LIVENESS AND DEADNESS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: ON THE PERCEIVED LACK OF LIFE OF THE INFINITE STREAM

Ludmila Lupinacci
London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

Social media rely on the maintenance of a sense of constant activity and unceasing updating to captivate users' attention and encourage quantifiable engagement (Chun 2017). To incite continuous connectedness, they also cultivate an imaginary of *aliveness*, of 'pulsating life' – of excitement, anticipation, newness (Beer 2019). Perhaps the most evident ways in which this sense of 'vibrating life' is encouraged is through notifications and trending lists – which actualize the promised significance of content at the individual and societal level, respectively, although these two often overlap. Also, the nonstop informational flow – materialized in the now widespread structure of the infinite 'stream'– makes the present contingent and fluid (Weltevrede et al. 2014), reinforcing the image of incessant movement. This paper aims to critically examine how this socio-technically constructed urge to remain continuously connected is experienced by the people who use social media in the context of everyday life. My goal is to scrutinize the 'feltness' of social media use, as well as how the claim of liveness translates (or not) into the perceptions articulated by ordinary users.

My entry point to this discussion is to position the claim of liveness as a central resource in the production of this imaginary of continuous connectedness, which then keeps us hooked to specific platforms under the assumption that something remarkable might happen anytime, all the time. Across decades, liveness has been employed to promise immediate access to meaningful happenings as they unfold, thus reinforcing sensations of urgency, unpredictability, and risk (Feuer 1983, Scannell 2014, van Es 2016). 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' (Couldry 2004, Bourdon 2000). Importantly, instead of focusing on extraordinary media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), I am more interested in people's relations to media in the ordinariness

of everyday life, and on how these routinely, 'non-eventful' practices are mediated by digital technologies. Underlying this decision is the theoretical standpoint that the power of social media emerges precisely from their apparent banality (Chun 2017).

This paper seeks to identify patterns across individual experiences provided by ordinary users of different platforms, which then inform broader theorizations. I conducted a thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through the diary-interview method, while embracing a phenomenological sensibility. The guiding empirical question, broadly put, was: "how does it feel to use social media?" Respondents completed a five-day long qualitative diary, preceded and followed by semi-structured interviews. The 20 participants are adults (19–47yo) who live in London and make use of a range of social media on a daily basis. Rather than picking a discrete platform to examine I treat them here as an integrated environment of affordances from which people can choose depending on particular social purposes and needs (Madianou and Miller 2013).

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). 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 these fuelled sense of anticipation, however, are rarely met. As verbalized by the interviewees, the use of social media is not always exciting – and can, in fact, become tedious, frustrating, exasperating.

Because they are seen as good sources of entertainment, social media are often employed as pastime activities and, in fact, most of the time the informants do not use these platforms with a clear purpose in mind, which confirms their naturalized, habitual status. On top of its apparently aimless character, the use of social media tends to be perceived as heavily time consuming. Consequently, the use of these platforms as a simple pastime often results in (even more) lethargy. Which means that, paradoxically, in a research centrally concerned with liveness – with what feels animated, pulsating, injected with life – one of the most commonly observed experiences is that of *deadness, lifelessness*. Interestingly, this perceived 'lack of life' of social media is described both as a result of the presence of too many potentially interesting things, and as the platforms' incapacity to deliver anything interesting at all. 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 or attention-grabbing.

The claims made by social media platforms reflect, to a large extent, the ideological prerogative that disconnection and isolation are undesired, and that communication "brings humanity, enlightenment, progress" (Carey 1989:309). 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 technologies to understand their operation. 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 lived. While the results discussed here are not meant to be exhaustive – and, in fact, this paper 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. Finally, the very fact that the interviewees admit they keep using these platforms in spite of their perceived lifelessness seems to be deeply permeated by the belief on the 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.

References

Beer, D. (2019). *The Quirks of Digital Culture.* Emerald Publishing.

Bourdon, J. (2000). Live television is still alive: on television as an unfulfilled promise. *Media, Culture & Society*, 22(5).

Carey, J. W. (1989). Technology and ideology: The case of the telegraph. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*.

Chun, W. H.K. (2017). *Updating to Remain the Same. Habitual New Media.* The MIT Press.

Couldry, N. (2004). Liveness, "Reality," and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone. *The Communication Review*, 7(4).

Dayan, D., Katz, E. (1992). *Media Events : The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Feuer, J. (1983). The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology. In E. Kaplan (Ed.), *Regarding Television*. Los Angeles: American Film Institute.

Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *16*(2).

Scannell, P. (2014). *Television and the meaning of live*. Polity Press.

Van Es, K. (2016). *The Future of Live.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Weltevrede, E., Helmond, A., Gerlitz, C. (2014). The Politics of Real-time : A Device Perspective on Social Media Platforms and Search Engines. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31(6).