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Media life

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Life in today's liquid modern society is all about finding ways to deal with constant change, whether it is at home, at work or at play. Over the last few decades, these key areas of human existence have converged in and through our concurrent and continuous exposure to, use of and immersion in media, information and communication technologies. Research in countries as varied as the United States, Brazil, South Korea, The Netherlands and Finland consistently shows that more of our time gets spent using media, and that multi-tasking our media has become a regular feature of everyday life. It must be clear that media are not just types of technology and chunks of content we pick and choose from the world around us – a view that considers media as external agents affecting us in a myriad of ways. If anything, today we have to recognize how the uses and appropriations of media penetrate all aspects of contemporary life. This world is what Roger Silverstone (2007), Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg (2006), and Sam Inkinen (1998) label a 'mediapolis': a comprehensively mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life. It is the point of this commentary to argue that such a perspective on life lived *in*, rather than *with*, media can and perhaps should be the ontological benchmark for a 21st-century media studies (Deuze, 2009).

As media become pervasive and ubiquitous, forming the building blocks for our constant remix of the categories of everyday life (the public and the private, the local and the global, the individual and the collective), they become invisible – in the sense that, as Friedrich Kittler suggests, we become blind to that which shapes our lives the most. I propose that the key challenge of communication and media studies in the 21st century is, or will be, the disappearance of media. This is not a renewed claim for the kind of soft techno-determinism espoused in the work of Marshall McLuhan and Manuel Castells (Stalder, 2006: 153). The increasing invisibility of media is exemplified by their disappearing from consciousness when used intensely – by their logic of immediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1996). In this process, the primary bias of media technologies – the fact that people can read, edit and write their codes, programs, protocols and texts – comes to shape our sense of reality. This is a reality that seems malleable as well, that could be manipulated, fast-forwarded, panned, scanned and zoomed in on (Stephens, 1998). In this statement of purpose, I follow the lead of David Harvey (1990), who signaled a

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gradual change in the human experience of space–time relationships in the course of the 20th century – as exemplified by the increasing speed of travel and telecommunications – as a benchmark for a global change in people's sense of reality itself. Media become the playground for a search for meaning and belonging – not just by consumption or what Harvey calls 'flexible accumulation' of artifacts and ideas that would make up and reconstitute one's sense of self-identity, but also by producing, co-creating, assembling and remixing 'a whole series of simulacra as milieux of escape, fantasy, and distraction' (1990: 302). Castells in this context has argued for an emerging culture of 'real virtuality' (1996: 364ff), where reality itself is entirely captured by mediated communication. With Harvey and Castells, I think it is important for media studies not to see people as hapless victims of this seemingly fragmented worldview, nor to assume that this shift towards a media life inevitably makes people's experience of society somehow less 'real' or 'true'. The potential power of people to shape their lives and identities can be found in the assumption that people produce themselves (and therefore each other) in media. This perhaps may additionally explain why people do not recognize their media habits because they are a constitutive part of them.

Beyond the blurring of boundaries between people as producers and consumers of information that is disseminated and co-created across multiple media platforms – a process Henry Jenkins (2006) calls 'convergence culture' – the distinctions drawn all too easily between humans and machines, or, as Lev Manovich (2001) explains, between culture and computers, can also be seen as becoming less relevant to 21st-century media studies. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued how 'the anthropology of cyberspace is really a recognition of the new human condition' (2000: 291). The newness of the contemporary human condition can perhaps best be understood in an abstract sense as a socio-technical experience of reality – a reality that seems to submit itself (potentially) to the affordances (or, as Deleuze and Guattari [1987] have suggested, '*agencements*') of media: a reality that could be cut, pasted, edited, remixed and forwarded. This argument builds on my earlier suggestion that media should not be seen as somehow located outside of lived experience, but rather should be seen as intrinsically part of it. Our life is lived *in*, rather than *with*, media – we are living a *media life* (Deuze, 2007: 242).

Media studies and media life

In a way, the media life point of view does not differ much from earlier points of view offered by noted theorists, such as Marshall McLuhan's perspective on media as extensions of man, which form and structure how we perceive and understand the world around us. Similarly, authors coming from a variety of disciplines have developed comprehensive perspectives on media and social theory (Fuchs, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee, 2008; Luhmann, 2000 [1996]; Rasmussen, 2000; Thompson, 1995), media ecology (Strate, 2006) and mediatizaton (Lundby, 2009) that supersede the existence of media in a material sense. Such work generally aims to explore how changes and developments in society interact with trends in media (production, use and content). Yet these approaches, however eloquent and inspiring, tend to confirm the traditional biases and

boundaries of (critical) communication and media studies – reproducing people and their media in terms of production, content, and reception, and interrogating the presumed consequences omnipresent media may have for (the communicative relationships between) people and society. It is perhaps time to take the next step: using an ontology of media life for theorizing and operationalizing the way we see ourselves and the role we (can) play in society.

The media life perspective offers a prediction and explanation of increasingly invisible media; it sustains a theoretical argument as that proposed by Friedrich Kittler (2009), aiming to resolve ontology's hostility to media. As Kittler argues, 'philosophy … has been necessarily unable to conceive of media as media', in that the relation between observer and the observed as for example expressed in writing, audio or video recordings is generally not considered to be of influence to the work of the philosopher. This blindness to the structuring role of media in lived experience not only considers but moves beyond technical media – while acknowledging how significant the medium may be to the message – to address the essential nature of media as the invisible interlocutor of people's lives. In today's media culture, where people increasingly move through the world (more or less deliberately) assembling a deeply individualized media system – in other words: living in their own *personal information space* – such a viewpoint can form the basis of investigation and understanding of everyday life.

Beyond the theoretical and empirical consequences of a media life-based ontology, I would like to touch on the discussion by Denis McQuail on the future of mass communication theory in the 2010 edition of his seminal handbook of the field. McQuail suggests a shift towards a somewhat post-industrial view of mass media, where media are not crucial to everyday life and public communication because of their potential to reach an entire national or otherwise mass public with a restricted range of content and experiences, but rather where their impact is premised on 'the voluntary engagement of the public in its own immersion in a rich and varied world of mediated experience'.[1] Similarly, Manuel Castells articulates the rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication.

> We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive. True, the medium, even a medium as revolutionary as this one, does not determine the content and effect of its messages. But it makes possible the unlimited diversity and the largely autonomous origin of most of the communication flows that construct, and reconstruct every second the global and local production of meaning in the public mind. (2007: 248)

The media life perspective engages with these various challenges to media and communication studies by taking the premises as articulated by Castells and McQuail to their logical extreme: media are everywhere, and therefore nowhere. Quite literally, the suggestion here is to take an ontological turn in media studies – one that neither tries to make media all-powerful (in terms of their hegemonic potential to consolidate power structures in social institutions such as the state, economy and the family), nor aims to 'decenter' media research in an attempt to focus more specifically on the question how

can we can live, ethically, *with* and *through* media (Couldry, 2006). As Sonia Livingstone suggests, a 21st-century media studies must be grounded in the assumptions that '[f]irst, the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society; and second, as a result, the media mediate, for better or for worse, more than ever before' (2009: 7). This *mediation of everything* is premised on the increasing invisibility of media which, in turn, makes media indivisible from (all aspects of everyday) life. The moment media become invisible, our sense of identity, and indeed our experience of reality itself, becomes irreversibly modified, because mediated.

The *Truman Show* delusion

The media life perspective applied to the theory and empirical evidence of media studies raises (and perhaps confirms) the issue, that our lived reality cannot be experienced separate from, or outside of media. Metaphorically speaking, we are now all living inside our very own *Truman Show* (referring to the 1998 movie by director Peter Weir): a world characterized by pervasive and ubiquitous media that we are constantly and concurrently deeply immersed in, that we are the stars of, and that dominate and shape all aspects of our everyday life. Importantly, in this world it is also up to each of us to navigate the largely unwritten rules and hidden passages of 'an ocean of media' (Lamb, 2005) on our own. In the film, Canadian-American actor Jim Carrey portrays the life of a man – Truman Burbank – who does not know that his entire life is one big reality television show, watched by millions all over the world.[2] In the course of the movie it becomes clear that the only way out for Carrey's character will be his individual ability, as the only 'True Man', to figure out whether the people in his life are actors (and to what extent they act), and where the fine line between the studio (stage, decor) and the 'real' world can be drawn. As in the contemporary individualized society, the solution to this vexing dilemma can only be found by the individual, using his/her skills (Beck, 1992 [1986]), while all the time aware of at least the possibility of being constantly monitored and recorded (Andrejevic, 2009). The rather ominous *Truman Show* metaphor is perhaps only appropriate insofar it addresses people's complex, interconnected yet often solipsistic engagement with reality through media. When asked how the show can be so successful in convincing Truman that his world is real even though it so clearly features a fake reality, the director of Truman's reality show (named Christof in the movie, a not so subtle reference to Slavoj Žižek's concept of the 'small other' embodying the authority of, in this case, God) answers: '[w]e accept the reality of the world with which we are presented'.[3] It is important to note the implication of this narrative, as it does not seem to be premised on a notion that Truman's world is unreal. The *Truman Show* is just another version of the real, one that is carefully staged and completely mediated. This staged reality bears a resemblance to Plato's allegory of the cave, as the people in the cave watching the puppets, like Truman, were unaware of any other lifestyle or world other than the one they were shown. Using the *Truman Show* as a metaphor for living a media life, one must additionally note that the ending of the movie – Truman escapes the studio – might in fact be the only truly unrealistic aspect of the film's story, as in our fully mediated existence, escape is impossible.

During the summer of 2008 psychiatrists Joel and Ian Gold made headlines around the world with their diagnosis of a new condition found in five of their patients. The brothers suggested that the combination of pervasive media, classical syndromes such as narcissism and paranoia, and an emerging media culture where the boundaries between the physical and virtual world are blurring produces a new type of psychosis: a 'Truman Show Delusion' (TSD; see e.g. Kershaw, 2008a). People who suffer from TSD are more or less convinced that everything around them is décor, that the people in their lives are all actors, and that everything they do is monitored and recorded. In an interview with Canadian newspaper the *National Post*, McGill University's Ian Gold attributes TSD to 'unprecedented cultural triggers that might explain the phenomenon: the pressure of living in a large, connected community can bring out the unstable side of more vulnerable people.… New media is opening up vast social spaces that might be interacting with psychological processes' (*National Post*, 2008: A1). In a follow-up interview with *Newsweek*, his brother (affiliated with the Bellevue Hospital Center in New York) suggests that TSD 'is the pathological product of our insatiable appetite for self-exposure' (*Newsweek*, 2008: 10). Earlier that week in a special report on the WebMD site, he links TSD more generally to the role media play in people's lives: '[w]e've got the "perfect storm" of reality TV and the Internet. These are powerful influences in the culture we live in.… The pressure of living in a large, connected community can bring out the unstable side of more vulnerable people' (Wright, 2008). The TSD additionally contains a belief that one's life has ceased being spontaneous, as one is always aware of (the possibility of) the scripted and broadcasted nature of everything one does. In a special report about the TSD on the website of the American Psychological Association (APA) one year later (6 June 2009), the brothers identify specific features of modern culture – 'warrantless wiretapping and video surveillance systems … widely accessible technology … reality TV shows and MySpace' – as squaring with the *Truman Show*'s basic premise (DeAngelis, 2009).

In the APA report and in an earlier background story in the *International Herald Tribune*, several experts are quoted who confirm the possibility of the TSD, suggesting that '[o]ne way of looking at the delusions and hallucinations of the mentally ill is that they represent extreme cases of what the general population, or the merely neurotic, are worried about' (Kershaw, 2008b: 7). Writing in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Paolo Fusar-Poli and colleagues confirm the diagnosis of their American colleagues, describing the common symptoms of TSD as:

> [f]irst, there is the sense that the ordinary is changed or different, and that there is particular significance in this. This is coupled with a searching for meaning, which, in this case, results in the 'Truman explanation'. The third feature is a profound alteration of subjective experience and of self-awareness, resulting in an unstable first-person perspective with varieties of depersonalization and derealization, disturbed sense of ownership, fluidity of the basic sense of identity, distortions of the stream of consciousness and experiences of disembodiment. (2008: 168).

The significance of this analysis of the contemporary human condition for our argument is the realization, that:

(1) TSD is perhaps best understood an amplification of a distinct sense of uncertainty and unsettlement in the population at large;

(2) TSD accelerates a sense of urgency about one's life project of self-identity; and

(3) TSD indirectly acknowledges an alternate ending to the movie on which it is based, namely a scenario where Truman does not (cannot) leave, but stays to tell his own story.

Media life and society

It must be clear, then, that in the relationship between media and the human condition there are several elements that serve to amplify and accelerate broader trends in society, such as:

(1) a primacy of self-governance and self-reliance over deference to authorities such as parents, professionals and politicians (in this regard see especially Bauman, 2006, 2009; Beck, 1992 [1986]);

(2) an extension of community premised on simultaneous co-presence and telepresence as directed by the individual and her/his concerns (as particularly documented in Wellman [2002] and his subsequent publications[4] in terms of a shift from 'little boxes' and 'glocalized' communities to those based on 'networked individualism', linking individuals with little regard to space); and

(3) the emergence of mass self-communication next to mass communication signifying the shift in almost all industrial societies from survival values toward increasing emphasis on self-expression values as comprising the major area of concern to people in such societies (Inglehart and Baker, 2000).

According to Bauman, people's current endemic and, perhaps more importantly, *undirected* uncertainty breeds a particular kind of fear – a fear that is based on 'our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done' (2006: 2). All the more interesting is the connection Bauman sees between people's uncertainty about their prospects in a rapidly moving 'runaway world' (as Giddens, 2002), and the structure and consequences of a deeply individualized society. However, this society is at the same time, as Bauman indirectly admits, irrevocably connected. 'The new individualism, the fading of human bonds and the wilting of solidarity, are all engraved on one side of a coin whose other side bears the stamp of globalization' (2006: 146). Considering the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of media and the signaled uncanny capacity of contemporary media to connect and isolate at the same time – to make the world concurrently larger and smaller – it becomes crucial for a 21st-century media studies to engage directly with people's experience of reality as lived in media. As noted in the discussion of TSD, this experience is rooted in people's sense that reality is fundamentally changed or different – and that reality has become particular to their own experience of it. The key to considering what it means to live a media life must perhaps be an appreciation of the 'off' nature or, what Slavoj Žižek (2006) has theorized as a mode of *parallax* reality as lived (and mediated) experience. In other words: people in media life inevitably engage with reality on the basis of a constant moving in between idealism (what we perceive) and materialism

(what is apparent), using the tools and techniques of contemporary digital and networked media to edit and remix both their perceptions and the appearance of that reality. One therefore wonders whether people in this context are inevitably reproducing the very reality they seek to modify, or whether there are in fact human agencies (Callon, 2005: 4) to be found in the affordances of media. In short: can we be free and mediated at the same time?

Discussion

A future media studies can perhaps benefit from a new, or additional ontological turn – after and next to the cultural, the linguistic and the spatial turn. I have argued in this commentary that media cannot be conceived of as separate to us, to the extent that we live *in* media, rather than *with* media. There are extensive social and cultural repercussions occurring primarily due to the way media are becoming invisible, as media are so pervasive and ubiquitous that people in general do not even register the presence of media in their lives. The networked individualist and personalized information space that digital natives have created for themselves and which constitutes their everyday reality influences work, play, learning and interacting by unsettling, liquefying all boundaries. Considering the largely informational and symbolic nature of life's processes (and an increasing immateriality of one's experience of society), research must find its starting point in a dynamic, perhaps even mobile understanding of media and society (Urry, 2007). Such an understanding is further grounded in a recognition (not an explaining away) of the increasing invisibility of media. Research should therefore not only focus on the way people use media in the context of people's sense of reality, moving beyond the production-content-reception premise of media and society, but also challenge any taken-for-granted technological inferences with everyday life.

Situating media *in*, rather than *with*, everyday life opens up ontological opportunities for complexifying media research and additionally draws our attention to the wider social context of finding, producing, editing and distributing meaning through 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2007). The purpose of the media life perspective is not whether we can make reality more real, or whether more or less engagement with media helps or handicaps such noble efforts. The point is rather how we can interpret media life in terms of how we can change it.[5] Humberto Maturana (1997) has raised what are quite possibly the essential stakes in our discussion of the interconnected relationships between humans and technology:

> I think that the question that we human beings must face is that of what do we want to happen to us, not a question of knowledge or progress. The question that we must face is not about the relation of biology with technology … nor about the relation between knowledge and reality.…
> I think that the question that we must face at this moment of our history is about our desires and about whether we want or not to be responsible of our desires.

Living a media life is not necessarily submitting to the confounding reality of participating tactically in an all-encompassing reality show, nor does it contribute to a potential

strategy of avoidance and disconnecting from such a reality. Kathryn Montgomery offers a glimpse of the potential of a media life point of view:

> [t]he transition to the Digital Age provides us with a unique opportunity to rethink the position of [people] in media culture, and in society as a whole [as] there is still enough fluidity in the emerging media system for actions to help guide its future. (2009: 221)

If we live our lives in media and we choose to take responsibility for it, what exactly are our options to constitute each other and ourselves in society, to be (as stated earlier) free and mediated at the same time?

> I am struck by the ending of *The Truman Show.*… All the film can offer us is a vision of media exploitation, and all its protagonist can imagine is walking away from the media and slamming the door. It never occurs to anyone that Truman might stay on the air, generating his own content and delivering his own message, exploiting the media for his own purposes. (Jenkins, 2004: 36–7)

Here, Henry Jenkins hints at the beginnings of a media life option to understand our role in the world today – precisely because he considers escape as a flawed option. The fallacy of the escape clause is that it is premised on an understanding of human beings as possessing a core essence, literally a 'true' self (as the name Truman suggests) that ultimately can be retrieved. Such a point of view can be considered problematic, if not (as Slavoj Žižek argues), impossible. Our essence, as human beings, is not immutable, locked into our physical presence, our cognition and behaviors. Considering the current opportunity a media life gives people to create multiple versions of themselves and others, and to endlessly edit oneself in the context of a 'redactional' society, as John Hartley (2000) has put it, we have now entered a time where, as Luigi Pirandello considered in his novel *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, we can in fact see ourselves live, become cognizant about how our lifeworld is 'a world of artifice, of bending, adapting, of fiction, vanity, a world that has meaning and value only for the man who is its deviser' (1990 [1925–6]: 39). But this does not have to be an atomized, fragmented and depressing world. Our experience of the world in a media life perhaps must be seen as a world where we truly have individual and collective control over reality if only we could be at peace with the endless mutability of that reality (and if we developed the necessary read/write multimedia literacies to change it). As Pirandello wonders:

> [w]hy do you believe firmness of will is so highly touted, and constancy of feelings? The former has only to waver a little, and the latter has only to be altered by one degree or change ever so slightly, and it's goodbye to our reality! We realize immediately that is was only our delusion. (1990 [1925–6]: 42)

This delusion that is our reality in media life – possibly a mild and collectively shared form of the *Truman Show* Delusion – can also be seen as ultimately liberating, something we can explore and navigate freely if we accept, with the protagonist in Pirandello's novel, that always rushing to find out who we really are only produces 'futile constructions' (1990 [1925–6]: 160).

Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*, postulated that '[m]an is by no means the crown of creation: every living being stands beside him on the same level of perfection' (1976 [1895]: 14). From this blank slate, Nietzsche argued in *The Gay Science*, we might 'become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves' (1976 [1882]: 335). This is not to say that a life lived in media is a life lived without 'the social forces constraining people's ability to make choices and take action' (Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee, 2008: 18). What I would like to suggest is that the media life perspective exposes us to endless alternatives to and versions of ourselves, and that much of the confusion and anxiety about these options is grounded in people's struggle to position themselves in media (as well as the social pressure on people to stick to a version that was generated for them, for example as 'citizens' for democracy, or 'consumers' for capitalism). Society governed by media life is one where reality is, like many if not most websites, permanently under construction – but not only by unseen yet all-powerful guardians in the panoptic fortresses of governments and corporations that seek to construct a relatively cohesive and thus controllable reality, but also by all of us.

A powerful metaphoric example for this kind of society is the so-called 'Silent Disco' phenomenon, where partygoers dance to music received directly into headphones. The music gets broadcast via FM transmitter with the signal being picked up by wireless headphone receivers worn by the silent party attendees – often listening to different, individualized streams of music while still dancing together. This suggestion of being together and generally having a great time, yet still being alone in one's experience captures the notion of a life lived in media, where people are more connected than ever before – whether through common boundaryless issues such as global warming, terrorism and worldwide migration, or via internet and mobile communication – yet at the same time on their own – as people increasingly participate in voluntarist and self-interested forms of social cohesion that are all too often confounded by a real or perceived impotence of people in their identities as citizens, consumers and workers 'to shape their own social environment and [to] develop the capacity for action necessary for such interventions to succeed', as Jürgen Habermas suggests (2001 [1998]: 60).

The governing principle of media life is completely mediated self-creation in the context of always-available global connectivity. A possible consequence of the argument in this article is to advocate that we should not dwell too much on existential contemplations and just go with all affordances media provide us with and be satisfied with the privilege of our times to use such technologies to make art with life. As Michel Foucault asks: '[w]hy should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?' (1984: 350). Indeed, suggests Bauman, 'we are all artists of our lives – knowingly or not, willingly or not, like it or not' (2009: 125). In this work of art, people are on their own – much as Nietzsche advocated – but never alone (if anything, we must have an audience!). Sure, we can disconnect on demand, but nothing in the data on how we live our lives in media suggests we truly or massively do so. Critically and deliberately, I suggest people – scholars, politicians, marketers and citizens alike – should only connect, as in the words of E.M. Forster in *Howards End* (1910): '[o]nly connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.'[6] Media are where our passion materializes in the prose of our life narrative.

Notes

1. Quoted from an unpaged document provided by the publisher in advance of publication.
2. For reviews and analysis, see URL (consulted October 2010): http://www.rottentomatoes. com/m/truman_show; the *Truman Show* script is available at URL (consulted October 2010): http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Truman-Show,-The.html
3. See URL: http://www.reellifewisdom.com/reality_we_accept_the_reality_of_the_world_with_ which_we_are_presented
4. For a list of relevant works by Wellman see URL (consulted October 2010): http://www.chass. utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/publications.html#network_theory
5. Here I am paraphrasing Karl Marx's 11th thesis, carved on his gravestone at Highgate Cemetery (East) in London: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.'
6. Full text available at URL: http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2891

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