

## THE POLITICS OF MEDIA USE IN DIGITAL EVERYDAY LIFE

### ABSTRACT

*This conclusion summarizes key insights from the former chapters, and highlights political dimensions of media use in digital everyday life. I particularly underline how our more digital everyday lives intensify communicative dilemmas, in which individuals in everyday settings negotiate with societal norms and power structures through their uses of media technologies. I also discuss how everyday media use connects us to different societal spheres and issues, also pointing to global challenges such as the pandemic and the climate crisis, arguing that everyday media use is key to our understandings of society. I discuss how to analyze this in media use research, emphasizing attention to processes of change and disruption.*

With everything that is going on in the world, why care about media use in everyday life? In this concluding chapter, I will summarize and discuss insights from the book, and particularly highlight some of the political dimensions of media use in digital societies. I argue that everyday media use is central to how we engage with societal issues, and that our uses of digital media technologies for navigation across social domains represent negotiations of norms and power dynamics.

The status of everyday life as political can be considered in different ways, depending of our understanding of what political means. It is obvious that everyday life is political in the sense that ‘politics’ refer to contestations of power. Longstanding traditions of critique and scholarship have highlighted

how power dynamics are constitutive to the organization of everyday life, and further accentuated everyday life as a sphere in which we experience such struggles and tensions. This is particularly central in feminist scholarship on topics such as lived experience (deBeauvoir, 1949) or public engagement (Landes, 1998). In media and cultural studies, feminist perspectives that highlight political dimensions of everyday life are very much part of key studies and traditions (see for instance Cavalcante et al., 2017; McRobbie, 1991; Radway, 1984; VanZoonen, 1994). So, everyday life is political, and political dimensions in everyday life also relate to different uses and interpretations of media.

On the other hand, if we apply a notion of politics that refers more specifically to processes of government and public decision-making, everyday life can easily appear further removed from politics, for many of us. Perceptions that there is such a distance, and that it matters, can even be used to explain what everyday life is, defining the concept through a focus on ordinary people and their experiences, as opposed to elected officials or other elite power positions (see Haddon, 2004; Sandvik et al., 2016, p. 9). Yet, also in this understanding, the connection between everyday life and a sphere of politics is a central point of inquiry, also for media use research. Much of the interest in news use – as well as studies of those who consume less news – is premised on ideas that news foster connections between people and democratic politics (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019). Other studies problematize such connections (Woodstock, 2014) or point to how various cultural and socioeconomic structures shape everyday lives and further affect use and non-use of news (Hartley, 2018; Toff & Palmer, 2019; Villi et al., 2021). The conceptual approaches that inform some of the empirical studies of this book, such as public connection, allow for a user-focused exploration of how media use connects people to political matters, asking people about the public world – as they experience it in everyday life (Couldry et al., 2010; Moe & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Swart et al., 2017).

In the introduction, I argued that everyday life is an inclusive topic in the sense that everyone has one. I further wrote that a myriad of scholarly perspectives and works are relevant to understand everyday life, so that we might find points of resonance also in discussions of everyday lives that are very different from our own. However, I also underlined the deep and interlinked inequalities that shape people's different everyday lives, and positioned the Norwegian empirical context of the book as a small, wealthy Global North welfare state with a strong digital infrastructure. This context shapes the understandings of digital society and everyday media use developed throughout this book, while the different empirical studies represent further prioritizations of some experiences

and user groups. With this starting point, the book is specifically positioned, and the analyses have only touched upon a few political dimensions of media use in everyday life. This concluding discussion will foreground these, after summarizing the main frameworks and arguments.

## MAIN FRAMEWORKS AND ARGUMENTS OF THE BOOK

To understand media use in everyday life, I argued in the first chapter, we might consider this as an empirical, methodological or theoretical research interest, signalling positions that prioritize people's contextualized experiences with media in their lifeworlds. Building on theories from philosophy, sociology and media studies, I developed an understanding of media use in everyday life that highlighted routinized navigation across social domains and the role of digital media for this purpose. This understanding draws on conceptualizations of the lifeworld (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) that encompass temporal, spatial and social dimensions, and on theories that foreground existential aspects of mediated connectivity (Markham, 2021; Silverstone, 1994). I further discussed how the analytical concepts of media repertoires (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017) and public connection (Couldry et al., 2010) can inform explorative empirical research into media use in everyday life, allowing for open and user-focused approaches. Last but not least, the chapter discussed what it means that our societies and media use practices are becoming more digital and datafied, with immersive, algorithmic and intrusive media. Drawing on the notion of a middle ground between technological determinism and social constructivism (Baym, 2015), I argued that digital media use shapes everyday life, and that everyday life shapes digital media use. I also pointed to the growing research literature on digital disconnection (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021) as relevant to understand how dilemmas of digital technologies are entangled in everyday life.

Building on these discussions, the main argument of the book is that digital media transform our routinized navigation across the social domains of everyday life, including our orientation to communities and people around us. The three subsequent chapters substantiated this argument in analysis of media use on an ordinary day, media use in life transitions, and media use in societal disruption.

In Chapter 2, I used the idea of an ordinary day as an entry point for understanding media use, particularly highlighting the centrality of smartphones at the centre of digital user practices. Building on day-in-the-life interviews from different studies, I also discussed methodological challenges of this approach,

such as noticing and describing the ordinary, or moving beyond the smartphone. The analysis followed different media users through an ordinary day, as they wake up, navigate across social domains, and seek connection and companionship through everyday media use. I argued that seemingly mundane practices are made meaningful through the social connection they entail, and I situated users' communicative choices regarding digital technologies as part of different everyday settings and experiences. Returning to the ideas from the introduction, I positioned smartphone checking as essential to what we do in digital everyday life: Checking the phone is key to our navigation across social domains, part of different activities, and serves to aggregate and accompany other forms of media use that also remain important, in the age of smartphones.

In Chapter 3, I moved beyond an ordinary day in the lives of media users, to analysis of how media use changes in conjunction with transitions in the life course. Such transitions constitute moments of destabilization, in which media repertoires and modes of public connection are reconfigured and adapted to changing circumstances. This could entail that preferences are reconsidered, that elements are temporarily or permanently discarded, while habits are taken up or amended. In such processes, easily adaptable digital media technologies like the smartphone become ever more important, as easy-to-reach for tools for new forms of self-expression, information-seeking and social contact. The empirical material of the chapter was a small qualitative interview study with mothers about digital media use the first year with a new-born. This analysis particularly brought forward the communicative dilemmas of navigating parenthood in an age of ubiquitous connectivity, demonstrating how presence ideals or notions of digital inferiority come into conflict with practical and emotional considerations.

In Chapter 4, I continued the analysis of everyday media use in times of destabilization, focusing not on individual life transitions but on the societal disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on a qualitative questionnaire study conducted in the first weeks of lockdown in Norway, and follow-up interviews at the end of 2020, I analyzed changing media repertoires through the keywords more digital, less mobile, still social. The analysis showed that reconfiguring uses of digital media was a central component of coping strategies when everyday life was turned upside down. While the pandemic destabilized media repertoires, people's reorientations to the challenging situation were dependent on communicative resources and relations established beforehand, connected to inequalities and divides. I further discussed how terms such as 'Zoom fatigue' or 'doomscrolling' could express struggles people face in digital communication and information environments, but also are fundamentally indicative of the social and existential aspects of media use as a form

of connection. Experiences of losing meaningful social contact or worrying for the world situation are mediated through these terms, but not problems pertaining to the digital media as such.

In sum, the three analytical chapters followed media users through circumstances that ranged from mundane to extraordinary, framing everyday life not as a stable entity, but as an ongoing and partly unsettled existential project. The analyses explored how media use is embedded in everything that happens in everyday life, whatever everyday life might look like at the moment, with media use taking on shifting functions and meanings. This embedded position is not in itself new, but it has been accentuated as well as complicated with the digitalization of media and of society.

Through the smartphone, we spend considerable amounts of our everyday lives supplementing our various activities with digital media use, or turning parts of our attention to something happening elsewhere. The smartphone can be considered the prime symbol of problematic distraction, but also as a meaningful opportunity to maintain social bonds across geographical contexts. Most people would probably be able to recognize both as true, situated in different everyday moments. There are compelling reasons why ambivalence remains essential to understand uses of the smartphone (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), and why it is, along with social media (Chia et al., 2021) key to cultural and scholarly concerns about our digital communicative culture.

A central argument I have made is that media use, as other aspects of everyday life, will be most easily noticed and reflected upon when something is changing. Therefore, the book has taken particular interest in moments of disruption and destabilization, often followed by reorientation and reconfiguration. The analyses indicate that digital media become more important when everyday life is changing – destabilization inspires digital media expansion in media repertoires. In circumstances as different as individual life transitions versus a collective societal crisis, digital media appeared as a resource that people would turn to, to make sense of events and practically manage shifting circumstances. The smartphone, in particular, adapts to new situations, provides information and companionship, fills in-between moments, and constitutes an extension of the person, connecting to people and situations beyond oneself. All of these capacities are important in ordinary everyday life, and become even more important when everyday life is disrupted.

This understanding of everyday media use in digital society brings forward several potential political dimensions, regarding the different lives of users facing various kinds of stability and disruption. Drawing on the analyses of the former chapters, I particularly draw attention to two of these:

Digital everyday life intensifies communicative dilemmas, and transforms connections to societal issues.

#### DIGITAL EVERYDAY LIFE INTENSIFIES COMMUNICATIVE DILEMMAS

The first political dimension of everyday media use I would like to foreground is how our ever more digital everyday lives transform the communicative dilemmas that users encounter in everyday settings. It is an established tenet that digitalization of the media has affected choice and selection of media content, but less attention has been paid to how user decisions – including the most mundane ones – are always made in some kind of everyday circumstance that may or may not play into what people do with media.

I started this book by asking how our lives have changed after the smartphone, a mobile media technology that rapidly became a staple of everyday life, for a considerable number of people. When we pick up the phone, as many of us do all day and every day, we make decisions that feed into power dynamics in digital and datafied society. Through the smartphone, many aspects of our everyday lives can be tracked and surveilled, with impacts that are hard to grasp for individual users. This includes spatiotemporal dimensions such as where we are and when we move between locations, social dimensions such as who we communicate with, as well as sensory, bodily and intimate aspects of our activities. The growing literature on datafication (Flensburg & Lomborg, 2021) includes key research strands on user experiences with datafied media technologies, often taking an everyday perspective to explore how people actually encounter datafication (Kennedy & Hill, 2018; Livingstone, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Das, 2020). Likewise, studies of how people understand algorithms in the media often apply an everyday perspective to explore how people negotiate with and interpret algorithmic interactions (Bucher, 2017; Siles et al., 2020; Swart, 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021b). Whereas critiques of datafication also emphasize global power dynamics and inequalities (see for instance Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Milan & Treré, 2019), everyday media use is essential to how people experience these divides, and essential to debates on privacy, power and feedback loops in datafied society.

Such considerations are part of the communicative dilemmas considered in this book, which has touched on examples such as new parents who try to develop social media sharing policies, or smartphone users discussing how to manage their phone settings. However, my main focus has been on the kind of communicative dilemma where users consider potentially conflicting values

embedded in everyday communication. This is also a form of political contestation, where societal norms meet personal circumstances, intensified by the complexities of hybrid information environments. In pandemic lockdown, uses of media technologies at home became an arena for figuring out how to manage colliding work and family obligations, how to conduct health and risk assessments, how to maintain sociability and connection, and how to stay informed while preserving mental energy. While this was an extraordinary situation, it very clearly illustrates the position of everyday life as the sphere in which existential communicative dilemmas are experienced.

As media technologies have become increasingly interwoven in most social domains across society, everyday considerations about media use take on new levels of complexity. There is intense public discussion about appropriate uses of media technologies, as seen in debates about digital tools in education, screen time in families, or always-on working life. These examples point to questions of when, where, how, how much and to which purposes we should (and should not) use smartphones and other digital media. In public discourse, problematic aspects are easily ascribed as intrinsic to new media technologies, while the values that are seemingly infringed upon tend to be considered separate to media, inherent to the different social domains in which media are used. This is not in itself new, as other historical critiques of media also connect to broader cultural debates and societal values (Syvertsen, 2017; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). What is made evident with a cross-media everyday perspective, however, is how many different dilemmas are left to be negotiated by users in a range of micro-settings in daily life. In this book, analyses of users in transitional or precarious situations show that normative ideas about media use take part in very different situations, as people navigate between social domains and often rely on mediated communication to keep it all together.

#### DIGITAL EVERYDAY LIFE TRANSFORMS OUR CONNECTION TO SOCIETAL ISSUES

The second political aspect of everyday media use I would like to underline, again based on the analyses of this book, concerns the role of digital media technologies in shaping our connections to the world around us. Everyday life is the space in which opportunities or hindrances for public connection are found, where people's different resources and experiences shape different modes of connection, to local, national and global issues.

Re-reading classic texts on media use and everyday life, it is striking to find characteristics about the state of the world that appear almost too on-the-nose for 2022. Roger Silverstone wrote, framing his discussion of television and ontological security, about the need to keep chaos at bay, in a world

*massively transformed by the threats of nuclear holocaust, of environmental disaster, but also by our vulnerability to the exigencies of national and international politics, and by the paradoxes of a planetary communication system that connects and disconnects us in the same breath to a world which is otherwise entirely out of reach. (Silverstone, 1993, p. 574)*

In 2022, there is a new war in Europe after Russia invaded Ukraine, immediate extensive action is needed to face the climate crisis, and there is a pandemic we are not entirely done with. These and other crises demonstrate our immense vulnerability to societal systems, as Silverstone wrote, and there are paradoxes in how media and communication connect us not just to each other, but also to knowledge of these and other threats.

Following this perspective, one function of media use in everyday life is to help us organize our engagement with the threatening chaos of the world, trying to establish practices that enable us to feel some ontological security, at least in the sense of trust to keep going on with things, as everyday life continues. Through everyday media use, we develop habits for how we monitor and engage with our personal lifeworld and the world at large, as we are checking news, checking messages, temporarily disconnecting, sharing, discussing, communicating or coordinating. The literature on public connection indicates how a variety of mediated and non-mediated practices could represent possibilities for connecting to public spheres, but also that these connections vary considerably between users (Couldry et al., 2010; Nærland, 2020; Swart et al., 2017).

We can ask if the connection to societal issues is intensified as media use becomes more digital, mirroring the discussion above on communicative dilemmas and digital user patterns. Like television once brought events of the world into people's homes in new ways, digital media environments are characterized by a multitude of constantly updated information streams spread across platforms (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2020; Boczkowski, 2021; Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2020). The analysis of pandemic media use in this book supports others who have highlighted that intensification is one important keyword for changing media use in the pandemic (Treré, 2021). Likewise, the notion of doomscrolling captures a particularly intense connection – one that is emotionally and cognitively unsustainable over time – between the chaos of



the world and the individual media user. This intensification is possible due to the affordances of smartphones and digital media, and attention economy news streams. However, several studies also find that experiences of disconnection and avoidance seem to follow intensification, as part of changing media use in crisis situations (Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2021; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Tréré, 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021b). This means that a variety of communicative practices can be part of whether, how and when people connect to social and political issues through everyday media use.

### CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL SOCIETY THROUGH EVERYDAY MEDIA USE

So, with everything going on in the world, why care about media use in everyday life? This book has hopefully provided arguments for why our everyday lives with media are interesting and important, not just to us as individuals, but also to the shared social world we inhabit.

In a digital and datafied society, there is no obvious separation between people's everyday engagements with technologies, and the power relations embedded within these same technologies. Using digital platforms or social media implies that people relate to power structures that they might, at the same time, perceive as opaque, surveilling, problematic or downright harmful (Chia et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2015; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021a). Everyday life is also the sphere in which we encounter and engage with societal issues, from seemingly small matters to concerns about the state of the world, made constantly available to us by media technologies in the hybrid information environment. Everyday media use is central to configuring the routines that our societal orientations rely on, but also part of inequalities that shape different everyday lives and different formations of communities and publics (Milan et al., 2020; Møller Hartley et al., 2021). To integrate and highlight an everyday perspective on media and communication allows us to approach these issues as they are encountered by a range of people, situated in different contexts, as part of lifeworlds and lived experiences.

While practices of everyday media use can be mundane, their role in our daily routines represents central modes of orientation to society, and entail navigation of complex power dynamics. We routinely encounter and negotiate a series of dilemmas of high societal and political relevance – as part of media use in ordinary everyday life.