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Hjarvard, Stig

Published in:
Between what we say and what we think: Where is mediatization?

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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The Janus face of digital connectivity: The transformation of social dependencies

Stig Hjarvard
University of Copenhagen

Abstract: The experience of digital connectivity has a Janus face: Online media empower the individual to communicate and act beyond his or her immediate social space, but such media also create new forms of dependencies due to the increased presence in everyday social life of institutionalized demands from, for instance, the workplace and the market. Building upon theoretical insights from media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001), critical theory (Habermas, 1989), symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1971), and theories of social network media (Dijck, 2013), I specify how digital connectivity involves a restructuring of social interdependencies. The ambiguous experience of increased connectivity reflects a wider process of mediatization in which instrumental rationalities become present and influential in life-world settings. The theoretical arguments are illustrated by results from a survey of media dependency in Denmark.

Keywords: connectivity, dependency, digital, individual, mediatization, virtualization

"Turn. Me. Off." demands the headline on the front page of the prestigious German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. The newspaper introduces its main story concerning increasing self-criticism about people's media-saturated lives with the following sub-heading: "Ever-more people want to free themselves from their smartphones. They long to be unreachable" (*Die Zeit*, 2015). The newspaper headline alludes to the hit 1981 electronic song by the German band Kraftwerk, 'Computerliebe' ('Computer-love'), with its refrain of "turn me on, turn me off" ("Schalt mich ein, schalt mich aus"). In this song, Kraftwerk envisions not only computers and humans becoming emotionally attached to one another but also the deepest of all human feelings – love – becoming programmable, making the most intimate social relationship dependent on digital technology. Despite the clear message of the title, the picture accompanying the story in *Die Zeit* underscores the ambiguous feelings connected with dependency on digital technology: In the picture, a young woman dives into the splashing water of a smartphone screen, evoking the attraction of boundless movement, a free swim in the internet ocean of information. The text says 'turn me off', but the picture says 'turn me on'.

Figure 1. Frontpage of *Die Zeit*. July 16, 2015. The headline ("Turn. Me. Off.") and the picture seem to reflect different opinions about the attraction of connection.

The downsides of ubiquitous media and the problems of always being connected are beginning to enter public discussions in a variety of social contexts. Discussions about the influence of digital and online media, for example, increasingly address concerns about its negative effects on teaching and learning due to the pervasive presence of computers and internet in the classroom; the problem of employees having their leisure time invaded by work-related communication; and the inability of individuals to avoid surveillance by both private companies and public authorities. A growing market for self-help advice has emerged concerning how to disconnect from the media or at least reduce the time spent on television, social media, or computer gaming. An analysis of such self-help guides suggests that, as a response to what are experienced as invasive media, strategies of 'reverse domestication' are promoted to allow individuals and fami-

lies to keep the media at a conscious distance and thereby reduce or change the influence of media in everyday contexts (Karlsen and Syvertsen, 2016). For many people, however, disconnection is not a real option since the online media have become institutionalized as indispensable to people's work and family lives as well as integrated into the fabric of larger institutions such as politics and public administration. In particular, as Morozov (2017) argues, the people working in the expanding and often-precarious 'gig economy' of part-time, flexible jobs, such as the drivers for the Uber taxi company, cannot really afford to disconnect since their jobs are built upon a digital infrastructure that compels them to be connected or miss the next slice of income.

In this article, I will address the transformative nature of digital connections and in particular examine the tensions between experiences of increased individual autonomy and new forms of dependencies on systemic and institutional powers. Both these experiences are real and reflect the dual, Janus-faced character of increased connectivity. Interactive and online media allow the individual to communicate and act beyond the immediate social space and its local constraints and obligations, but these media also create and relay new forms of dependency due to both the structural characteristics of the media themselves and the ways in which digital media relay an integration and continuous presence of institutionalized demands, for instance from the workplace and the market. From the perspective of mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2013), the political, social, and cultural implications of ubiquitous media cannot simply be addressed from the point of view of 'mediation', i.e. individuals' communicative encounters by and through various media. By drawing attention to the processes of 'mediatization', we emphasize how online media are implicated in social and cultural *change* and through these changes come to *con-*

dition – though not determine – the ways in which people may or may not communicate and interact with each other. Following this perspective, I will focus on media's role in *restructuring social interdependencies.*

The integration of digital and online media into ever-more social and cultural spheres represents an *intensified mediatization* that not only allows for 'more' digital interaction but also restructures the social conditions under which we interact. As Dijck (2013) has pointed out in her study of social network media, such media not only communicate social relationships but also produce new forms of sociality. The new forms of networked relationships and social interactions involve a change of social dependencies between the individual, the wider community, and the media. To examine these changing forms of interdependency, I will draw upon existing media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Jung, 2017) and seek to integrate it into the overall sociological framework of mediatization theory. The discussion will predominantly be of a theoretical nature, but I will also include a few findings from an empirical survey study of people's experiences of how media may interfere with existing social frameworks and restructure dependencies in their daily lives.

Media and social dependency

Mediatization theory has from the very outset addressed questions concerning dependency since the very concept implies that social and cultural fields become intertwined with and dependent upon various media. In my own writings, the increasing dependency of culture and society on the media and their logics are at the very heart of the definition of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013: 17). The media's development into a semi-independent institutional domain in society – governed by its own technological, aesthetic, and institutional logics – and other institutions'

growing dependency on media's communicative resources have made other institutional domains dependent on the logics of the media, including both 'big' institutions, such as political institutions, and 'small' institutions, such as the family. Dependency is rarely a one-way street but is most often a reciprocal, dual, or many-sided relationship through which social entities are tied to each other within a web of obligations and exchanges, drawing upon each other's resources in the course of daily interaction. For instance, when political institutions become mediatized, the consequence may not only be a growing dependency of politics on the media, such as political actors increasingly relying on media resources to communicate with their constituencies, but also a dependency of media on political institutions, such as journalists being dependent on politicians as political sources. The influence of mediatization processes on the dependencies between various institutions should not be understood as a zero-sum game in which domains such as politics or the family simply lose autonomy as they become dependent on the media. As, for instance, Aelst et al. (2014) and Donges and Jarren (2014) have argued, the logics of media do not necessarily directly oppose the logics of other institutional domains but may be overlapping. It is, furthermore, necessary to distinguish between various entities and layers within each domain since the restructuring of dependencies may influence the institutional domain as a whole and the various organizations and individuals within the domain in dissimilar ways (Hjarvard, 2017b). For instance, children and teenagers may, as part of their growing dependency on mobile media, experience both a growing independency in relation to their parents and an increasing dependency in relation to their peer networks.

The notion of 'dependency' often involves normative and critical evaluations of relationships. This is clearly the case for 'dependency theory' in the social sciences,

which addresses unequal relationships between center and periphery, i.e. Western domination and exploitation of developing countries (e.g. Frank, 1967). Analyses of the influence of new media often invest dependency with explicit or implicit normative implications regarding both people and media. Particularly in her later writings, Turkle (2011) laments the hollowness of the social ties we cultivate through online media: "We talk about 'spending' hours on e-mail, but we, too, are being spent [...] The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy" (Turkle, 2011: 280). For Turkle (2011), a key problem with the social relationships formed through online media is precisely that they release people from the strong ties, the lasting social interdependencies that underlie true relationship. At the other end of this normative spectrum we find Rainee and Wellman (2014), who celebrate the individual's ability to free himself from the "bounded cocoon" of local and strong social ties. The internet and interactive mobile media provide a new social operating system that fosters a new form of 'networked individualism' based on much weaker ties: "The turn towards a network operating system has been built on flexible connectivity between individuals and the ability to trust one another across distances and groups without requiring the cohesive force of the tribe to punish transgressions" (Rainee and Wellman, 2014: 57). Networked individualism allows the individual to break free from existing dependencies, and the possibilities are limited only by the individual's own ability to maneuver in the extended network.

The problem with both these conflicting positions is that their normative or critical approach is based on a perspective that takes as its departure the individual's encounter with the network. We instead need a holistic perspective that allows us to examine mutual dependencies as structural properties of interlocking networks of media,

individuals, and social institutions. Only from such a holistic, structural, and relational perspective is it possible to assess the full implications of the restructuring of social dependencies through the growing influence of media. Both Turkle (2011) and Rainee and Wellman (2014) highlight important aspects of current developments, but their individualistic perspectives do not allow them to consider how the experiences of either hollowness or individual freedom may be circumscribed by the web of relationships and dependencies that various media carry with them. Without such a structural perspective, we can easily get caught up in the old dichotomy between strong media effects versus strong audience effects, now instead projected onto the era of digital and network media. Turkle (2011) tends to echo the idea of strong media effects in the sense that digital media are said to erode the individual's ability to sustain strong and meaningful social ties. Rainee and Wellman (2014) reassert the paradigm of powerful audiences in the era of new media by stressing new media users' abilities to use the social operating system of digital networks for their own purposes. For Turkle (2011), the digital media are too powerful, while for Rainee and Wellman (2014) the media empower the already competent individual user.

Within media and communication studies, so-called 'media dependency theory' (Ball-Rokeach, 1985) has sought to develop "an ecological approach to understanding individuals' dependency relations to media in the context of individual, organizational, and societal-levels relations and changes" (Jung, 2017: 5). Media dependency theory was initially developed out of dissatisfaction with ideas of both strong media effects and strong audience effects, for instance use and gratification research (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). Neither media nor media users are inherently weak or strong, but they are circumscribed by power dependency relations at micro, meso, and macro levels of society. Following this ecological or holistic approach, the

media's influence on an individual's knowledge, opinions, or behavior should be considered in light of the individual's dependencies on the set of media available to him or her. However, dependency on various media is not only configured by the media but also by the wider set of relationships within which individuals, organizations, and media are embedded in various institutional contexts. According to media dependency theory, the media constitute an information system within society ('information' understood in a broad sense, also involving entertainment, etc.), and the individual's dependency on various media is a result of the various goals that the individual pursues due to his or her position in the overall social structure. The various media represent information resources upon which individuals may be dependent for the pursuit of different social goals, but because of individuals' different social positions, these goals and dependencies are not uniform. Dependency on the media as an information resource is different for a teenager in a low-income suburban neighborhood than for a middle-aged investment banker in the city center. Furthermore, dependencies on the media are subject to contingent circumstances, for instance situations of social insecurity or individual experiences of informational ambiguity. Media dependency theory posits that, in general, the higher degree of insecurity or ambiguity, the more individuals will become dependent on the media as an information system.

Media dependency theory was originally developed to conceptualize the interdependencies of individuals, media, and society in the era of mass media, and the theoretical framework has subsequently been reformulated into a 'communication infrastructure theory' in light of the profound changes resulting from the emergence of the internet and mobile media. This framework preserves the original idea of an ecological approach that integrates micro, meso, and macro interdependencies between social entities at various levels at the same time as it takes

into account that the new media environment not only constitutes an information system but also affords an infrastructure for communicative action for all social actors, individuals, and organizations (Rokeach et al., 2001). The infrastructure both enables and constrains communicative action on the part of individuals and organizations, and the various actors' dependency on this infrastructure is reflected in their degree and types of connectedness within the overall digital media environment (Jung et al., 2012; Jung, 2017).

Media dependency theory differs from mediatization theory by retaining focus on mediation processes. The holistic sociological framework is developed to better account for the ways in which various media condition communicative action. This is also a concern of mediatization theory, but the latter combines it with a strong interest in media's role in processes of social and cultural change. From the perspective of mediatization theory, media dependency theory provides an important insight in its emphasis on the multilevel and reciprocal character of dependency relationships. Dependencies on the media are not solely – and in some cases not even predominantly – a product of the media themselves but are equally an outcome of the multilayered interdependencies between individuals, organizations, media, and social institutions. It is through these interdependencies that various media come to appear relevant, necessary, and sometimes unavoidable for pursuing social goals and fulfilling cultural obligations (Hjarvard, 2017a). In light of this, I suggest, mediatization may also involve processes by which media relay dependencies to other social institutions. Various online media may relay the virtual presence of institutional demands to new social settings at the same time as they weaken the salience of demands of the offline social encounters through which individuals pass in the course of their daily lives.

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Virtualization of institutional domains and social interaction

An important consequence of the integration of media into ever-more aspects of social and cultural life is the virtualization of both institutional domains and situated social interaction (Hjarvard, 2013: 33ff). In both cases, these changes involve a restructuring of dependencies between individuals, media, and social domains. At the level of institutional domains (such as politics, family, industry, and education), the presence of online media creates a new social geography by which the boundaries of the institution become permeable and less tied to physical space. Obvious examples are families divided by migrant labor, who continue emotional, social, and financial interactions across countries and continents through the use of online media (Miller and Madianou, 2012) and the spread of distance work to private households (Perrons, 2003). In both examples, online media become a crucial resource for conducting daily life and thereby imply increased dependence on the media, but the examples also demonstrate a wider restructuring of the dependencies involved in these processes. In the case of divided migrant families, the media may provide a social technology to ensure family cohesion, yet the entire social situation of dispersed migrant families involves new social arrangements, liberties, and dependencies concerning child rearing, sex, citizenship, leisure time, etc. In the case of distance work performed in the household, the restructuring may involve changing work-life balances, new conditions for child rearing, etc.

By making possible new forms of social organization, digital media act as a catalyst for wider social transformations, of which increased dependency on the media is only one component. Media are a necessary but insufficient condition for the restructuring of interdependencies. They may initiate changes, but the subsequent develop-

ment and anchoring of alternative forms of social organization depend on the interplay between the involved networks of social actors at micro, meso, and macro levels of society. The consequence of mediatization is a growing dependency on the media and their various logics, but this dependency may also relay dependencies with work, distant family members, etc. – or in some cases loosen dependencies with other social contexts.

The virtualization of institutions and social interaction does not render physical space superfluous. Instead, a blending of physical and virtual spaces is taking place. Institutions typically retain a dominant physical location for their main activities, such as the home for the family institution, the parliament for the political institution, the school for the educational institution, and the factory or office for the work institution. However, the boundaries of institutions become fuzzy and less tied to physical space when media allow individuals and groups to 'perform' family, education, work, and politics in various virtual settings. The 'blending' of virtual and physical spaces follows all four dimensions of mediatization identified by Schulz (2004): extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation. As the examples of migrant families and distance work exemplify, media clearly extend the reach of institutionalized practices beyond the boundaries of physical locations, and some of the practices hitherto bound to specific localities may be substituted by new virtual practices. At the same time, new virtual practices amalgamate with older, physically bound practices, and the new and the old accommodate to each other. For instance, in the institutional domain of learning and teaching, the development of 'flipped classroom' pedagogies exemplifies a combined amalgamation and accommodation between online and offline activities: Students may prepare themselves at home by watching online lectures, reading books, and taking notes, while in the physical classroom they engage in

work that to some extent resembles earlier preparatory homework such as problem solving and group work. The presence of media in both the home and the classroom allows old and new teaching practices to blend in new ways.

This blending of boundaries is not only present at an institutional level but is also discernible in daily life's continual flow of situated social interactions. At this micro level of society, the blending of physical location and virtual connections puts pressure on the most crucial condition of successful social interaction: the ability of individuals to agree on the present definition of the social situation. According to Goffman's (1971) analysis of the face-to-face encounter, participants' interaction is guided by a shared interpretation of the social situation at hand. The interpretation is typically cued by the types of people involved, the locality, and the physical layout, including the available 'props' that we may be used during interaction. An encounter between close friends in a bar with glasses and playing cards at the table thus suggests a completely different definition of the situation than does an encounter between fellow students and a teacher in a classroom with a blackboard and chalk. People may tacitly negotiate the details of the situation (for instance degrees of formality), and the particulars may change over the course of the encounter. As Goffman's (1971) studies demonstrate in minute detail, participants need to agree on the definition of the social situation, otherwise the interaction will fail, and misunderstandings and frustration will occur.

With growing virtual interconnectedness, the ability to reach agreement about the social situation between people in a face-to-face encounter becomes more fragile, not least because the balance between the individual's and the group's ability to commit to and define the present social situation is tipped in favor of the individual. When each of the participants has other social situations available online, they are tempted to judge the present

location-bound situation against other, potentially more interesting or important situations and can opt out of the present situation in favor of online interactions. This is not only because people may individually choose to direct their attention towards other scenes but also because online media make them available to others outside the present location. They may, for instance, be called, posted, or e-mailed by spouses, children, employees, or advertisers. In this way, interconnectedness relays dependencies from one context to another, both in terms of obligations to observe communicative politeness rules (e.g. demands of responding quickly to incoming requests) and to have social commitments towards others (e.g. demands of attending to issues related to family members, tasks at work, etc.). In her study of financial traders' use of computers for work, Knorr Cetina (2014) suggests that a new type of situation has emerged. The pervasive presence of computer screens "transforms the face-to-face situation into a synthetic situation" (Knorr Cetina, 2014: 39). By 'synthetic', she means that face-to-face interaction is transformed and augmented by intelligent and interactive media at the same time as social interaction becomes directed towards and accountable to non-present others, both distant other humans and technological systems.

The changing conditions of social situations are not only a result of the virtual world intruding upon the physical face-to-face encounter. The extensive virtual availability of the outside world from almost every location and every institutional setting allows the individual to actively engage with and 'surf' through a myriad of social situations. In addition, digital media can augment social interaction through the constant presence of available information online: The interactional space becomes intelligent, allowing the individual to interact in a more informed manner with both distant others and those physically present. This provides the basis for the experience

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of individual empowerment. For instance, when at work, you may also choose to chat with your children, conduct banking affairs, and in general seek information from everywhere merely by touching a screen. At the micro level of social interaction, this pervasive connectivity is often experienced as an increased pressure on attention. The individual's attention becomes divided between various social situations, online and offline, and the group's ability to get everyone to comply with an overriding definition of the social situation is weakened. For the individual, commitment to and definition of the social situation increasingly appears to be a matter of choice since he or she may decide to opt out of the present situation and instead engage in available situations online. From the individual's perspective, this may seem like empowerment, but since this choice is principally available to all, the outcome is not necessarily in anyone's interest. Because everyone may end up dividing their attention, everybody may experience a loss of attentiveness and commitment to the social situations with which they are engaging.

Experiencing media dependencies

Up to this point, I have discussed changing dependencies at a theoretical level, but I will now try to illustrate empirically how some of these changes are experienced by focusing on how the growing presence of various online media is experienced as a disturbance of the daily conduct of social interaction. The data will illustrate how social rules and norms for social interaction are currently under pressure due to the growing connectivity and restructuring of dependencies. These empirical results are based on a survey conducted among 1510 respondents. The survey was been carried out in collaboration with YouGov, and the respondents were sampled through YouGov's panel. The survey was conducted online (CAWI) in

the period of August 28 – September 8, 2015. The data are weighted on the dimensions of age, gender, and geography on the basis of the overall population statistics from Statistics Denmark in order to be a representative sample of Danes aged 18-74 years.

As becomes evident in *Figure 2*, a considerable majority of the adult Danish population experiences that somebody in their closer circle of acquaintances has become *too dependent* on the use of one or more media. The survey also provides details about the media for which this is the case, and it is predominantly online media such as the mobile phone, internet, social media, and to some extent television that most people feel are responsible for this kind of overdependence. The widespread experience of being too dependent on various media may at a general level be said to confirm that media have restructured dependencies in everyday social life. However, the specific nature of these dependencies may involve different dimensions of both a psychological and sociological nature, and the space limitation of this predominantly theoretical essay prevents me from pursuing these dimensions in any detail. For instance, the personal, almost intimate relationship that many users develop with their mobile phone (Miller, 2014) bears witness to its social importance, but it may also entail separate psychological dimensions of dependency such as Fear of Missing Out, FoMO (Przybylsk et al., 2013). In line with the overall sociological perspective of this essay, I confine myself to a short explication of the problems of divided attention in social interaction on the basis of the results of this survey. *Figure 3* and *Figure 4* indicate that the presence of mobile phones and tablet computers during face-to-face interaction is often experienced as a problem, in the sense that people feel that other people and themselves are less present during the interaction. Almost half of the population often or very often experiences that other people are less present in a social situa-

tion, and 41% say it happens sometimes. When it comes to respondents' evaluations of their own presence, they experience it less often, but even here, 11% say it happens often, and 33% report it happens sometimes. The difference between the evaluation of other people's and one's own dependency on the media accords with the general third-person effect, stipulating that people generally think other people are more influenced by the media than they are themselves (White and Andsager, 2017).
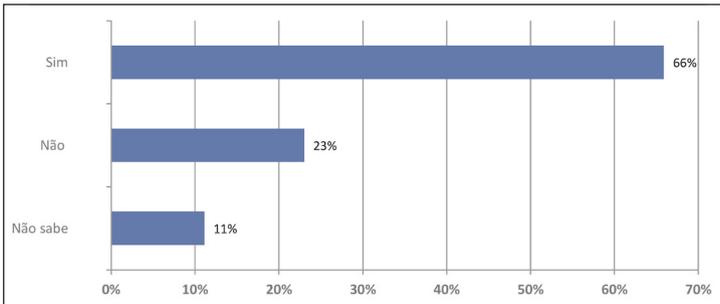

Figure 2. The widespread experience of other people being too dependent on various media. Question: "Do you know somebody in your closer circle of acquaintances who has become too dependent on the use of one or more media?" Base: Danish respondents aged 18-74 years. YouGov panel. N=1510.
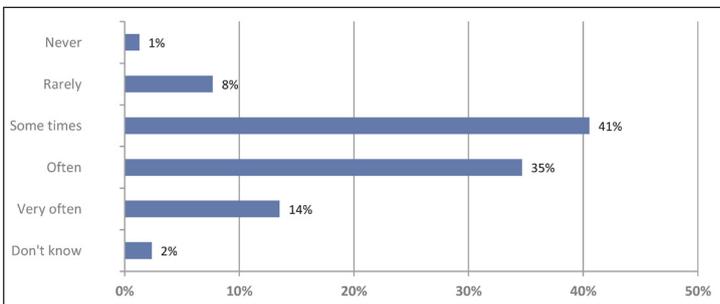

Figure 3. The experience of divided attention of other people. Question: "How often do you experience that mobile phones and tablet computers make people less present in the situation you are in?" Base: Danish respondents aged 18-74 years. YouGov panel. N=1510.
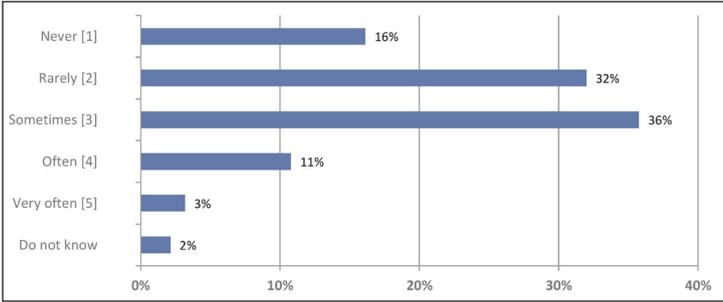
Figure 4. The experience of divided attention in your own be-
havior. Question: "How often do you experience that your
own use of mobile phone or tablet computer makes you
less present in the situation you are in?" Base: Danish re-
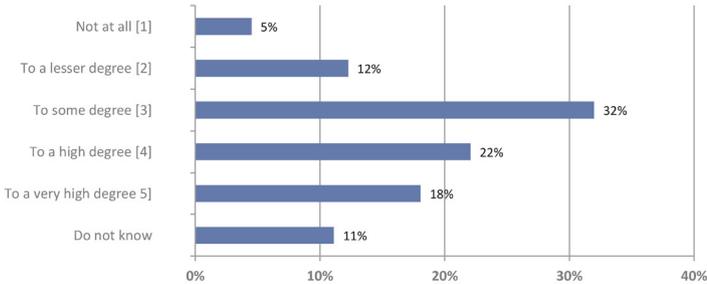spondents aged 18-74 years. YouGov panel. N=1510.

Figure 5. The necessity of having guidelines for the use of me-
dia in relation to work. Question: "To what degree do you think
it is a good idea, if your workplace has guidelines for the use of
media in relation to work (for example e-mail, internet, mobile
phones)?" Base: Danish respondents aged 18-74 years who are or
have been employed during the past year. YouGov panel. N=1070

The experience of both oneself and others as in-
sufficiently present in face-to-face interaction due to the
availability of online media may reflect that the informal
social rules of negotiating the current social situation, in-
cluding rules regarding the required presence and atten-
tion by participants, have come under pressure and have

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not yet been sufficiently developed to manage ubiquitous online media. The survey also demonstrates that many people feel they need more formalized help to ensure that online media do not interfere unproductively in social interaction. When asked about the necessity of having guidelines stipulated for the use of media in relation to work (for example e-mail, internet, mobile phones), 40% of respondents reply that this would be a good idea to a high or very high degree. 32% think it is a good idea to some degree, 12% feel it is a good idea to a lesser degree, and just 5% think it is not a good idea at all. There may be many reasons for people wanting more formal guidelines for media use in connection to work, but it seems reasonable to suggest that people experience difficulties in demarcating the boundaries between work and other tasks, both in relation to ability to concentrate on work-related matters when they are supposed to be working and, conversely, being free of work when not present at the workplace. The increased technical connectivity and growing social interdependencies following the spread of online media are still in their early stages, and the necessary informal norms and formal rules for administering this new social landscape are not yet in place.

Intensified mediatization

The growing integration of various media into ever-more institutional contexts and into the situated interaction of daily life reflects an intensified form of mediatization. The era of mass media such as the press, radio, and television transformed public life and public institutions, particularly the political domain but also other cultural domains. The everyday flow of situated social interactions was clearly circumscribed and influenced by the presence of mass media, from the daily political interactions informed by news media to daily life's orientation towards

popular music, cinema, and broadcast entertainment. However, face-to-face micro social interactions were not permeated by technologies allowing every individual to interact with others not present in the physical location. This blending of physical and virtual worlds represents an intensified mediatization in which the 'life-world' of everyday life becomes more strongly connected to the 'system world' of various institutions, including the market (Habermas, 1989).

Dijck (2013) provides an interesting study that may elucidate how this interconnection between 'life-world' and 'system world' occurs through social media, although she does not herself make use of Habermas' categories. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become a taken-for-granted infrastructure for social interaction, and Dijck (2013) uses a historical study to trace how various social media have developed their operations by merging commercial and technological rationales with the users' norms of social interaction. Dijck and Poell (2013) label these operating principles as 'social media logics', consisting of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. These social media logics underlie new forms of online sociality in which systemic properties blend with life-world orientations:

> Technological pressure from multiple platforms to select the most popular and most connected person or idea, is, in turn, reinforced by peer pressure in real life. Peer pressure has become a hybrid social and technological force; connections between people inform automated connections and vice versa (Dijck, 2013: 157).

The technological pressures are embedded in algorithms that not only augment already existing social motivations for individuals to seek the company of

others but are also designed to intensify this motivation and mold it to comply with systemic – including commercial – pressures to maximize the number of online interactions. Online media, including social media, allow for a reconfiguration of the relationship between system world and life-world in which interdependencies between various institutional contexts are spelled out in new and intensified ways. Dijck (2013) points to the interconnections between social media logics and norms of daily life, but as we have seen earlier, the processes of mediatization also relay new dependencies between the life-world and other institutional domains, not just to the media. In this manner, media make systemic structures and instrumental rationalities virtually present and important for communication in life-world encounters at the same time as the communicative life-world informs and becomes a resource – especially a data source – for the systemic parts of society. The digital footprint of life-world interactions becomes a valuable commodity that is sold and used for strategic purposes, such as product marketing and political campaigning.

The intensified mediatization of culture and society following the spread of digital and online media is often experienced as a Janus-faced development, simultaneously liberating for the individual and producing new forms of social dependency. These two aspects are not necessarily experienced equally by everyone. For some, individual opportunities seem to be the most prominent side of the story; for others, increased dependency seems to curtail the promise of the former. In order to sociologically understand these different experiences, we must move beyond both the paradigm of strong media effects and strong user effects by examining how media dependencies are embedded within a restructuration of social interdependencies between individuals, organizations, media, and different institutional domains.

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