

‘Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing’: liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Ludmila Lupinacci** 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

Social media fuel a sense of unsettledness to encourage uninterrupted connectivity and generate quantifiable engagement. This article is concerned with the habitual, naturalized character acquired by these platforms and with how this is paradoxically constructed by prompting a permanent state of anticipation. The aim here is to explore, with a phenomenological sensibility, the experiences that emerge in settings of continuous connectedness from the perspective of the people who use these technologies in the context of everyday life – that is, the ‘users’. Theoretically, the entry point is to revisit the claim of liveness – and its shifting relations with issues of sequential flow and eventfulness – and to position it as a central resource in this process, in which users are deliberately encouraged to expect the unexpected even in ‘non-eventful’ situations. Drawing from the thematic analysis of data collected through the diary-interview method with people who live in London and use a range of social media, I examine both how this urge of continuous connectedness operates and the ambivalent experiences it generates. The findings were categorized into five themes: excitement, anxiety, reassurance, fatigue, and responsibility.

Keywords

eventfulness, experience, flow, immediacy, live, liveness, scrolling, social media

Corresponding author:

Ludmila Lupinacci, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: L.Lupinacci-Amaral@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

Transcending temporal, geographical, and corporeal constraints has been, historically, one of the main catalysts for the development of communication technologies. By releasing the circulation of messages from physical restrictions, media fulfill fantasies of expanded experience and provide us with access to happenings and people that could not be reached directly, immediately (Marvin, 1988). In doing so, they also work in the maintenance of society across time and space (Carey, 1989). Importantly, media's capacity to sustain societies goes beyond media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992), as these institutions and technologies also act in the organization and preservation of the ordinariness of everyday life (Scannell, 2014). And although news media in particular have been extensively theorized as having a primary role in the production of reassurance in an increasingly unsettled world, so-called 'social media' support the emergence of distinctive forms of social coordination by relying on different configurations of the interplay between real-time connectivity and sociality (Frosh, 2019; Van Es, 2016).

This article starts from the premise that even though, on the one hand, media are trying to navigate and adapt to an unstable and ever-changing environment, on the other hand, these same institutions purposefully create, fuel and encourage unsettledness to maintain their centrality and status. More specifically, and even though the nature of the phenomenon in itself is not new, it is remarkable how social media generate a sense of unpredictable flow and potential eventfulness in order to prompt an ongoing quest for affective sparks (Pedwell, 2017) in their users, aiming to sustain their business models and their continuance as profitable companies. Social media, which largely generate revenue through data-driven targeted advertising, rely on unsettledness to captivate attention and encourage active, quantifiable engagement, which is then employed to produce (and sell) predictability (Chun, 2017; Couldry and Kallinikos, 2018).

My entry point to this broader discussion is to position the claim of liveness – provisionally defined as the experience of immediate connection through media (Lupinacci, 2019) – as a central resource in the production of these unsettling sensations, in which we are deliberately encouraged to always expect the unexpected even in ordinary, uneventful situations, which then keep us hooked to specific platforms under the assumption that something remarkable might happen any time, all the time. Across decades, liveness has been employed by a range of media industries and technologies to promise immediate access to meaningful events and happenings as they unfold, thus reinforcing a sense of urgency, unpredictability, and risk (Feuer, 1983; Scannell, 2014). Starting from 'the live' is productive because, historically, it plays a central role in positioning media as a primary source of temporal, spatial, and social organization, which in turn helps to shape the willingness to remain 'connected' (Bourdon, 2000; Couldry, 2004).

Social media represent now a vastly fertile area of study, and the available scholarship has addressed the implications of these platforms from a myriad of perspectives. Regarding the operation of these companies and their work in inciting connectedness, perhaps the most influential approach is the examination of the political economy of platformization (Helmond, 2015), which has been extensively done through the critical scrutiny of platforms' business models and discourse (Van Dijck, 2013). The proposal here is to adopt an experience-centered standpoint to offer a complementary layer and a

more complex account of these socio-technical processes that are now so crucial to our everyday lives. Therefore, in order to unveil how compulsory continuous connectedness operates and the ambivalent experiences it generates, I will present a thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained through interviewing and the submission of electronic diaries by London-based users of a range of social media. Before that, I will contextualize the discussion on steadiness and eventfulness while trying to foreground what is actually new. By revisiting paradigmatic theorizations of media flow (Williams, 2003 [1974]) and media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992), I will explore liveness in its relation to issues of continuity and interruption, now applied to the social media landscape.

Furthermore, I would like to clarify that this is not an article centrally concerned with the confirmation or refusal of the addictiveness of social media. By ‘compulsory’ continuous connectedness, I am not referring to a pathologized dependency on specific technologies (as discussed, for instance, by Holmgren and Coyne, 2017) but rather to the socio-technically constructed notion that it is only by keeping always-on (Turkle, 2008) and actively engaged that one can navigate and thrive in an environment that is purposefully framed as continuously uncertain.

Media, flow, and eventfulness

Media outlets have faced for decades a number of challenges both in terms of internal, direct competition and of the proliferation of alternative platforms for entertainment and information (Ytreberg, 2009). To ensure that people will stay tuned for long periods of time despite the increasing range of possibilities to choose from, specific content organization and presentation strategies come forward. In this regard, perhaps the most well-known strategy is the ‘planned flow’ (Williams, 2003), in which media ‘fills time by ensuring that something happens’ (Doane, 2006:251), turning fragmentation into continuity. In the planned flow, through editorial work, discrete segments of content are organized in a logical and coherent manner. This constant, unceasing flux of content aims to maintain people’s eyeballs hooked on the same channel (Williams, 2003), often foregrounding and relying on the ‘explosiveness of the present’ and the ‘drama of the instantaneous’ (Doane, 2006). Under this context, an ‘event’ is something that breaks the ordinariness of the regular flow, either because it is an urgent happening or because it is a ceremonial proceeding conferred with significance (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Scannell, 2014). Thanks to their status of exceptionality, media events represent intermissions on the routine, creating a sense of ‘sacred time’ that occasionally excludes everything else from attention (Dayan and Katz, 1992).

Moreover, although the narrative describing the strategic use of the planned flow is usually focused on broadcasting, a similar pattern can be identified in the social media environment. Defining ‘social media’ is a challenge, as there is not only a wide and incessantly growing range of platforms available but also the same application might have diverse uses and ‘become so many things to different people’ (Madianou, 2015:1). Therefore, by embracing the fact that most people make use of more than one platform and switch constantly between them, rather than picking a discrete application to examine I treat them here as a manifold, integrated environment of affordances from which people can choose depending on particular socio-technical purposes and needs (Couldry and

Hepp, 2016; Madianou and Miller, 2013; Primo et al., 2017). Importantly, social media promise not only a connection to the ‘world out there’ and a general sense of community and belonging at (inter)national scale, but also the possibilities of interacting immediately with those who matter most, beyond para-social engagements (Baym, 2015). They are, at the same time, platforms for mass and interpersonal communication – or *masspersonal communication* (O’Sullivan and Carr, 2017) – blurring even further the boundaries between what matters at societal and individual levels.

Nevertheless, and similar to television, in the social media industry, more than grabbing the audiences’ attention, it is necessary to convert this attention into value. Potential eventfulness, then, emerges as a convenient strategy for generating interest and the consequential engagement (Ytreberg, 2009). By eventfulness, I mean ‘the possibilities for endowing event-status through media’, and what we have now is (to a great extent thanks to the pervasiveness of recording and sharing technologies) that ‘every moment becomes pregnant with historical possibilities, even if the overwhelming majority of time is ordinary’ (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2018: 136, 138). Potential eventfulness is, in short, about the latent futurity of the present, and the prospective remarkability of the prosaic.

In this regard, instead of focusing on extraordinary media events, I am more interested in people’s relations to media in the ordinariness of everyday life, and in how these routinely, uneventful interactions with others and with the world are mediated by digital technologies. Underlying this decision is the assumption that the power of social media emerges precisely from their world-building capacities (Frosh, 2019) and their apparent banality (Lovink, 2019) – or, as put by Chun (2017: 1), that ‘our media matter most when they seem not to matter at all’. I emphasize, however, the fact that even these habitual engagements are often punctuated by particular (media or life) events, and continuously impregnated by potential eventfulness (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2018) – that is, the expectation that something remarkable might happen any time, all the time, and that thus you need to be able to follow it as it unfolds in real time, ‘live’.

Social media, predictability, and continuous connectedness

Long before the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Raymond Williams famously noted that the experience of watching television is often that of consuming a sequence or flow, instead of discrete units of content. With social and mobile media, this idea that the flux is the constant is reproduced at increased scale and pervasiveness. However, while TV programming is based on segmentation and scheduling, programming networked media involves producing ‘a series of stored instructions that supposedly guarantee – and often stand in for – a certain action’ (Chun, 2008:153). Here, the ‘editorial’ work depends heavily on algorithmic systems, which are employed to sort and organize the vast amount of content available and, in so doing, play a ‘powerful role in producing the conditions for the intelligible and the sensible’ (Bucher 2018:7). Furthermore, television’s liveness, and therefore its overall commitment to the representation of social realities as they are happening, is based on the premises of interruption of the ongoing, steady informational flow (Bourdon, 2000; Couldry, 2004), and the consequent disruption provoked by a ‘crisis’ (Chun, 2017; Doane, 2006) or by a meaningful event (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Scannell, 2014). Social media’s liveness, however, is not necessarily characterized by intermission:

these platforms thrive on continuous connectedness, not on imminent interruption. Importantly, the proposition of social media's constant unrest is not to disrupt per se, but rather to generate active engagement and, finally, predictability – or the capacity to anticipate users' preferences and behavior for targeted advertising purposes (Chun, 2017).

Furthermore, as a crucial component of this strategy of inciting continuous connectedness, digital platforms that profit from social data fuel an imaginary of *aliveness*, of 'pulsating life' – of excitement, anticipation, and freshness (Beer, 2019). Perhaps, the most obvious ways in which this sense of 'vibrating life' is encouraged by the platforms is through notifications and trending lists – which actualize the promised significance of content at individual and societal level, respectively, although these two often overlap. Moreover, there are numerous prompts used by different platforms to foment the desire for continuous connectedness. In short, in the context of data capitalism, the calling of social media platforms is to serve us a (better, more intense, enhanced) version of our own experiences – and they do so under a rhetoric of openness and transparency in which oftentimes the mission stated is to make experiences increasingly 'direct', pure (Beer, 2019). This pursuit of immediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) is certainly not a new or recent phenomenon – and is in fact at the core of what Van Es (2017) describes as the historical 'paradox of liveness' – but it is clearly a discourse that has become increasingly powerful.

This constant encouragement of continuous connectedness has raised concerns about users' mental health and well-being, particularly when dealing with information overload (Andrejevic, 2013) or connection overload (LaRose et al., 2014). This has also spurred resistance movements such as digital detox (Sutton, 2017; Syvertsen and Enli, 2019) and temporary disconnection (Jorge, 2019). In spite of these punctual initiatives, what we generally have is the reinforcement of always-on connectedness and engaged, active attentiveness under the pressure that, at any time, something worthy of attention – something eventful – might happen, and that social media are the best available resource for us to keep track of this ongoing informational flux. The continuous flow in itself – most obviously materialized in the now widespread structure of the infinite 'stream' – helps to produce unsettledness, foregrounding this idea of incessant movement and making the present contingent and fluid (Wetevrede et al., 2014). Social media streams tend to be organized in a reverse chronological order and are constantly updated, which creates a 'spatio-temporality of immediacy and privileges real time engagement' (Gerlitz, 2012). Within this ongoing and steady flow, there might be important happenings, and what is unsettling is precisely that you do not know when they are going to take place.

Liveness and the experience of immediate connection through media

One of the most long-lasting manifestations of media's self-proclaimed capacity to fulfill the aforementioned aspiration of connection beyond physical constraints is the promise of 'liveness'. Through 'the live', we are offered an enhanced opportunity for accessing the world 'as it is', 'directly', and as it unfolds 'in real time'. As I have argued elsewhere (Lupinacci, 2019), even though real-time video streaming is the most evident

manifestation of it in the current mediascape, the promise of liveness underlies social media's claims and functionalities more generally. Notably, these platforms promote a sense of instantaneity, co-presence, ephemerality, and authenticity in order to obtain the data that is necessary to their operation.

When inquiring about liveness, then, I am not referring only (nor necessarily) to the idea of 'universal' simultaneity typical of broadcasting, but also to a more complex set of relations – with their own ideological and experiential dimensions – such as connection in contexts of remoteness, (co)presence at a distance, and synchronicity of experienced temporalities. It is also worth noting that the term 'live' is not a well-rounded academic concept cautiously developed with analytical purposes (Scannell, 2014). Liveness is a socially and technologically contingent construction (Auslander, 2008; Couldry, 2004), and therefore any proclaimed "'original meaning" of the live is a fable' (Van Es, 2017:4). Nevertheless, to say that something is 'live' usually means that it is happening in real time, here and now. However, realliveness is not its only quality or attribute, as the live also implies uncertainty – as put by Scannell (2003: 105), 'any live situation is inherently fragile. There is always the possibility, at any moment, that things could go wrong'.

Moreover, in spite of its conceptual elasticity, the different uses of the word 'live' have in common the idea of 'a connection of people to people [. . .] and/or of people to a "natural" (i.e. not pre-recorded in any of its components) event, through technology' (Bourdon, 2000: 534). Directly associated with liveness is, therefore, the sense of simultaneous, shared experiencing – the awareness that others are accessing the same thing, at the same time (Bourdon, 2000). This social aspect should not be taken for granted, as the experience of liveness is not an accidental or essential property of the media but rather has to be carefully, intentionally 'brought to life' by the institutions themselves (Scannell, 2014; Van Es, 2017). Consequently, crucial to the theoretical grounding of this article is the understanding of 'the live' not only as a technical capacity of media infrastructures but rather as a larger set of ideas. In other words, that is through 'the live' that we gain access 'to something of broader, because 'central', significance, which is worth accessing now, not later', and 'that the media (not some other social mechanism) is the privileged means for obtaining that access' (Couldry, 2004: 4).

In this regard, the project that informs this article is concerned with the investigation of (if and) how social media users *experience* liveness in the context of everyday life, and it does so through a phenomenological lens. Phenomenology, as the study of the lived experience, is concerned with the 'feltness' of life to us (McCarthy and Wright, 2004), and postulates that experience would be the awareness of the world once it is made present to us through our senses (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]). Phenomenology is also based on the premise that our lifeworld, although experienced subjectively, is the world experienced by everybody (Landgrebe, 1973). Nevertheless, I adhere to the postulation that experiences are complex constructions, which are always embedded in – and articulated through – discursive and material arrangements. Pure sensations should therefore not be naively taken as the only source of evidence (Scott, 1991), mostly because the 'orientations' that our bodies take in the world are not necessarily casual, as they can actually be organized in certain ways (Ahmed, 2006). Things are not simply 'out there' for our apprehension and consciousness, which means that whatever one experiences is shaped, constructed, and therefore dependent on specific structures.

In short, on the one hand, based on different streams of phenomenological enquiry (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 2012; Scannell, 2014; Schutz, 1967) and, on the other hand, inspired by critical social theory (Ahmed, 2006; Couldry and Hepp, 2016; Scott, 1991), the proposal is to account for experiences as complex, multi-layered processes that comprise both sensorial and interpretative processes in a world that is heavily technologically mediated but also always already structured by particular discursive constructs and contextual contingencies. Experience is, thus, both given to us through our senses and a dynamic site of struggle, dispute, and negotiation.

Empirical methods

In order to examine how the urge for continuous connectedness in social media operates and the ambivalent experiences it generates, as well as the role played by liveness in this process, I conducted a thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through the diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977), while embracing a phenomenological sensibility. The guiding empirical question was, ‘how does it feel to use social media?’ Respondents completed a 5-day long qualitative diary, preceded and followed by 1-hour long semi-structured interviews. The 20 participants were adults (19–47 years old) who live in London and make use of mainstream social media on a daily basis.

This article does not aspire to provide exhaustive or representative findings about the uses and experiences of social media. The aim is, instead, to identify patterns across the individual experiences, perceptions, and discourses provided by ordinary users of different platforms, which then will be used to inform broader theorizations. In this regard, in order to optimize the variety of experiences, I have conducted a heterogeneous purposive sampling. The rationale behind it is that any evidence found would not be specific to a particular group, population, or context, but rather likely to consist of a phenomenon that is observable across diverse cases (Robinson, 2014). Concerning the strategies for recruiting and contacting participants, I used a multisited purposeful selection across London, complemented by online adverts. I tried to ensure the inclusion of participants from different age groups and genders, who live in diverse neighborhoods, have varied types of social relations (for instance, those with family living abroad and/or in long-distance relationships), and who have different types of occupation (including students, designers, a bike mechanic, an engineer, office administrators, as well as freelancers, self-employed and unemployed people) to increase the likelihood of obtaining a multiplicity of experiences of, and with, social media.

Finally, the platforms mentioned in the interviews and diaries (collected in 2019) were Facebook, Facebook Messenger, FaceTime, iMessage, Instagram, LinkedIn, Periscope, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Skype, Slack, Telegram, TikTok, Twitch, Twitter, WeChat, Weibo, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Across these platforms, there is undoubtedly a vast array of formats, content, and uses – for purposes as diverse as interpersonal communication, entertainment, and information seeking. As aforementioned, I deliberately embraced this manifoldness in an attempt to explore what people do, and feel, when in contact with social media.

Analysis and findings

The empirical data were then examined through a thematic analysis, which consists of the identification of meaningful common patterns within the dataset. Thematic analysis is considered a suitable method for the exploration of meanings attributed by people to their lived experiences, and to describe how they feel and behave in a particular context (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Guest et al., 2012). The following sections will focus on the characterization of – and the exploration of the ambivalent experiences described by the respondents in – contexts of compulsory continuous connectedness, while situating ‘liveness’ within this debate. For analytical purposes, I have categorized the findings into five broader themes: excitement, anxiety, reassurance, fatigue, and responsibility.

Excitement

The respondents manifested their enthusiasm with the possibilities offered by social media platforms. While the content of these experiences obviously varies immensely – both across informants and within the lives of particular subjects – there are some clear patterns in the analyzed verbalizations. Among the most flagrant ones is the use of social media for purposes of amusement or entertainment, and the corresponding deliberate avoidance of distressing content in order to maintain these platforms as uplifting environments so that their use for extended periods of time becomes more bearable. Informant #7 (F, 33) declared,

I want to be informed, but I don't want to be informed in a way that is going to upset me. [. . .]
I like to have pictures of cats as well. It's a bit of a balance, I see news that make me sad, then I have pictures of cats.

This quote also emphasizes one aspect that is crucial to the arguments this article is trying to convey – the fact that social media are experienced as continuous flows, not as discrete publications, messages, or ‘posts’.

Moreover, being the first to know about a given topic, regardless of its apparent frivolity, is one of the main drivers of continuous connectedness: ‘It's like, have you seen the newest trailer? No?! [. . .] Get something early, get on top of it. And there is nothing actually urgent about these trailers, but it still feels nice. It feels good’ (Informant #19, M, 25). In fact, ‘immediacy’ appeared with great prominence as one of the defining characteristics of social media according to the interviewees. Nevertheless, the findings seem to point out less to a reliance on a universal ‘real time’ and more to perceived freshness (the ‘phenomenal now’, as put by Scannell, 2014) – that is, the excitement is situated in accessing something that *feels* new, regardless of its actual novelty.

An aspect of social media platforms that seems crucial to the informants that is also significant in TV-centered scholarship is their apparent *endlessness*. Remarkably, this perceived limitlessness of social media refers not only to the never-ending flow of content (and the expected ongoing availability, as we will see) but also to a perceived infinite diversity of versions for the same stories. A big motivation for the use of these platforms – both as a continuous habit and in punctual moments – is the enjoyment

resultant from the possibility of accessing other people's reactions to, and experiences of, whatever is happening:

On Twitter, particularly if you're following a hashtag or a trending subject, you can't help but see different views. That's really interesting. It's also interesting to see the kind of race to say certain things and then the repetition of people saying certain things, and wondering who said it first and if they'd seen the other people who had said it. And how quickly the memes or the GIFs are out there, and I find fascinating, and that's a real race, to be the first one to think of a joke and make it. So it's both to see what people are thinking and saying, but also to get a sense of the diversity of reactions. (Informant #4, M, 41)

Anxiety

The urge for continuous connectedness might also generate discomforts. In this section, I explore the outcomes through the lens of anxiety, in which what was once exciting is converted into unnerving experiences. The main identified sources for anxiety regarding the unsettledness produced by social media are (once again) their perceived endlessness, the consequential fear of missing out, and the attention demanded by notifications.

The apparent infinity of social media streams is frequently positioned as responsible for creating a state of constant alertness, which often prompts 'stress-scrolling' or 'doom-scrolling'. Central to the desire to scroll often and scroll more is the expectation that something important might happen at any time: 'I might still have been on Facebook to check notifications and randomly browsing at the same occasion, to see if there was any particular breaking news', said Informant #7 (F, 33). Likewise, Informant #19 estimated his own use of WhatsApp: 'I probably check it every hour [. . .] there is always someone plugging something in one of the message groups, so at least once an hour'. Regardless of the accuracy of this estimation, what is crucial here is the evidence for this prevalent sense of potential eventfulness – which, in turn, makes it very difficult for the informants to actively disconnect, even when they wish so (and this will be elaborated further in the section about responsibility).

This means that social media use is marked by a permanent state of fear of missing out – even if, consciously, the interviewees admit that the likelihood of something actually important having passed is very small: 'I had little time for social media, which made me a bit uneasy as I wasn't able to check Facebook, even though I know there wouldn't be of much importance that I would be missing' (Informant #17, F, 47). And even those who consider themselves relatively unaffected by the pressures of always-on connectedness admit that, in specific occasions, they experience anxiety as well. The endlessness of social media is a major source of ambivalent experiences, even if most of them are attributed to their habitual character:

I sort of hate social media, but I sort of love it. I just think, the Instagram thing, it's everywhere, and if you're not there people are talking about things and you're like 'I didn't see that'. And it's because you're not in that bubble. So you feel like you're missing out, which I don't really care that much but then I think it has become such a habit [. . .] It's so engrained in everything that we do, that's just hard not to, in some level, get involved with it. (Informant #5, F, 25)

On top of this habitual status, a common trigger employed by social media is the use of notifications, which has a great impact on the frequency of their use: ‘Even if I’m not looking at it, just receiving notifications is kind of stressful. I know that I need to do it later, so it doesn’t really help’, says Informant #18 (F, 24) – which is corroborated by Informant #4 (M, 41): ‘you can turn off notifications, but they’re still there when you go in’. Notoriously, the perceived intensification of the use of notifications by social media has made this once thrilling feature of the platforms into an increasingly dreaded aspect of their use: ‘With the notifications, I used to get excited at the beginning, especially with Facebook. But now I think there is a lot of pollution, things we don’t really want’ (Informant #7, F, 33).

Reassurance

Eventually, social media become not only the source of unsettledness but also one of the main gateways for support, comfort, and help. In this section, I examine reassurance as an experience that emerges (and is often sought after) in uses of connective platforms. I will scrutinize the shared aspect of these allegedly personalized platforms once users realize that other people might be going through the same as them.

In situations of personal crisis, the capacities of mobile phones and social media to provide access to remote contexts often come in handy. Being able to contact anyone, anywhere, at any time is highly praised by Informant #6 (F, 25), for instance, who described her relationship with a long-distance friend: ‘And it helps actually the fact that she is in a different time zone. [. . .] She’s always there for me, and it really helps’. The experience of ‘being there’ is a highly emphasized capacity of media technologies, and it is usually accompanied by some (promised) degree of liveness, which in turn is said to promote feelings of belonging and collectivity (Bourdon, 2000; Scannell, 2014). Typically, however, the ‘there’ refers to a remote place in which a specific situation – an event – is unfolding. In terms of personal relationships, however, ‘being there’ seems more connected to the possibility of making oneself readily available to share an emotional state.

Social media are also employed for obtaining endorsement and validation – the corroboration that whatever you are experiencing is also being felt by others. In these cases, the motivation is not to find out what people are talking about more generally, but actually the search for instantaneous confirmation that you are not the only one having a particular experience, while said experience unfolds. This is exemplified by Informant #1 (F, 26):

For example, if I’m failing to get tickets, then I can go on Twitter and see in real-time if other people are also struggling as much as I am [. . .] It’s so that I can feel like I’m not the only one who is failing.

Some of the first theorizations of both liveness as the essence of television, and of the Internet as an environment for interpersonal communication, emphasized these media’s potential for the creation and maintenance of (respectively, national and virtual) communities. While the data collected ratified the importance of the communal potential of social media, in practice, it seems like most of these communities tend to be fleeting,

fluid, and ephemeral. Community, here, is defined not necessarily by the participation in an enduring group of people or the experience of togetherness (Bakardjieva, 2003), but rather by the affective experience of empathetic identification more generally, often absent of complex negotiation over collective identity (Papacharissi, 2015). What is fundamental to the experience of communion here is the awareness of the existence of others who might be experiencing the same, even if only momentarily:

I felt like I was part of a group of people that were consciously plugging into this [. . .] In the back of my mind, I definitely thought like I was not the only person, like ‘oh my god, this happened!’. I felt like I wasn’t alone in being interested in it. (Informant #19, M, 25)

Fatigue

The combination of a continuous, endless flux of information and the pushiness of the platforms often becomes exhaustive, and the interviewees manifested sentiments of boredom and lethargy about their experiences with social media. In this section, I explore fatigue both as an incentive for the use of social media and as a consequence of their use.

As they are seen as good sources of entertainment, social media platforms are often employed as pastime activities: ‘It’s like comfort eating, it’s a similar thing. I go on Facebook when I’m feeling a bit bored. It’s not that I want to know what is going on, it’s just that I see things’ (Informant #2, F, 25). This quote also sheds light on a related aspect – the fact that, most of the time, the informants do not access social media with a clear purpose in mind, which once again evidences the naturalized status of these technologies. On top of its apparently aimless character, the use of social media tends to be perceived as heavily time consuming – which corroborates research on temporal overload (Syvertsen and Enli, 2019), and time pressure (Wajcman, 2015). In this regard, the expressions used by the informants to describe their everyday experiences are quite striking. Informant #19 (M, 25), for instance, calls it ‘the scroll black-pit’ – ‘Where you scroll through things that might be interesting, but none of them is attention grabbing. You’re just scrolling nonsense’. For Informant #5 (F, 25), ‘It’s like a wormhole [. . .] you’re just absentmindedly scrolling through nothing’. The consensus is that using social media platforms frequently feels like doing nothing at all – the ‘experience of no experience’ (Scannell, 2014: 186). Informant #18 (F, 24) mentioned such perception in her diary entries: ‘It made me feel drained and useless for wasting so much time’. During the second interview, she was then invited to elaborate:

A lot of the time, you’re not really looking at anything, just scrolling through stuff. You’re not really interested, you’re just looking for the sake of being able to go in there, whatever it is that makes us do it. Often, it’s just a time filler. Because you have nothing else to do, really. It’s easier, your phone is always with you, and often there is really no benefit. At least in my case, it might make you feel more frustrated with this waste of time. [. . .] And I don’t know what is about it that makes it so appealing. It just happened, and it’s funny because in the back of my mind I was thinking about the fact that would need to say this to you.

As a result of this pointlessness, the use of social media as pastime often results in (even more) lethargy. Which means that, paradoxically, in a research centrally concerned

with liveness – with what feels animated, injected with life – one of the most commonly observed experiences is that of *deadness, lifelessness*. This lack of ‘life’ of social media is described both as a result of the presence of too many potentially interesting things (the ‘infoglut’, as put by Andrejevic, 2013), and as the absence of anything interesting at all. For Informant #8 (F, 27), the problem is the former: ‘I followed so many different pages and people that it’s just cluttered. You have to spend time to go through all the stuff. It’s too much content’. For Informant #5 (F, 25), in turn, the weariness with social media results from their incapacity to deliver relevant content all the time:

Yeah, because there is a limit. Like, there is nothing happening. You pick it up and you’re like ‘what’s happening?’ Nothing, you checked it twenty minutes ago. [. . .] There is probably a limit of stuff that’s happening and you are interested in. So, like, there’s probably loads of stuff that’s happening, but if it’s not tailored to what I am interested in then I might be like ‘well, nothing is happening’. But that’s just my opinion of what’s happening. I’ve definitely had days in which I was like ‘how is it that there is nothing new?’

The quotation above makes evident how engrained the ideological promise of newness and freshness is in people’s expectations and their daily media practices. It also illustrates the relative awareness of the operation of social media’s systems of recommendation. And, in fact, the lack of perceived updates (not rarely attributed to ‘the algorithm’) is mentioned by the interviewees as one of the main reasons for the abandonment of specific platforms – particularly, Facebook.

Responsibility

By responsibility, I mean the perception of continuous connectedness both as a sense of duty – with oneself and with others who matter – and as ‘response-ability’, or the ability to respond or react to things as they happen. As discussed in previous sections, the fear of missing out, and the pressure involved in checking and responding continuously to notifications, is central to the experience of social media as described by the informants. However, the common answer for questions on whether they would be able to spend a week without social media was that it would not be a problem, as long as they could let specific people know that they would be out of reach. The priority, therefore, is to alert those with whom one has some sense of responsibility. The permanent pressure of being contactable and able to respond in the moment at all times appeared with great prominence in the interviews – even if respondents admit they have demanded the same from others in the past: ‘It’s like, “where are you? Why aren’t you accessible? Are you taking a two-hour shower?” So I do find that annoying, but I have definitely been that person’ (Informant #19, M, 25). Interestingly, this unspoken expectation of continuous connectedness and attentiveness works both ways – on the one hand, the interviewees confirmed that they would normally expect people to reply immediately to a message, post, or comment; on the other hand, this compulsory availability often becomes too demanding:

I for example, feel like I can’t get a holiday from it unless I’m on a holiday. It feels silly, because you can think ‘just don’t go in it if you don’t want to go in it’. But I feel like, if I don’t

go in it, if I don't go on WhatsApp for, like, two days, I can guarantee that my friends will be like 'what's wrong? What's happened? Are you okay?' So I think that it feels sometimes like a duty. [. . .] Even with friends, if someone messages you, you're like 'oh, I need to reply to them'. It could become a bit like work. (Informant #5, F, 25)

There is the recognition that although, technically, the easiest solution would be to simply disconnect, in reality, the peer pressure to stay always-on and constantly actively engaged, as well as the possibility of being misunderstood, usually stops them from doing so. Furthermore, in addition to this permanent responsibility toward others, the informants also manifested a profound sense of onus to themselves, their identities, and their citizenship – namely, the burden of keeping informed about everything, every time:

It's a bit like a duty, in a sense. I feel like a moral duty to stay in touch with your country and with your relatives. I like to go back and feel like I really haven't lost touch. Or you'd feel like you're suddenly a stranger. It's a bit sad. And there is also the fear of missing out, you know. So I do it because I need, and because I have to. (Informant #7, F, 33)

As I have been arguing, social media manufacture certain prompts in order to maintain their own centrality and status as profitable companies. In this regard, liveness – experiencing in real time what is happening, as if you were there or as if it was happening here – is certainly part of an ideology (Feuer, 1983), but it is also crucial to the phenomenological experience of using these platforms daily. In this perpetual nurturing of the imaginary of continuous anticipation, the result is, often, the tacit responsabilization of individuals whenever something happens and they are not prepared: 'I don't want to be too surprised, actually. If something happens, I want to have seen it coming'. (Informant #7, F, 33)

Discussion

Not surprisingly, the informants' relations with social media are profoundly marked by ambivalence. Relying on these platforms – for duty, but also for pleasure; willingly, but also helplessly – brings a whole set of comforts and discomforts (Beer, 2019). As summarized by Chun (2017: ix), 'new media are wonderfully creepy. They are endlessly fascinating yet boring, addictive yet revolting, banal yet revolutionary'. A core aspect of liveness is the potential of imminent risk, the unpredictable, surprise effect, combined with technical immediacy (Scannell, 2014). Sometimes, the result is thrilling, exhilarating. And, in fact, one should not underestimate the affective function of media – after all, we use these technologies not only to keep informed and to contact others, but also to *feel* in certain ways. The frequent possibility of accessing 'relevant' content, and consequently living interesting experiences, combined with infinite scrolling and an endless influx of messages and notifications, can be very persuasive in ensuring continuous connectedness.

The expectations constructed by this fueled sense of ongoing anticipation, however, are rarely met. As verbalized by the interviewees, the use of social media is not always stimulating – and can, in fact, become tedious, frustrating, exasperating. First, because the incessant (and even if initially exciting) attempt to keep track of everything that is going on is never really fulfilled in practice, which often produces anxiety. The content presented in a continuous flow, in turn, might give rise to additional stress and the

consequent need for reassurance. Furthermore, aware of the time and energy they spend on these platforms, participants describe navigating aimlessly and pointlessly through an apparently unceasing waterfall of content that seldom delivers something that is noteworthy, attention grabbing, or remotely interesting. If the televised event provides the audience with ‘the “oceanic” feeling of being immersed in it’ (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 197), then perhaps we could say that social media often generate the overflowing feeling of being sunk; of drowning in an endless informational flow.

Moreover, if television – particularly in the occurrence of media events – relies on the creation of a sense of universality (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Scannell, 2014), mainstream social media, for the most part, offer a different communicative structure, in which uncertainty is located not only in the possibility of something relevant eventually happening, but also in the attribution of responsibility to people in actively keeping track of things as they happen, when they happen. Once the focus moves from the extraordinary to the ordinary, the work of keeping actively engaged becomes an individual duty.

Although several aspects of these phenomena can be traced back to televisual flow and media events, what social media bring that is different or new is the general (and usually convincing) idea that they can provide people with what matters to them individually. In this regard, it might be productive to reconsider a final influential theorization emergent from television studies – namely, Paddy Scannell’s (2000) conceptualization of a *for-anyone-as-someone* structure. This comprises a hybrid communicative entitlement in which electronic media address their audience both as (a) a mass, highlighting their usefulness for anyone, anywhere, and (b) as particular persons for whom the content is made: ‘The *for-anyone-as-someone* structure expresses “we-ness”’ (Scannell, 2000: 10). In the case of social media, however, it is not only (or necessarily) the content that is carefully crafted to be perceived as individually significant – it is, as I have been discussing, the very organization and presentation of this content in a personalized but continuous flow that, according to the platforms, has your best interest in mind, delivering what is relevant not to a generic ‘anyone’, neither to ‘someone’, but to *YOU*. And, as explained by Chun (2017), in a data-driven environment, ‘Whether any particular *YOU* is aware of it or not, *YOU*s constitute a latent resource’ (p. 119).

Finally, underlying the available conceptualizations of liveness is the idea of *as-if-ness*. The mediated ‘live’ is what is not, but what still appears to be: experiencing it means feeling *as if* you were there, seeing it firsthand; *as if* you were together; *as if* whatever is happening is unfolding right here, right now. And although social media offer an access to the world out there that seems tailored to your individual interests, they work, at the same time, to make you aware (and crave the awareness) of others who are going through the same. Media do, as observed by Dayan and Katz (1992), the translation of *as-if-ness* into ‘a shared perception of reality’ (p. 177) – which, even in today’s data-driven setting, remains extremely powerful.

Concluding remarks

Pivotal to the aforementioned narrative that foregrounds the space/time collapsing capacities of media is the prerogative that disconnection and isolation are undesired, and that communication ‘brings humanity, enlightenment, progress’ (Carey, 1989: 309). The

promises made by social media reflect, to a large extent, these ideological stances. And if habit is indeed ‘ideology in action’ (Chun, 2017: 7) then it becomes urgent to question and unveil the taken-for-grantedness of these platforms to understand their operation. A phenomenological sensibility comes, I argue, as a useful resource for the unpacking of these ordinary experiences that are now so pervasive.

Phenomenology, as previously discussed, studies how the world ‘appears’ to situated subjects (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Scannell, 2014) – in this regard, one important complexity brought by the current culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013) is that what ‘appears’ to us has become heavily entangled with computational processes that are, in turn, driven by commercial purposes (Chun, 2017; Couldry and Kallinikos, 2018). While the five empirical themes discussed here are not meant to be exhaustive – and, in fact, this article represents a small fragment of a broader project – they offer a good hint of how it feels to use a range of social media platforms in the context of everyday life. The ambivalent interplay of what I am calling here excitement, anxiety, reassurance, fatigue, and responsibility is permeated by a ubiquitous, even if often tacit, claim of direct access to social realities as they are happening (Couldry, 2004) – in other words, sustained by promises of liveness.

Most of the experiences mentioned by my interviewees consist of the use of social media for ‘keeping in touch’ with others and with the world. And, in fact, by bringing distant events, happenings, and people into our experiential realm – by making them present to us, while in turn making us feel present in the world, even in contexts of remoteness – mediated communications have a profoundly existential dimension (Frosh, 2019; Scannell, 2014). This means that, in a world in which digital technologies are so pervasive, our very conditions of existence are changed (Frosh, 2019). By assuming that social media provide us with reorganized modalities for perceiving and situating ourselves in time and space, the broader project that informs this article aims to unveil how this affects our capacities and possibilities for connecting and making sense of ourselves, of others, and of the social world, and with what consequences. Although many of the available theorizations prefer to focus on the political economy of our platformized society, I argue that a phenomenological sensibility can contribute to shed light on other dimensions of these processes and practices. It is through a phenomenological lens that we can grasp the ways in which platforms are actually experienced, lived. After all, predictability – which is what social media companies ultimately focus on – can only work if users accept and subscribe to the widespread claim of unsettledness, and if they feel like checking, scrolling, and engaging constantly, continuously. This is a habit that has to be sustained, and, as I have been arguing, a central resource for its maintenance is the claim of immediate connection through media – or liveness.

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ORCID iD

Ludmila Lupinacci  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4371-6768>

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