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A Life Lived in Media

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Abstract

Research since the early years of the 21st century consistently shows that through the years more of our time gets spent using media, that being concurrently exposed to media has become a foundational feature of everyday life, and that consuming media for most people increasingly takes place alongside producing media. Contemporary media devices, what people do with them, and how all of this fits into the organization of our everyday life disrupt and unsettle well-established views of the role media play in society. Instead of continuing to wrestle with a distinction between media and society, this contribution proposes we begin our thinking with a view of life not lived *with* media, but *in* media. The media life perspective starts from the realization that the whole of the world and our lived experience in it are framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by (immersive, integrated, ubiquitous and pervasive) media.

Media Life

In this article, we argue that an additional ontological turn should take place in the way we understand and use media. Media have become so inseparable from us that we no longer live *with* media, but *in* media. We bring together and evaluate fundamental media theories with specific reference to the so-called “media generation” to interrogate our argument of media's ontological possibility, under several distinct terms: the (inevitable) disappearance of media from active awareness (*invisibility*), the productive approach to the lifeworld that media engender (*creativity*), the way people and institutions adapt to the criteria for mediated inclusion (*selectivity*), and the restructuring of social bonds in media (*sociability*). We conclude by locating the answer to the all-important “so what” question in considering life as a work of art in media. 1

Research in countries as varied as the United States, Brazil, South Korea, The Netherlands, and Finland consistently shows how through the years more of our time gets spent using media, and how concurrent use of multiple media has become a regular feature of everyday life. With close to two billion people using internet on a regular basis and well over four billion mobile phone subscriptions in the world (at the time of writing this piece), media can not just be seen as types of technology and chunks of content we pick and choose from the world around us — a view that considers media as an external agent affecting us in a myriad of ways. If anything, today we have to recognize how the uses and appropriations of media penetrate all aspects of contemporary life, how media are not just both artefacts and contents (as McLuhan envisioned), not just units consisting of queer couplings between hardware and software (as Ian Bogost and Levi Bryant suggest[1]), not even an infrastructural combination of their material conditions, what people do with them, and how all of this shapes and is shaped by people's everyday social arrangements (as proposed by Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone[2]). There is no external to the media in our lives. In this paper, we explore the implications of this premise. 2

The whole of the world and our lived experience in it can and perhaps should be seen as framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media. This world is what Roger Silverstone (2007), Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg (2006) label a “mediapolis”: a mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the 3

experiences of everyday life. However, a paradox of pervasive and ubiquitous media is their increasingly invisibility; they are so embedded in our lives that they disappear, which would suggest we inevitably lose ourselves in media. “[T]he dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions,” writes Friedrich Kittler in the foreword of his work on emerging media in the 19th century, and in the process “what remains of people is what media can store and communicate” [Kittler 1996, xl]. Media, in other words, make us lose ourselves. Quite literally, sometimes, as Kittler remarks in a 1998 speech in honor of British music theorist and composer Brian Eno: “music shows us that a culture is only as popular as it can lose itself in its own technologies” [Kittler 1998]. When media become both ubiquitous and invisible, we may very well be losing ourselves in our technology to the extent that it generates our lives on the basis of a specific set of rules, codes and protocols. As Brian Arthur states in his take on the evolution of technology: “this thing that fades to the background of our world also creates that world” [Arthur 2009, 10]. From a perspective that aims to resolve the false dichotomy between machines (cf. media) and humans (cf. life), we would prefer to argue that the thing is us as much as it is itself.

Media's Invisibility

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued that the contradictory and ambivalent ways digital media operate in our culture today mean that “digital technologies are proliferating faster than our cultural, legal, or educational institutions can keep up with them ” [Bolter and Grusin 1996, 312]. They suggest this ambivalence stems from the double logic of remediation embedded in all media. On the one hand, media make themselves known to us by remixing their properties: today's phones include music players, video screens, and so on; any television show or advertisement uses conventions and formulas from previous programs and formats; and, as we have seen, people are in their daily activities concurrently exposed to multiple media. Bolter and Grusin suggest that media work very hard to make themselves invisible. For example, there is the tendency of media artifacts to become so big they drown out everything else (wall-sized TV's, such as Panasonic's fittingly titled Life Screen [Lifescreen]) while also shrinking to near-invisible proportions (computer chips as brain implants allowing people to give computer commands and play games without moving a muscle, such as the BrainGate sensor by bio-tech company Cyberkinetics[3]). 4

As media become invisible, they become all-powerful. We propose that the key challenge of the digital humanities in the 21st century is, or will be, the disappearance of media. What we therefore aim for in this text is an understanding of the different ways those things taken for granted that make up our day-to-day existence have become automated, augmented and organized through media. The human experience of space-time relationships in the course of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the increasing speed of travel and telecommunications, represents a change in people's sense of reality itself [Harvey 1990]. Media become the playground for a search for meaning and belonging — not just by consumption or what David Harvey calls a “flexible accumulation” of artifacts and ideas that would make up a fragmented sense of self-identity, but also by producing, co-creating, redacting and remixing “a whole series of simulacra as milieux of escape, fantasy, and distraction” [Harvey 1990, 302]. With Harvey, we do not see people as hapless victims of this seemingly disjointed worldview. We locate the potential power of people to shape their lives and identities and produce themselves (and therefore each other) in media. 5

Media-centric theories such as Marshall McLuhan’s ideas of media as extensions of man, Michael Callon and Bruno Latour’s insistence on the agency of non-humans, and Friedrich Kittler’s call for an ontology of media can be considered to be among the first steps to an ontological turn in the relationship between humans and media. From a society-centric take on the role of media in everyday life, arguments developed by various authors signal an ongoing convergence of the social and material dimensions of media. Consider for instance the work on media ecology by Neil Postman and Lance Strate ([Strate 2006]), and on media and social theory ([Thompson 1995], [Garnham 2000], [Rasmussen 2000], [Silverstone 2007], [Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee 2008]). In order to provide studies of the digital and the human with a sophisticated perspective that would do justice to the contemporary fusion of media with all other aspects of society, Hjarvard proposes “mediatization” as a conceptual innovation, which suggests that “[c]ontemporary society is permeated by the media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and other social institutions” ([Hjardvard 2008, 105]; see also [Lundby 2009]). The media life perspective is not so much a synthesis of earlier approaches coming from either a medial or social point of view, but rather seeks to move beyond 6

such categories.

7 Since 2006, the Educause Center for Applied Research (ECAR) conducts annual surveys and interviews with thousands of undergraduates at US colleges and universities about the role of information technologies in their lives. In its 2008 report a quote from one of their teenage respondents is used to illustrate the broader trends borne out of the data: “I don't look at it as ‘getting on the Internet.’ The Internet is a part of life. It's a lifestyle” [Salaway and Caruso 2008, 9]. The 2010 report opens with another student's sentiment expressed in that year's study: “My laptop is my life.” [Smith and Caruso 2010, 7] A poll of more than 27,000 adults across 26 countries (commissioned by the BBC) conducted by GlobeScan found that four in five adults (79%) regard internet access as a fundamental human right [BBC News.com]. A 2002 report on people's use of media in general and mobile communication in particular by the anthropological agency Context describes the emergence of a “mobile life” as follows: “A [c]onstant awareness of wireless finally wanes when people are truly living a mobile lifestyle”, seamlessly integrating wireless into everyday life such that “where people find it difficult to live a life without wireless” [Context Research]. Reports on media life by scholarly groups, media companies, and market research firms in for example the US (Pew Internet & American Life[4]), Germany (GoldMedia and Bitkom[5]), the UK (LSE and The Carphone Warehouse Group[6], Ofcom[7]), across Latin America (Synthesio[8]), and globally (Comscore MobiLens,[9] The Nielsen Company[10] and others consistently claim that many, if not most users cannot imagine a life without networked media in general and mobile devices in particular.

8 In this abundantly mediated and progressively mobile lifestyle media are such an augmented, automated, indispensable and altogether inalienable part of one's activities, attitudes and social arrangements that they disappear — they essentially become the life that people are experiencing on a day to day basis. Most authors of reports about people and their media scramble for concepts to label, classify, claim and tame them, as the Digital Generation, iGeneration (also known as Generation Z or the Internet Generation[11]), Net Geners, Generation Upload (as coined by a 2009 Vodafone marketing campaign in Germany[12]), and Generation C (where C stands for Content; coined by trendwatching.com in 2004[13]). Such terms are generally used for people born after the early 1990s who grew up after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the proclaimed end of the Cold War (1991), after the Tiananmen Square protests and subsequent massacre in China (1989), after the release of Nelson Mandela (1990) and the end of Apartheid in South Africa (1994), after the end of military regimes and dictatorships across Latin America (Argentina, 1983; Brazil, 1985; Suriname, 1988; Chile, 1990), as well as after the introduction of the World Wide Web and the digital mobile phone in 1990.

Media's Creativity

9 Much can be said about the lack of generalizable evidence that would support a notion of either discrete or durable generational difference when it comes to a life lived in media. The rhetoric of the “digital native” is certainly flawed in many ways [Bennett et al. 2008]. On the other hand, it does seem that children and youths experience the world and their role in it with media functioning as a precondition. Considering a wide range of trends and theories across several academic disciplines, Norm Friesen and Theo Hug make a compelling case for considering the “mediatic a priori” for “the perception of time, space, and the shaping of attention and communication” [Friesen and Hug 2009, 73], particularly when it comes to meeting the challenges of educating today’s youth. In a review of the role media play in children's everyday lives around the world, David Buckingham and Liesbeth de Block note how “media that our children experience are […] a mixture of the national, regional and global. These media can serve to maintain national allegiances and offer a view of the world that reconnects children with another history or opens a window to a new world” [Buckingham and de Block 2008, 4]. Buckingham and De Block emphasize an additional layer of media immersion at work, for example when it comes to the ongoing fusion and hybridization of local idioms and traditions with global media brands and genres. What makes this work significant for the concerns about media life is how it reminds us of the ways in which media activities and practices can only be understood in a broad context that includes both material and spatial considerations, reflecting a nuanced take on how the social arrangements of media both stretch existing ways of doing things and making sense of the world across cultural and spatial boundaries, while at the same time functioning to articulate and demarcate local communities and identities. Perhaps it is safe to say that the consequences and articulations of media life are more visible in the everyday lived experience of the young.

Many if not most of the trends signaled here are neither exclusive to networked and mobile communication devices, nor are they uniquely supercharged by children or teenagers' use of them. Historicizing the role media play in everyday life and analyzing the remediation of old and new devices, functions, and forms consistently confirms such a caveat to many claims made in the literature. Yet we argue that the media life perspective considers such developments regardless of whether one sees continuity or change; analyses of media can take a leap of faith towards a post-historical being in order to understand people's current mediatization. The interpenetration of media in all aspects of people's lives suggests how the boundaries one perhaps all too quickly draws between different types of media (analog or digital), different modes of being (public or private), and different groups of people (in the center or the periphery), are, if anything, in flux. When the organizing categories and principles of life are in constant motion, uncertainty reigns. Vilém Flusser's notion of a "being in a world of absurd chance" [14] characterizes people's experiences of a life lived in media from two angles: on the one hand as cut off from history with calculated strategies as a last resort providing control, and, on the other hand, as having "reached the goal, which they were longing for right from the beginning: the digital code is the most perfect method to change the world however you like it." We suggest that a media life perspective aims for the latter while focusing on the first; people are doing more than just killing time in a game of chance and probability — they are in fact looking at and engaging with the world around them (as) in media with an eye to create and redact it. 10

Society in the digital age has become increasingly organized around the various ways to organize and diversify the intertwined or networked processes of production and consumption. Theorizing the way media function in our everyday life as indistinguishable from our bodies, senses and experiences begins with an awareness of media as industries (casting people in roles of production and consumption) and techniques (governing the way people access their world through physical as well as sensory experiences). As such, the ongoing convergence of production and consumption of media across companies, channels, genres, technologies and culture [Jenkins 2006] is also reflected in the convergence of other aspects of our everyday life, for instance between self and social identities (especially on social networking sites), between work and play, and due to time-space compression, the convergence of the local and the global. If anything, the logic of media must be seen as dissolving the distinctions drawn all too easy between humans and machines, or, as Lev Manovich (2001) articulates, between culture and computers. To this one should add how cyberspace, internet, and other networked technologies are not particular to specific devices or practices anymore, as today a wide variety and ever expanding set of artifacts (and what people do with them) are networked. 11

A media life perspective unsettles the key organizing categories of the study of communication and the role of media in people's lives: production, content, and consumption. Certainly, the problematic nature of such categories has been highlighted in the past. One could think of Stuart Hall's notion of media as encoded and decoded with (invariably contested) meanings, to challenge a dominant paradigm where mediated messages were generally seen as transmitted. We might also consider James Carey's equally formidable challenge to the sender-message-receiver or transmission model of communication by emphasizing the ritualistic nature of the way people use media and technology to make sense of their world. Work in the field of media anthropology also stresses the linked and circular nature of the production and consumption of culture. Scholars in media studies, sociology, informatics, and geography similarly have critically articulated the categories of media production and consumption within the parameters of the capitalist (and distinctly cosmopolitan) project, rather than within the material practice or lived experience of how people actually use and make media. An early example of such work would be John Thompson's *The Media and Modernity* [Thompson 1995] , where he carefully defines any form of mediated and quasi-mediated communication as produced and received in differentiated contexts that blur boundaries between space and time, as well as between public and private domains. Thompson particularly takes aim at the misleading concepts of "mass" media and "mass" communication, arguing that in a digital age the wide variety of and availability and access to media forms signal much more complex, dialogic and differentiated forms of communication. Manuel Castells's more recent book *Communication Power* [Castells 2009] extends Thompson's original argument with the concept of mass self-communication: where people self-generate messages (generally about themselves), and decide which messages are self-directed and self-selected (in terms of how sources, channels, and receivers are identified and used). 12

A life lived in media inspires a "creative" outlook on one's world — as if reality is something one can zoom in or out from 13

as viewed through a camera (or by swiping one's fingers on a touchscreen display), or move up or down in like we are used to when channel surfing. What media's creativity requires, then, is a set of life skills that are premised on a multimedia literacy: an ability to both “read” and “write” media. John Hartley ([Hartley 2000]) underscores such a literacy in a take on media life that suggests individuals are becoming part of a global “redactional” society, where the core competences once exclusively associated with professional media workers – their ability to effectively find, create and gather, select, edit, disseminate and redistribute information — are necessary for everyone to attain in order to guarantee continued existence in a networked information age. This phase in our history is furthermore one of networked individualism, concludes Barry Wellman on the basis of a decades-long research project on the implications of what he calls a “triple revolution” [Wellman 2002] of the proliferation and differentiation of the personal internet, the personal mobile accessibility of information and communication, and a turn from densely-knit groups to sparsely-knit networks (including family households) based on personal connections and relationships. Wellman suggests that high speed place-to-place communication (i.e. internet) supports the dispersal and disintegration of organizations and communities, whereas high speed person-to-person communication (i.e. mobile connectivity) supports the dispersal and role-fragmentation of workgroups and households [Wellman 2002, 15–6].

14 Our networked individualism experienced in a redactional society can thus be seen as both the consequence and cause of media life. This does not mean there are no structures of support and social cohesion anymore, nor does it suggest that our concurrent immersion in media makes us more (or less) sociable. Writing with Carolyn Haythornthwaite, Wellman underscores that “[e]ven before the advent of the Internet, there has been a move from all-encompassing, socially-controlling communities to individualized, fragmented personal communities” [Wellman 2002, 32]. Media amplify and possibly accelerate existing social tranformations in ways that can be attributed to an improvement of our real or perceived chances for survival in a world of increasingly stretched social relations. Seen as such, the increasingly lifelike nature of media — including the contemporary design and development of ubiquitous computing (e.g. applications and uses that become so second nature to us that they disappear from consciousness), haptic technologies (cf. touchscreens) and natural user interfaces (such as the motion sensor devices in gaming consoles: Nintendo's *Wii*, Microsoft's *Kinect*, and PlayStation's *Move*) — further contribute to a role of media in our lives that is immediately interfaced with our living environments (including our bodies).

15 Looking at reality framed by media — from a joystick to a computer mouse, from a remote control to a motion sensing device — makes it seemingly subject to one's own experience of it. On the one hand, today's media can be seen as “intrinsically solipsistic” [Morley 2007, 211] technologies, enabling the ongoing retreat of people into their very own quasi-autonomous and narcissistic “tele-cocoon” [Habuchi 2005], “mediasphere” [Sloterdijk 2004], or “personal information space” [Deuze 2007]. On the other hand, this individualized immersion instantly and kinetically connects people with others anywhere else, thus turning their very own societal bubbles of space into fully mediated spaces of global coexistence. Seen either way, a life in media is at once connected and isolated, requiring each and every individual to rely on their own creativity to make something out of life: not just to give it meaning, but to symbolically produce it.

16 The media's creativity connects to a broad and influential strand of thinking — both in academia and professional fields – regarding the increasing significance of culture and creativity in the economy at large(as for example the work of Richard Florida and John Howkins attest to). Néstor García Canclini [Canclini 2001] observes along these lines a global reconstruction of world culture and local creativity under the paradigms of technology and the market, and advocates vigilance in this process. More concretely, such viewpoints can be linked to Maurizio Lazzerato’s critique of the rise of immaterial labor as the new form of work organization in contemporary global capitalist society. Immaterial labor refers to the changes taking place in workers’ labor processes in the manufacturing, knowledge and creative industries (including for example journalism and advertising), where the time-tested craftsmanship involved in direct labor tends to shifts to the currently more privileged yet self-deleterious skills of the information age — cybernetics, computers, and mediated communication. Immaterial labor also refers to a parallel process of commoditization of activities that can be roughly labeled as traditionally being part of the realm of social skills: assigning status and building reputations (within specific communities of interest), maintaining and structuring social relations (in teams and networks), including identity play and performance. Nick Couldry, Göran Bolin, and others have extended these notions to articulate a perspective on

“immaterial media landscapes”, where what is produced by people can be seen as existing increasingly in the realm of views, attitudes, symbols and ideas, yet has direct consequences for concrete social and political realities.

17 There runs a parallel argument through these and other more or less recent observations about the apparent immaterial, post-materialist and dematerialized *weightless* nature of contemporary society (as in a reduction in the quantity of materials required to serve economic functions, including factories, machines and labor), attributing primacy to the largely informational and symbolic nature of life’s processes. To some extent, this explains the significance of media as benchmarks for creating and circulating meaning. Indeed, contemporary social theory is suffused with claims about our increasingly liquid, ephemeral, self-reflexive, mobile and otherwise less than stable, permanent or tangible modern times (see in particular [Bauman 2000], [Bauman 2005], [Bauman 2009]). The dissolution of communication’s key sense making categories is articulated in this broader debate, and thus can be seen to fit within processes of theoretical abstraction about the boundary-erasing nature of contemporary life as well as practical observation of the concurrent exposure to media people enjoy today.

18 The question is, what can be said about the kind of creativity a media life inspires — to what ends does such creativity interpellate individuals? To some extent, this seems a democratizing force, as the infrastructure of internet, widespread mobile connectivity, and an abundance of “plug-and-play” artefacts reduce digital divides and open up creativity to people from all walks of life. The collaboration and participation often found in networked media attracts and challenges people to interact rather than be just consumers of reality. Alison Hearn suggests another explanation, as she argues how this compulsive behavior of “outer-directed self-presentation [...] trades on the very stuff of lived experience in the service of promotion and profit” [Hearn 2008, 207–8]. For her, social media are forms of self-branding mandated by a flexible corporate capitalist project that “has subsumed all areas of human life, including the very concept of a private self” [Hearn 2008, 208].

19 Hearn's argument follows that of Zygmunt Bauman, who suggests that in our contemporary consuming life “the test [people] need to pass in order to be admitted to the social prizes they covet demands them to recast themselves as commodities: that is, products capable of catching the attention and attracting *demand* and *customers* ” ([Bauman 2007, 6]; emphasis in original). It is indeed a fascinating paradox that much of the media's creativity takes place within the parameters and constraints set and to some extent controlled by the same institutions that historically have set the parameters within which most people would have understood their reality: corporations and the state. It begs the question whether people inevitably end up reproducing the system they seek to subvert, or if they can in fact tactically gain a foothold exactly because they are part of the system (de Certeau, 1984 [1980]). The media life perspective would dictate that media are the ecosystem that people are a constituent part of, which includes the 'goldplating' culture of the new capitalism [Sennett 2006]. But even if all user (co-) creation can be reduced to self-branding in the service of capitalist imperialism [Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee 2008], the profit people seek is not necessarily gained without agency or resistance (as Nicholas Garnham notes), nor does it solely exist in monetary terms. It would thus strike us as a fallacy to suggest this “produsing” [Bruns 2005] is just the manifest behavior of a globally shared false consciousness (in the Marxist understanding of the concept). On the other hand, people's more or less creative engagement with the world is all too often confounded by a real or perceived impotence of people in their identities as citizens, consumers and workers “to shape their own social environment and [to] develop the capacity for action necessary for such interventions to succeed”, as Jürgen Habermas suggests [Habermas 2001 [1998], 60]. Media's creativity is therefore not necessarily liberating or empowering, it depends on one’s ability to take advantage of it – to quite literally be able to hack life. The mastery of such creative notion makes debates about digital divides, the participation gap, media competence and multimedia literacies all the more crucial.

Media's Selectivity

20 According to Niklas Luhmann [Luhmann 2000], social systems or institutions (political, economic, scientific, and so on) within society have increasingly taken seriously the way media depict them. Hjarvard takes up this paramount media orientation as evidence of an ongoing mediatization of society — a process “whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on the media and their logic” [Hjardvard 2008, 113]. A duality arises in that media become so integrated in the operations of social institutions, that they also acquire the status of media institutions

themselves. As a result, social interactions, whether between institutions or in society at large, take place via media. All institutions are dependent on societal representation, and media have in the last decades become increasingly indispensable as platforms for the publication of private affairs and the co-creative interpretation of reality. This means that an institution's success in the media becomes necessary for the exertion of influence in other areas of society. Therefore, all functional areas within society have learned to look at themselves through media glasses. Society's institutions — which for the purposes of our argument include the family, the church (including the mosque, synagogue, and so on), the state and the workplace – have, due to the expansion of the media system, undergone a shift towards self-reflective commentary and positioning vis-à-vis the media [Jameson 1991]. The media system has in this sense taken over the role of former authorities by leading our attention away from power balances and imbalances and towards the development of self-identity as a life project, a lifestyle management [Giddens 1991].

21 From a media life point of view, this institutional orientation to media has now become each and every individual's primary frame of reference. People do not just orient to media as objects (i.e. as consumers), but also and increasingly as producers via the mass personalization of our media environments, the selective exposure and appropriation of media technologies and the large amount of time spent on online social networks. This incessant creation (and, as some would argue, "oversharing") of lived experience in media makes us part of a larger media system that produces reality in terms of the reality it records, redacts, selects and thereby constructs. It is, as Juan Miguel Aguado [Aguado 2009] asserts building on the work of Luhmann: in a media life, people, groups, networks and institutions observe themselves in the selection terms of media, that is, in terms of whether they are relevant and of interest to media. In the process, the media's systems of reference and criteria for selection gradually come to structure the way people live their lives in media. Stephen Duncombe [Duncombe 2007] is among those who argues in favor of such an orientation, suggesting that appealing to the "fantasy" of mediated spectacle allows both (political) institutions as well as engaged citizens to get their points more effectively across rather than puristically sticking to factual, rationalist discourse. Referencing the media's qualities of interactivity, malleability and participation, Duncombe sees opportunities for a *Dreampolitik*: a politics that finds expression in media and is not evident "on the well-ordered fields of reason and rationality. Perhaps it never was" [Duncombe 2007, 176].

22 Reporting on values surveys in 43 countries, Ronald Inglehart [Inglehart 1997] observed a global shift of people's perspectives as citizens away from traditional social institutions and towards a distinctly skeptical, globally interconnected, yet deeply personal type of self-determined civic engagement. Other studies, such as the one by Robert Putnam, have detailed broad societal trends towards distinctly individualized and often outright anti-authoritarian attitudes. "We are undoubtedly living in an anti-hierarchical age", concludes Beck [Beck 2000, 150]. Slavoj Žižek engages most explicitly the link between the individualization of contemporary society — towards a hedonistic solipsism not dissimilar to the presumed quality of contemporary mobile media — and the omnipresence of networked computers and cyberspace. This is not to say that Žižek embraces the promise of global connection without pause, as scholars such as Castells [Castells 2001] and Scott Lash [Lash 2002] are a bit more likely to do. Bauman objects to such benevolent readings of the networked potential of contemporary media life, suggesting that "Castells and Lash fall victims of internet fetishism fallacy. Network is not community and communication not integration – both safely equipped as they are with disconnection on demand devices" [Bauman 2006a]. Žižek, however, warns against the fallacy of explaining these interconnected phenomena as evidence of the progressive disintegration of social bonds. "[I]n order for an individual to immerse herself in the virtual space, the big Other has to be there, more powerful than ever in the guise of cyberspace itself, this directly universalized form of sociality which enables us to be connected with the entire world while sitting alone in front of a screen" [Žižek 2008, 34]; emphasis added. Here Žižek points towards the hidden nature of media as a principal component of the uniquely mediated experience of being together alone (connected yet isolated) in the world today.

23 For Žižek the key to understanding the solipsism, skepticism and reflexive engagement of our times is not so much the often suggested absence of a "big Other," a universal symbolic institution such as God or Kant's categorical imperative that provides people common ground and a way out of themselves. What is missing, according to Žižek, is "a small other which would embody, stand in for, the big Other — a person [...] who directly embodies authority" [Žižek 2008, 35]. This lived experience of a life without universal or even local experts and authorities — whether these are

priests, parents, professors or presidents — offering guidance does not necessarily mean society is falling apart. For Žižek, self-identity is impossible, since our multiple identities (especially in cyberspace) are always in motion and are intersubjectively constructed. The liquid modern "art of life," [Bauman 2009] as confined to the lifelong project of identity, thus becomes a way of managing being part of an individualized society where "how one lives becomes the biographical solution of systemic contradictions" [Beck 1992, 137] in conjunction with the omnipresence and deindividualizing effects of networked computers and cyberspace. This is not necessarily another way of restating the famous 1993 cartoon by Peter Steiner in The New Yorker, stating that "[on] the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." [15] The exact opposite could also be true: due to the lack of anonymity, as for example captured by one's digital shadow, everyone can know you're a dog.

24 As research on the generally restrained behavior of people in crowds online (for example on discussion forums, mailing lists, and social networks) suggests, deindividuation today is best conceptualized as a shift from a personal identity to a social identity, shared by members of the crowd [Postmes & Spears 1998]. This social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), found particularly in computer-mediated communication contexts, lends credence to Žižek's implicit suggestion that media today may function as a substitute for the small other. Paraphrasing Žižek, media provide the intersubjective cues needed to fill the void of the empty self. Individual and institutional orientation to media is intrinsic to the process of "emptying" out of meaning that container-concepts such as self and society undergo. Following this line of thought, it is perhaps not surprising that generally speaking, people are reportedly more likely to trust each other than they are to trust social institutions. The global PR firm Edelman conducts annual surveys (since 1999) on trust and credibility among college-educated, middle class and media-savvy adults in 18 countries. What the firm has found is a gradual erosion of trust in governments, traditional institutions and elites (especially in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United States) in favor of "a person like me," who is considered to be the most credible source of information. Instead of trusting the government or God automatically or even implicitly, people trust each other as embodied in the end-to-end principle of the internet (as in its protocols and physical infrastructure) and its emerging peer-to-peer social arrangements (as in the online sharing of processing power, disk storage, network bandwidth, and content). The main caveat to this embrace of what Pierre Lévy [Lévy 1997] enthusiastically calls "collective intelligence," is that the "other" in media might as well be an institution (or a dog).

Media's Sociability

25 Sherry Beck Paprocki, one of the authors of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Branding Yourself* [Paprocki 2009] states in the *New York Times* (March 27, 2009): "[i]f you don't brand yourself, Google will brand you", referring to a perceived need to control the information people find about you when they type your name into a search engine. *Times* reporter Alina Tugend motivates her story on the challenge of presenting oneself online as follows: "[n]ot being online today is akin to not existing." Apparently, it is not enough to have a profile on Facebook — you need a Twitter account, a YouTube channel, you should be uploading your own video mashups, designing custom levels in your favorite computer game, and on the whole using any kind of media to tell everyone about everything. Beyond such feverish assumptions about the need to self-disclose in media lies a much more practical consideration, as danah boyd suggests in a blog post for the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the University of California, Irvine: "In many situations, there is more to be gained by accepting the public default [of online social media such as Facebook] than by going out of one's way to keep things private. And here's where we see the shift. It used to take effort to be public. Today, it often takes effort to be private."

26 A reoccurring theme that gets emphasized in media related research is the issue of privacy — particularly regarding the ongoing mediatization of even the most intimate personal relationships. Numerous scholars lament the apparent lack of felt urgency among people in general and the young in particular about their lack of privacy. The loosely connected global network of privacy organizations, activists and scholars, as for example mapped by Colin Bennett in *The Privacy Advocates* [Bennett et al. 2008], shares and is powerful enough to produce a grave concern about the various ways in which communication technologies enable the gathering and mining of personal data. The worries by such authors and organizations seem validated by the way in which successful companies such as Facebook set up their policies regarding people's privacy when using social media. As explained by Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg in

front of a live audience (on 8 January 2010), the “age of privacy” seems to be over: “When I got started in my dorm room at Harvard, the question a lot of people asked was ‘why would I want to put any information on the Internet at all? Why would I want to have a website?’ And then in the last 5 or 6 years, blogging has taken off in a huge way and all these different services that have people sharing all this information. People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time. We view it as our role in the system to constantly be innovating and be updating what our system is to reflect what the current social norms are.”

27 As numerous observers and pundits commented at the time of Zuckerberg's statement, the relatively modest claim that his company is just following existing or emerging social norms seems somewhat disingenuous. However, most concerns about users’ privacy at social networking sites tend to reflect an equally naive expectation that people do not care or do not understand privacy issues in the context of media life. People today generally tend to feel that selectively sharing private information is part of participating in the public realm of social media, a sentiment eagerly exploited by businesses, specifically when seeking to interact directly with children and teenagers outside the purview of parental control [Montgomery 2009, 67 ff]. A key and appealing feature of media for all kinds of marginalized media users — such as teenagers, senior citizens, diasporic communities, pro-ana networks, and other significant minority groups — is exactly the fact that it is public, which allows them to publicize and distribute work as well as gain new forms of visibility and reputation. One wonders whether the various authors and organizations in their concern conflate *privacy* — the quality or condition of being private — with *private* — where the individual person controls what is shared and what remains secret, rather than being submitted to some form of authoritarian oversight.

28 To most, privacy (in media) signals the ability to exercise control over their lives in a more or less deliberate attempt to circumvent notions of privacy that are based on an otherwise regulated space with rules and norms that are beyond the scope of intervention to those directly affected. This argument can be extended to the engagement of most, if not all people with regard to their media: control over people's private mass self-communication is ultimately solipsistic and not necessarily consensual. However, this does not mean that people are effectively autonomous in their self-regulatory behavior when it comes to privacy. The shift away from privacy as an inalienable right to a solely individual responsibility can be seen as a consequence of the rise of a globally interconnected media culture where, indeed, the constant and ongoing presentation of self is a benchmark for effective participation in life. It is perhaps not surprising in this context that several researchers signal a fascinating paradox: while people using media are simultaneously and instantaneously connected with large and multiple groups and networks, they are also increasingly ascribed with a deeply individualized and self-centered value system. As US psychologist David Downing writes: “[...] such ostensible connectedness is, in actuality, with a machine that is, in circular fashion, a projected externalization of our own desires and phantasies with which we are in narcissistic relation” [Downing 2007, 991–2].

29 This argument falls within a tradition of considering today's youth in particular, and Western culture in general, as supremely narcissistic because people supposedly have increasingly inflated and positive views of themselves, even though they are at the same time apparently obsessed with fitting in. By this account, in a redactional society of socially fragmented individuals, media become all-powerful as agents of dehumanization exactly by virtue of their uncanny capability to enable the representation of people in all their personal glory and uniqueness. On the other hand, the empirical evidence regarding both the experimental and experiential fusion of social and computer networks in local communities, as for example the study compiled by Patrick Purcell in his edited volume *Networked Neighbourhoods* [Purcell 2006], suggests the ways in which different forms of computer-mediated communication usually have quite positive effects on community interaction, involvement and social capital, enabling people to keep in touch with old friends, colleagues and acquaintances, and deploying media largely in the service of connections. Such mediated connections, as Buckingham and De Block as well as other scholars note, produce cultural diversity and particularity as much as they foster allegiance and traditionalism. And even if it could be argued that these communities, connected across time and space, foster fitting in and group loyalty through thinly veiled appeals to self-representation and self-determination, one would still have to stop and wonder about the durability of these more or less integrated communities.

30 A wonderful metaphoric example for the being alone and together characteristic of a life lived in media is the so-called

“Silent Disco” phenomenon, where partygoers dance to music received through headphones. The music is broadcasted via FM transmitter and the signal is picked up by the wireless headphone receivers worn by the silent party attendees, who often listen to different, individualized streams of music while still dancing together. This suggestion of being together and generally having a great time yet still being alone in one's experience captures the notion of a media life, where people are more connected than ever before – whether through common boundary-less phenomena such as global warming, terrorism, and worldwide migration, or via internet and mobile communication – yet at the same time on their own, securely secluded in “mediaspace” [Couldry & McCarthy 2004].

Within the matrix of relationships between media and the human condition, contemporary technologies and the things people do with them, and how all of this fits into the social arrangements that govern people's lives, several elements serve to amplify and accelerate broader trends in society. These elements include a primacy of self-governance and self-reliance over the deference to authorities such as parents, professionals and politicians, as well as an extension of community premised on simultaneous co-presence and telepresence as directed by the individual and her/his concerns. Lastly, the emergence of mass self-communication next to mass communication in industrial societies signifies the shift from survival values to an increasing emphasis on self-expression values [Inglehart & Baker 2000]. 31

The emphasis on performing oneself seems to go hand in hand with people's endemic and, perhaps more importantly, undirected uncertainty about how to express themselves. According to Bauman, this breeds a particular kind of fear, a fear that is based on “our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done” [Bauman 2006, 2]. All the more interesting is the connection Bauman sees between people's uncertainty about their prospects in a rapidly moving “runaway world” (as Anthony Giddens calls it), and the structure and consequences of a deeply individualized society. Considering the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of media and the signaled capacity of contemporary media to connect and isolate at the same time — to make the world concurrently larger and smaller — we would like to move our concluding comments on the media life perspective to a another level of abstraction: that of people's experience with reality. 32

Discussion: Media's Reality

At the end of this essay, we are left with a couple of key observations. We argue that an ontological shift can take place because media cannot be conceived of as separate to us, to the extent that we live *in* media, rather than *with* media. There are extensive societal and cultural repercussions occurring primarily due to the way media become invisible because media are so pervasive and ubiquitous that we do not even register the presence of media in our lives. The networked individualist and personalized information space in media that constitutes people's everyday reality influences work, play, learning and interacting. Considering the weightless or immaterial nature of contemporary society and the largely informational and symbolic nature of life's processes, research must find its starting point in a dynamic or mobile (as John Urry suggests) understanding of the relationships between what Sean Cubitt in *EcoMedia* [Cubitt 2005] articulates as polis, physis and techne: the human world, the green world (i.e. nature) and the technological world. Such an understanding is furthermore amplified by a recognition (not an explaining away) of the increasing invisibility of media, which in turn contributes to the overall mediatization of not just society, but indeed — through media's creativity and sociability — reality itself. In other words: today, in order to get to the real — to see it, recognize it, value it, and change it — we have to go through media. 33

The purpose of the media life perspective is not whether we can make reality more real, or whether more or less engagement with media helps or handicaps such noble efforts. Humberto Maturana has raised what we feel are the stakes in our discussion of the interconnected relationships between humans and technology: 34

> I think that the question that we human beings must face is that of what do we want to happen to us, not a question of knowledge or progress. The question that we must face is not about the relation of biology with technology [...] nor about the relation between knowledge and reality [...] I think that the question that we must face at this moment of our history is about our desires and about whether we want or not to be responsible of our desires. [Maturana 1997]

Living a life in media does not necessarily mean submitting to the confounding reality of participating tactically in an all-encompassing reality show, nor does it require a strategy of avoidance and disconnection from such a reality. A glimpse 35

of the potential of a media life point of view is offered by Kathryn Montgomery, who sees that “[t]he transition to the Digital Age provides us with a unique opportunity to rethink the position of [people] in media culture, and in society as a whole [as] there is still enough fluidity in the emerging media system for actions to help guide its future ” [Montgomery 2009, 221]. If we live our lives in media and we choose to take responsibility for it, what are our options to constitute each other and ourselves? How can we be free yet mediated at the same time? As people see increasing potential in current waves of emancipation, grass-roots organizations, participation and community, and opposition to the powers of state and industry, a realization of their media life may provide an incentive to “return to a more organic social form” [McQuail 2010, 183], which integrates and articulates not self-interest but partnership (taking responsibility for others) and not self-redaction but directed freedom (shaping an artful media life). The organic form therefore incorporates the medial form.

36 Our own reality or essence, as human beings, is not immutable, locked in to our physical presence, our cognition and behaviors. Considering the current opportunity a media life gives people to create multiple versions of themselves and others, and to endlessly redact themselves (as someone does with his/her profile on an online dating site in order to produce better matches), we now have a entered a time where, as Luigi Pirandello considered in his novel *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, we can in fact see ourselves live, become cognizant about how our lifeworld is “a world of artifice, of bending, adapting, of fiction, vanity, a world that has meaning and value only for the man who is its deviser” [Pirandello 1990, 39]. But this is not an atomized, fragmented, and depressing world, or it does not have to be such a world. Our world — as in our sense of self — in a media life must be seen as a world where we would truly have individual and collective control over reality if only we could be at peace with the endless mutability of that reality.

37 Following Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*, we therefore postulate that “[m]an is by no means the crown of creation: every living being stands beside him on the same level of perfection” [Nietzsche 1977, 14]. From this blank slate, Nietzsche argues in *The Gay Science* (1974 [1882]), that we might “become those we are — human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves” [Nietzsche 1977, 335]. This is not to say that a life lived in media is a life lived without “the social forces constraining people's ability to make choices and take action” [Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee 2008, 18]. What we suggest is that the media life perspective exposes us to endless alternatives to and versions of ourselves, and that much of the confusion and anxiety about these options is grounded in people's inability to position themselves in media (as well as the social pressure on people to stick to a version that was generated for them, for example “citizens” for democracy, or “consumers” for capitalism). Society governed by media life is one where reality is, like many if not most websites, permanently under construction, not only by unseen-yet-all-powerful guardians in the panoptic fortresses of governments and corporations that seek to construct a relatively cohesive and thus controllable reality, but also by all of us. The governing principle of media life is mediated self-creation in the context of always-available global connectivity. We realize that a possible consequence of our argument in this paper is to advocate that we should not dwell too much on existential contemplations and just go with all the affordances media provide us with, and be satisfied with the privilege of our times to use such technologies to make art with life. As Michel Foucault asks: “[w]hy should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?” [Foucault 1984, 350]. Indeed, suggests Bauman, “we are all artists of our lives — knowingly or not, willingly or not, like it or not” [Bauman 2009, 125]. In this work of art, people are on their own — much like Nietzsche advocated — but never alone.

Notes

[1] See [LarvalSubjects].

[2] See [Liewrouw & Livingstone 2009]

[3] See http://www.clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT00912041.

[4] See http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/5-The-Mobile-Difference--Typology.aspx.

[5] See http://www.bitkom.org/de/themen/36444_55033.aspx.

[6] See http://www.mobilelife2008.co.uk.

[7] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/consultations/msa.

[8] http://synthesio.com/corporate.

[9] http://www.comscore.com/Products_Services/Product_Index/MobiLens.

[10] http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/category/online_mobile.

[11] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Z

[12] See http://blog.vodafone.de/2009/07/08/wer-ist-die-generation-upload

[13] See http://trendwatching.com/trends/GENERATION_C.htm

[14] Quoted from Vilém Fluser: A brief introduction to his media philosophy, a text originally written for a lecture Siegfried Zielinski held in Boston.

[15] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Internet,_nobody_knows_you're_a_dog.

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