



# Introduction: Understanding Media and Society in the Age of Digitalisation

*Dennis Nguyen, Ivonne Dekker, and Sergül Nguyen*

This book offers insights into diverse research perspectives on highly relevant issues in contemporary media and society, which have been fundamentally transformed by digital technologies. The main goal is to illustrate how different research interests and practical choices lead to a broad spectrum of approaches in media and communication studies. It places emphasis on the following aspects: how different methodological outlooks are combinable within the framework of practical research projects; how research interests and practical choices determine research practices; how media and communication studies inspire and stimulate research in different disciplines; and why it is imperative to have a critical look at the value of data and methods in the age of digitalisation. “Understanding” in this context is an umbrella term for different research perspective and methods that all try to map and examine how digital media change society from small, for example human-tech interaction, to large contexts, for example digital public spheres.

---

D. Nguyen (✉) • I. Dekker  
HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [dennis.nguyen@hu.nl](mailto:dennis.nguyen@hu.nl); [ivonne.dekker@hu.nl](mailto:ivonne.dekker@hu.nl)

S. Nguyen  
Galatasaray University, Istanbul, Turkey

© The Author(s) 2020  
D. Nguyen et al. (eds.), *Understanding Media and Society in the Age of Digitalisation*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38577-4\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38577-4_1)

A strength of this volume is its international scope and its selection of arguments and case studies, ranging from deeper critical reflection on research methodologies to concrete studies on digital communities, political communication, news media coverage, visual communication, media and socialisation, and media usage in the health sector. The book's chapters are a diverse selection of critical commentary and hands-on research and thus combine theoretical deliberation with empirical studies, to provide a rich "snippet" of how researchers globally, with different specialisations and at different academic career stages, practise media and communication studies.

The wider field of media and communication studies is still relatively young but can nevertheless look back at over 30 years of intense and highly interdisciplinary research in the constantly shifting intersections of sociology, cultural studies, political science, psychology, and, more recently, Internet studies, critical algorithm studies, and the computer sciences. It has distinct sub-fields with strong research traditions such as journalism studies and film studies and is open to the discovery of new ground, by merging with neighbouring disciplines, as, for example in the instance of media psychology. This diversity derives from the fact that media technologies mould and configure all aspects of social life (Coudry and Hepp 2018) that attract attention across the academic landscape. Digital technologies are ubiquitous and challenge a narrow understanding of the term "media" (Bunz and Meikle 2018). The "digital plenitude" (Bolter 2019) of contemporary media culture stimulates research in a variety of distinct sub-disciplines that share a common interest in the relationship between humans, individually and as groups, and the media technologies that they build.

Research on media and communication is by nature extremely dynamic and prone to adopt, but also shape, trends, as theories and methods evolve in close relationship with their manifold research subjects, which themselves change at a rapid pace. As an interdisciplinary field with manifold, often innovative research methods along the qualitative-quantitative spectrum, media and communication studies are constantly being reinvented. Especially in the age of digitalisation, algorithms, and big data, the field is one of the hotspots for trends related to the so-called digital humanities. The assumption is that with new types and large volumes of data, for example, about cultural and social practices in the use of media technology, new methods are needed for analysing inherently digital phenomena (Rogers 2019). However, despite a clear trend towards a digitalisation of

the humanities, practical challenges related to the feasibility of data-driven research designs and an obvious need for more theory-focused research interests do not render “traditional” approaches obsolete.

Quite the contrary, a diversity of methodologies continue to exist in parallel to each other; they cannot be seen in isolation but in sum provide a complementary view on developments and challenges in political, social, and cultural practices that are inherently mediated and digitalised. The research areas themselves are diverse and highly relevant for understanding culture and society, and the field of media and communication research has the potential to increase the current stock of knowledge considerably: what are communities and how do they form cultures? What is user behaviour and how does it change with new technologies? What is the history of media and how does it shape the present and future? What are current trends in media production and consumption? How do genres emerge and evolve? What is media (and data) literacy and how can it be included in media education? How do we frame groups and issues, that is, what is media representation? What is participation in media culture and public discourse? How do users interact with media technology and how do increasingly autonomous devices look back at users?

In this book, each contribution critically comments on trends in specific, but interrelated sections of media-based interaction. These range from empirical studies driven by digital methods to philosophical reflections on human-machine relationships. The chapters illustrate the variety of angles in the field, which goes much further than the traditional epistemological binarities of quantitative versus qualitative, or normative versus descriptive, research philosophies, as technological, cultural, and political factors also affect the way research is conducted in the (digital) humanities. The main questions the book attempts to find answers for are: what does media studies and communications research look like today? What are examples for digital humanities applied in practice—and to what extent have their expectations been either fulfilled or disappointed?

The book provides a sober and honest summary for why “old-fashioned” research practices still remain highly relevant for a diversity of reasons and why the field is constantly redefining itself. This is of great value for researchers, educators, and students: for researchers, to see how their work fits into current research trends and find inspiration from the examples, arguments, and insights in the book; for educators, to plan their teaching methods in relevant subjects and fill it with examples; and for students, to understand why their discipline is so inherently interdisciplinary and diverse

and to inform them about the routes they can take in their own studies but also what obstacles they need to consider. In each chapter, emphasis is placed on elaborating about methodological choices in order to open them up for a broader audience. Thus, all contributions follow a similar structure in presenting their goals, frameworks, methodologies, and results to increase accessibility and comparability.

The book combines contributions from 14 international researchers, and the research is organised in three parts that in sum provide a comprehensive overview of current approaches to epistemological and methodological challenges, cultural analysis of media products, digital media and politics, media technology and human interaction, and the future of media studies and communications research.

## OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Part I, *Challenges and Opportunities in Media and Communication Studies*, starts with some fundamental questions about practising research in a highly interdisciplinary and rapidly changing field. Insights come from researchers with a common interest in critically analysing how digital technology shapes society, especially in regard to media technologies, but with diverse backgrounds ranging from digital and data politics (Dennis Nguyen) and fan culture studies (Nicolle Lamerichs) through visual media (Dulce Da Rocha Gonçalves) to environmental communication and tourism studies (Konrad Gunesch). In combination, their contributions map the chances and opportunities of digital media and digital data for both researchers and actors in specific domains (such as fan communities or travelling) and outline challenges, risks, and pitfalls that come with the ever-increasing digitalisation of social life. Despite their clearly distinguishable angles and different examples, the chapters are united by several broader questions about how research can take new directions in the age of digital media and also why it is not an easy feat to conduct valid and reliable research when addressing complex and dynamic social phenomena that involve media technology. However, they also shed light on how to learn from the past and propose new areas for fruitful research.

In his chapter “Media and Communication Studies in the Age of Digitalization and Datafication: How Practical Factors and Research Interests Determine Methodological Choices” Dennis Nguyen starts with outlining the potentials but also very practical limitations of embracing trends associated with the computerisation of research in media and

communication studies as central sites for developing, discussing, and practising digital humanities. While disputes over methodological philosophies are not new to the field, media and communication studies may be the right place to experiment with mixed method designs that also make pragmatic use of digital research strategies. Dennis Nguyen observes that “for practical and research-interested based reasons, different methodologies continue to coexist and should explore when and how to complement each other. This also means that questions of reliability, validity, transparency and ethics stay as relevant as ever.”

Nicolle Lamerichs takes the argument further in the chapter “User Tactics and Algorithms: A Digital Humanities Approach to YouTube and Tumblr”. In her selected empirical cases Lamerichs takes a close look at how users form digital communities that are largely determined by online platforms such as YouTube and Tumblr. She places emphasis on how algorithmic configurations have a tangible impact on online communities and how users try to subvert and negotiate the rules of engagement. The chapter takes a critical look at the limitations of digital data if taken at face value and without contextualisation by raising essential questions: “In terms of methodology, scholars of media and platforms need to stay critical and weary of algorithms and guidelines that shape their data sets. Are there ways to apply digital methods while also being critical of platforms and their interfaces and policies? Considering that platforms filter so heavily, does it still make sense to focus on the content that users engage with the most?”

The next chapter takes a closer look at how the Internet forms a rich archive for records of human cultural activity. In her chapter “Making Sense of the (Internet) Archive: Negotiating Meaning, Memory and History in Artistic Practice”, Dulce da Rocha Gonçalves discusses photographer Daniel Blaufuks’ artistic methodology and exposes how the photographer works within the rules of his medium specificity: by highlighting the inner logic of the Internet and its hyperlinks, Blaufuks builds intensive cartographies of collective memories. This archive is open to critical inquiry from different methodological angles, including decidedly qualitative ones. Da Rocha Gonçalves observes that “Blaufuks is also connecting the atlas, the database device, to the structure of the Internet: the spatial display highlights the potential connections between images; it displays the inner logic of the Internet, as an archive of images in constant movement, separated by and connected by hyperlinks.”

Konrad Gunesch's chapter "Slow Tourism Joining New Media in Global Sustainability and Environmental Communication: Inspiring Individual and Industry Travel Practices and Media Expressions" closes Part I with a critical discussion of the lack of research on the interplay between slow tourism, sustainable travel, environmental communication, and digital media. He outlines how researchers who want to address this research gap can learn from previous work on framing, journalism, and digital media studies. Gunesch indicates that there is a need for a transdisciplinary perspective as different media technologies shape and transform travellers' behaviour from planning through experiencing and post-processing their journey. He closes with the remark that "most of these recommendations seem to come down to responsible use of new and digital media forms and expressions by individuals and institutions in the travel and tourism industry". The chapter illustrates how media and communication research keeps pushing boundaries and how insights from these disciplines can stimulate and inspire research in other domains.

The main goals of Part I can be summarised as follows: exploring why research in media and communication studies is not yet and may never be fully digitalised and computerised for practical and epistemological reasons and analysing what methodological problems the field faces and what the implications are for future research in existing and new domains of research.

Part II of the book, *Researching Meaning, Representation, and Politics in Digital Media*, examines the relationship between digital media and politics; emphasis is placed on the digital transformation of the public sphere and how the Internet has changed the rules for public communication in terms of participation and framing via content. The part brings together four case studies by seven authors from six different countries: South Africa (Ivonne Dekker), Germany (Dennis Nguyen), Turkey (İnci Çınarlı and Sergül Nguyen), Montenegro (Radmila Radojevic), Slovenia (Jan Bajec) and Greece (Ioana Ferrà).

In their chapter "Combining Qualitative and Digital Methods for Exploratory Framing Analyses: The Case of Alternative Video Coverage of the Syrian War on YouTube", Dekker and Dennis Nguyen provide an exploratory study that combines digital methods with a qualitative framing analysis in political non-mainstream YouTube content. They show how automatised tools for collecting and analysing digital data in the form of, for example, user comments can help with efficiently mapping essential parts of online discourses in a manner that saves time and how a deeper

critical analysis of especially visual content can benefit from qualitative research methods to reveal layers of meaning in complex media texts. The authors observe that YouTubers “tend to make much stronger ideological statements in their coverage and commentary on conflicts such as the Syrian War and thus reframe issues by linking them to different political discussions that go beyond the immediate context.”

Çınarlı and Sergül Nguyen take a critical look at how news media and digital platforms contribute to the construction of a culture of fear in which highly accelerated, hectic, and dramatised breaking news coverage plays a central role. In their chapter “Mediating Fear by Breaking News: A Case Study of CNN Türk and NTV”, they examine two of Turkey’s most important TV news channels’ usage of the breaking news concept in their broadcasting routine and Twitter feeds for a week of activity in March 2017, right before a crucial referendum in the country. With a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis, the researchers show how Turkish TV news seems to be in the danger of overusing breaking news and similar labels in framing their stories in the race for views and clicks in the attention economy. They conclude: “instead of being the first to break the news, media outlets should strive for the truth and public interest which is in fact the *raison d’être* of journalism.”

Radojevic, Dennis Nguyen, Bajec, and Ferra close the part with a digital methods-inspired study on Instagram usage in the Idomeni refugee camp in Greece during the height of the so-called migration crisis in 2016. Their chapter “Visual Framing and Migrant Discourses in Social Media: The Story of Idomeni on Instagram” shows that social media platforms such as Instagram are important sites for political discourses but that they also shape how interactions take place and in which form. This has important implications for understanding the role of digital media in (transnational) public discourses and for applying new, digital research strategies: “Instagram allows non-media communicators and independent journalists to enter the stage. This platform expands and shapes the imagery associated with the refugee crisis and through real-time uploads from the ground serves as an alternative (or supplementary) source of news. However, the platform has significant limitations and lacks any means of quality control; therefore, each contributor needs to be closely scrutinised in terms of intentions and practices.”

The main goals of Part II are to critically discuss and show with concrete examples how studies combine methodologies from “traditional” and digital research approaches in the field of political online communication; to weigh potentials and benefits for participation and public

discourse against downsides that contradict normative expectations in the form of conflict, misinformation, and undermining trust; and to explore why research on political online communication is prone to embrace digital methods and how accessibility to (the right) data poses a considerable limitation.

Finally, Part III, *Analysing How Digital Media Changes Interaction*, explores how to research the relationship between media technology and social (and anti-social) interactions and the treatment of the human mind and body that all rely on continuously changing modes of communication. More specifically, the chapters investigate how social media apps shape social and anti-social behaviour, how users seek health information, and how the emerging field of medical humanities connects to (critical) media studies. The part comprises three chapters from researchers with strong backgrounds in mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative research.

In “A Quantitative and Qualitative Approach to Analysing Cyberbullying in Classmates’ WhatsApp Groups”, Dana Aizenkot analyses with a mixed methods design how the app has become essential for socialisation processes among school children and how the medium’s affordance is instrumentalised for digital forms of abuse, coercion, intimidation, and domination. She collected data from a representative sample of Israeli pupils ( $N = 1111$ ) for a survey with open and closed questions on their experience with the app and forms of cyberbullying. While it is important to understand the extent of a problem such as cyberbullying, the way it is performed and becomes manifest depends on the technological framework, which inevitably, through its affordances, will shape and transform behaviour, which implies that research designs must embrace flexibility. As Aizenkot explains: “Yet, given the constant upgrading of social networks, the expressions of cyberbullying may change in the future. Therefore, a mixed methods approach is advisable.”

Dennis Rosenberg, Rita Mano, and Gustavo S. Mesch take a similar route in their chapter “Technology Experience, Health Beliefs or Background? Examining the Factors Affecting the Intention to Use Social Media for Health Purposes”. Here, qualitative research prepared the ground for a larger quantitative survey among social media users. The research interest is to better understand when, how, and why users seek advice and information about health issues on the Web. The way individuals seek, access, and make use of information has drastically changed with the digital transformation and encompasses virtually all domains of private



and public life. By looking at the case of health information, the researchers are able to examine the connection between technology, beliefs, personal background, and the intention to use social media as a source for information about health issues. While seeking and consuming such health information online, it is a very subjective experience for a large number of users. The authors thus plead for a combined approach and conclude: “we propose conducting mixed methods research in order to address health-related social media use in future studies. Nevertheless, before implementing such approach, researchers should consider its possible high cost [...] as well as various potential research obstacles.”

The final chapter of this part is “Constructing 24/7 Madness. The Pathology Behind Schizophrenia in Western Urban Screen Cultures” by Bjorn Beijnon. He connects critical media studies and philosophy with the emerging field of medical humanities by providing a qualitative analysis of the cultural construction of normal and pathological behaviour in modern digital society with schizophrenia as the case study. The ubiquity of screen technology in many media-dense urban contexts affects the concept of attention not only on a psychological but also on a cultural level. Medical practice may lag behind the swiftly changing nature of attention in a tech-driven environment, which may lead to exclusion and mis-categorisation. Through the use of media theory and philosophy Beijnon aims to show, how and why schizophrenic patients are not being disciplined into subjects of the twenty-first century. The chapter demonstrates the strength of qualitative research especially in exploring new territory for interdisciplinary research.

The main goals of Part III are to illustrate how media technology transforms different forms of communication and how this shapes interactions between individuals and also between humans and machines and to show that specific research interests cannot be fully addressed with digital data and that more conventional forms of research continue to display great flexibility in understanding different aspects of media usage and its effects.

The main line of reasoning and central motif of this volume is to show how media and communication studies focus on diverse subject matters that each come with various methodological challenges and also how digitalisation provides a plethora of issues to investigate and at the same time broadens the horizon for conducting research. It achieves this through a combination of theorisation, critical reflection, and empirical examples. This book takes a comparative look at the field from an international perspective and discusses trends in research practices. While broad and diverse

in its scope, the present volume cannot be deemed as exhaustive and may only offer another set of arguments in a long and ongoing discussion about methodological differences and when and how to bridge them. However, it aims to contribute to an emerging body of knowledge and reflection on current research in a highly diversified field that tackles the issue of digitalisation in media and communication studies from a critical perspective and considers both practical and epistemological questions. It provides a sober and honest summary for why “old-fashioned” research practices still remain highly relevant for a multitude of reasons and why the field is constantly redefining itself.

## REFERENCES

- Bolter, J. (2019). *Digital Plenitude. The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of New Media*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- Bunz, M., & Meikle, G. (2018). *The Internet of Things*. London: Polity.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. London: Polity.
- Rogers, R. (2019). *Doing Digital Methods*. London: Sage.