

GOING VIRAL: ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA



FRUSTRATION/REVELATION LECTURE SERIES

TALK BY

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ABSTRACT | Every research project involves countless small decisions, and each one could have huge consequences on the findings as well as on the researcher. This is especially the case for ethnographers, who collect data on the social world with first-hand participant observation, using their own bodies to gain a sensory understanding of the field. This talk presents my ethnographic research on virality and social media. To trace the organization of virality, I ask, How do people go viral online, and why do they pursue it? Over the course of 11 months and 50 interviews, I immersed into the world of content creators to understand how they catch and hold the attention of global mass audiences on Facebook and other platforms. There are tremendous economic rewards of high reach, but there are also social risks in the form of status loss and context collapse. I experience these risks and rewards personally as I learn to create and post videos for my own monetized Facebook page. In discovering the labor and logic behind virality, this carnal ethnography pushes theoretical boundaries in the sociology of culture, and it pushes my own boundaries too: am I willing the risks to go viral?

BIO | Ashley Mears is Associate Professor of Sociology and a core faculty in the Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University. Working at the intersections of economic sociology, cultural sociology, and gender, she studies how societies value people and things. She is the author of two books, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (California, 2011), about the gendered labor behind the 'look' in New York and London fashion markets, and *Very Important People* (Princeton, 2020), a study of conspicuous consumption among the global VIP party circuit. She has also written for *The New York Times* and *The Economist*. She has been a visiting faculty at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, and at the University of Amsterdam.

FRUSTRATION/REVELATION SERIES | Research can be characterized by long stretches of frustration and puzzlement, punctuated by occasional moments of revelation. This series focuses on exceptional scholars who will not deliver standard academic talks, but who will bring to life struggles faced when pursuing their research, how they came to study a specific topic, difficult choices made, failures, and then sometimes revelations - sudden or slowly accumulating - that have transformed how they view their research, their respective disciplines, and even the world at large. In the process, we also learn about academic disciplines and the kind of work scholars do in crafting their research. There will be a discussion following each lecture where the first three questions are reserved for Undergraduate students.

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