

# MEDIA USE IN DIGITAL EVERYDAY LIFE

“Now that digital media connect or disconnect our everyday lives within and across contexts, then the task of their users is to navigate these new opportunities, smartphone in hand, so as to enjoy new choices, face the at-time intense tensions and dilemmas that result, and orientate to a changing world as resourcefully as possible. In this carefully-researched book, Brita Ytre-Arne puts people at the heart of her insightful and empathetic dissection of modern life.”

—Professor Sonia Livingstone, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science

“In *Media Use in Digital Everyday Life*, Brita Ytre-Arne provides an insightful account of how we have woven the smartphone into every fabric of our everyday lives, and how our lives have been variously reconstituted in this process. A most helpful read for scholars and students alike.”

—Professor Pablo J. Boczkowski, Department of Communication Studies, Northwestern University

“Digital media and their infrastructures have comprehensively changed everyday life for all of us. Brita Ytre-Arne’s book provides an excellent basis for understanding these transformations, not only by clarifying the concept of everyday life in relation to media, but above all through the sophisticated analysis of the changing use of media and the associated dynamics and disruptions in the formation of everyday life.”

—Professor Andreas Hepp, ZeMKI, University of Bremen

“Ytre-Arne carefully unwraps how smartphones have impacted the way we work, play, and interact with the world around us. By lifting the veil over the rituals, routines and often ambivalent and messy experiences of people, Ytre-Arne invites us to critically reflect upon the taken-for-grantedness of mobile communication in everyday life. As such, *Media Use in Digital Everyday Life* is a must-read for those wanting to understand digital culture in its full complexity.”

—Associate Professor Mariëk Vanden Abeele, MICT research group, Ghent University

# MEDIA USE IN DIGITAL EVERYDAY LIFE

BY

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Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2023

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80262-386-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-383-3 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-385-7 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a product of my long-running interest in researching and reflecting upon media use in everyday life. I have been fortunate to be able to pursue this interest across several projects I have worked on with numerous colleagues. I am therefore grateful for many rewarding discussions on everyday media use, and to everyone who has been involved in the studies that the book draws on.

More specifically, the book is situated at the intersection between three research projects: *Media, Culture and Public Connection* led by Hallvard Moe was a broad study of cross-media use and public connection in Norway; *Intrusive media, ambivalent users, and digital detox (Digitox)* led by Trine Syvertsen is an ongoing project on digital disconnection, and my project *Media Use in Crisis Situations* expands studies of pandemic news use into a broader interdisciplinary project. I would like to thank all the excellent scholars and nice people involved in these projects, and the many informants who have shared their experiences with media in everyday life.

In the writing process, I have been particularly grateful to Trine Syvertsen and the Digitox team for encouraging comments on the book proposal, and to Hallvard Moe for constructive feedback on the introduction and lively discussions about phenomenology and the lifeworld. John Magnus Ragnhildson Dahl conducted some of the in-depth interviews that were most productive to analyze, and Ranjana Das insightfully helped me situate the book on the metaphorical bookshelves of the research literature on everyday media use.

At Emerald, Kimberly Chadwick has been a very supportive editor, and many others have helped with various parts of the process. The anonymous peer reviewers provided encouraging comments that improved the manuscript. With funding from the publication fund at the university library of the University of Bergen, this book is published open access. I would like to thank everyone who has assisted in making the book come to life.

In my own everyday life, I am also grateful to Anders, Sunniva and Olav for inspiration to think about – and not think about – writing this book.

Bergen, August 2022

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# INTRODUCTION: MEDIA USE AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN DIGITAL SOCIETIES

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents the research questions, approaches, and arguments of the book, asking how our everyday lives with media have changed after the smartphone. I introduce the topic of media use in everyday life as an empirical, methodological, and theoretical research interest, and argue for its continued centrality to our digital society today, accentuated by datafication. I discuss how the analytical concepts of media repertoires and public connection can inform research into media use in everyday life, and what it means that our societies and user practices are becoming more digital. The main argument of the book is that digital media transform our navigation across the domains of everyday life by blurring boundaries, intensifying dilemmas, and affecting our sense of connection to communities and people around us. The chapter concludes by presenting the structure of the rest of the book, where these arguments will be substantiated in analysis of media use on an ordinary day, media use in life phase transitions, and media use when ordinary life is disrupted.*

Can you remember your first smartphone, and did it change your life? I bought my first smartphone in the early summer of 2011, right before the birth of my first child. I can safely say that life was never the same again. Although the new phone was hardly the most significant change that happened, it became part of how I reconfigured everyday life.

My coincidental timing of these events might be a personal particularity, but the early 2010s, only a little more than a decade ago, was a period in which smartphones became part of everyday life for lots of people. This happened in Norway where I live, and in other countries in the Global North, soon followed by broader proliferation worldwide (Avle et al., 2020). In 2021, it was estimated that more than 90 per cent of people had smartphone access in a growing number of countries around the globe (Deloitte, 2021). ‘Smartphones changed everything’, wrote the *Wall Street Journal* in 2020: ‘smartphones upended every element of society during the last decade, from dating to dinner parties, travel to politics. This is just the beginning’ (Kitchen, 9.9.2020). But while all of this was happening, people lived their lives, using smartphones along with other media old and new, interwoven with what was going on in their lives, and in the world around them.

This book explores the role of media in our everyday lives in digital societies, after the proliferation of smartphones and in conditions of ubiquitous connectivity. I analyze everyday media use across platforms, content types and modes of communication, taking the perspective of how we live our lives with media – how we manage plans and practicalities, keep in touch with friends and family, seek information and entertainment, work and learn, take part in shared experiences, and connect to our social lifeworlds. We might do all of this in the space of one single day, and we might experience such a day as ‘ordinary’ – just normal everyday life. But media technologies are also part of our less ordinary days, important to how we manage life-changing transitions and special events in our personal lives, and to how we relate to local communities, political processes or global events. We use media to connect to each other, and to society – throughout an ordinary day, across the life course, and in times of disruption.

The smartphone is emblematic of how our everyday lives with media are changing in a digital and hyper-connected society, and as such it is essential to the topic of this book. A central question I discuss is what it means that most of us now have a smartphone to reach for, from where we are and what we are doing, to manage multiple aspects of our daily lives: A mobile, flexible device we rely on to communicate, find information, entertain and assist us, often used in combination with other media, but also a device that enables tracking and surveillance of our movements and engagements, informing feedback loops based on our personal data. How has digital media use in everyday life changed after the smartphone?

To answer these questions, I draw on classic scholarship on media and communication technologies in everyday life (Baym, 2015; Silverstone, 1994), and on recent analysis of digital ambivalence and disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020). With a user perspective, I situate smartphones and other kinds of digital platforms as part of broader *media repertoires* (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017), with an interest in the totality and internal relationships of any kind of media that people use and find meaningful in their everyday lives. I further understand everyday media use as central to *public connection* (Couldry et al., 2010), to how we orient ourselves to a world beyond our private concerns.

The book provides an updated perspective on media in everyday life after digital media has become increasingly embedded and ingrained in society. A purpose for the book is to fill a gap between classic (but old) discussions on everyday media use, and recent (but sometimes narrowly focused) studies of new technologies. Our understandings of everyday media use are still shaped by theories developed before the internet, before digital and social and mobile media. This book highlights rather than discards these understandings, but moves forward in tackling dilemmas of technological transformations, and by considering recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I untangle how media becomes meaningful to us in the everyday, connecting us to each other and to communities and publics. The book offers empirical, methodological and theoretical insight on media use in digital everyday life.

### WHY EVERYDAY LIFE?

‘Everyday life’ is one of those concepts that everyone understands, but which is still difficult to define. The term is not internal jargon belonging to a particular research field, but instead recognizable across a range of contexts – we might even describe it as an ‘everyday’ term. One of the early ideas behind this book was to answer the questions: ‘But what do you mean by everyday life?’ and further ‘Why do you [meaning media use researchers] go on about everyday life?’. These are good questions. Let us start with the latter: Why everyday life? More precisely, why would someone interested in media use find it important to refer to everyday life for contextualization?

In media and communication studies, interest in everyday life has a long history. The idea of everyday life has been central to approaches and research interests in cultural studies (Gray, 2002; Morley, 1992), media phenomenology (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013; Scannell, 1995) or media ethnography (Hermes, 1995; Radway, 1984). The term has been particularly central to

theories of *domestication* (Haddon, 2016; Silverstone et al., 2021) focused on processes of gradually integrating media technologies in the home. Roger Silverstone wrote a classic volume on *Television and everyday life* (Silverstone, 1994), arguing that in order to move past debates on television as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and actually understand what it is, we have to consider television as embedded in tensions and dynamics of everyday life. Shaun Moores (2000) applied everyday life as a framework for understanding the historical development of broadcast media, and Maria Bakardjieva (2005) analyzed the domestication of computers and internet technologies in everyday life. Elizabeth Bird (2003) wrote *The Audience in Everyday Life* to argue for the relevance of ethnographic methods to understand our media-saturated reality, while Tim Markham (2017) wrote an introductory textbook titled *Media and Everyday Life* to present topics and thinkers in media studies through their relevance to daily life.

All of the above are books on media with ‘everyday life’ in the title. Moreover, the term keeps popping up in journal articles on a variety of topics regarding media use: A comparative study of why people read print newspapers in the digital age refer to how different media are integrated into everyday life (Boczkowski et al., 2021), while a study of people who prefer online media at home find that digital alternatives are perceived to be better integrated into domestic everyday life (Müller, 2020). In analysis of how and why we follow news, the idea of the everyday provides a way of situating ordinary users at the centre of attention, by discussing everyday news use (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2019) or everyday public connection (Swart et al., 2017). In debates about datafication and emergent technologies, the notion of the everyday is used to highlight human and social experiences with for instance self-tracking (Lomborg & Frandsen, 2016), smart homes (Hine, 2020) or algorithmic media (Willson, 2017).

What do these different contributions have in common? They refer to everyday life to signal a position, because referencing ‘everyday life’ holds some empirical, methodological or theoretical implications. The term can be invoked to answer the ‘so what’-question: A compelling reason for why we need to study media at all is its relevance to everyday life (Silverstone, 1999). Today we can adapt this argument to why we need to study the smartphone – it is part of everyday life. Through such statements, we frame the smartphone as a technology and research topic that is recognizable and relevant to experiences and dilemmas each of us encounter. The smartphone has transformed society, but it has done so through our everyday interactions.

Similarly: Why does it matter if people read international news or look at cat videos online, watch Netflix or Linear TV, listen to music on Spotify or

prefer vinyl records? If you are interested in media business models or media policies, and find the choices users make a bit puzzling, you might need to look into motivations and contexts in everyday life to gain a deeper understanding of what goes on. Attention to everyday contexts can both complicate and enhance insights gained from other types of tracking and measurements of media use (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2020). To understand new technologies, or connect critiques of these phenomena to people's experiences, everyday life is an essential framework: It is easier to grasp the idea of 'the Internet of Things' (Bunz & Meikle, 2018) as having to do with whether your refrigerator needs internet connection, than through concepts such as machine learning or smart sensors.

Sometimes the position signalled by referring to everyday life is explicitly normative. A key example is the debate on everyday experiences with *datafication*, or 'the quantification of human life through digital information, very often for economic value' (Mejias & Couldry, 2019). The idea of so-called 'big data' as more precise or valuable has been met with critical questions (Boyd & Crawford, 2012), and with concern for how audience engagement can be harvested and utilized for opaque purposes (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2020). In criticizing these developments, the notion of 'everyday life' is central to put the human experience of living in datafied conditions front and centre (Kennedy & Hill, 2018), or to focus on the people rather than systems (Livingstone, 2019). This interest further corresponds to feminist (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020) and postcolonial critiques (Milan & Treré, 2019) of datafication and power.

We can also signal analytical and methodological interests by referring to everyday life: The term is used to prioritize context over generalizability, and ordinary user perspectives and experiences over media professionals and institutions. This could imply attention to small acts of engagement in social media (Picone et al., 2019), and inclusion of seemingly mundane practices of media use (Hermes, 1995; Sandvik et al., 2016). An everyday life perspective is a backdrop for cross-media research (Lomborg & Mortensen, 2017; Schröder, 2011) rather than pre-selecting which media to study based on the researchers' preconceived notions of what matters. Qualitative researchers and ethnographers also draw on 'everyday life' as a term that points towards preferred methods: Talking to people about a day in the life (del Rio Carral, 2014), 'capturing life as it is narrated' (Kaun, 2010) with diary methods, and exploring experiences and reflections in informants' own words. Some quantitative studies of media use also use the term (Hovden & Rosenlund, 2021) and research on everyday media repertoires can combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017).

I am also someone who often explain and position my key research interests through the notion of everyday life. A long-running interest in everyday life has informed my preference for qualitative and user-focused methods, in the studies I draw on in this book and in other projects. I have used the term ‘everyday life’ in the title of publications (Moe & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Ytre-Arne, 2012), and also explored how media use changes with biographical disruption to everyday routines (Ytre-Arne, 2019) or discussed audience agency in everyday encounters with digital and datafied media (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021a). For me, the everyday signals a perspective on why and how to study media use: it is important because it is part of daily life, it is interesting because everyday life is diverse and meaningful, and it is impossible to be done with because it changes constantly. I do not think there is any necessary contradiction between an everyday perspective versus a societal or political perspective on media use – instead, everyday life is where political dimensions of media are experienced, interpreted, and acted upon. This point runs as an undercurrent through the analyses of this book and is highlighted in the concluding chapter.

### WHAT IS EVERYDAY LIFE?

We have established that media are part of everyday life, and that research on media use is interested in everyday life. That is not to say that definitions of everyday life abound in the literature referenced above, or in the field at large. Even classic contributions observe that commenting on the topic of everyday life might seem simplistic (e.g. Silverstone, 1994, p. 19). There is considerable variation in how precisely or extensively the concept is explained: Some works develop distinct philosophical understandings (e.g. Bakardijeva in Sandvik et al., 2016), or ground the term in substantial discussion of different theoretical positions (e.g. Cavalcante et al., 2017). Some authors define the term and how it connects to methodological and analytical frameworks in their studies). Others explain adjacent concepts to the everyday, such as the study mentioned above of why people still read print newspapers (Boczkowski et al., 2021), which draws on theories of ritualization, sociality and cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, everyday life is theorized in disciplines from human geography (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001) to psychology (Schraube & Højholt, 2016). Some central philosophical contributions are Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947), which formulates a Marxist-inspired argument about the importance of this sphere of human conduct in the face of capitalism and technological change, and Michel De Certeau’s *The Practice of*

*Everyday Life* (1984) which emphasizes the concept of potentially subversive tactics in people's navigation through daily life. Another key work is *The Structures of the Lifeworld* (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) which formulates Alfred Schutz' theory of the *lifeworld* in which everyday life is enacted, including spatial, temporal and social dimensions, and how we move through 'zones of operation' where people and places beyond our immediate surroundings are yet within 'restorable reach' to us, through the familiarity or routines in the everyday which we take for granted (1973). This understanding has been particularly important to phenomenological and sociological studies of media and technologies in everyday life.

Such philosophical works on everyday life are briefly to comprehensively referenced in studies of everyday media use, providing a background understanding that is made more or less explicit. For instance, Herman Bausinger (1984) set out to discuss the role of media in daily living, drawing on Schutz and a growing empirical as well as philosophical interest in everyday life as a research topic. He observed that media are not used in isolation from one another or from personal relationships. Making an example of the intricate details of negotiating media use in family dynamics at home, he argued that 'The media are an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted' (Bausinger, 1984, p. 349) and made several points that have later been picked up in discussions of media ensembles (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017) and of media use as mundane but yet meaningful in everyday settings (Hermes, 1995; Sandvik et al., 2016). In her study of early internet use at home, Marija Bakardjieva (Bakardjieva, 2005) provides a thorough theoretical discussion of how Schutz and Lefebvre's theories relate to communication technologies, developing the idea of a critical phenomenology to understand users as well as systems.

Roger Silverstone's work on everyday life also references Schutz' understanding of the lifeworld, and further invokes Anthony Giddens' sociology of the self in a discussion of whether this lifeworld is different in conditions of late modernity (Silverstone, 1993). Silverstone references debates about order and chaos in a world of complex societal issues and new communication systems, juxtaposed with an observation that television is something we have seemingly come to take for granted, as a technology and social phenomenon and as part of our everyday lives. Connecting these threads, Silverstone emphasizes the significance of routines and familiarity in keeping the chaos of the world at bay and upholding a sense of order:

*Routines, rituals, traditions, myths, these are the stuff of social order and everyday life. Within the familiar and taken for granted, as well as through the heightened and dramatic, our lives take shape and within those shapes, spatially and temporarily grounded*

*and signified, we attempt to go about our business, avoiding or managing, for the most part, the traumas and the catastrophes that threaten to disturb our peace and sanity. (Silverstone, 1994, p. 18)*

In this understanding, everyday habits institute and reaffirm a sense of *ontological security*, a concept Giddens applies to describe feelings of trust and continuity in people's experience of the world and sense of self, central to how people position themselves in the world and give meaning to life (Giddens, 1991). Ontological security is also a key concept in Annette Markham's more recent theory of digital communication as echolocation, emphasizing ping-backs when we send out messages through digital media, and in return have our continued existence in the world confirmed (Markham, 2021). Her discussion underlines how feelings of being connected or disconnected through digital media can harbour existential anxieties related to the confirmation of the self.

Across these theories of everyday life, some key dimensions stand out. Everyday life has to do with the organization of time (temporal dimensions), space (spatial dimensions), and people and activities (social dimensions) through which we make meaning and relate to the world and our position in it (existential dimensions). I draw on these dimensions to further situate media use in everyday life, emphasizing how we use media for routinized navigation across social domains.

#### SITUATING MEDIA USE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

To understand media use – here applied as an umbrella term for all kinds of relationships and engagements with media and communication technologies – we need to situate media use as part of everyday life, in people's lifeworlds. Drawing on the ideas introduced above, of familiarity and routines, and of spatial, temporal, social and existential dimensions, we can envision many different roles and positions for media. I am particularly interested in how we use media to orient ourselves as we move through our everyday lives, as part of what I call *routinized navigation across social domains*. What does this mean, exactly?

Everyday media use is *routinized* because we do not invent it from scratch – we rely on repeated actions that we are familiar with, regarding media use as well as other aspects of everyday living. Imagine waking up in the morning and not repeating anything you have done before – instead of making the same type of coffee and checking the same apps on your smartphone. Like other habits and routines, familiar and repeated media use practices are particularly essential to the ontological security of everyday life emphasized by