INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY LIFE IN MEDIA

The more society in general and people’s lifeworlds in particular collapse into media, the more media as a set of social practices allows for a broader and more empowering understanding of our contemporary environment. Whether the literature refers to it as telemediatization, mediatization, or mediation by any other name, today we live in, rather than with, media. The media life perspective (Deuze, 2011, 2012) starts from the realization that the whole of the world and our lived experience of it can be seen as framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by (immersive, remixed and remixable, ubiquitous and pervasive) media. Setting out from the framework of life as lived in media, people’s engagement with, and participation in, all kinds of online communities can be seen as an expression of society; not one that exists exclusively online and therefore can be characterized by its difference or newness, but an emerging form of sociality that allows us to see society as a whole more clearly.

LIVING IN MEDIA

Media are to us as water is to fish. This does not mean that life is determined by media—it merely suggests that whether we like it or not, every aspect of our lives takes place in media, and that our engagement with media in many ways contributes to our chances of survival. Part of this kind of life is coming to terms with a super-saturation of media messages and machines in households, workplaces, shopping malls, bars and restaurants, and all the other in-between spaces of today’s world. Research around the world consistently shows how through the years, more of our time gets spent using media, and how multitasking our media has become a regular feature of everyday life. Consuming media regularly takes place alongside producing media, as the distinction between media activities such as zapping, zipping, viewing, reading, and downloading and actions like chatting, forwarding, remixing, editing, and uploading disappears from people’s active awareness of media use.

With particular reference to the world online, the offline world of practices and experience should be seen as extending into the realm of media and vice versa, giving shape and form to what Manuel Castells (2010) describes as a culture of real virtuality, where the online world of appearances becomes part of everyday lived experience instead of just existing on our computer and television screens.

Imagine for a moment any of life’s fundamental experiences—undergoing processes of social change, seeking and finding love, becoming part of a community, being alone—existing (wholly, or in part) outside of media. This type of thought is possible—but indeed, solely or increasingly, only as an
imagined life. Whether it is the Arab Spring or the Occupy Wall Street movement, the uncanny experience of attending a concert or marriage at which more people seem to be recording the event than in fact witnessing it, or simply by attempting to articulate a more or less coherent sense of self; media are inextricably linked, enmeshed, and involved with social reality. In this process, media come to arrange such realities: adding perspectives and dimensions (while obfuscating others), introducing (and excluding) others into events without necessarily being co-present, enabling participation in otherwise (or formerly) utilitarian experiences of life.

COMMUNITY LIFE IN MEDIA

Our lives as lived in media not only make media disappear but also bring the self forth in relation to the world around us: nature, machines, and people. It is in this context that I see the contributions to this volume as signifying (if not advocating) the co-evolutionary character of what Sean Cubitt (2005) labels as polis, physis, and techne: the human world, the green world (i.e. nature), and the technological world. Any attempt to demarcate “online” as strictly the domain of media and “offline” as the world of life will get lost in circular rationalizations. This does not mean that it cannot be meaningful to separate these realms—as this makes sense to many participating in the debate on whether the kind of relations sustained and knowledge obtained in online communities are reliable, or even real. Yet collapsing such substantive concepts offers so much more…

Consider this: a fundamental insight about the existence and nature of online communities is that they are all “local” communities. In fact, a volume on niche online communities is a book about all communities—both online and offline. Community as a more or less stable, internally coherent, and all-encompassing social system is largely an exercise in theory. In real life, people participate (and have always participated) in one or more niche communities all the time. Loosely following Erving Goffman’s seminal work, it is in their more or less skillful negotiations of multiplicitous community life where people’s chances for social survival get articulated.

The various more or less recent takes on different, inconsistent, adaptive, and evolving types of social fabric as exemplified in community life and identity politics owe a debt to Herbert Spencer and Georg Simmel, who towards the end of the 19th century were among the earliest sociologists to articulate a view on everyday life in society as a complex and dynamic process, inevitably riddled with fragmentation and conflict. When considering communities today, it is perhaps safe to say that the tools most people use to find out about, articulate, and in the process, perhaps produce some sense of belonging, of self, and of social identity, are largely symbolic, and therefore inevitably mediated. The often-heard claim that media form the symbolic fabric in our lives supposes that media are somehow the social glue or cement that keeps contemporary societies, communities, or any other social grouping together. However, as Zygmunt Bauman warns:

*What you cement doesn’t depend on the quality of the cement itself. It may be a tower block. It could be a mud hut. It could be a new shopping mall. A prison. A madhouse. A discotheque. But only when the building is finished can you really say what has been cemented.* (as cited in Deuze, 2007, p. 678)
Not only does Bauman (2000) remind us of the endless variety of communities that get constituted through media, the Polish philosopher also hints at two other crucial caveats when considering media as the social fabric of people’s lives today. First, there is the fact that many, if not all, contemporary communities are by definition “cloakroom” communities—temporary groupings that “need a spectacle which appeals to similar interests dormant in otherwise disparate individuals and so bring them all together for a stretch of time” (p. 200). It is possible to argue that thousands of people leaving comments, and comments on comments at a suddenly massively popular video on YouTube are a perfect example of such an intrinsically temporary (but, depending on the spectacle, not necessarily meaningless) community. Second, Bauman hints at the fact that the materiality of media—the kind of devices, platforms, and content or user experience involved—may constitute different types of social fabric and thus produce different communal forms.

In short, what the work on online niche communities as gathered in this volume offers is a glimpse of the lived experience of media life, in all its diversity, complexity, spatiality, and temporality. As many authors argue, it is by studying the dynamics within these communities as articulations of life both online and offline that we get a better understanding what it is—what it takes—to participate and belong in today’s world.

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REFERENCES


