Between Existential Mobility and Intimacy 5.0: Translocal Care in Pandemic Times

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured every social, political, economic, and cultural aspect of modern society. Millions of people have been stuck in lockdown within and across borders, national and regional terrains, in their homes and worse places. At this time of unprecedented change and 'stuckedness', digital communication technologies have served as a lifeline to forge and nurture communication, intimate ties, and a sense of continuity and belongingness. But being stuck and simultaneously virtually mobile has brought many difficulties, tensions, and paradoxes. In this paper we discuss first insights from a study with 15 members of the elderly Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) population in Melbourne, Australia to explore experiences of being stuck and virtually mobile. We find practices of translocal care – ways of caring for distant others through digital technologies, made more complex by the pandemic and shaped by two dynamics: networked collective 'existential mobility' (Hage 2009), and a quantification of feeling that we call 'intimacy 5.0'.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, digital media, translocal care, existential mobility, intimacy 5.0

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many people's lives to a standstill. National borders, businesses, and households were forced to close in order to stop the spread of the virus. People across the globe have followed social distancing rules, adhered to public health protocols, such as entering into support 'bubbles' with another household, and endured lockdowns. Entangled in people's experiences of being stuck and bubbled, and their fears and feelings of uncertainty, is a turn to virtual mobility through digital technologies.

This paper investigates how 15 elderly people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia used digital communication technologies to forge and sustain translocal care during a lockdown in 2020. In the pandemic, mobile devices and social media platforms have become an essential part of what McKay (2016) describes as translocal care – ways of caring for distant others. We explore this conception drawing upon the first author's findings based on remote interviewing – via Zoom and phone calls – among research participants from August to October 2020. The interviews covered the research participants' history of migration to Australia, ownership and use of mobile devices and online channels, as well as the positive and disruptive experiences of digital media use. The interview data, which were in English, were categorised and analysed based on similarities and difference (Saldaña, 2011) . Virtually all participants described care at a distance as a key activity, and highlighted two aspects as particularly important. We set these out with a set of vignettes below, and introduce two concepts to develop a deeper understanding: 'collective existential mobility' and 'intimacy 5.0'.

The main objective of the paper is to critically analyse how an array of mobile communication technologies and online channels shape the experiences of intimate care practices among ageing CALD people. Further, we also attempt to problematise how the onset of the pandemic has provided new ways for the ageing migrants to traverse distance between both non-proximate and proximate living arrangements. In a pandemic social terrain, digitally mediated intimate communications as well as lighter touch practices of 'checking in' with friends and family have surged (Watson et al 2020).

These new virtual mobilities enable new practices of translocal care, and our research shows how these are shaped by two interconnected dynamics. On the one hand, narratives of existential mobility – the need to feel that one's life is going somewhere (Hage 2009) - have become more interconnected, more intimate, deeper, stronger, and more collective. On the other, technology companies and platform operators who support the virtual mobilities needed to care for each other at a distance have gained ever more intimate and interconnected insight into people's relationships, thoughts and feelings across waves of Internet development (Figure 1).
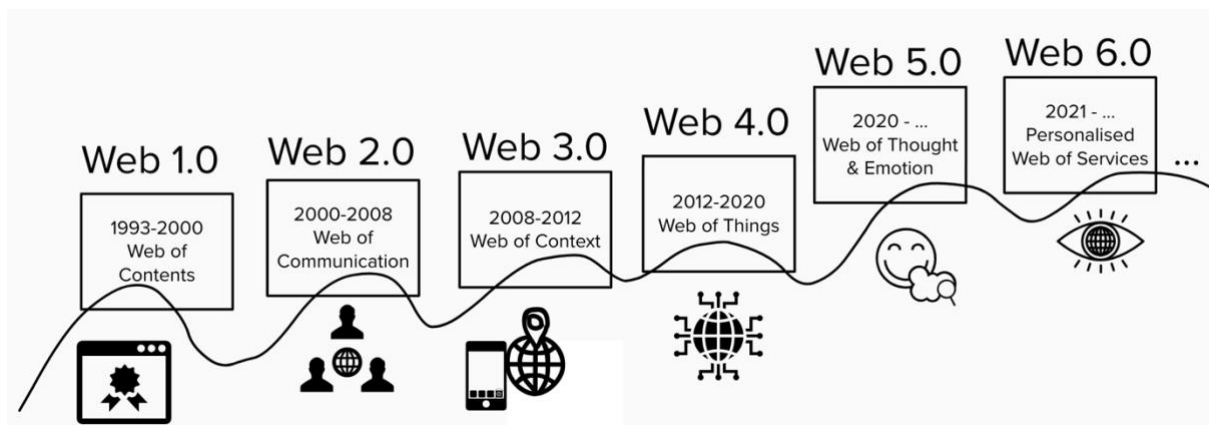

Figure 1 Waves of Web development from Web 1.0, adapted from Rani et al 2021.

These developments are deeply entangled with transformations of intimacy (Giddens 1992), and our respondents' narratives capture emergent experiences of what we call intimacy 5.0. We discuss how translocal practices of care, collective existential mobilities, waves of Web development, and transformations of intimacy are connected in the sections below.

CIRCUITS OF TRANSLOCAL CARE IN A MOBILE RISK SOCIETY

Donna, a 96-year-old woman originally from the Philippines, migrated to Australia in 1994. She is one of the participants in the first author's study of elderly CALD Melburnians' digital practices. She was petitioned by her son and initially lived with her son's family, taking care of her grandchildren. She eventually moved out of her son's house and now lives alone. Her son and his family, her grandchildren and great grandchildren visit her regularly. She also socialises with other elderly Filipinos in Melbourne by attending events, meetings, and other activities of various elderly

organisations. However, because of the COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, the family visits and physical gathering with the elderly communities were stopped. Luckily, her son could 'bubble' with her and was still visiting her while observing social distancing. Further, she was checked by professional staff who brought groceries and key supplies, for which funding comes from MyAged Care, a government-funded aged care service. To deal with the lockdown, Donna relies on a smartphone, a tablet computer, and an array of online tools. She uses Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Zoom, and YouTube. She also has a SMART TV to watch online religious masses and Australian news. Notably, she has learned to use these tools with the help of her son as well as attending some of the (pre-pandemic) elderly communities' digital literacy programs. As such, despite being physically stuck, she manages to stay connected to her family, friends and communities. The exchanges of texts and photos on Facebook messenger, attending Zoom sessions with friends, and accessing homeland contents via Facebook and YouTube contribute to Donna's ability to enact intimacy while in confinement.

While Donna's case highlights the circulation of care among proximate support networks, some elderly participants receive and deliver care on a transnational scale. Edwin's story highlights the reach of such connections. He is a 66-yeard old man, originally from Indonesia, who moved to study in New Zealand for his PhD. There he met his English wife, and they moved back to Indonesia. Later, they found themselves in Australia. Edwin is already retired but remains active in volunteering work for various projects to help villages in Indonesia. As a father, he connects with his three children, who are living in New York, London, and Australia, via a WhatsApp family group chat. Further, as a sibling, he also uses a WhatsApp family group chat to maintain ties with his siblings in Indonesia. For Edwin, the messaging application plays a huge role in enabling transnational connections. He describes how connections stretch across the globe, linking relatives together. He explains:

> WhatsApp is our main platform that we use to discuss family things. Of course, I've still got a strong connection to things that are happening there [in Indonesia]. I introduced the set-up of the WhatsApp for my family group some time ago so we communicate with them quite regularly. I've got two sisters and a brother who are in Indonesia and they are part of the group and my other brother is in Nairobi. He's got a French wife so he's actually based in

France but he works with the United Nations in Nairobi which is in Kenya. With the WhatsApp group we communicate and share information.

Despite having his own family, Edwin has been very supportive of his siblings in Indonesia. On top of sustaining transnational connections via WhatsApp, Edwin also provides practical care at a distance. This is evident in the way he raises concerns about the safety of his younger sister during the interview:

> They are quite concerned because they are under lockdown in Jakarta, but they let us know they're being careful. We are concerned about one of the siblings, a younger sister, she's also being very careful, but she lives on her own. We are using WhatsApp to keep the connection to ensure that everything is okay and if she needs any assistance […] the assistance of course is mainly through contact, the support is [also] financial in some cases and to provide financial assistance where we can. My sister has no income, one of my sisters, so we provide her with regular financial assistance.

Research on migration, digital media and care has long highlighted how communicative mobilities facilitate the delivery and receiving of care (Baldassar et al., 2007; McKay 2016). Studies have shown how migrants utilise mobile devices and online channels to forge and sustain long-distance relationships, a coping mechanism for the pains of physical separation (Madianou and Miller, 2012; Cabalquinto, 2018). In the first author's earlier research (2020), transnational caregiving is articulated as a form of 'elastic carework', highlighting how different forms of resources are stretched across distances to enact care support. Emotional, moral and financial support is often asymmetrical and can be burdensome for some family members. For example, suppressing one's emotions can become crucial in sustaining a sense of familyhood, when, for example, adult children working abroad do not want their ageing parents to see them struggle.

Donna and Edwin's stories highlight how the human and non-human become entangled in the enactment of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Mol et al., 2015). How has this changed the experience of translocal care during COVID for those with extensive experience of online intimacy? The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified virtual mobilities in many ways. This is most salient for individuals who have to constantly manage spatial and temporal immobility. For Donna, remaining connected with the help of mobile communication technologies is a means for maintaining proximate

intimate ties. Notably, transnational connections also allow her to maintain her cultural identity (Baldassar and Wilding, 2019) by accessing homeland information. More importantly, Donna highlights how digital media use shapes the enactment of care practices. During the field work, Donna highlighted that her son was setting up and teaching her to use online tools. For her, this act of care is something to be proud of: "I am very proud of my son because he is very caring although he's a family man with my grandchildren [...] Very caring and very helpful...]". In a way, virtual mobilities can help in addressing a growing issue on isolation and loneliness among elderly people in Australia (Neves and Sanders, 2020).

Donna and Edwin's stories show how translocal care becomes more complex in a mobile risk society (Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring, 2020). The notion of a 'mobile risk society' extends Beck's (1992) observation of how complex post-industrial societies, technologies and processes inevitably produce risks that are beyond societies' control. Reflecting on the way in which the multiply interlinked mobilities of people, viruses, money, objects, goods, resources, information, images, and data form 'constellations of bodies, technologies, physical spaces, knowledge, and skills in constant flow', Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring (2020) argue that 'ambivalence has become normality, and paradox solutions and temporality dominate' (p. 5). The simultaneous im|mobilisations that Donna and Edwin experience attest to these contradictory complexities, and they highlight asymmetries of virtual mobility (Cabalquinto 2020b). Virtual mobility can create new possibilities for those –like Donna – who have support for accessing digital technologies, or Edwin's sister – who receives financial and emotional support from him. At the same time dependence on virtual mobilities creates tensions, or worse, destitution, for those who do not have access to support networks, such as the millions of Filipino workers who are stranded abroad or who have been repatriated into unemployment during the COVID crisis (Fernandez et al 2020). The safety net that supports Edwin's sister is not available to everyone.

EXISTENTIAL MOBILITY AND STUCKEDNESS

Mercy, a 62-year-old Filipino woman working in the disability sector, constantly gets updates about her 90-year-old mother's health and social welfare through her left-behind brother in the Philippines via a Facebook messenger family group chat. She has three brothers and two sisters in the Philippines. Because of old age, her mother's mobility has deteriorated. During the field work, she said, "I thought my mother would die two weeks ago. She got very sick." Through Zoom and Facebook Messenger, she is able to talk to her mother on a daily basis. In the group chat, she always receives photos of her mother. For instance, her brother sent her a photo of their mother getting a new haircut. Meanwhile, online channels allow Mercy to enact care for her mother. As she highlighted, "I like to know all the details of what's happening with her, the food that she eats, the care that she gets and sometimes I teach them how to care, how to lift her up or whatever things that need to be done with her". Despite being stuck in Melbourne, she is able to mobilise her networks via digital technologies to provide care for the mother. This practice gives her joy, "Of course it makes you happy. There is the feeling of assurance that, "Oh, she's being taken care of."

Hage (2009) coins the term 'existential mobility' drawing on his anthropological investigations of transnational migration and racism. Whilst recognising the often existence-threatening social, political, or environmental conditions that prompt people to migrate, he also observes many people's need to feel that their life 'is going somewhere'. He shows that migrants may arrive in places where others – often the marginalised and disadvantaged of the host society – are stuck, and the very sense of their now 'going somewhere' with their lives can create tensions. He also explains how, for some, a state of stasis and the process of 'waiting out' a personal or wider societal or economic crisis like the pandemic can become an endurance test. This burden becomes, perhaps not bearable, but somewhat lighter in the context of shared narratives of a collective good life where the elderly can be properly cared for.

Mercy's story shows how virtual and physical mobilities of translocal care during the pandemic are shaped by, and shape, existential mobilities. The very need to care for Mercy's mother in this distributed and technologically mediated way arises from the migratory existential mobility of

members of Mercy's and Donna's and Edwin's families. Through more intensive connectivity, narratives of sacrifice for the purpose of a better life become something shared between all. McKay's (2007) critique of the notion of care drain in the care chain literature was perhaps the first to pick up on this collective character of existential mobility. She argued that intimacy should not be understood merely as a relationship of face-to-face care. It is, rather 'made through emotional labour' and has 'at its root an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way' sometime in the future (McKay, 2007: 179).

Donna, Edwin, and Mercy's stories show how the pandemic intensifies efforts of practical care, and online communications. The virtual mobilities of translocal care in pandemic times shape a more collective dimension of existential mobility, where whole families and support networks, distributed across the globe can be on the move together, depending on the physical mobility of some. As elderly members of multi-generational global family networks, Donna, Edwin, and Mercy draw these narratives together. But their collective existential mobilities come at a price.

INTIMACY 5.0

Dorothy is a 70-year-old woman originally from the Philippines. She moved to Australia when she was petitioned by her sister in 1991. From then on, she worked in different jobs. Now that she is retired, she organises many events for elderly communities, including teaching elderly people to use mobile devices and online channels. As a person who is very adept in using technologies, Dorothy is very aware of online scams. Asked what she uses her technologies for, she says:

> Sometimes news, sometimes from the mobile, but I don't always believe what is written, especially in the Facebook, and I don't usually press like or reply to them, something like that, because I know some of them are not honest or there are scams. I have to delete. *Interviewer: How do you know that it's a scam?* Because one time I received a text message from my mobile saying, "Congratulations. You won something." How did I win? I didn't even buy the ticket or what, so it's a scam. I deleted it, and they said, "If you really press like, you will get a voucher like this and like that." What if I press like and they get all the things about me? I don't like those things. ... These people, why do they need my bank account number?

Dorothy's experience demonstrates the frustrations of dealing with the way in which the 'behavioral exhaust' of online life is turned into data under 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019) and exploited by commercial, but also political, and even criminal actors. She is able to deal with this, but for some elderly people, noticing and managing scams can be more challenging. A case in point is Rahul, a 63-year-old University Lecturer. During the field work, Rahul's landline kept on ringing as he was speaking. He explained that there was no need to answer the call: a man, whose voice had become familiar to him, kept on calling and offering to pay fifty percent of his electricity bill. Rahul knew that this was a scam. But the man was persistent, and Rahul got drawn into deferring rather than stopping these conversations. He reported the incident to the police but nothing happened. He stated: 'I don't know. They are not able to do anything. For the police it's not a serious thing. It's a nuisance. I think they should stop people at the early stages, rather than leave them. It's a crime.'

Both Dorothy and Rahul know that their dependence on digital technologies puts them at risk. In a mobile risk society, despite being connected, being able to identify a scam, and escaping it by ignoring messages or calls, elderly web users can still become trapped in an exploitative loop.

If we align the original Web 1.0, a read-only web of static content, with practices of 'Intimacy 1.0', centred around interpersonal interactions through face-to-face encounters, letters, and telephone calls, subsequent waves of Web development have turned up the access to and the degree of commercial, criminal, and political scrutiny of, practices of intimacy (Fig 2). Web 2.0 brought social interaction, allowing social networking and content sharing, as well as new capacities for mapping and extending people's networks of intimate relationships (Intimacy 2.0). Transformations of how trust can be gained and maintained happened at this juncture. Web 3.0, also called the semantic web, linked data and enabled greater interactivity, as well as providing context such as location awareness for emergent personalised mobile internet services. It also increased searchability and introduced artificial intelligence, allowing more detailed analysis of the nature of intimate connections (Intimacy 3.0). And as Web 4.0 spread connectivity into the world of things, connecting people and objects, including their cars, watches, houses, media systems, fridges and more, 'Intimacy 4.0' expands

tracking to material and embodied aspects of everyday life, including sleep patterns, fitness regimes

and 'buddy' relations. This has driven capacity for profiling for predominantly commercial purposes,

but also for novel opportunities for crime and political surveillance. Now, Web 5.0 uses artificial

intelligence to analyse people's thoughts and emotions to micro-target content.
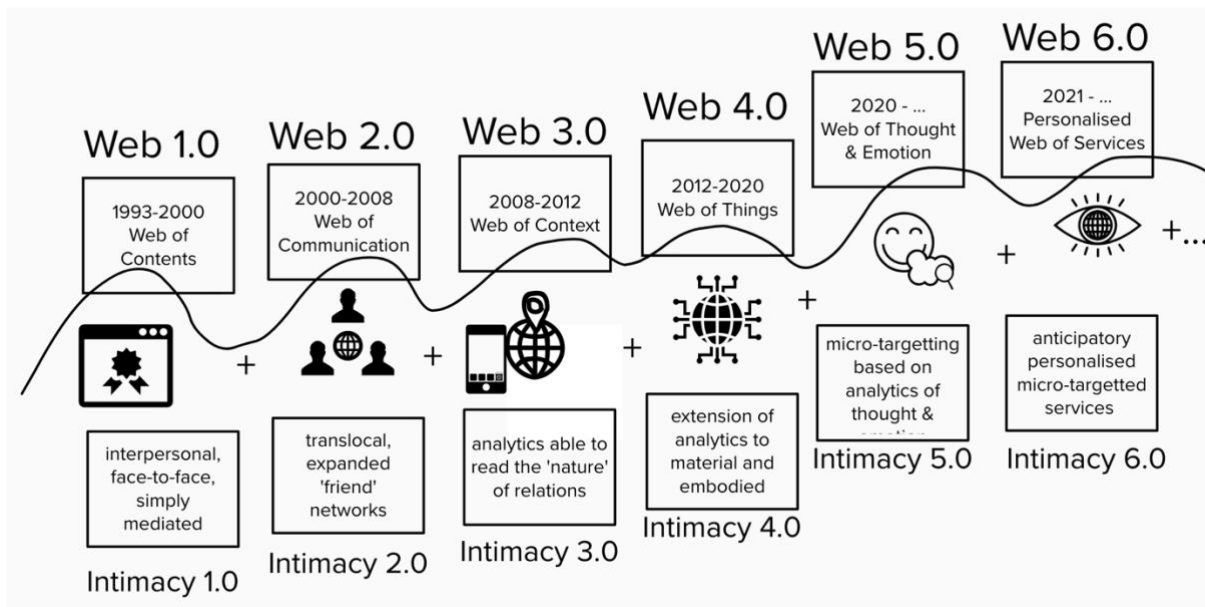

Figure 2 Cumulative augmentations and transformations of intimacy linked to Web development

We introduce the notion of 'Intimacy 5.0' to capture the cumulative augmentations and

transformations of intimacy linked to these waves of web development. Intimacy 5.0 is a combination

of vastly extended capacities to connect, to enact translocal care and collective existential mobility,

but it also renders participants virtually defenceless against exposure to deep emotional and thought

profiling. Dorothy and Rahul's acute reflexive awareness and resistance to scams exemplify the

helplessness of users in this socio-technical entanglement, and the elderly are not alone. Companies

like Facebook actively explore how to profit from 'moments when young people need a confidence

boost' (Reilly 2017). With new abilities to estimate "teen emotional states…based on how teens use

the service, including "worthless," "insecure," "defeated," "anxious," "silly," "useless," "stupid,"

"overwhelmed," "stressed," and "a failure"" (Reilly 2017), Facebook is able to exploit vulnerability.

Disasters generate new and enormous 'Intimacy 5.0' opportunities. In a survey, COVID researchers in Taiwan found that more than 40% of respondents experienced high levels of anxiety (Lu et al 2020). This ranged from worries about catching the virus to more generalised fears about the future. This allows for a convergence of surveillance and disaster capitalism (Klein 2008), and 'empathetic' capitalism, and the pandemic has intensified exploitative practices. In 2020, global tech companies rolled out different campaigns and services that supported the World Health Organisation's call for physical distancing practices and lockdowns to stop the spread of the coronavirus. For instance, Facebook released a range of 'care-themed' stickers. Instagram produced 'stay at home' stickers. YouTube showcased a series of 'At home with me' videos. Google used 'stay home and save lives' as a specially designed doodle on its web page. These contents were framed as digital artefacts that encourage individuals to sustain connections while in non-proximate settings during a pandemic (Cabalquinto & Ahlin, 2021). But their use registers interconnections and emotional states.

A worried person may not only be highly susceptible to scams, but also legitimate promotions of health, insurance, 'prepping' or finance products, as well as ideological manipulation when micro-targetted on the basis of analytics of their emotional states. This turn to empathy is anything but empathetic (Pedwell 2012, Hunt 2018) and it is not an unintended consequence. In fact, it is the opposite, as people's vulnerabilities are deliberately being taken advantage of for profit. Intimacy 5.0 is claiming even the most sensitive human experiences as free raw material for profit – a new form of accumulation by dispossession that is focused on people's thoughts and emotions. In that light, prospects for more personalised services based on even more intelligent information management in Web 6.0 and its associated promise of 'Intimacy 6.0' (aka even more fine-tuned and anticipatory emotional and ideological manipulation) are not encouraging.

CONCLUSION

Modern communication technologies serve as lifelines in pandemic times. The challenges of physical separation brought upon by travel restrictions, lockdowns and physical distance has been managed through digital media use. In this paper, we have shown how 'stuckedness' has been overcome through virtual mobilities. Individuals and households are metaphorically placed in a 'bubble–' in two ways. Firstly, containment of interaction to intimate support bubbles was overcome through virtual mobilities of translocal care, strengthening collective existential mobility and bonds. However, our discussion also shows how these colourful and floating intimate digitalised bubbles are made transparent and can become penetrable. Various sectors of our society – commercial, political, and criminal – prey on data generated through translocal care, especially data about vulnerability. The notion of intimacy 5.0 captures not only the emotive, personalised, and networked aspect of digital media use in overcoming immobility during the pandemic, but also highlights the exploitation of emotion for commercial, political, and criminal purposes.

So how do we move forward from this? The pandemic has definitely exposed various opportunities and challenges in the digital realm. On the one hand, positive collective existential mobilities continue to grow within the cracks of a pandemic life. On the other, virtual mobilities have become a target for enhanced commercial and political exploitation and manipulation. It is this ambiguous complexity of collective existential mobility that we wish to highlight. Existing asymmetric and hierarchical structures may determine who the winners and losers are during and post-COVID. To engage with this inquiry demands a critical interrogation of diverse digital practices and their consequences.

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