

# Liveness redux: on media and their claim to be live

Media, Culture & Society

2017, Vol. 39(8) 1245–1256

© The Author(s) 2017



Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/0163443717717633

[journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs)



**Karin van Es**

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

## Abstract

Increasingly media are asserting themselves as live. In television, this has been an important strategy and recently it has been employed by new media platforms such as Facebook, Periscope and Snapchat. This commentary explains the revival of live media by exploring the meaning and operations of the concept and argues the continued relevance of the concept for the study of social media. Traditionally, there have been three main approaches to the live in academic writing (i.e. liveness as ontology, as phenomenology and as rhetoric): each has its particular shortcoming. This paper proposes that it is more productive to understand the live as a construction that assists to secure media a central role in everyday life.

## Keywords

broadcast media, institutions, live tv, liveness, myth of the mediated centre, social media, symbolic power

In the contemporary media landscape, claims to the live are once again ubiquitous. Consider, for instance, the revival of live broadcasts, apparent not only from the popularity of event TV (e.g. NBC's string of live musicals in the United States, the recent 3-minute live segment in an episode of the animated series *The Simpsons*, or the live ad by Snickers during *Super Bowl LI*), but also from the social TV phenomenon. The trend is not limited to broadcast television, however. Consider, also, the live-streaming of operas and performances by the Royal Opera House in London to cinemas across the globe, or Woody Harrelson's directorial debut, a live film, in which case even the silver screen is advertised as a site for live experiences. Furthermore, liveness is a feature also of live-streaming platforms such as Periscope, and of functionalities of larger platforms such as Facebook (with Facebook Live), and Snapchat (Live Stories).<sup>1</sup>

---

## Corresponding author:

Karin van Es, Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2a, 3512 EV Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Email: [k.f.vanes@uu.nl](mailto:k.f.vanes@uu.nl)

The last few examples in particular confront us with new, emerging forms of the live – forms not necessarily referential to traditional broadcasting, and challenging common assumptions of the concept as developed within media studies. Building on some of the arguments in my book (Van Es, 2016), I want to use this space to investigate the concept and argue for its continued relevance for the study of social media.

## Existing approaches to the live

Philip Auslander (2008) has traced the origins of the term ‘live’, as used in relation to media, to the introduction of broadcasting. Radio, he explains, presented the problem that the listener could not discern if what he or she was hearing was recorded or transmitted at the time of its production, as he or she was unable to see the source of the sounds. The term ‘live’ helped to solve the issue. In the early days of both radio and television, live programming was used strategically to secure the position of networks (Vianello, 1985). In television, it became the defining characteristic of the Golden Age, which spanned from the late 1940s till the beginning of the 1960s. However, live programming was fairly expensive, hard to monetize and less flexible in comparison to recorded programming. Therefore, it was later reserved for special occasions only. In 2010, it regained popularity, when social TV became a tech trend. The pairing of television and social media allowed viewers to share their television experiences in real-time. On the part of the networks, the hope was that this would encourage audiences to watch content when broadcast live. At the same time, the introduction of digital and networked technologies contributed to a host of new forms and types of live media that did not predicate their practices on those of traditional broadcasting. Scholarship has lagged behind in reconsidering these newer forms, which fail to be captured by established perspectives.

Principally, it is possible to distinguish three approaches to the live in media studies: an ontological one, a phenomenological one and a rhetorical one. Broadly speaking, these orientations boil down to a definition of the live in terms of a property of technology, an audience affect or an industry discourse. In what follows, I provide a few examples to illustrate these approaches and discuss their shortcomings.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, the sort of classification I make here oversimplifies the position of the authors in this debate. My point, however, is that each position overstates one particular basis for our (viewers’ or users’) understanding of the live, and that each provides us with only a single piece of a much larger puzzle.

Approaches that define the live in ontological terms suggest that technology is the source of liveness. In work on television, this argument was first used in relation to the ‘beaming lines’ that made the medium ‘alive’ (Zettl, 1978) and, later, to the electronic nature of transmission (Crisell, 2012; Heath and Skirrow, 1977). Stephanie Marriott (2007) came to the defence of Heath and Skirrow, for even if ‘liveness is not ontologically given, it is nevertheless latent in the medium at all moments and under all sets of circumstances’ (p. 58). For me, Paddy Scannell’s (2014) discussion of the surveillance camera, which, he writes, has ‘the quality of immediacy not of liveness’ (p. 98) is revealing of what this ontological take on liveness misses. For liveness to take shape, there needs to be an institution to *interpret* the events (Bourdon, 2000: 538). For Scannell

(2014), liveness is ‘the worked at, achieved and accomplished effect of the *human application* and use of technologies whose ontological characteristic is immediate connectivity’ (p. 99, my emphasis). I contend that this need to ‘work at’ explains in part why commuters are provided with *real-time* rather than *live* traffic and timetable updates.<sup>3</sup> In my book, I analyse how the term ‘real time’ is often used to reference technical performance. Its definition, then, is seemingly devoid of the ‘sociality’ I would argue is inherent to the live.

Another issue that challenges the ontological approach is the room for flexibility in simultaneous transmission and reception (White in Couldry, 2004: 355). The definition of live TV provided by Sørensen is revealing here. She defines live TV as ‘the *live broadcast* of an event that is transmitted to viewers and users *in real time as it unfolds*’ (Sørensen, 2016: 3, original emphasis). In the footnote appended to this definition, however, she provides nuance: she specifies that near-real-time transmission is also possible, because content is sometimes delayed to adhere to regulations regarding profanity, obscenities and so forth. Such a comment reveals that the live-as-ontology approach overlooks how economic, social and cultural norms play roles in shaping the live, and that the live is more than just a matter of technical performance.

A second body of work attests to a phenomenological take on liveness. Here, the live is related to human experience. Scannell (2014) has made an important contribution to this debate. The task of his book *Television and the Meaning of Live*, in his own words, is

[t]o show how it is indeed possible for anyone (including Heidegger and critical theorists) to have an experience watching television; and that this experience is meaningful, genuine, authentic, real and true to the extent that the hidden production care-structures of television produce it as such. (p. 103)

In his writing on television, Scannell has proposed that the producers of live television work hard to create a sense of ‘communicative entitlement’ in the audience. By having experienced something through watching it at the same time as others, we, as viewers, have a shared (even if individual) experience. The ambition of Scannell’s work has been to turn attention away from *academic thinking* about television and towards how we *experience* it. As a result, however, it downplays the influence of institutions and technologies in constructing liveness. The strength of his argument can therefore also be said to constitute its weakness.

The third approach to the live positions it as rhetoric. Two strands of thought come together here; their common kernel is the belief that the live is a discursive construction emanating from the media industry. Elana Levine (2008), for example, has explored how liveness is used to create hierarchies of value – not only between different media, but also within television itself. This is part of what she calls ‘struggles over distinction and cultural worth’ that have taken new forms in the new media environment (Levine, 2008: 395). For another group of scholars, the discursive construction of liveness is a matter of power. Perhaps the most influential account of the live in media studies is that of Jane Feuer (1983). In her article ‘The Ideology of Liveness’, she claims that liveness is not an essential technological property of television but rather an ideological construct. Television programmes have a fragmentary character, as a result of practices such as

cutting back and forth between events, and the use of instant replay and slow motion. Yet in spite of this, a sense of flow and unity is accomplished through the ideological connotations of the live (Feuer, 1983: 16).

Important for my purposes here is that Feuer (1983) notes a problem with her account in the conclusion of her article: a problem that relates to how the ideology of the text is reproduced in audiences:

In trying to figure out how ‘oppositional readings’ of a program such as *Good Morning, America* by its intended audience might occur or perhaps already occur, we remain caught in a hermeneutic circle. Is the spectator positioned by the apparatus, or is the spectator relatively free, and if so, what permits us to analyze texts in the way I have done above, and why is *Good Morning, America* so successful? (p. 21)

Engaging directly with Feuer’s article, Nick Couldry (2003) claims to provide a way out of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ found in such an ideological approach via the concept of media ritualization (p. 99). Later, I will elaborate on his media ritual approach, which provides a useful way of considering the relation between media and power beyond media texts and/or their reception.

What understandings of the live in rhetorical terms share, is that they overemphasize the power of institutions in shaping it. Media institutions are not free to label just anything as ‘live’. We need only look to the history of television, for instance, to the criticism levelled at coverage of the Olympic games, where events are often promoted as ‘live’ despite being tape-delayed to be aired in prime-time. In other words, such an approach overlooks how both technologies and audiences also play a role in the construction of the live.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarly writings reflecting on the live, even if they do not explicitly align with either of these approaches, assume that there is a simple and rather obvious definition of liveness, namely that it concerns the simultaneity that links the production, transmission and reception of an event. However, this once again reduces the live to a technical performance.<sup>5</sup> I would counter here that any ‘original meaning’ of the live is a fable. For, *always* a construction, the live has never *not* been social.

## Revisiting liveness

Existing perspectives on the live, then, all overlook parts of a bigger picture. More importantly for this paper, each of them by itself would be unable to account for the complexity brought to bear on the concept by *emerging* forms of the live. To more fully grasp the category, then, I propose that it is best studied as the product of particular interactions among institutions, technologies and users/viewers. More specifically, it is necessary to analyse how the following three aspects of the live come together with each manifestation of it: its framing by platform owners, technology’s mediation of spatial and temporal relations, and user/viewer expectations of the live (as made explicit in statements or practices).<sup>6</sup> Approaching the live as a construction helps to account for its diversity – a key task at a time when forms of liveness proliferate on new media platforms.

However, while studying constructions of the live exposes *how* it operates in certain instances (i.e. how different actants come together to stabilize the live, and the promises made in or through it), it mostly leaves unexplained the *why* (i.e. which roles it plays in the media industry and why it is so sought after) and *what* of liveness. Therefore, my project of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in terms of *constellations of liveness* is inspired also by Nick Couldry's work on media rituals (2000, 2003, 2004). Couldry argues that the live helps to sustain 'media power' – that is, the concentration of symbolic resources in the institutional sphere known as 'the media'. His argument can further advance our understanding of the live.

Couldry (2003) posits that the live is a media ritual category that helps to legitimate 'the myth of the mediated centre': the belief that society has a centre and that the media speak for it (p. 2). Liveness naturalizes this myth in that it 'suggests a little more explicitly [than other media ritual categories] that the reason media things matter more is because they are part of society's current "reality"' (Couldry, 2003: 48). This is most evident, Couldry says, in how we place more value on what is 'in' the media than what is 'out', as evinced by the heightened reaction when a media personality enters the room. By affirming the divide, people actively reproduce the myth. Couldry (2003) regards the symbolic power of the media as 'its particular privilege of constructing social reality' (p. 17). However, since it operates as a general power, it can be and is contested on a local level.

Although media ritual theory is a good point of departure for an understanding of the why of liveness, two points need to be addressed. First, like many scholars, Couldry lumps together different forms of the live under labels such as 'online liveness' (see Couldry, 2004). I would claim in contrast that the live is articulated in mutually rather different *constellations of liveness*. After all, the Internet is merely the backbone around which diverse platforms have been built, and each of these uniquely coordinates relations across space and time among users and between users and content. The 'live' in live tweeting, for instance, is distinct from the 'live' in live-streaming.

As pointed out by Couldry (2004), the live is not a descriptive term, but one more akin to a Durkheimian category, in that it 'reproduce[s] our belief in, and assent to, something wider than the description carried by the term itself' (p. 354). What binds a category – and here I follow the rereading of Durkheim by Warren Schmaus (2004) – is the *function* its constituent elements perform. Live media all draw on configurations of real time and sociality to establish their value. In line with Couldry, one could argue that what live media share is that they establish that something needs to be attended to now rather than later, because it is important to us as members of society. This is the collective function of live media, and what binds those media together as a group. However, live media can make different selling points explicit by drawing on the particular relation they configure between real time and sociality. With regard to news broadcasts, for example, the live is used to frame the programme as *authentic* and *real*. The live broadcasts of sports draw more on the *unpredictability* of the competition – the excitement that comes from the awareness that anything can happen – and on notions of *presence*. In yet other cases, the programme might stress *participation*. All these ideas are associated with the live and can be foregrounded depending on the particular constellation that is relevant in each case.

The second point in Couldry's account I want to tackle is his explanation of the audience's desire for the live. In media ritual theory, the live is said to make explicit that the media matter because they provide access to our current social reality (Couldry, 2003: 48). It is thus suggested that there is, as Bourdon (2000) writes, a 'need to connect oneself with others, to the world's events' (p. 193). Couldry in this context stressed that the coordination of society through a particular medium is not a neutral act. But what his explanation brushes over is how media achieve this *feeling of connection*. As mentioned earlier, the lifeless video footage of a surveillance camera does little to connect the audience to the event; this has to be worked at. To explain how the feeling of connection is made (and maintained), we need to look elsewhere. Doing so helps to unpack the live beyond its immediate function and explore how it is that certain notions (e.g. presence, authenticity, immediacy) have come to be associated with it.

As pointed out earlier, Scannell (2001) has claimed that broadcasts provide authentic experiences, offering viewers what he calls a sense of 'communicative entitlement'. He argues that

[t]he world, through television, becomes available for anyone to experience, yet each encounters it as an aspect of their own life and experience. The experience in its availability is the same for all, yet generates countless variations on its own basic thematized structure. (Scannell, 2001: 410)

In short, Scannell finds that by having seen something on television unfold in real time (that was available to others in the same way), one can claim to have experienced it and is therefore entitled to talk about it with others. He relates this entitlement to television's capacity to create 'possibilities of participation, effects of being-there' (Scannell, 2001: 409). Such an insight enriches our understanding of the live's appeal for people. The lure of the live is not just about media connecting people to a social centre, it is also about giving them the chance to be part of an experience. This sense of communicative entitlement provides a convincing explanation of the live's appeal because it locates it in human experience. Prototypical indices associated with liveness (e.g. the direct address, onscreen slips and the caption 'live' chromo-keyed in a corner of the screen) are all means to make audiences feel a part of what is transpiring on screen. This experience does not occur naturally, nor can it be achieved through rhetoric; rather, it is the result of the hard work of producers. To achieve it, they do such things such as editing footage, switching between cameras and providing narratives for the events we see on TV (see Scannell, 2001).<sup>7</sup>

This explanation of how the live is made to appeal to audiences, to make them *feel* that the media are significant in that they provide access to society's centre, can be a productive addition to the media ritual argument. However, it does require that one replace Scannell's positive evaluation of the media process with the recognition of the construction of a myth of the mediated centre. In addition, one also needs to recognize that there is an inherent tension between the constructedness of the live and the concealment necessary to entitle one to a given experience. *Pace* Scannell, I would claim that this constructedness is not only the work of producers, but is the product of an interaction among media institutions, technologies and viewers/users. This tension is what makes it productive to analyse the live, as it points to the sites where symbolic power is being exerted.

If broadcasters and viewers/users alike want the live, then why are not *all* media live? This is a question Andrew Crisell has attempted to answer in *Liveness & Recording in the Media* (2012). He concludes that several economic, cultural and social reasons explain why this is not the case. Recording, he suggests, allowed programmes to be turned into commodities; it enabled the buying and selling of programmes, facilitated repeated airings and helped the growth of seriality (Crisell, 2012: 25–29). It must not be forgotten, furthermore, that even in the 1950s, it was the prime-time anthology drama that was celebrated as ‘live’, obscuring in the process how other genres, such as the talk shows and soap operas, were *also* broadcast live (Levine, 2008: 395). To remain a source of distinction, the category needs to be reserved for moments of perceived significance. From the viewer/user’s perspective, it may not always be *possible* or even be felt *necessary* to watch/listen/participate in media as they are broadcast live. Obviously, there is also the convenience in choosing when, where and how to consume media. Moreover, some media are for personal enjoyment only.

## The media landscape in transition

The advent of broadcasting made events previously accessible to only a few available to a larger audience. Providing a ‘stable temporal framework’ (Scannell, 1996: 155), the schedules of broadcast media were woven into the routines of everyday life. Time-shifting technologies have since disrupted standard practices of broadcasting. Users can now choose when and where they watch television and listen to music, and consequently audiences have fragmented across space and time. Moreover, unlike the information flows of broadcast media, on-demand platforms and social media address individuals (through personalized feeds) rather than collectives. These atomized individuals can and are linked around particular content – often, as I argue in a bit more depth below, events.

Initially, this change in affordances for the user was met with enthusiasm, with arguments often centring on the potential of social media to democratize the media landscape. In the mean time, however, social media have increasingly commercialized, and today, they compete with broadcast media for consumer attention.<sup>8</sup> And in the process, they need to demonstrate their value. The resurgence of the live, I would argue, can be understood as a product of this competitive media landscape, where old and new media institutions compete to dominate the market.<sup>9</sup>

Despite claims as to the death of broadcast television, specific genres, such as event television, continue to attract large audiences (Gillan, 2011). For example, the broadcast of Super Bowl XLIX by NBC in 2015 was the most-watched show in US television history (Taibi, 2015). Sørensen (2016) explores how broadcasting live media events is part also of the multiplatform strategy adopted by British public service broadcasters (PSBs). PSBs are interested in liveness and media events because they help them to compete with video-on-demand platforms such as Netflix, YouTube and Amazon. They use social media to ‘boost attention around live events, and in this process accumulate viewers, as well as build and amplify the sense of their own importance and centrality in the mediation of live events’ (Sørensen, 2016: 6). The goal with live events, she explains, is to attract people to platforms and keep them there. She contrasts this with ‘extended liveness’ (Ytreberg, 2009), sought in

reality formats, which steers people across platforms, thus deepening audience engagement and loyalty. Social TV is meant to encourage viewers to watch programmes when they are first broadcast on television, thus helping to protect the business model of selling eyeballs to advertisers. This makes sense, since despite expansions and tweaks in how audiences are constructed in the ratings, these rankings are still primarily focused on live viewership. Second-screen platforms do, however, enable voluntary online monitoring, therein offering a form of 'instant feedback' for producers and advertisers, and providing the latter with more detailed audience information (Lee and Andrejevic, 2014: 48).

But broadcast TV is not alone in associating itself with events as they happen. In fact, many other platforms use such events tactically to attract an audience. For instance, the livecasts of opera and ballet were a strategic response to the predicament of struggling opera houses and the fierce competition faced by cinemas from new platforms for media consumption (Barker, 2013). Furthermore, Facebook and Twitter have shown interest in acquiring a central role in its distribution of live video (Atkinson, 2016). It seems then that, in this cluttered media environment, events, premised on live content, are used in attempts to attract audiences.

Although television is still *the* medium that reaches large audiences simultaneously across screens (Sørensen, 2016: 6), the capacity for social media such as Facebook and Twitter to do the same should not be underestimated. In the social media era, new concentrations of power have emerged and with them a new myth: one Couldry (2015) has called the 'myth of us'. The author here refers to the language emerging around these commercial platforms that assert themselves as the new sites of the social. The myth sustains the claim that assembly on these platforms is natural and that participating on them contributes to the larger social order; in going online in this way, users are made to feel more special than if they had engaged with the offline world (Couldry, 2015: 620). In the process, those media generalize what a few people are saying and feeling to stand for what all of society is purportedly saying and feeling (Couldry, 2015: 621). The live has an important role to play in perpetuating both the myth of the mediated centre and the myth of us.

Facebook's News Feed offers access to the lives of our friends as they unfold online. Although everyone has an individualized network, comprising 'friends', the people or organizations one 'follows' and pages 'liked', these connections overlap. As a result, a Facebook friend can become topical resources for discussion with other friends – much like in the scenario of collective viewing of events broadcasts on television. However, while the 'myth of us' was initially based on *this* kind of access to our personal relations, media institutions have increasingly been reintroduced into such connections. Facebook has been facing 'context collapse' because users are now sharing less and less personal information.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it introduced Instant Articles in 2015 making news content an important part of the business. This feature allows users of the Facebook mobile app to read entire articles from partner news organizations instantly. Increasingly, then, the myth of us and that of the mediated centre merge on a single platform.

Although Facebook's News Feed is not always cast as live, there has been experimentation with various live subfeeds over the years. Moreover, in certain circumstances, the flow of the feed accelerates and provides access to events as they unfold. From celebrity

deaths to national disasters, the posts from our connections inform us of happenings in the world. With extensions such as ‘Trending’ and ‘Safety Check’, Facebook is increasingly a platform that people use to keep updated on current events. When implemented, these extensions reveal the cracks in the proposition that such platforms are entry points to the social. The Safety Check feature was introduced in 2014, though its development was prompted by social media usage during the tsunami and earthquake in Japan in 2011, and has since been used during major natural disasters. However, it was also activated during the terrorist attacks on the Bataclan nightclub and elsewhere in Paris in November 2015. At the time, Facebook received widespread criticism for not having activated it during the bombings in Beirut the day before the Paris attacks, in which 43 people were killed.<sup>11</sup> This points out how Facebook plays an important role in the distribution of attention. The platform affects not only how people understand and experience their social circle, but also the world.

In terms of the live, it becomes important to note that the ways social media exercise their symbolic power differ from those of broadcast media. The scarcity introduced by social media is not about limiting content and production – as it had been with broadcast media – but by selecting what content is seen (Andrejevic, 2014: 200). Algorithms govern the ‘regime of visibility’ on these platforms in determining what content is viewed by whom (Bucher, 2012). The procedures in algorithmic selection are unknowable, and the platform can promote or block whichever content it chooses.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the symbolic power resides in the production and distribution of content, whereas in social media it is exercised via distribution.<sup>13</sup> This shift withdraws the exercise of this power from public visibility and comprehensibility.

## Long live the live

To make the ideas about the live that I have explored here a bit more concrete, I would like to close with a short example: a mockery of a Q&A on Facebook Live by *De Speld*, a Dutch satirical online news magazine. In March of 2016, Facebook introduced Facebook Live, allowing users to engage with their followers by live-streaming to them. Soon after, *De Speld* organized a Q&A with a couple of fishsticks, using the Facebook Live feature. It put up a 50-minute livestream, announcing that the website’s staff were ‘live with their fishsticks’, and inviting the public to post their *urgent* questions. A little more than 20 minutes after the first, a second fishstick was added. In an update of the post accompanying the stream, the editors remarked that there was only a limited amount of time to ask questions to the second fishstick – as it would, it was announced, leave again after some time (as was indeed the case: it was ‘extracted’ 17 minutes later).

In this spoof, the liveness of the event was highlighted in a number of highly recognizable ways, and these markers of liveness became all the more meaningful, as it was social media’s insistence on being ‘live’ that was being ridiculed. First, the video stream had the term ‘live’ chromo-keyed in a corner of its frame. Second, it communicated the number of viewers watching at any time. (When I was watching, for instance, the number was 5.4K.) Third, the text accompanying the stream emphasized the pressure of passing time by noting when the Q&A would end and by updating the accompanying

post and stressing the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity it provided. Together, such paratexts framed the video stream as something of grave importance, and the event as having a particular social significance. The humour here resided in the stark contrast between this claim, and the video of a lifeless chunk of processed fish. In the absence of any ‘hard work’ to create an ‘experience’ for the viewer/user, a parallel is easily drawn with the surveillance camera. It is here in particular, I find, that *De Speld* is rather sharp in its critique. The fishstick livestream lacked the *structure* that ought to have been imposed by the producers of the event.

Incidentally, and ironically, the *De Speld* stream did draw a rather sizeable audience, and in the process, became a media event in itself. Individual viewers were indeed able to discuss their particular experience of the event with others, and consequently, it arguably became a ‘live’ one. Ultimately, of course, what is considered socially significant (and therefore must be seen now rather than later) is subjective – or perhaps rather, a matter of agreement between interested parties – and therefore does not go uncontested. This explains why at times we find ourselves struggling with the label ‘live’. When asked if, for instance, a livestream of a corpse flower in some botanical garden in a place far-away is live, one may answer, slipping back into a definition centred on instantaneity, that it is indeed. In my own experience of watching such streams, however, these *are* indeed live-streams, but they do not *feel* live.<sup>14</sup> Yet, if there were watched simultaneously by hundreds of thousands of others (and this were evident), they might be experienced as such.

In my view, the diversity of the live and its relation to media power are very well captured by the humour of the *De Speld* Q&A. The significance of the concept of the live, entangled as it has been in discussions on the ontology and aesthetics of television, has been misunderstood by many media scholars. Reducing it to a feat of technology, or of human affect or industrial rhetoric, overlooks how analysing constellations of the live can expose how relations to and on media are permeated with power. The live cannot be pushed at audiences by industries without being supported by the technologies and the viewers/users around which the claim to it has been built. In a climate where more and more media are presenting themselves as stakeholders in the social through the live, the way forward is to unpack this live by reflecting on how institutions, technologies and viewers/users stabilize the live in particular media (platforms). By critically engaging with their constellations of liveness, as I have done in my book, it is possible to tease out the values they promote and bring forward how they control the production and distribution of symbolic forms.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. Interestingly, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat have at the same time converted to non-chronological timelines prioritizing posts based on the users’ interests (algorithmic feeds).
2. Here, I draw on an overview of these approaches provided in my book (see Van Es, 2016).

3. Andrew Crisell (2012) claims that ‘there is little point in our having a *live* connection to something that is *lifeless*’ (p. 104). Human contact, he argues, is what is desirable about liveness and is why a live image of a teaspoon (his example) may not be seen as live.
4. In my own research, this became very obvious in an analysis of the online music collaboration platform eJamming. Although promoted as enabling users to play music ‘together online live’, the platform was not able to deliver on the expectations of its users, specifically of playing together ‘live’. This had to do in part because of the latency (the delay in sound) encountered by the users when performing together in an online session. The technology thus prevented seamless synchronicity between musicians. But their problem wasn’t just with these delays. Users were also disappointed that they could not perform for an audience by opening up their sessions to others than those jamming. See (Van Es, 2016).
5. This assumption is reflected in the work of Bourdon, who contends that ‘[t]elevision has very quickly made of a technical feat an institutional performance [...] we have moved from the original meaning to a varied set of situations, containing both social and technical features, where the word “live” is used’ (Bourdon, 2000: 534).
6. In my book, I explain how constellations of liveness can be studied in greater depth and provide examples of analysis (see Van Es, 2016).
7. Crisell (2012) has made a similar argument. He claims that there is a desire for co-presence, a craving for human contact that is fulfilled by liveness (in that it provides co-presence in time). For this reason, the objects of live television need to ‘manifest the process of temporal existence’ (Crisell, 2012: 15). He argues that inanimate objects are sometimes made *alive* by human presence (e.g. the voiceover).
8. One should probably put into perspective the idea of social media and broadcast media simply competing. As the phenomenon of social TV is taking a clearer form, one can see that they can also exist in a relationship of mutual reinforcement.
9. I would argue that platforms like Facebook are in fact media companies (despite their own insistence that they are ‘merely’ technology companies).
10. The company has attempted to combat this by features such as ‘On This Day’, reminders of special occasions, prompts to post recent photos from phones and live video (Frier, 2016). The fact that less personal information is being shared does not detract from its claim to the social.
11. A post on the Facebook Safety Check page by Alex Schulz (Vice President of Growth) explained this decision. He argued that Safety Check was activated in Paris because it is a place where violence is less common and because a lot of activity on Facebook was taking place there (*Facebook Safety*, 2015).
12. The owners of social media platforms can do so, in part, because they insist on being labelled technology companies rather than media companies, in to keep stock prices high and evade media regulations. Their role in the 2016 US presidential elections, however, prompted discussion on the matter. Facebook in particular was criticized for amplifying the dissemination of ‘fake news’ and accused of right-wing censorship.
13. In my book, a comparative analysis between the liveness of *The Voice* and that of Facebook helped to flesh out how the symbolic power is different in these two communication forms (Van Es, 2016).
14. Perhaps the anticipation of its blooming is what makes it feel live for some people.

## References

- Andrejevic M (2014) ‘Free lunch’ in the digital era: organization is the new content. In: McGuigan L and Manzerolle V (eds) *The Audience Commodity in a Digital Age: Revisiting Critical Theory of Commercial Media*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 193–206.

- Atkinson C (2016) Facebook and Twitter in race to acquire rights to stream live TV. *The New York Post*, 17 March. Available at: <http://nypost.com/2016/03/17/facebook-and-twitter-in-race-to-acquire-rights-to-stream-live-tv/> (accessed 30 May 2016).
- Auslander P (2008) *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Barker M (2013) *Live to Your Local Cinema: The Remarkable Rise of Livecasting*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bourdon J (2000) Live television is still alive: on television as an unfulfilled promise. *Media, Culture & Society* 22(5): 521–556.
- Bucher T (2012) Want to be on top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*. Epub ahead of print 8 April. DOI: 10.1177/1461444812440159.
- Couldry N (2000) *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*. London: Routledge.
- Couldry N (2003) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Couldry N (2004) Liveness, ‘reality,’ and the mediated habitus from television to the mobile phone. *The Communication Review* 7(4): 353–361.
- Couldry N (2015) The myth of ‘us’: digital networks, political change and the production of collectivity. *Information, Communication & Society* 18(6): 608–626.
- Crisell A (2012) *Liveness and Recording in the Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Facebook Safety (2015) Facebook. Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/fbsafety/posts/930229667014872?hc\\_location=ufi](https://www.facebook.com/fbsafety/posts/930229667014872?hc_location=ufi) (accessed 7 June 2016).
- Feuer J (1983) The concept of live television: ontology as ideology. In: Kaplan A (ed.) *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*. Los Angeles, CA: The American Film Institute, pp. 12–21.
- Frier S (2016) Facebook wants you to post more about yourself. *Bloomberg*, 7 April. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-07/facebook-said-to-face-decline-in-people-posting-personal-content> (accessed 30 May 2016).
- Gillan J (2011) *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV*. New York: Routledge.
- Heath S and Skirrow G (1977) Television: a world in action. *Screen* 18(2): 7–59.
- Lee HJ and Andrejevic M (2014) Second-screen theory: from the democratic surround to the digital enclosure. In: Holt J and Sanson K (eds) *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, and Sharing Media in the Digital Era*. London: Routledge, pp. 40–61.
- Levine E (2008) Distinguishing television: the changing meanings of television liveness. *Media, Culture & Society* 30(3): 393–409.
- Marriott S (2007) *Live Television: Time, Space and the Broadcast Event*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Scannell P (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Scannell P (2001) Authenticity and experience. *Discourse Studies* 3(4): 405–411.
- Scannell P (2014) *Television and the Meaning of Live: An Enquiry into the Human Situation*. London: Polity Press.
- Schmaus W (2004) *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sørensen IE (2016) The revival of live TV: liveness in a multiplatform context. *Media, Culture & Society* 38(3): 381–399.
- Taibi C (2015) *Super Bowl XLIX was Most-Watched Show in U.S. Television History*. *The Huffington Post*, 2 February. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/super-bowl-tv-ratings-2015-patriots-seahawks\\_n\\_6595690](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/super-bowl-tv-ratings-2015-patriots-seahawks_n_6595690) (accessed 30 May 2016).
- Van Es K (2016) *The Future of Live*. London: Polity Press.
- Vianello R (1985) The power politics of ‘live’ television. *Journal of Film and Video* 37(3): 26–40.
- Ytreberg E (2009) Extended liveness and eventfulness in multi-platform reality formats. *New Media & Society* 11(4): 467–485.
- Zettl H (1978) The rare case of television aesthetics. *Journal of the University Film Association* 30(2): 3–8.