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Liveness, “Reality,” and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone

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Television’s liveness has long been seen as one of its key features. This paper argues that “liveness” is not a textual feature, but a more fundamental category (in Durkheim’s sense) that contributes to underlying conceptions of how media are involved in social organization through their provision of privileged access to central social “realities.” This ideological view of liveness (cf. Jane Feuer’s early work) is then extended in two ways: first, to consider two new forms of “liveness” that do not involve television (online liveness via the Internet and “group liveness” via the mobile phone); and second, by connecting liveness with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and thereby linking “liveness” (including in its extended senses) with other parts of the materialized system of classification through which we make sense of the everyday world.

Liveness should be interpreted as a development within media history as a whole. . . . At the base, the need to connect oneself, with others, to the world’s events, is central to the development of the modern nation. (Bourdon, 2000, pp. 551–552)

Media belong to the history of the progressive organization of social life across space and time: Media, in other words, are part of governmentality, which is not to deny that they have many other dimensions too (such as expression, pleasure, and imagination). From Durkheim onwards, sociology has been concerned with how social order is enacted, in part, through categories of perception and thought. Liveness can be understood as a category crucially involved in both naturalizing and reproducing a certain historically distinctive type of social coordination around media “centers” from which images, information, and

narratives are distributed and (effectively simultaneously) received across space. This general context is helpful for understanding the persistence of “liveness” as a term, and some of the tensions currently surrounding it; even better, understanding mediated “liveness” in this way links media debates to wider questions about how, in media-saturated societies, social “order” is possible to the extent that it is; in particular, it links to the possibility of rethinking one concept of ordering, Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus,” for mediated societies, a point to which I return.

This approach questions the way “liveness” in media-studies debates is generally seen as an issue specifically about media texts and the changing conventions and interpretations embedded in media production. It insists that larger questions are at stake, confirming that the curiosity of media scholars in “liveness” has been well-placed, but at the same time detaching that term from an exclusive application to one specific media technology (usually television).

The Forms of Liveness

An important earlier argument which connected television’s liveness to wider sociological questions was Jane Feuer’s paper on “The concept of live television” (1983). Feuer was interested in the ideology of television as a social technology, not the way other types of ideology (political or commercial) might be transmitted through television: specifically the “ideology” that television connects us “live” to important events, so that we see things as they happen. However, Feuer’s article ended (1983, pp. 20–21) with a question about how that ideology is socially reproduced in audiences’ use of television texts that remained unanswered. Perhaps this is why analysis of the ideological implications of televisual form ceased, for a while, to be central to media studies in the 1990s (there were other factors, of course, to do with the rethinking of “ideology” itself).

The value of Feuer’s work now, however, does not depend on the continued acceptability of the term “ideology”; indeed, things may be clearer without that term. The question instead is whether “liveness” (as applied to television and other media) is purely a descriptive term, whose usefulness depends on matters of fact, or whether it is, in Durkheim’s sense, a *category*—a term whose use depends on its place within a wider system or structured pattern of values, which work to reproduce our belief in, and assent to, something wider than the description carried by the term itself: in this case, media’s role as a central institution for representing social “reality.” In a recent book (Couldry, 2003) I argued that we can develop Feuer’s insight by interpreting liveness as a ritual term—that is, a category put to use in various forms of structured action that naturalize wider power relationships. There are many forms of ritualized practice in relation to media. But what follows does not depend on that wider argument. Instead, I will focus on the claim that “liveness” works as a category distinction whose importance is more than purely descriptive.

This is the best way of explaining, I suggest, some striking features of the trajectory of the term "liveness" in discourses about media. I mean, first, the substitutability of the media involved in liveness (originally radio, then television, increasingly the Internet and, in certain respects, the mobile phone); second, the fuzziness permitted over how "simultaneous" transmission and reception have to be for "liveness" to be achieved (White, 2004); and third, the persistence of the term "liveness" notwithstanding challenges to the paradigms of liveness at particular historical moments. These points are connected, so let me explore them in more detail.

In television's early days, when all programs were performances broadcast live, television was entirely a "live" medium in the sense of being broadcast as it was performed. As the proportion of live performance declined, the term "live" switched its reference while remaining in use. Jerome Bourdon (2000) argues that the reference-point of "liveness" shifted to those parts of television which broadcast *real* events as they happen, but this is difficult to fit in with the continued use of "liveness" in relation to fictional or semi-fictional programs such as soap operas or gamedocs. Instead, it is more plausible that the decisive criterion of liveness is not so much the factuality of what is transmitted, but the fact of live transmission itself (Ellis, 2000, p. 31).

There is, however, a connection to real events built into "liveness," but an indirect one. Live transmission (of anything, whether real or fictional) guarantees that someone in the transmitting media institution *could* interrupt it at any time and make an immediate connection to real events. What is special, then, about live transmission is the *potential* connection it guarantees with real events. Or at least this is how liveness is now generally constructed. Joshua Meyrowitz put this succinctly:

There is a big difference between listening to a cassette tape while driving in a car and listening to a radio station, in that the cassette player cuts you off from the outside world, while the radio station ties you into it. Even with a local radio station, you are "in range" of any news about national and world events. (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 90)

Liveness—or live transmission—guarantees a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening.

If understood this way, it is no surprise that the category of liveness continues even as the set of media technologies to which it is applied expands. Not only does television's "liveness" continue to be emphasized as one of its key selling points more than a decade after some argued video recording would mean the end of televisual "liveness" (Cubitt, 1991). Liveness now takes new forms which link television to other media. These media include the Internet—as in the much commented-upon "live" transmission on the *Big Brother UK* Web site of Nick Bateman's expulsion in 2001, hours before edited highlights of the episode could

be shown on television (Lawson, 2001)— and the mobile phone, as in U.K. mobile phone companies' marketing strategies during the buildup to the 2001 summer season of reality TV:

Ultimately the [enhanced] SMS services may all boil down to the quality of the content and characters, not forgetting the giddy excitement that can be generated from a message telling *Big Brother* obsessives of two housemates being in bed together—'live on the internet now.' (Vickers, 2001)

Because liveness is not a natural category but a constructed term, its significance rests not on technological fact, but on a whole chain of ideas:

1. that we gain access through liveness to something of broader, "central," significance, which is worth accessing now, not later;
2. that the "we" who gain live access is not random, but a representative social group;
3. that the media¹ (not some other social mechanism) is the privileged means for obtaining that access.

Liveness, in sum, is a category whose use naturalizes the general idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the "realities" that matter for us as a society.

The connection of liveness to the media's reality-claims is hardly accidental. We could say a great deal more about the reality claims of television, especially about current forms of reality TV which (as we have seen) provide some clear examples of how the reference of "liveness" is being stretched (cf. Couldry, 2003, chapter. 6). Instead, however, I want to discuss how, at the same time that "liveness" is expanding across media, its *categorical* weight is being challenged by potential rival forms of "liveness" which are not (or not unambiguously) linked to a mediated social "centre."

When I say rival "forms" of liveness, I do not mean flows of communication which are necessarily referred to *as* "live" (since liveness is a category, its use is embedded in contexts that are largely habitual), but rather emergent ways of coordinating communications and bodies across time and space which, like "liveness" proper, involve (more or less) simultaneity, yet not an institutional "center" of transmission. Two fundamental shifts in information and communications technologies in the past decade threaten, *prima facie*, to destabilize liveness in the sense considered so far.

The first is what we could call *online liveness*: social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites, all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure. Often, online liveness overlaps with the existing

category of liveness, for example, Web sites linked to reality TV programs such as *Big Brother* which simply offer an alternative outlet for material that could in principle have been broadcast on television if there had been an audience to justify it. Online liveness here is simply an extension of traditional liveness across media, not a new way of coordinating social experience. But since the communications space of the Internet is effectively infinite, any number of "live" transmissions can go on in parallel without interfering with each other: Alongside live streaming of long-anticipated events on Web sites (major sporting events) and news-site coverage of breaking news exist chat rooms on myriad different sites that link smaller groups of people. All of these involve simultaneous co-presence of an audience, but in the latter case there is no liveness in the traditional sense—that is, a plausible connection to a center of transmission. What if the latter type of online liveness increasingly dominates people's trajectories as media consumers? This "liveness" would involve no central connection mirroring Pierre Levy's (1997) characterization of cyberculture as "universality *without* totality." It is impossible yet to assess the likelihood of this shift, as the Internet's contrasting tendencies toward fragmentation and concentration are played out. Much, including the Internet's capacity to deliver advertising audiences to fund continued media production, will depend on the outcome.

The second rival form of "liveness" we might call *group liveness* but it would not seem, at first sight, to overlap at all with traditional liveness since it starts from the co-presence of a social group, not the co-presence of an audience dispersed around an institutional center. I mean here the "liveness" of a mobile group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting. Peer-group presence is, of course, hardly new, but its *continuous mediation* through shared access to a communications infrastructure whose entry points are themselves mobile (and therefore can be permanently open) is new. It enables individuals and groups to be continuously co-present to each other even as they move independently across space. This transformation of social space may override individuals' passage between sites of fixed media access, as when school friends continue to text each other when they get home, enter their bedroom, and switch on their computer. As well as being a significant extension of social group dynamics, group liveness offers to the commercial interests that maintain the mobile telephony network an expanded space for centralized transmission of services and advertising. We return here to the ambiguity of original telephony which served as a limited broadcasting system (Marvin, 1987) before it became exclusively an instrument of interpersonal communication, but mobile phone use may not stabilize toward one use rather than the other in the way fixed telephony did. Whatever happens, the result will affect the context in which traditional liveness—individual communication to a socially legitimated point of central transmission—is understood.

Liveness and Habitus

These last remarks—about how liveness's significance as a category may be changed by other shifts in how communication flows are becoming embedded in social interaction—have been speculative, but in conclusion let me anchor them in some reflections on their empirical consequences. Social categories, in Durkheim's sense, are in one way abstract (they are abstracted in analysis from the flow of social life), but in another they are quite concrete, since they only work by being *embedded* in the thought and action of situated agents. This is especially true of Pierre Bourdieu's development of Durkheim's work through the concept of Mauss, Durkheim's collaborator: habitus. For habitus addresses the level at which embodied dispositions (particularly dispositions to classify the world in social action) are generated by structural features of that same social world. Tracing how the weight of "liveness" as a social category might be changing is part of asking how the "habitus" of contemporary societies is being transformed by mediation itself.

This is, of course, a huge topic, but I hope at least to establish some starting points. Some contextual remarks about Bourdieu's work are necessary, since it has been appropriated in media sociology piecemeal over the years rather than systematically. There are many ways of approaching Bourdieu, but one of the most promising is through a concept neglected in almost all media sociology: habitus. For it is here that Bourdieu, following a philosophical path out of phenomenology, addresses how agents' dispositions to act are themselves *formed* out of preexisting social contexts, a question that, as Nick Crossley argues, is "one of the most fundamental phenomena that sociology can address" (Crossley, 2001, p. 4).

In recent years habitus has received increasing attention as a concept (Calhoun, 1995; chap. 5; Crossley, 2001; McNay, 1999), although it has also received a fair amount of unsympathetic criticism (Alexander, 1995). It has been most frequently applied, if at all, in media sociology in its form of class-specific habitus in connection with Bourdieu's sociology of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). This, however, is not the most interesting usage of habitus for us here. For habitus is fortunately not tied to Bourdieu's controversial belief that the taste dispositions of social classes are shaped decisively by the early differences in their material conditions of existence; it can also be used more generally to understand the *range* of "generative structures" (McNay, 1999, p. 100) that shape dispositions. Even if a problem with Bourdieu's account of class-specific habitus in the arena of taste is that it ignores how mass media have aided the de-differentiation of taste boundaries (Wynne O'Connor, 1998), there is huge scope for investigating how media might have changed the fundamental conditions under which dispositions of *all* kinds are generated.

Bourdieu's overall neglect of media has often been noted (this is a fundamental issue in assessing his account of how contemporary societies hold

together [Calhoun, 1995, p. 155], but it is especially striking when we reflect on his early definition of habitus in this general sense as "a general transposable disposition which carries out a systematic universal application . . . of the necessity inherent in the *learning conditions* [of social action]" (emphasis added) (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). Media are clearly relevant to how children learn about the contemporary world, including its temporal and social organization, so mediation should surely be central to rethinking habitus. If we consider one of Bourdieu's best-known analyses of how habitus works in traditional societies, the analysis of the Berber house (Bourdieu, 1990), the mechanism is the structuring of domestic space. But no one can ignore media's role in structuring contemporary domestic space, embedded in the walls of today's living spaces as our "window" onto the distant social world. What is difficult is to capture the sheer breadth and complexity of how media might work as habitus, that is, as a "*materialised system of classification*" (emphasis added) (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 76). Fortunately, in his most developed writing on habitus, Bourdieu is open to the contribution of representations, especially those through which "the group presents itself as such" to itself (1990, p. 108). Media, of course, involve both types of structuring: the prior structuring of the spaces in which we live and become subjects, and the representations in which we recognize ourselves as groups. Liveness, indeed, as a category of media, marks the media's constructed role as the access point to what is supposed to be "central" to the "group," that is, the whole society. So the link of liveness to the organization of social behaviour passes quite naturally through the concept of habitus.

This point can be traced to all three types of liveness discussed earlier. Traditional "liveness" is written into daily habits which embody our dependencies on media flows: for example, the regular watching of a television news bulletin at least once every evening or the habit of many, including myself, of being woken daily by an alarm-radio offering the latest live news. The decentralized form of online liveness characterizes Internet use where new forms of public sociality may be emerging, sometimes in circumstances where the existence of relevant "peers" itself has to be generated outside existing social networks (see Orgad [in press] on online self-help groups for breast cancer sufferers). Mobile-phone-based "group liveness"—and its extension into the individual users' sense of themselves as permanently available for contact—is already being translated into embodied forms of responsibility best analyzed in terms of habitus. Take this quotation from an unemployed single mother living in north London:

I always have my phone with me . . . and it is always on. Last week I popped out to the shop on the corner here and forgot my phone. Half-way down [the street] I turned back to get it. The shop is only two minutes away but I still came back . . . (quoted in Crabtree, Nathan, & Roberts, 2003, p. 29).

The test in all this is to trace how categories of thought come together to organize dispositions and, through them, specific practices. Liveness, in its most general sense of continuous connectedness, is hardly likely to disappear as a prized feature of contemporary media, because it is a category closely linked to media's role in the temporal and spatial organization of the social world. The category "liveness" helps to shape the disposition to remain "connected" in all its forms, even though (as we have seen) the types of liveness are now pulling in different directions. It might seem that, by broadening our consideration of liveness this far, we have lost the specificity that made it such a compelling term in academic writing on media and in everyday media discourse. I hope, however, to have shown that the opposite is true: It is only by understanding the tangled web of social categories in which mediated liveness is lodged that we can understand, in turn, why debates about liveness in media research will continue to have wider resonances for the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. On the use of "the media" to refer to those media constructed as society's "central" media, see Couldry 2000 (2000, p. 6) and Gitlin (2001).

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