek support, and the realisation of having to post personal details of her distress to an unknown 'others' on Elefriends. This demonstrates how presenting an identity on Elefriends requires being open in a community where there is no direct a priori knowledge of the other members. This seems to go against the desire for safety and security that would help Amy feel supported and less distressed. Successfully acclimatising to Elefriends is vital to the success of support on the site. Amy, over time, was able to manage the process of acclimatisation, and therefore build a supportive network through Elefriends. In the following interview extract with Julie, we see how practices of seeking care in Elefriends can transform into support giving, even if that was not the intention on entry:

## Extract 2.

*Julie: I think the way I felt personally at the time, I was searching for answers and I was literally just trawling the computer looking for answers as to why somebody would commit suicide. I looked on American websites. I looked on British websites. But when I saw Elefriends, I saw that there were people who, you know, were all walks of life, all, you know, ages, all types, if you like. And initially, I wasn't really looking for a mental health help for myself. Well, in fact I was, but at the time I was thinking of my son and trying to find answers, which as time goes on, you realise you're never going to find an answer to why someone's ended their life, really... And I didn't – I think I didn't appreciate the help I was getting really at the time. I think I was just searching, searching, searching (long pause) and using it every day and maybe speaking to people only if they'd posted about how they felt suicidal... as time goes on, you realise that your own mental health is affected by bereavement, in my case. I've suffered with depression in the past and I suppose, in a way, I've also used it to try and pass on my knowledge and my thoughts to others, rather than just taking – I'm reluctant to say help, but let's say help from other people. I started to offer my (long pause) – what's the word I'm looking for? Again, I don't like to say help because I don't know if you help anybody. But, you know, your experiences, a shared experience perhaps.*

The instantaneity of social media can lead to the idea that connecting with people is relatively straightforward and yet in terms of peer support and Elefriends Julie's extract demonstrates how complex an experience it can be. As we saw with Amy, acclimatisation takes time, as identifying how the digital atmosphere of Elefriends operates is not immediate. Indeed, the

atmosphere is subject to variation, and as such Julie has to come to terms with communicating in a changing digital 'space'. Julie's initial search for support following her son's death through suicide involved looking for answers that she came to realise she could never find. Instead, she came to recognise her own feelings of distress only once she had been exposed to other people's stories in relation to suicide. This was a new affect of the atmosphere for Julie, and highlights how affect can be transmitted through atmospheres. It was not a general facet of the atmosphere in and of itself, but rises to experience in the relational operation of communication through Elefriends between Julie and other users. It was also not immediately available to consciousness, and not something Julie felt she could provide support to others when she first started to use Elefriends. Although the possibility for her to do so exists as soon as her use of Elefriends commences (as her bereavement preceded her use of the site), it takes time for this to become a conscious option for her. It is *virtual* as it is a possibility but not one that is actualised immediately. Indeed, Julie's path could have taken a different route (e.g. she could have not continued to use Elefriends) and then the possibility would have never been realised. In this sense, atmospheres can be thought of as having virtual and actual realms (Anderson, 2014). The latter are the ones that come to be experienced, with the former the multiple possibilities that exist, not all of which will be actualised.

The transmission of affect for Julie occurs when she posts about her experiences regarding her son's suicide. She refers to this as a 'shared experience'. The idea of peer support is central to Elefriends, and Julie's extract demonstrates how this can work in action. The transmission of feelings of distress to Julie does not happen through directly being able to *see* it or *hear* it in others, as has been claimed in relation to affective contagion in groups (Sampson, 2012). It is not something that passes through, or fills, a space, as might happen in offline settings. Instead it is

through asynchronous and synchronous communication that affect is transmitted between users of the site. This is something quite distinct about the digital atmosphere of Elefriends. In-person atmospheres are often formed by the movement of affect through a collective of actors who are present (e.g. a crowd at a sports event). In Elefriends actors (i.e. users) are not always present, although traces of their activity are (e.g. previous posts and comments). Acclimatising to atmosphere consequently involves getting used to the *absent-present* form that others can take.

Julie's extract is an example of an atmosphere subject to continuous variation. It is the movement of affect that forms the atmosphere, and as the movement varies, so does the atmosphere. The unanticipated realisation that she could provide support to others unfolds through the movement of affect and (re)shaping of the atmosphere. Julie was initially reluctant to accept the possibility that she could provide help to others but had to react to the new possibilities that emerged (e.g. being asked for support). Indeed, the idea of reciprocating support was initially troubling for Julie as it meant acting as if she *could* help, which to her was a presumption not easily made. The affective potential of the atmosphere shifts from initially affording Julie some means to cope with her loss (or at least provides some content to her unrelenting 'search for answers' regarding her son's suicide), to the point where the communication of her experience comes to afford support for others. The following section explores in more detail how support for others can operate, and how the atmosphere can then produce new possibilities for the spread of affect. We use the term *fragile atmosphere* to highlight how caring relations developed in and through Elefriends can come to need to be cared for themselves. It is not simply the case that joining Elefriends provides ongoing access to atmosphere/s of support, but that atmospheres themselves can become objects for care.

## Fragile Atmosphere

Caring relations require taking care of the on-going (affective) relations they create.

*Caring relations require caring about the conditions of possibility they enact.* The unfolding realities of illness underline that our embodied selves, as well as our personal orderings, are fragile, on-going collective achievements of humans and things that need caring relations in order to feel at home. (Schillmeier, 2014: 123).

The power of Elefriends to bring together people suffering with ongoing mental distress faces a particular problem. As Schillmeier notes, caring about the conditions of possibility involves encountering the unfolding nature of humans and things that can be somewhat 'fragile'. Caring relations require taking care of. In the following examples we look at what this means for the operation of the digital atmosphere of Elefriends. In the following extracts concerns regarding users' health are seen to emerge due to a failure in communication and a perceived disconnection from the community, specifically in relation to deleting one's account (or threatening to):

### Extract 3.

*Daisy: Every time I stumble across an account that has been deleted I find myself worrying about what could have happened to that person. What if they are not okay? What if I could have helped?*



*Where have they gone? What if I disappear next? How can I find out how they are? Do the Elehandlers check on people?*

Daisy speaks about the problem of inactivity, whereby uncertainty can develop when a fellow user's pattern of activity changes (e.g. they become inactive for a period of time). Such inactivity is a common part of social media use, but is particularly significant in Elefriends because of the affective stakes of a user 'deleting' their profile for instance. Here a key concern emerges in relation to the meaning of a period of disconnection, which can be unpredictable and erratic. Disconnections can be felt as particularly problematic if they are unexpected as they do not fit a user's typical pattern of activity. In the above example the disconnection seems to come out of the blue, and consequently disrupts the care process. Users cannot care through a period of disconnection, and as such care becomes truncated. Given the frequency of concerns expressed regarding self harm (and suicide) on the site, a 'deletion' is often seen as a major sign of risk, and can create significant levels of anxiety in other users. In addition to this initial anxiety and shared concern regarding the well being of a user who 'deletes', is the difficulty associated with ascertaining the reason for deletion (e.g. are they okay?). At these times care becomes somewhat fragile, with a deletion creating an atmosphere of collective anxiety, which can then become an object requiring care. Support needed is now collective rather than individual, and something that emerges due to Elefriends being the only means of contact between users. The following extract provides insight into how anxiety can spread in the community due to a user deleting the account. The extract begins with a post in which Laura states that another user's account has been deleted. These extracts come from a sequence of comments in reply to Laura's post. There were other comments from users in this sequence that have not been included because they

were not involved in the study (and therefore did not provide consent for their data to be used). In the extract '.....' denotes a comment removed:

Extract 4.

Laura: Erm, purple giraffe's account has been deleted?! :-(

Angela: :(

.....

Laura: I know - have been so worried about her but knowing she was here among safe & loving Elefriends meant I could try to support her :-( Does anyone know anything about purple deleting her account? I'm just worried she's not safe :-(

Victoria: :( Oh no~

.....

Laura: Sending hugs - me too - no matter how bleak things seemed she always came back here &, as far as I know, not taken this step before so it's worrying :-(

((((((((((((hugs))))))))))))))

.....

Laura: She had times when she said was going to leave as she didn't want to be a burden to anyone but she always stayed so it's a shock to see this. I wish I knew what to do to find out if she is safe. I guess it's a case of just hoping she is

The Ele: The Ele just wanted to pop in with some extra hugs. He knows that it can be a bit of a shock when an elefriend deletes their account. Sometimes an elefriend might decide that want a little time and space, but lots of people do come back when they feel more

ready to chat. The Ele and his handlers are contactable by email [elefriends@mind.org.uk](mailto:elefriends@mind.org.uk) if anyone has a question about their account.

Laura: Thank you Ele - \*hugs Ele back\* - I hope that is the case for purple giraffe & I respect her need for that. Just hoping she is safe is all - thank you Ele xxx

.....

Mark: So many people do disappear and we wonder why, alas it is the nature of our illness but people do return as well :0)

.....

Laura: Hope so - I just know she was in a bad place - I truly hope she just needs some space & will return. I respect her decision - it's just in my nature to worry xxx

This extract demonstrates how a new form of care is required following a disruption caused by a user deleting their account. Here care shifts from focusing on an individual to the collective, as members of the community concerned about Purple Giraffe's deleted account attempt to manage the spread of anxiety through the group. The difficulty users have is ascertaining whether the deletion is an instance of a common social media practice (i.e. taking a break) or a sign of a more serious escalation of Purple Giraffe's distress (e.g. self harm, or even suicide). Laura's post transmits an anxiety through the network, which is picked up by other members who know Purple Giraffe. An atmosphere of concern and anxiety is created. This elicits a range of responses, which try, to varying degree, to 'repair' the atmosphere. This is no straightforward task though. Angela offers a minimal response in the form of a 'sad face' emoji. Victoria extends this to include a brief comment ("oh no"). These are common forms of social media communication, but run the risk of being seen as inadequate at a time when concern exists regarding Purple Giraffe's well being. A further comment by Laura offers a possible explanation

in terms of reminding others of Purple Giraffe's previous discussions of leaving Elefriends, although as these were never acted out, the current situation elicits a deeper concern.

The threat in terms of a growing atmosphere of collective anxiety is sufficient to warrant an intervention from one of the moderators of the site (who takes the form of the 'Ele') to try to repair the atmosphere. Quick action by the 'Ele' is required to try to limit the development of a new atmosphere characterised by the spread of anxiety. The intervention is constrained though by the fact that Elefriends is a peer support site, and as such, no formal professional support can be provided. As such, the moderator cannot offer to 'help' with the anxiety in a formal way, but can only offer a generic reason why a user may delete their account. The offer to provide any support beyond this is limited to questions about a user's account. Whilst this may seem somewhat cold, it appears key to ensuring that moderation does not overstep the clear boundary between overseeing online peer support and providing formal mental health care. The provision of care and support is structured to take place between users, rather than between individual and professional service (in this case, Mind). This is one of the key challenges facing online peer support sites such as Elefriends. Whilst peer support can have positive effects in terms of connecting people with similar experiences, when something goes 'wrong', this can add to the distress of others, and cannot be addressed through the intervention of a professional. Peer support remains peer support, through thick and thin.

The conversation about Purple Giraffe shows how digital atmospheres vary through shifting patterns of affective energy, which inform users' experiences of mental distress. The potential to provoke anxiety that spreads through the site can create challenges about how to communicate and interact without triggering distress in others. In pro-ana online communities such concerns

have been managed through developing group rituals that authenticate users as well as developing specific tools to make one's anorexic body 'evident online' (Boero and Pascoe, 2012: 27). For users of Elefriends the concern is to make one's distress present online in such a way that facilitates care and support (for oneself and others), but without making it so evident that it triggers distress in other members of the community (e.g. through descriptions of self-harm). This tension is an ongoing feature of the atmosphere of the site.

### **Concluding remarks**

The power of social media to connect people is well known. What this paper has sought to highlight is what can happen when such power is put to work in mental health. We have argued that using the concept of atmosphere highlights the conditions, challenges and risks associated with entering, adjusting, and developing practices of care and support in and through Elefriends. This is important as not only is social media usage in mental health increasing, it's happening simultaneously with a reduction in availability of face-to-face services. This presents a cultural shift in mental health care. Peer support can empower people through offering access to a range of shared experience. And yet, it also holds potentially negative implications of shifting responsibility for care to patients and service users, rather than professional services. The analysis of experiences of using Elefriends is of value for informing these issues. The concept of digital atmosphere highlights how people's distress is not solely dependent on individuals, but unfolds through collective practices that flow through bodies and social media. Instead of conceptualising individuals and Elefriends as distinct 'spaces', we have argued that users' experiences of distress are shaped through being enveloped within atmospheres that involve bodies, discourse and images. Atmospheres transmit affects, which

produce and inform individual experience, which in turn can change the atmosphere. The idea that Elefriends is simply a tool *for* distress is shown to be too simplistic as it does not draw attention to the multiple ways that experiences of distress are shaped through being enveloped within digital atmospheres. Some of this is about social media being a technology (e.g. something instantaneous and always available) and some is about the reality of having the potential to connect with a huge amount of people with shared experience/s.

Providing support through social media is not without its problems. Unlike face-to-face spaces of support (e.g. community day centres), the availability of Elefriends means that there is considerable diversity in the levels and stages of distress for those who use it. The first challenge is being able to provide an online environment that can respond to a broad range of needs, e.g. from help at times of crisis (e.g. active self harm or suicide) through to information guidance (e.g. how to access financial support). Secondly, the caring nature of the activities in Elefriends means that users are automatically faced with a dilemma when friends from the site delete their profile unexpectedly. For others, this practice of *switching off* acts as a warning sign, and can create a collective anxiety in the community regarding the health of the user who has deleted. When this is coupled with distressing posts from the user prior to deletion the collective anxiety is amplified. Clearly, the care practices can become fragile at times of disconnection which presents a possible limit to peer support in Elefriends (at which point the Ele commonly steps in to reassure). Schillmeier (2014) describes how technologies are not just designed to 'fix' the needs of care but they are an 'active part' in the configuration of caring relations. It is essential to care for these relations so as to enhance their affective capabilities (e.g. how to empower people through online peer support). Schillmeier continues that technology also 'complicates' the everyday practices of care and thus 'caring relations require taking care of

the on-going (affective) relations they create' (p.123). Analysing experiences of distress through Elefriends as atmospheric can help address these issues.

Thinking of Elefriends as multiple digital atmospheres speaks directly to the ways that mental distress is shaped by encounters with Elefriends as an object-technology itself, as well as a mediating space for encountering other people. Moreover, atmospheres, when thought of not as a *thing*, but rather as a 'condition being constantly taken up in experience' (Anderson, 2014: 148), help to illuminate the ways that bodies shift through online care practices that are constantly being (re)created. This concept of digital atmosphere extends existing theories regarding *digital affect* though a focus on the transmission of affect through digital spaces, and the subsequent production of individual and collective experience. Moreover, atmospheres speak directly to the way/s that people experience of using Elefriends is *spatial*, in the sense that they feel they are 'entering' an environment populated by others and in which their activity is visible.

Elefriends is a networked technology facilitating multiple atmospheres that shape affect, and consequently users' experiences of distress. These are characterised by new encounters and continual movement and actively caring for future affective possibilities is part of the everyday activity in Elefriends. Thus time spent away from Elefriends can actually increase anxiety in the community. There may also be a number of practicalities and requirements that are necessary to constitute and continue practices of care and support on the site. Social media such as Elefriends should not only be seen as a solution to a problem (e.g. providing more effective peer support), but also need to be thought of as introducing new care practices, which themselves will require caring for. Social media can have positive benefits in relation to feeling support, but

can actually exacerbate distress at other times. As we have shown, distress is changed by the experiences of using sites such as Elefriends, and as such, social scientific analysis needs to become attuned to the new affective possibilities of the increased use of technologies designed to assist with mental health care and support.

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