



# COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA  
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,  
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto  
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,  
Nico Carpentier**

edition lumière

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## Table of Contents

- 7 Introduction: Communication as the intersection of the old and the new  
*Maria Francesca Murru, Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Nico Carpentier*

### Section 1. Theories and Concepts

- 19 What kinds of normative theories do we need? Ideal and non-ideal theories in communication research  
*Kari Karppinen*
- 31 Friends, not foes: Integrating structuralist and agentic perspectives on media consumption  
*Alyona Khaptsova, Ruben Vandenplas*
- 45 The rise of the alternative: Critical usefulness of the “Alternative Media” notion in the Czech context  
*Ondrej Pekacek*
- 59 “The closest thing to teleportation”: The concept of *liveness* in the age of connectivity  
*Ludmila Lupinacci*
- 71 Crisis of liberal democracy, crisis of journalism? Learning from the economic crisis  
*Timo Harjuniemi*

### Section 2. Media and the Construction of Social Reality

- 85 The construction of the homeless in the Greek street paper *shedia*  
*Vaia Doudaki, Nico Carpentier*
- 105 Mediation and place: The sharpening and weakening of boundaries  
*Magnus Andersson*

- 115 “Yay! I am officially an #estonian #eResident!” Representations of Estonian e-residency as a novel kind of state-related status and affiliation on Twitter  
*Piia Tammpuu*

### Section 3. Mediatizations

- 129 Situational analysis as a research method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations  
*Karsten D. Wolf, Konstanze Wegmann*
- 141 Football and mediatization: A serious academic pursuit or just scholars playing silly games?  
*Michael Skey*

### Section 4. Media, Health and Sociability

- 155 Tradition and the digital: A study of dating attitudes among Australia-based Chinese dating app users  
*Xu Chen*
- 173 Visual matters in health communication: A systematic review  
*Fatma Nazlı Köksal, Fatoş Adiloğlu*
- 185 Power to the patient? Studying the balance of power between patient and GP in relation to Web health information  
*Edgard Eeckman*

### Abstracts

- 199 Spanish TV fiction and social networks: Tweeting about *Cuéntame como pasó*
- 200 Repressed identity: Negotiating normality in the Balkan cinemas
- 201 Place of communication in territorial construction of “metropolitan public space”
- 202 Losing the critical edge: Why journalism has been unable to challenge the austerity hegemony
- 203 Professional and personal performances: Case studies of how selected photojournalists use conflict-related images on Instagram
- 204 Live, here and now: Experiences of *liveness* in everyday engagements with connective media
- 205 Audience experiences of interactivity in contemporary Lithuanian theatre: Production and evaluation

- 206 The telling of femicide in the voice of the Mexican press 2017
- 207 The evolution of the terms referring to people on the move: A discursive analysis of media discourse in French and Dutch
- 208 The politics of participation in WhatsApp communities in rural Kenya: Discursive-material analysis
- 209 Czech media and the refugee crisis: Media populism and journalistic culture in mainstream and alternative news outlets
- 210 A digital public space: Just a theory? Or how social network sites are perceived by their Norwegian users?
- 211 Mnemonic resistance to instant history: Polish contemporary feminist movement and its practices of historical visibility
- 212 The concept of ‘virtual residency’ and digitally enabled translocality: The case of Estonian e-residency
- 213 Digitizing our sense of touch: The social construction of haptic technologies
- 214 Revisiting media repertoires: The media use of the Flemish population
- 215 Young adults’ learning about sustainable consumption in informal ‘situations’
- 216 The rise and fall of a critical paradigm in media research and communication: analysis elite western periodical publications 1935-2015
- 217 Michael Moore and documentary as persuasion
- 218 Dating apps and cultural contexts: Investigating how Australia-based Chinese users engage with Tinder and Tantan
- 219 Individual values a basis for selective media exposure
- 220 The #Girlbosses of YouTube: Manifestations of feminism in the era of social media and entrepreneurial femininity
- 221 How the blockchain technologies may impact the digital media content creation and consumption
- 222 The role of cultural mind-mapping in intercultural business communication between European and Chinese associates
- 223 The ideology of enjoyment: Images of enjoyment on Instagram

## **“The closest thing to teleportation”: The concept of *liveness* in the age of connectivity**

*Ludmila Lupinacci*

### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses the current state (and the very usefulness) of *liveness* as a conceptual tool in media and communications research in an environment in which connective platforms are ubiquitous and increasingly powerful. Starting from the understanding of liveness as a context-contingent and continuously evolving term (Couldry, 2004; Auslander, 2008; 2012), and considering the widespread use of the live as a promotional resource by these media institutions and technologies, the article maps the core definitions attributed to the word in the academic sphere, and addresses the potential shortcomings of the available conceptualizations in characterizing the communicative practices that unfold in the present-day culture of connectivity.

**Keywords:** live, liveness, social media, connectivity, platforms

## 1. Introduction

Historically, the development of mediated communications has been driven by the desire to overcome temporal, geographical, and corporal constraints (Meyrowitz, 1985; Carey, 1989). By surpassing these boundaries, media are said to give us access to events, happenings, people, and places that would not be reachable directly, *immediately*. On the one hand, by doing so, they provide us with a “*sense of physical and social being in a shared world with others*” (Frosh, 2018: 2). On the other hand, however, once we depend on specific technologies and institutions for this access, then our very possibilities for contact with others and with the world become entrenched with their technical affordances, economic logics, and commercial interests.

The concept of *liveness* has been a persisting manifestation of media’s self-proclaimed capacity of fulfilling this aspiration of connection beyond the limits of time and space. In addition to being a popular term employed by media industries for decades to designate specific types of content, the word *live* is also a recurring topic in academic inquiry, particularly within the areas of performance and television studies. In short, the meanings commonly attributed to liveness in this literature are: simultaneous transmission and instantaneous availability of content; real-time interaction; non-recorded, or non-mediated experience; spontaneity or unpredictability; and authenticity or commitment to a “natural reality”. Regarding this evident flexibility, Auslander (2008; 2012) and Couldry (2004) claim that the live should not be taken as a static or technologically determined property but rather as a context-contingent term that is in a continuous state of redefinition.

As a manifestation of such conceptual elasticity, it is remarkable how in the current media landscape we witness once again a proliferation of (so-called “social media”) platforms that foreground liveness as one of their main attractions—Facebook Live, Twitter Live, Instagram Live Stories, and so on. Which means the live, traditionally associated with broadcast technologies, seems to have sustained its visibility and relevance even with the pervasive adoption of digital artifacts of communication and, more specifically, with the popularization of connective media—which function as organizers of perception, operating both in our personal, individual lives and on broader social dynamics that unfold in the collective sphere (Radfahrer, 2018; Frosh, 2018).

Notably, our very possibilities for sociality and for experiencing the world have become deeply entangled with data-sorting processes and the operational strategies that reflect the commercial interests of these platforms (van Dijck, 2013). For instance, take algorithmic mediated timelines—recently adopted by mainstream services such as Twitter and Instagram—, which challenge established expectations of “real-time”, chronological linearity (and consequently become the object of heated debates). Changes like this point to the necessity of a reconsider-



ation of the taken-for-grantedness of the concept of liveness since, however fuzzy and flexible, our earlier and common understandings of it might have become insufficient to characterize many of today’s communicative practices.

Bearing this in mind, this chapter discusses the current state of liveness as a conceptual tool in media and communications research in the context of pervasive use and presence of connective platforms. In order to do so, the chapter starts with a brief critical review of available core definitions. Subsequently, it offers an outline on the ‘culture of connectivity’, and explores how the centrality and ubiquity of connective media platforms might impact on the experiencing and understanding of liveness. Finally, the chapter will address the shortcomings of our current frameworks on the live, proposing pathways to forthcoming empirical examination.

## 2. Reviewing liveness

It is worth noting that the term “*live*” is not a well-rounded academic concept cautiously developed with analytical purposes (Scannell, 2014). It is an ordinary word that has been used both by common people and by media industries to describe specific (albeit diverse) types of media content—most frequently, so-called “real-time” television shows in which the unfolding of a situation (a talk, a piece of news coverage, a musical performance) and its broadcast are simultaneous (Scannell, 2014). In terms of scholarly efforts, one of the common strategies for trying to characterize the live is through identifying its opposite counterparts: “mediated”, “recorded”, “scripted”, etc. Although this can be helpful in understanding what the word means in specific situations, it does not seem a prolific strategy to sharpening liveness as an analytical instrument for broader theorisations, as it makes it reliant on each of these always-changing opposites. Having this in mind, in this first section I will briefly review the central contributions available as an attempt to refine liveness as a concept.

In performance studies—that is, scholarship focused on theatre, music, dance—liveness is commonly linked with the physical co-presence between a performer and an audience, in which the lack of technical mediation is said to guarantee a degree of “*realness*”. Phelan (1993), for instance, understands the impossibility of reproduction as live performance’s defining trait. In this sense, live performance would be ontologically based on simultaneity, disappearance, and *ephemerality*, underlining its character as a passing, unique, and irreproducible situation; an authentic, but short-lived, experience.

Auslander (1997; 2008), in contrast, calls into question this alleged primacy of the live performance. According to him, the live and the mediated are not mutually exclusive opposites. In fact, the very existence of the qualifier *live* per se derives

from the emergence of media technologies. Liveness, for him, should be understood as an *affective* experience dependent on cultural and technological context.

In the scope of television studies, an initial conception was the understanding of liveness as this medium's essential trait, due to the fact that, contrary to film (which is composed by materially recorded, enduring frames), the basic unity of the televisual image would be a fleeting, continuously changing, and always incomplete scanning beam. Under this view, television's liveness is based on the always-presentness of the electronic image (Zettl, 1978).

In a different and more critically engaged direction, Feuer (1983) presents an argument for the comprehension of liveness not as the ontology or *raison d'être* of TV, but rather as its *ideology*. According to her, in spite of its self-proclaimed *essence of liveness*, the majority of television's content cannot even be considered live in the strict (*real-time*) sense. She then sees televisions' liveness to be built from "*an ideology of the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real*" (Feuer, 1983:14) —anchored on the basic claim that, through the screen, we are given access to what matters, as it happens.

In a similar vein, Bourdon (2000) also calls into question some of the long-lasting assumptions about television—whose central purpose, according to him, would not necessarily be the *live* broadcasting in itself but actually to provide a *sensation of shared viewership*. He sees liveness as part of a broader history of media, which has in its core the aim to connect people and events of the world—while, in the process, creating and reinforcing mass sentiments that are central to the development of the modern state. Television's liveness is, under this perspective, fundamentally sociological.

Still in the scope of television studies, Scannell (2014) is concerned with the production and management of liveness by mainstream electronic media, which is achieved through strategies of concealment of their modes of production. This focus on the management of liveness by the media industry brings an additional layer to the term: liveness denotes a *perceived authentic*—because it is immediate and apparently spontaneous, even if heavily pre-planned—experience (Scannell, 2014: 96). Liveness is, therefore, filled with intentionality, and while the technical possibility of prompt transmission acts as its departing point, there is plenty of care employed to produce the effect of it (Scannell, 2014).

In the context of digital media, one of the first scholars to spur the reconceptualization of the live was Couldry (2004). He states that the central idea behind the claim of liveness would be that of "*a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening*" (Couldry, 2004: 3) and, further, "*to the 'realities' that matter for us as a society*" (Couldry, 2004: 4). Considering the implications of digital technologies, he proposes two other competing, and increasingly overlapping, forms of liveness. That is, two new and "*emergent ways of coordinating communications and bodies*

across time and space” (Couldry, 2004: 4) that do not necessarily orbit a mediated, institutional centre. These would be “*online liveness*”, based on the idea of a new form of public sociality characterized by decentralized social co-presence, which would be possible thanks to the Internet and its infrastructures, and “*group liveness*”, which designates the co-presence of specific social groups whose members are constantly connected, to a great extent thanks to mobile technologies (Couldry, 2004).

Already considering the pervasiveness of connective platforms, Hammelburg (2016) discusses liveness in the scope of digital media events, and suggests that *immediacy* and *affinity* would be its two central properties. Respectively, they comprise the potential of participating in a certain event at the exact moment it happens (or the chance of receiving information about it instantly) and the possibility of connecting with events or with people that matter (Hammelburg, 2016).

Finally, intending to refine the conceptualization of liveness to what she designates as a “*social media era*”, van Es (2016, 2017) explains the live as a construction resultant from the combined action of three kinds of players: institutions, technologies, and users. In the wake of Scannell, she sees liveness as a profoundly produced, yet apparently natural media experience (in Es’ words, “*the paradox of liveness*”), but she also highlights an inconformity with reductionist interpretations that foreground just one aspect of the live. With these tools, van Es (2016) examines four platforms as cases from which she extracts more general theorisations that aim to describe the present-day state of liveness. In this regard, she pushes the definition of the live beyond a mere technical capacity, conceptualizing it as an “*institutionalized product of the interaction between real-time connectivity and sociality, manifesting itself in a series of different configurations*” (van Es, 2016: 155).

It is necessary to acknowledge, therefore, the continuous effort of scholars in reconceptualising liveness considering socio-technical transformations. The work of van Es (2016, 2017), in particular, seems spot-on on several of its considerations, especially when it discusses the matter of symbolic power and the ways in which social media platforms have appropriated liveness as a strategy for the maintenance of hegemonic control. Agreeing with her, I see liveness as an experience that results from the combined action of different instances: the technical element of the mediation, the social or affective dimensions of the communicative process, and the institutional forces that intentionally shape it.

Nevertheless, one of the limitations of the available studies on the topic is that, mostly due to methodological decisions, they are not able to theorise with empirical grounds if and how liveness is experienced by those who use the media content and platforms under examination, and what are the consequences for these peoples’ social lives and access to others and to the world. As a result, most of the academic reflections we currently have on the topic are, notably, grounded on assumptions about ordinary people’s engagements with—and experiences of—media.

### 3. Connective platforms and the culture of connectivity

In the present-day “*culture of connectivity*” (van Dijck, 2013) our perceptions of time and space, and our very possibilities for sociality are deeply entangled with data processing and the commercial interests and operations of specific platforms. Before moving forward in situating liveness within this context, it is important to acknowledge that the word *platform* itself is object of intense debates. This is mostly because the term tends to be publicly employed by many big players of the digital market as, thanks to its appearance of neutrality, it conveniently works across multiple venues and audiences (Gillespie, 2010). Nevertheless, these platforms should not be seen as mere facilitators or intermediaries but rather as mediators with agency to shape the social activities that emerge from their use (van Dijck, 2013).

Therefore, by *connective platform* I am generally referring to contemporary mainstream (so-called *social*) media companies and technologies, which have deep reach and embeddedness into people’s everyday lives. In their dual nature, or “*double articulation*” (Langlois & Elmer, 2013), these institutions and technologies assume apparent contradictory roles as both propellants of creativity, expression, and agency, and as reproducers of power relations that support commercial interests (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2016).

Social media platforms have become some of the main infrastructures through which most of us organize our lives, connect with others, and exert sociality (van Dijck, 2013; Couldry & Hepp 2016). However, as explained by van Dijck (2013), behind the rhetoric of participation, interactivity, and connection that is so commonly found in their promotional discourse, there is a strong interest in the quantifiable by-product of this *engagement*: users’ data. It is through the capture, storage, processing and reorganization – or manipulation – of this ever-increasing amount of information that these companies make profit (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017).

Furthermore, through their automated logic, social media platforms are able to organize and shape if, how, and when people have access to others and to the world—and they tend to present such processes as transparent and natural, although they actually depend deeply on calculative infrastructure and data-sorting (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017). This is the case with algorithms, for instance—a term that has acquired an unprecedented popularity over the last few years, and is usually employed to designate the (often obscured) formulas that guide the operations of these platforms, claiming to offer us what is relevant to us individually while veiling their very operation behind a discourse of impartiality and objectivity (Gillespie, 2014).

An additional significant dimension of this “*culture of connectivity*” is what Couldry (2015) has labelled the “*myth of us*”—the idea that social media platforms give rise to the formation of natural collectivities, and therefore were developed simply to respond to and facilitate a popular desire to be continuously connected

to those who matter. Such strategy can be clearly identified, for instance, in Mark Zuckerberg’s recent manifesto on Facebook’s changes, in which ideas such as “*a journey to connect the world*” and “*to build a global community that works for us all*” are foregrounded as the company’s central aims<sup>1</sup>. As Couldry (2015) further explains, there is no natural “*us*”, since the mere existence of this collectivity depends heavily on the actions of the platform itself.

Of course, it is imperative to recognize that media claiming to offer shared experiences and “*natural*” collectivities while obfuscating their very role as mediators is not a recent or unprecedented strategy. As previously addressed by Feuer (1983), Bourdon (2000), and Scannell (2014), television has been employing a similar scheme for decades. In fact, it is worth noting that connective platforms borrowed from television’s broadcast the promise of connecting people to what matters at the same time these events unfold, with the additional feature of providing potential multiple options and sources from which the audiences can choose. However, instead of relying on the mobilization of national or mass sentiments, or on the access to events that matter in a more general or societal level, connective platforms tend to emphasize the importance of the live as a solution for giving people access to what is significant for them intimately and individually.

#### 4. Liveness and connective media

*Facebook Live makes it easy to share the moment with the people you care about; Live lets you connect with the people who care most.*<sup>2</sup>

*When you’re done, your live story disappears from the app so you can feel more comfortable sharing anything, anytime.*<sup>3</sup>

*We’re making it easier for you to share what’s happening in your world. Live video is the most immersive way to experience what’s happening around the world.*<sup>4</sup>

*Explore the world through the eyes of somebody else. It may sound crazy, but we wanted to build the closest thing to teleportation. While there are many ways to discover events and places, we realized there is no better way to experience a place right now than through live video.*<sup>5</sup>

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1 <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>

2 Facebook Live

3 Instagram Live Stories

4 Twitter

5 Periscope

All of these sentences, filled with claims about what the live is and what it is good for, were extracted from the platforms' respective institutional websites. Even though they were clearly produced for promotional purposes they can give us a hint on the ideas behind the offer of liveness. *Live*, according to these taglines, is a solution for connecting people to, and letting people take part, first hand, in what matters to them, personally, right now, regardless of geographical distances. This promise links liveness to the idea of obliteration of temporal, spatial, and social distances through media.

Interestingly, the claims of direct experience made by different connective media platforms repeat to a great extent those made by the mass media in preceding decades: a commitment to an ephemeral, irreproducible, and therefore authentic experience (as manifested by Instagram), that of an immediate access to the world and its happenings, as they unfold, and "as if you are there" (as can be seen in the discourse of Twitter and Periscope), and that evoking a sense of collectivity, community, and meaningful shared viewership (as with Facebook Live).

Although real-time video streaming is the most evident and explicit manifestation of it in the current mediascape, it is important to see that the assumption of liveness underlies, with varied degrees of subtlety, connective media's claims and functionalities more generally. In this regard, it becomes imperative to explore the potentially varied experiences of liveness that emerge through different articulations of our current media manifold (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). We live in an environment where connective applications constantly encourage senses of instantaneity, co-presence, ephemerality, authenticity, and interactivity through the continuous use of temporal, spatial, and social prompts, in order to obtain the digital footprints (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017) necessary for their market operation.

This means that while the experiences of the audiences are a key part of liveness, one must not to deny the role of media institutions and technologies in these complex processes. As Scannell (2014) and van Es (2016), have pointed out then, liveness is to a certain extent intentionally managed, encouraged, framed and shaped by those that control the media industry to attend to certain purposes. This happened with radio and television, and the same goes for the key actors in the contemporary media landscape. As argued by van Es (2016), our current "*social media era*" still reproduces such dynamics, although the strategies for exercising symbolic power and sustaining control are not necessarily the same. The live has sustained its importance despite its multifaceted and unclear definitions precisely because it has been used as a resource by different media industries and technologies across decades to evoke certain key beliefs or assumptions about the world we live in, what is out there to be seen, and how one can access it.

This does not mean, in turn, that institutional forces should be taken as if they were able to monolithically determine how media technologies are used, appropriat-

ed, and experienced. In this regard, we need much more scholarly discussion on how people negotiate liveness, how effective is its ideological address, how people experience it in the context of everyday life, and what does it mean for them, for their social relations, and for their opportunities of grasping the world and its happenings.

## 5. Conclusions

Overall, in media and communications research liveness tends to be associated with a myriad of processes claimed by and/or allegedly perceived through media: apparent non-mediation, synchronization of experienced temporalities, the collapsing of distances, sociality, and authenticity. As pointed out by van Es (2016), the diverse definitions of liveness in the available literature orbit around three central views, referring to either a specific feature of a medium, an institutional ideological discourse, or a particular affective state of the media users.

This conceptual elasticity has been inherent to the live since its first popularization, and constitutes one of its strengths both as a buzzword and as an academic term that maintains its relevance regardless of technological innovation. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to establish some boundaries so that the word can be useful for analytical purposes. Therefore, I have attempted to delineate an initial (re)conceptualization. Liveness, I argue, can be provisionally defined as the *experience of immediate connection through media*. To talk about the live is to talk about media technologies and institutions providing (or claiming to provide) the obliteration of temporal, spatial, and/or social distances while often veiling their own role as mediators in these processes.

These themes have been central to mass media’s claims of liveness, and they persist in the current social media era. It is well documented and theorised how media institutions and technologies have been using liveness as a resource to reach their own commercial interests and ideological purposes. However, we still know very little about how these claims are actually received and perceived (if at all) by the audiences. Moreover, it becomes imperative to interrogate: if and how the varied academic understandings of liveness still make sense and suffice in describing today’s media experiences in the context of the culture of connectivity. The aim of my forthcoming work is to elaborate a more accurate and critical definition for liveness (or a grounded argument for the abandonment of the term) that helps us understand our current possibilities for accessing others and the world.

If, for instance, we take liveness to denote our capacity of connecting to people and events that matter to us (as defined by Hammelburg, 2016, and claimed repeatedly by the platforms themselves, as aforementioned), fundamental critical questions emerge. What happens when it is not up to individuals—nor to “so-

ciety”—to decide what matters, as this power increasingly belongs to platforms with their own set of criteria shaped by economic interests (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017)? What is “the live” when the very structures that promise to bring us together (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017) change and we cannot understand them? Social media now represent some of the most important reference-points for our shared experiences, our senses of time and space, and the way the world appears to us (Couldry & Hepp 2016, Frosh 2018). These central dimensions of the *social*, therefore, have now become deeply articulated with the logic arrangements of *connectivity*.

With media technologies, the whole world potentially becomes accessible, *liveable*. Through the promise of the live we are repeatedly told we have an enhanced opportunity of experiencing the social world “as it is”, “directly”, and “in real-time”. In the task of reconsidering the notion of liveness, what is at stake is how the reality of these dimensions is constructed, perceived, experienced, and negotiated in the interaction between the contemporary infrastructures of *connectivity* and our everyday lives.

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### **Biography**

Ludmila Lupinacci is a PhD candidate in the Department of Media and Communications of the London School of Economics and Political Science, in the United Kingdom. Prior to joining the programme, she completed her MSc in Communication and Information at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Some of her academic interests are: technology and society, Internet studies, digital platforms, social media studies, and computer-mediated communication. Her doctoral research, which is supervised by Professor Nick Couldry and Dr. Ellen Helsper, intersects with all of these topics, and aims to understand how liveness—immediate connection through media—is experienced in everyday engagements with digital technologies of communication and connective media platforms.

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