

# Life with the media manifold: Between freedom and subjection

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## Abstract

This chapter explores future directions for audience studies a decade after the practice turn and in particular asks what particular aspects of the media ‘sensorium’ are most pressing to investigate right now. After the introduction of the term ‘media manifold’ to capture the many-layered complexity of our uses of media in the digital era, my broader argument is that at a time of fast change in media platforms and the increasing supersaturation in at least rich countries of people’s lives with media, ethical and normative issues are becoming increasingly salient in media and communications research. The work of Sherry Turkle from psychology, Julie Cohen from legal theory, and Robin Mansell from political economy is, in particular, discussed.

*Keywords:* media practice; media manifold; ethics; sensorium; infrastructure

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## 1 Introduction

In this chapter I want to think about the gradual broadening of audience studies (my field), the expansion, as it were, of its thought-space that has been going on for the past 10-15 years. As a result, in the era of digital media, the domain of ‘media’ research, its broad object of study, is hardly recognizable from 15 years ago. This is clearly exciting, but it is not enough to get lost in exciting particulars. The purpose of my review is to consider some broader challenges to how we respond to the current stage of this broadening research agenda, challenges both analytical and ethical.

The first aspect of this transformation of media research is nothing directly to do with the digital, but rather with the decisive, shift towards theorizing media as practice. My 2004 article on that topic (Couldry, 2004, whose influence frankly took me by surprise) was only a way of expressing concretely a shift that was *already* under way in the late 1990s and early 2000s in some form in both media studies and media anthropology. The basic question (‘what [do] people do with media’) was originally asked by Elihu Katz in the 1950s, but the Uses and Gratifications approach that followed from that question focussed on *individual usage* of bounded objects called ‘media’. The practice approach to media discussed today differs in its *social* emphasis, and in its emphasis on relations *not limited* to the use of discrete technologies. However, this broader approach was *itself* foreshadowed in media research of the 1980s and 1990s. Early audience research emphasized that consumption is a ‘determinate moment’ in the production of meaning through media texts. Absolutely, but over time, researchers moved *beyond* the specific contexts of media consumption: so, for example, Ien Ang asked: ‘what [does] it mean [...] to live in a media-saturated world?’ (1996, pp. 70, 72), my own early research explored ‘what it means to live in a society dominated by large-scale media institutions’ (Couldry, 2000), and the so-called ‘third generation’ of audience research aimed to look at the broader patterns of ‘media culture’ (Alasuutaari, 1999).

Meanwhile in anthropology, by the early 1990s, Faye Ginsburg had already defined a distinctively anthropological approach to ‘mass media’ in terms that read like a prediction of where the whole field of media research was now heading. Here’s a quote:

Our work is marked by the centrality of people and their social relations – as opposed to media texts or technology – to the empirical and theoretical questions being posed in the analysis of media as a social form. (Ginsburg, 1994, p. 13)

A decade later, an anthropologist specializing in media, Liz Bird, wrote that ‘we cannot really isolate the role of media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored into the web of culture, although articulated by individuals in different ways [...] [because] The “audience” is everywhere and nowhere.’

(Bird, 2003, pp. 2-3) The boundaries around the act of ‘audiencing’ were already becoming less important. And this was all *before* the massive expansion in the possibilities for producing online content outside mainstream media institutions that came with the huge expansion in many countries of routine fast internet access: from the early 2000s, via desktop and laptop computers and then in the later 2000s, increasingly from mobile phones and most recently tablets or minicomputers.

Let’s leave aside the debate sparked by Jay Rosen about whether the audience had literally disappeared, which I think was rather unhelpful. We must see the reconfiguration of the boundaries between what still counts as ‘production’ in some sense and still counts as ‘reception’ (or audiencing, John Fiske’s term) – and those boundaries clearly *still* exist, it is just that their line has become more complicated – we must see that complex reconfiguration within a *longer history* in which the boundaries between ‘audiencing’ and other forms of activity were already *not the main point* about what was going on in media and everyday culture. That longer history saw a decentering of the field we thought we were studying in ‘media research’ that derived *already* from the early 2000s from a broadening and deepening of media’s embedding in the textures of everyday life *and* in the interconnectedness of media considered as an environment.

As a result, looking back now from the age of social media platforms, the shift towards theorizing media as practice seems thoroughly *overdetermined*. But the practice approach was at most a general move, signalling a need to radically broaden the frame in which we think about the domain of our work as media researchers: a shift to acknowledge what people ‘do in relation to media’ as hugely more varied than the old production-distribution-reception triad of media studies allowed. The practice approach did not, however, yet specifically open in detail the material practices through which people *select from* media, although this point was alluded to in my original essay (where I noted Hoover Clark and Alters’ important work: Couldry, 2004, p. 120). But as the scale and complexity of the domain we call ‘media’ expanded from a mere ‘world’ to a virtual ‘universe’ (over a decade), this question of selecting out – deeply neglected in the first 30 years of media studies – has become ever more essential, both analytically and practically, for each of us as users of media. Indeed a whole new sector of the media industries has opened up – first general platforms and portals, and increasingly the reified portals we call ‘apps’ lodged in our devices – whose goal, ostensibly at least, is to help us *select from* an impossibly large ‘mass’ of media content and informational resource.

Because this *selecting out* seems to us now such an obvious focus of attention, it is worth reflecting a little more on the history of its emergence. I remember when I first joined the LSE in 2000, I said to someone (who taught sociology, not media there) that I was interested in people who *didn’t* use media,

and she said, why on earth would that be interesting? As if a biologist were to say to you that she is mainly interested in parts of the solar system where there is no life. What was missing at that time was a broader framing of our relations to media that could include our practices of orienting ourselves away from particular contents (and so perhaps, for periods, *away from* all media content).

I had sensed, however, from when I first started getting interested in media, that traditional media studies (that gave such emphasis to our relations with *mainstream* media outputs) was grasping only a small part of its topic – the part that was lit up on centre stage as it were – and was ignoring the much wider set of possible relations we have to media in everyday life. In *Inside Culture chapter 3*, I tried to open out the rather narrow view of the text in media and cultural studies and raise the question of how individuals' trajectories through a much larger textual universe vary from those of other individuals (2000b, pp. 77-78): in other words to foreground, as an analytic object, people's ways of selecting particular contents *together*.

Implicitly, this must of course involve *not* selecting, and so, in some sense, already selecting *out*, other contents. Put another way, media studies' original conceptualization of the 'choices' we make in relation to the media environment was much too simple, partly because, as already mentioned, it ignored the vastness of the set of possible choices and partly, because it ignored the way, in practice, we connect *up* different micro-choices, how we watch this after that; how we read this, in the middle of listening to that, while also having chosen not to listen to that other thing. The sheer complexity – and inevitably trans-individual diversity – of the choices we make in relation to the vast media environment remains, in my view, relatively neglected, partly because it is hard work to research. We tried to get at it for a political context in the Public Connection project I ran with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham at LSE in the mid 2000s (Couldry/Livingstone/Markham, 2007). It has also been taken up brilliantly in the work of Jonathan Gray in the US and, in sociology, see Bernard Lahire's work in France on individual taste trajectories, but it remains neglected.

Of course, this interest in how we select *out* – from a much larger universe of possible media contents and uses – does not contradict, but simply extends and develops, the original idea of theorizing media as practice: indeed my original formation, which was to focus on practices related to media was designed precisely to allow for our practices that are *related to* media but involve *turning away* from them. As we start to think about how those choices themselves become embedded in particular organisations of non-media resources, for example, in the home space or the institutional work space, then a new topic opens up, which is the materialization of lifeworlds through media-rela-

ted practices. There are clearly sharp differences between how media feels in different places and this is something that, in my work with Andreas Hepp, I have approached via the still vague notion of ‘media culture’.

A very helpful study here is Charles Hirschkind’s study of cassette sermons in the media culture and public spaces of the Muslim Middle East. Hirschkind also foregrounds practice, via philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre’s concept of embodied practice, and, critically, also goes back to Walter Benjamin’s account of a cross-media, cross-sense concretization of our possibilities for grasping the world from a particular place and position, summed up in Benjamin’s brilliant term “sensorium”). As Hirschkind argues, unless we broaden out the framing of what we do with media sufficiently to take into account these multi-sense relations, we simply miss a whole dimension of the political of everyday life in the Middle East – and no doubt many other places too. But the notion of the “sensorium” is relevant also to the apparently much less sensual world of software that underlies our media environment today, as Matt Fuller pointed out in a prophetic essay back in 2003: ‘software constructs sensoriums, [...] each piece of software constructs ways of seeing, knowing and doing in the world that [...] contain a model of that part of the world it ostensibly pertains to’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 19). This is a theme that can be traced into the structured flow of media and sense contents across social networks, shaped by platform software that Gerlitz and Helmond trace in their well-known 2014 essay on ‘the like economy’ (Gerlitz/Helmond, 2014). Already this question of a sensorium or environment structured for commercial ends points towards larger political questions.

## 2 Further conceptualizations

Before I come back to that question of the politics of our relations with a multi-dimensional media environment, let’s stay for a few minutes with the question of how today we should conceptualize our basic relations with media. The idea of theorizing media as practice at least freed us up and allowed us to broaden the frame of media studies. But as already suggested, it did not offer a substantive conceptualization of the actual configurations which our relations to media take. Can we conceptualize those relations more sharply? I want to argue we can, through the notion of “media manifold”.

Certainly, there is good reason to try and sharpen our conceptualization: our relations to media obviously today go far beyond relations to a single object (watching TV, listening to the radio, playing a music track). Even the simplest act of media-making or media-consuming today is very often wrapped round with actions across media and across social media platforms that link us with a number of other people doing things with media. Many of us, through

routine uses of everyday devices, now are familiar with having the ability to access and redistribute media flows through those devices – sending a link here, adding a comment to this image before circulating it, and so on. The selective mechanisms of apps help us do all this in a focussed way within a bewilderingly wide flow of media reception and use. But these are all details, *micro* instantiations of the universe of action-possibilities that many of us now treat as ordinary, as just there, to be taken and used. Meanwhile, on a different scale, a new version of media’s institutional power has been emerging that is precisely predicated *upon* this universe of possibilities, and its potential to generate economic value.

John Ellis (2000), some years ago, helpfully marked the shift, in relation to television, from an era of media scarcity to an era of media plenty. But at stake now is something more. The ‘plenty’ operates on multiple dimensions, which in turn are connected up to each other, in concrete ways that we can actualize through simple actions (commenting on that picture we just took, before we send it out, potentially, to thousands of people). And this connecting up depends on a vast, software-based infrastructure. And our relations, not just to media but to this infrastructure, can or even need to be managed, of course. A huge number of economic wagers are based on the idea that there is money to be made out of managing those relations for us. We have, almost without noticing it, entered an era in which our relations to what we might still call ‘media institutions’ are based not on receiving scarce contents from a particular centre, or even on being helped singly to choose from a defined set of plentiful contents, but rather on being supported across what we might call a ‘*managed continuity*’; operating on many dimensions and involving platforms, sources, action-possibilities, and contents. That managed continuity enables us, it seems, to live reasonably comfortably in the world of media and information, resources and people. On the basis of that promise of comfort, the management of that continuity can be sold to us in some packaged form. I say in ‘some packaged form’ because, as we all know, the selling is rarely direct: the particular form which the fast evolution of *multi-dimensional media plenty* took was to offer almost everything apparently for free, so that the price for reliance on the managed continuity increasingly has to be paid through the background transfer of the data that one’s interactions with it can generate, and from which value can elsewhere be generated.

Let’s step back from this a second. The domain of ‘media’ relations which we are being helped somehow to manage is not a single medium, or even an easily enumerable list of single media; nor, is it an easily describable array of single media possibilities from which people choose in regular ways (that was the idea of polymedia in Miller and Madianou. However, as a concept this gave us little hold on the interrelations going on here, and their structured complexity.). Rather, it is better described through the notion of media manifold.

I introduced the term media manifold tentatively in 2011 in an essay in Virginia Nightingale's *Handbook of Media Audiences*, to capture the linked plurality of the media as we now encounter it, what I called there 'a complex web of delivery platforms' (Couldry, 2011, p. 220). Following my earlier interest in the variation of practice, I was interested in 'how we access and use that media manifold' and stressed the likely variety in people's practices of access and use. But I still left vague the nature of our relations with that plurality of media, a problem that I have already noted in the term 'polymedia'.

Now, and here I am drawing on ideas that I am developing with Andreas Hepp for our coming book *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, we need to do more work in conceptualizing how we relate to the obvious plurality of media today. It is interesting to think more specifically about the history of the term 'manifold' which comes from mathematics, specifically topology, where it refers to a topological space in many dimensions that can be adequately described by a shape in a lesser-dimensional (for example, Euclidian) space. Thus, the earth is a three dimensional shape which can, with reasonable fidelity, be reduced to a set of two-dimensional maps of parts of its surface. Deleuze put this notion to use to emphasize the open-ended complexity of the world but his emphasis was rather on how that order escapes any simply reduction to a model (Manuel DeLanda's [2009] book on Deleuze is helpful in clarifying what Deleuze means by his usage). The Deleuzian usage seems to lose touch with the *two-level* aspect of the manifold concept which, we would argue, is most useful in grasping how we are now with media; in other words, the relation between a many-dimensional object and the approximation to that object in an object with fewer dimensions.

Our suggestion is that this double concept well captures the *doubleness* of our embedding in today's extremely complex media universe. The broader set of media and information possibilities on which each of us can draw is almost infinite, and certainly organised on very many dimensions. In everyday practice, we choose, from moment to moment, from a reduced set of possibilities which actualizes, for daily usage, a pragmatic selection from that many-dimensional media universe. What we do with media, moment to moment, actualizes those further choices. There are therefore three levels. Yet, as we try to understand our relations as choosing actors to the wider universe of media, it is the first two levels (and their interrelations) which most concern us. The necessary relations between the first two levels are summed up by characterizing our relations with media in a two-level way, as relations with a 'media manifold'.

### 3 Consequences

If this is a useful way of conceptualizing our relations to media today – a way of grasping the basic shape that our embedding as reflexive agents in a many-dimensional universe of possibilities *has to take* – then we can now turn back to the question of consequences. And in the second section of my talk I want to consider two fundamental challenges which this profound reconfiguration of the media environment generates – challenges that are posed for us at this conference for sure but also for each of us more generally in everyday life; challenges that are firstly analytical and secondly ethical (or if you like, in a broad sense political. I will return to the question of politics in both narrow and broad senses in what follows.).

First, the analytical challenge: How then do we track what people do with media, by which we now mean: what they do within the sets of relations that are inherent to life with the media manifold? This tracking is cross-media from the start, but much of what we do is banal, it is not hermeneutically very rich: pressing “like”, checking a platform for updates. And yet, however banal what we do is, it is *registered*: the action-space of the media-manifold requires this, because if it wasn’t registered, our actions, or rather their traces, wouldn’t be *there* for others to interact with. But the economic models that underlie the infrastructure require this registration to be *long-term*, that is, permanently retrievable, because that (or rather its re-circulation) is the basis for value generation. And that means, apparently, that the traces of those banal actions are there for us as researchers to research, aren’t they? (Let’s leave aside some problem cases such as Twitter’s relations to researchers).

As a result, as researchers disposed and empowered to ‘read’ the world, we face a potential trap, and this is the first and analytical challenge that I mentioned. As researchers so disposed, we are inclined to foreground processes that provide us with *readable* evidence, without focussing enough on the social production of our preexisting disposition, as researchers, to read such evidence as the signs of a broader social transformation. And yet, in any such reading, competing versions of the ‘universal’ are at stake, as Pierre Bourdieu noted in his reflections on the ‘scholastic fallacy’. In other words, we read the world as if it really is the way we are already disposed to read it to be.

Today we face a deeply commercial version of this fallacy: our interpretative practices as researchers easily get entangled with the commercial drive of digital networks and social networking platforms (Van Dijck, 2013) to *sell* readable data about the processes they host as *privileged access* to ‘the social’ (in the form of targeted consumers: Turow, 2011). As a result, we face, not a general scholastic fallacy, but what I would call an ‘inscription fallacy’. There is no question of denying that digital networks are significant, or that social networking platforms have important political uses, especially in mobilizing

disparate and previously unconnected groups of people. But the debate so far has tended to focus on just a small subset of the reasons why digital networks and social networking sites might matter over the longer-term, and to whom. Through that narrow focus we risk falling into the *inscription fallacy*. I touch on this in a recent article called ‘The Myth of Us’ (Couldry, 2014), and it is noted too in an article from last year by Clemencia Rodriguez and colleagues (2014) on the dangers of misinterpreting alternative media through its online traces and ignoring ethnographic data. But there is much more to do to unpack the consequences of this fallacy.

We are back here to Benjamin and his essay on the storyteller’s demise in the face of a world driven only to supply decontextualized information (Benjamin, 1968). But this time the problem is right *within the sensorium that we take for granted as researchers!* Benjamin’s emphasis in that essay merely on the growth of information seems to fall short of the complexity of today’s challenges when at the same time – it seems like a shared ‘time’ even if it isn’t – new forms of instant presence are possible through platforms like YouTube that accelerate distant presence to others: would-be make up artists sitting in their bedrooms, or preaching executioners. But there is no inconsistency here. Both the impossible flood of mere information and the shocking presence to us of those people or things that were once distant, both abide by the same underlying condition that Benjamin grasped, which is the privilege, the non-negotiable privilege, in our sensorium, now given to what we might call the “understandable in itself”, a deep re-weighting of what counts as value hermeneutically in favour of the already just there.

Clearly this has great political potential. There is no question that the fabric of protest has been changed by the ability of those on the street to collect and quickly disseminate on a mass scale evidence of what is going on: the picture of a bloodied protester from a Tehran street in 2009, the video of a US policeman shooting an unarmed black man in North Charleston in April 2015. Digital media now are not exactly weapons of the weak, because they can be plugged straight into a large-scale distribution system. But with this new facility there are also problems for activism that stem from the automatic possibility of surveillance through media platforms. Christian Fuchs’ survey study of Occupy activists’ indicates their awareness of the contradiction between the additional tool that social media gives them, and the acute risks of surveillance by the state. Veronica Barassi from an ethnographic perspective brings out the costs for everyday political activism - the need constantly to keep up with the task of social media *production*, that is, the cost of constantly being ‘connected’.

This takes us toward the ethical challenge that arises from our life with the media manifold. An important guide here is Sherry Turkle’s celebrated book *Alone Together* (Turkle, 2013). Turkle’s concern is not with the specifics

of what we do with this or that medium, but with the whole gestalt – the *quality* of the overall life-process that intensive and continuous exposure to multi-dimensional communication through digital platforms *gets us into*. We (certainly younger people, but implicitly all of us) are now involved, she suggests in a new way of communicating through digital interfaces which is, in some key respects, problematic. And Turkle's views are particularly significant since in her earlier books she was the leading celebrator of our lines online. As just a small reminder of her argument, let's take some examples.

21 year old college student: 'I don't use my phone for calls any more. I don't have the time to just go on and on'. 16 year old school pupil who prefers texts to calls 'because in a call 'there is a lot less boundness to the person,' although "later in life" she concedes 'I'm going to need to talk to people on the phone' (2011, pp. 15, 146, 160)

Now you might want to dismiss these as symptomatic of the stresses of adolescent life, which are now just mediated through a different assemblage of technologies and habits. But we have to take seriously the amount of evidence which Turkle accumulates in favour of her thesis and also, sometimes, the depth of the concerns which she picks up from those she interviews. The most vivid example for me was the urgent question asked in front of Turkle – to himself, and not really to her – by Sanjay, aged 16: 'How long do I have to continue doing this?' (2011, p. 168). He is referring to his pain at noticing that while he had his phone switched off during a 30 minute interview he has accumulated 100 text messages with which he must now deal.

And this obvious pain in Sanjay's voice and his question prompts in Turkle a pained and broader question: 'Technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives, but is it offering us *the lives we want to lead*?' (Turkle, 2011, p. 17). ('it' here must = our whole life with media taken together). Are we living the lives we want to lead? When I read this, I took notice because this is the classic question of *ethics*: is my life, your life, the sort of life that it is good for me, you to lead? And I realized that this was a new voice entering media and communications – a voice of ethical questioning – that had been absent, almost entirely, for many decades. And that was when I realized that something strikingly new was going on. The way *forward* for major commentators like Turkle is going to be to ask ethical questions: questions framed by and arising from, individual experience with media and communications interfaces. So 'the media manifold' is not just an analytical matter, it is, implicitly, an ethical challenge, and so potentially a civic and political challenge.

Some scholars argue that this new, intensely mediated, environment that we take for granted is good for us. A key advocate of this position is Mark Deuze in his book *Media Life* (2012). There he writes of the value of 'becoming media' (xvii) in a 'media life'. Though his conclusions are the opposite of Turkle's, his way of framing the argument, however, fits exactly with the

normative turn in communications research. Thus, he starts out from an environmental assumption: ‘media [he means the continuous multimedia of the digital era, of course] provide the social fabric of everyday life’ (39); media values ‘structure the way we live our lives’ (227). He is not concerned with analysing the effects of particular media texts – indeed to him that no longer seems possible or even relevant – but with thinking about the effect, as he puts it, of our media-life. Deuze’s approach, although he sometimes appears to deny this, is also ethically committed: ‘at the heart of the project in this book is the question of what a good, passionate, beautiful and responsible media life looks like’ (32).

The normative turn is visible also in perspectives concerned with the overall *system* of information in which we are involved: A systems perspective on the design and outcomes of the ‘information system’ in which our lives are involved. An important linking figure here is a designer, the leading designer of virtual reality interfaces in the 1990s, Jaron Lanier, who more recently has become very critical of the consequences of our reliance on communication and information systems. In his book *You are not a Gadget!* (2011, p. 63) he comments on how our uses of digital systems are causing within us ‘a leaching of empathy and humanity’. Lanier’s writings are interesting as a symptom of the wider change under way – even amongst those who were once the strongest advocates of the switch to computer-mediated communications, but they are not the most elaborate version of the systems perspective that we can find.

More useful for us, is my LSE colleague Robin Mansell’s book *Imagining the Internet* (Mansell, 2012), which develops a critical approach to the design of what she calls ‘the information system’ that tries to bring together cultural/symbolic and economic/material dimensions of our lives with information. What Mansell tries to bring out from a number of different contexts and debates is a deep problem – that is, the divergence between *systems’* goals (efficiency, profitability, etc) and more typically *human* goals (openness, negotiability, transparency, trust – or, even more generally, matching what we would consider to be good things for human beings!). The divergence matters, because we don’t have the option of ignoring it, of pretending that we can live without information systems. So many aspects of our lives are now practically dependent on the background work of information systems: we cannot, any more, even pretend to stand outside this; our daily lives *start out* from the necessity of some automation of information systems if we are to do the basic things we need to be able to do.

This makes even more problematic our difficulty of intervening in those systems in order to make them work in ways that are closer to our intentions and wishes. As she notes, it has become increasingly difficult for us as human beings to intervene in the running of the information systems on which our lives depend, indeed many designers of systems claim that it is essential for

humans not to directly intervene in the running of the system, as its success depends on the absence of human intervention. But if that is the case, how can we ever know that what the system ‘wants’ is what *we* want – and why should we trust this to be the case? We live in other words what Mansell calls the ‘paradox of complexity’: that information systems are now generally assumed to be too complex to allow for human – let alone political or civic or social – intervention.

There must then be at least a *preliminary normative issue* if the systems on which we depend for our everyday living resources and habits depend, *in turn*, for *their* effective operations on *not* being visible to us and on *not* being open to our ethical intervention, even if we did, somehow, get an understanding of what they are doing. Because that would mean saying that an increasingly large part of human life is not open to normative reflection (because it is invisible to our inspection) and effective normative intervention: it would amount to saying that large parts of our lives are beyond ethics. And that, in the long run, is unliveable.

There are some parallels to Mansell’s systems-based version of the normative turn in communications research: Ulises Mejias’s argument (2013) that we need to pay attention to the exclusions of network practice and design in his book *Off the Network*. He asks at the start of that book: ‘what does the digital network include in the process of forming an assemblage and, more important, what does it leave out?’

Julie Cohen in her pathbreaking book *Configuring the Networked Self* (2012) offers, in ways that are strongly parallel to Robin Mansell, a critical approach to information systems and their role in our lives that she calls ‘cultural environmentalism’: this approach seeks to challenge how we have come to value information exclusively in terms of system (indeed market system) logics. For unless we make this challenge, she argues, we are helpless to address a painful gap that we live out every day: ‘the gap between the rhetoric of liberty and the reality of [our] diminished individual control’ (2012, p. 4) over our lives within information systems. She too insists that we have become increasingly dependent on a communications system that is vital to us, yet absolutely not, in most situations, open to human intervention or even monitoring.

And this, Cohen insist, has *real political* implications: ‘the configuration of networked space is [...] increasingly opaque to its users’, yet it operates via ‘a system of governance that is authoritarian’ (Cohen, 2012, pp. 202, 188-189). As in Mansell’s argument, there is no way of responding to this except by building new types of normative argument from new starting-points, forged outside the values of information systems themselves. Cohen’s book contains a powerful defence of building critical values based on the everyday realities of our embodied lives with information systems, that take account of the cost we incur through working with systems, and seek to take account of the

consequences of information systems for our forms of cultural development and self-formation. Cohen, a legal theorist, matters to us at this conference, because her intervention is based on *cultural diagnosis*: she asks what are the cultural consequences of digital environments?

I don't have space here to go further into the normative resources that might help us address these challenges, but want instead to concentrate on the nature of the challenge. All the writers I have discussed from Turkle to Cohen register a sense that the phenomena, if you like the phenomenology, of our daily lives is changing through media, and in deeply disruptive ways that we can't yet handle.

There are parallels here to the origins of environmental consciousness, on which a philosopher Hans Jonas (1992) offers a useful commentary when he discusses the transformation of (human) ethics that came when we grasped that ethics was no longer just about the relations between three separate components – human beings, physical nature (or the environment), technology (or things), but about human actions, which through their polluting side-effects, could directly transform nature, and so damage the only environment in which human beings can live at all. As a consequence, an ethics of the co-constitutive relations between humans, technology and nature became essential.

Could the same be true of our relations to media and information systems? Could this explain the *paradoxical* ('alone together') and *urgent* ('off the network') nature of these normative interventions? That they register, suddenly, what philosopher Paul Ricoeur called a 'limit situation' (2007, pp. 35-36) in which our sense of the problems and contexts of human existence, because they have been challenged fundamentally, generate, out of necessity, new *domains* of ethical thinking. Could media, our lives with media, our relations with the media manifold, generate today, require even, a new domain of ethical thinking?

Some may be tempted to consider ethics in isolation from politics, that would be a mistake, as both Mansell and Cohen's work bring out: it would misunderstand the source of our troubling, which is an underlying corporate and commercial ambition to build system, a system with the capacity to be the system that preconditions our possibilities of interacting with the world. An ambition that goes beyond hegemony, that goes beyond interpretation, and is in the business of remaking the world, as a phenomenal possibility.

## 4 Conclusion

Our bodily practices today – affective, cognitive, perceptive, orientational – are then being moulded within a new media-supersaturated environment which carries costs, costs that we are only gradually starting to grasp. And this is troubling people! And so, if I am right, we are at a paradoxical point in history – and the focus of this conference is on the cross-media points to a key line of change. On the one hand, we need, as researchers, to track the unparalleled complexity and inventiveness of our lives with the media manifold. And for this we need not only practice theory in general (of course, that was the larger door we had to open, if we were ever to find ourselves as researchers, analytically oriented to what is going on with us and with media) but also the concept of the media manifold which tries to hold in view the many-dimensional complexity of what it is we are ‘in’ with media, and the still complex *reductions* that our actions in relation to media necessarily involve. It is, of course, possible to read this vastness that analytically we must grasp as a space of freedom. But that is too simple!

For, on the other hand, our analytic must reach out also into *a politics*, a normative questioning of what it is we, as myriads of reflexive agents, have got ourselves into. That is the urgent challenge of Turkle’s and others’ work. It is reflected in the concerns of activists who must use some configuration of social media, yet know the costs in terms of surveillance. Put another way, no political economy of media can today do without a phenomenology of life with the media manifold. But equally, a phenomenology of media without a grounding in political economy is blind. It cannot see the wider political challenge being generated by the new economies of media that are *generating* the “phenomena” with which we are trying to live.

This tension– if you like between structure and agency, or freedom and subjection – was there at the start in the debates around practice theory. It emerged, for example, in the debate I had with an anthropologist, Mark Hobart, early on in the adaptation of practice theory (Couldry, 2010; Hobart, 2010). Hobart wanted to celebrate practice theory as a way of moving beyond any *centred* notion of power, which risked leaving contemporary forms of symbolic power completely neglected. But it is present in a much stronger form today, because of the astonishing ambition of the institutions we still call ‘media’, because that is how their power presents itself to us; as an interface with and through which we can act. Clearly therefore no turn to practice (indeed no methodological or analytic move) can resolve this tension, but at least the turn orients us to the key challenge for media research in our time: which is how adequately to grasp the politics – intellectual and practical – of a lifeworld in which media are every more deeply embedded and in which our possibilities for freedom are bought at the cost of a barely imaginable subjection.

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