

THE FUTURE OF

LIVE



Karin van Es

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polity

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Preface

Liveness has been, and still is, a persistent and much-debated concept in media studies. The emergence of social media, following the dot-com bubble bust of the early 2000s, has brought new forms of liveness into effect. These challenge common assumptions about and perspectives on liveness, and provoke a revisiting of the concept. This book develops a comprehensive understanding of what liveness is and seeks to clarify the stakes surrounding the category of the “live.”

So far, considerations of liveness have been partial: they tend to be limited in outlook to the notion’s relevance to the particular cases under scrutiny. As such, they promote either an ontological, phenomenological, or rhetorical perspective on the live. Each of these perspectives highlights some but obscures other dimensions of the notion. Reinterpreting liveness for the social media era, this book develops a method by which to combine those perspectives, charting liveness in terms of “constellations.” By analyzing the live as it manifests itself in four cases (Livestream, e-Jamming, *The Voice*, and Facebook), it explores the operation of the category of liveness and pinpoints the conditions under which it comes into being. The analyses it provides also facilitate a comparison of the mechanisms of control of broadcast media and social media, and a broader reflection on how these media relate to each other.

Specifically, the book should be of interest to upper-level students and researchers in media studies. It touches upon topics debated by radio, theater, film, television, and new media scholars. For television and new media researchers it is of particular interest, as it raises critical questions about today's social media and how we should envision their relation to broadcast media.

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Amsterdam, March 2016

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1

Introduction

It's early January 2016, and, over coffee, my neighbor Ronny tells me that several times a year she takes the ferry to the cinema across the IJ lake in Amsterdam to watch broadcasts of operas and ballets staged at London's Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. These performances are simulcast live to 15,000 cinemas in more than thirty-five countries. Ronny speaks enthusiastically of these occasions. She revels in the camerawork and enjoys the comfort of the cinema. During intermissions, she explains, tweets from viewers are displayed on screen, making visible, as it were, other viewers watching in cinemas across the globe. She has a friend in England who also attends these screenings, and afterward they evaluate the performances over the phone.

Ronny's account draws attention to the continuing reliance on the live in our present-day media landscape and raises several important considerations about it. These screenings, for instance, underscore how live broadcasts—contrary to the idea that liveness provides a natural and direct connection to a given occasion—are heavily produced (Caldwell 2000; Scannell 2001). To avoid transmitting “boring” footage of the operas and ballets taken from a single stationary camera, the broadcasts actively switch between cameras, offering multiple points of view. In overall effect, cinemagoers here are offered an experience unlike that of anyone actually present at the performances. This, of course, has been the case for

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“live” televised sports for at least a half-century. But these live-streamed events also illustrate that the live is no longer a property of radio or television alone; the “live” media landscape is now multifarious. Not only do services like Twitter make their own claims to be live, but they also intersect with traditional forms of liveness. In the above example, Twitter interacts with the streaming video shown in theaters worldwide, as audience members are actively invited to comment on the performance.

That the descriptor “live” has been used in relation to multiple media forms has magnified the confusion about what it means for a medium to be live. People tend to have a general notion of the term’s meaning. But when ideas about the “live” are put to critical scrutiny, the concept proves to be more complex than one might think. Consider these opera and ballet simulcasts: when they’re being promoted as live, what is actually being promised? Why does it matter that they are “live”? What do viewers expect from them?

Philip Auslander (2008) has traced the origins of the term “live” to 1934, when broadcast media confused the opposition between live and recorded performances, creating a “crisis.” He explains the crisis in terms of how “radio [unlike the gramophone] does not allow you to see the sources of the sounds you are hearing; therefore, you can never be sure if they are live or recorded” (Auslander 2008, 59). “Live” was introduced as a term so that the distinction could be made in these cases as well (*ibid.*, 60). That radio was a “live” medium to begin with had been a matter of strategic choice. As Robert Vianello explains,

The emergence of “live” radio was not only a mechanism to install centralized production/distribution of “programs” over local production/distribution, it is also the mechanism that installed the broadcast agent as the voice of concentrated capital, centralized production and mass consumption. (Vianello 1985, 28)

The same was true with the development of television. In fact, in the thirties, there were several experiments in Europe with television prototypes that were dependent on recorded images. However,

television's ability to electronically transmit live images was preferred in the United States, and that ability had a substantial impact on the formation of the networks and dominance of the television industry. Drawing upon their technical and structural experiences in radio, network broadcasters conceived electronic television as a means of transmitting images from point to point. (Friedman 2002, 3)

The post–World War II years marked the beginning of commercial television broadcasting in the United States. In terms of programming, from the late forties to the sixties, live anthology dramas (e.g., *The Philco Television Playhouse* [NBC, 1948–1955]) proliferated. These were initially Broadway plays and adaptations of classic theater that made the new medium quite attractive to a mass audience. They became the defining characteristic of what is now known as the Golden Age of Television. Television networks used their live programming to differentiate themselves aesthetically from film (Caldwell 1995, 38) and to deter competition in the distribution space. Transcribed programming, the alternative, would have made independent syndication possible and paved the way for non-network distribution, as indeed later happened (Vianello 1985, 27–31). In short, the electronic transmission of live images was “not television’s technological destiny, but rather an identifying characteristic that could be used when strategically necessary, convenient, or profitable” (Friedman 2002, 4).

By the fifties and sixties the networks had secured their position and programming was increasingly filmed or taped (Bourdon 2000, 183). This approach gained prominence because it was more profitable for the industry. Regularly scheduled live programming eventually became limited to newscasts, presidential debates, and sports (Friedman 2002, 4), and the occasional outlier such as NBC’s long-running *Saturday Night Live* comedy series. Subsequently, the eighties to the 2000s brought the VCR, remote control, and analog cable, providing audiences with more control over when and how they watched television. During this period occasional references were made to the Golden Age through special live programming (e.g., the live season premiere of NBC’s *ER* in 1997). According to Elana Levine, these instances can be seen as “struggles over distinction and cultural worth that have

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long been part of television history, but that take on new dimensions in an altered media environment” (2008, 395).

The competition for viewer eyeballs became fiercer in the “post-network era,” when the digital video recorder (DVR) and video on demand (VOD) gave viewers more choice over when, where, and how to watch television (Lotz 2014, 8). This period witnessed the popularity of reality-singing competitions, beginning in the 2000s, with shows like *American Idol* (Fox, 2002–2016) and extending to the present with shows like *The Voice* (NBC, 2011–). These programs enabled viewers to participate in live episodes through other “live” media. Despite the changing place of live programming in broadcast television, it retains an important function—one that is explored in depth in this book. Similar to the live experiments discussed by Levine, nowadays live television is used to compete with new viewing platforms and business models such as those represented by Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. Both event TV (e.g., important sporting events and awards shows) and social TV (i.e., the combination of social media and television) can be understood as popular industry strategies to draw audiences back to watching television live. Promising sociable experiences that depend on watching programming when it first airs, these strategies encourage live viewing—a form of viewership that can be monetized through Nielsen ratings.

Like the account of my neighbor watching her simulcasts, this brief historical reflection on the live in relation to American television highlights the concept’s complexity. It problematizes the idea that liveness is simply a property of a particular technology because, as I have noted, it’s part of a business strategy as well. We see, moreover, that the live can have multiple reference points; it operates at the level not only of transmission (live broadcast) but also of content (live programming). Yet the issue of the live gets even thornier. Consider the conclusion of Nick Couldry’s *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (2003), where the author deliberated whether, due to the pervasive influence of the internet and networked technologies, the category live would someday become “less necessary, even redundant” (138). I address at length how he came to speculate about this sort of future scenario in chapter 2. For now, though, it is important to

realize that over a decade after Couldry gave voice to this possibility, the live is still being claimed in several media formats, and even seems to be claimed *more* actively than before. Why is this? Here in this book I develop the argument that liveness can be understood as a construction, a product of the interaction among institutions, technologies, and users/viewers. By analyzing several instances of the live, I hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and to offer insights into the likelihood of its future survival.

Liveness as a Concept in Media Studies

Although liveness was at first a professional notion, it has been an academic concept central to television studies since the fifties and sixties (Bourdon 2000, 183), even if over time far fewer television programs were broadcast “live.” John T. Caldwell (1995) has criticized the concept’s centrality in television studies and the discipline’s “theoretical obsession” (27) with live TV. Yet despite this critique, the concept has persisted and been picked up in academic writing on “new media” (McPherson 2002; Couldry 2004; Michele White 2006; Ytreberg 2009; Auslander 2012). As I explore in the following pages, liveness in media studies—the perspectives on it and the scholarly assumptions behind it—fail to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the live.

In media studies to date, the concept of the live/liveness has been considered from three main perspectives: as ontology, as phenomenology (located in the audience), and as rhetoric. The distinctions that would differentiate the three perspectives are rather artificial, and thus some accounts fit with more than one perspective. However, by considering, through selected examples, the merits and shortcomings of those three main strands, I wish to lay the foundation for a discussion, at a later stage, of the alternative I propose: one that combines elements of all three perspectives, and in so doing outlines a conception understood as *constellations of liveness*. Liveness, I propose, is best understood as a construction informed by technologies, institutions, and users.

Ontology

In relation to television, it is possible to distinguish two types of ontological claims with regard to liveness, centered, respectively, on the technology of the scanning beam and the possibility for simultaneity among television's production, distribution, and reception. I consider these two forms of reasoning first, then home in on liveness that is seen as the ontology of "new media."

The first type of argument is exemplified by the work of Herbert Zettl (1978), who claimed that television's technological basis is precisely what makes it a "live" process. He writes:

While in film each frame is actually a static image, the television image is continually moving, very much in the manner of the Bergsonian *durée*. The scanning beam is constantly trying to complete an always incomplete image. Even if the image on the screen seems at rest, it is structurally in motion. (Zettl 1978, 5)

Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow (1977) have discussed liveness as a mode of the televisual in similar terms. They claim:

In one sense, the television image itself is effectively 'live,' very different in this to that of film. Where the latter depends on the immobility of the frame, the former, electronic and not photographic, is an image in perpetual motion, the movement of a continually scanning beam; whatever the status of the material transmitted, the image as series of electric impulses is necessarily 'as it happens.' Hence the possibility of *performing* the television image—electronic, it can be modified, altered, transformed in the moment of its transmission, is a production in the present. (Heath and Skirrow 1977, 53)

Television's difference from film, then, is technological: TV is electronic rather than photographic. Unlike Zettl, however, Heath and Skirrow also see liveness as an ideology of the television apparatus, in that it is rooted not only in the medium's electronic nature but in the dimensions of the image, which

offers “a permanently *alive* view on the world” (Heath and Skirrow 1977, 54).

The second type of argument that posits television as being ontologically live is based on the medium’s capacity to provide simultaneity between the time of production and that of transmission and viewing. As Auslander points out, right from its inception, the essence of the televisual was understood

as an ontology of liveness more akin to the ontology of theater than to that of film. Television’s essence was seen in its ability to transmit events as they occur, not in a filmic capacity to record events for later viewing. Originally, of course, all television broadcasts were live transmissions. (2008, 12)

In some approaches, liveness continues to be seen as an immanent feature of the operation of television. Though television is in fact a patchwork of different media and temporalities (Feuer 1983), liveness is always available as an option due to its electronic features (Marriott 2007; Mumford 1994). But this argument is problematic because it falls prey to a “metonymic fallacy” (Mimi White 2004): liveness is taken as *the* defining characteristic of television simply because television *can* be live.

Along similar lines of reasoning, an argument has been made that is centered on the *organization of transmission*—a view that has gained prominence since the decline of live programming on television. It is found, for example, in the writings of Joshua Meyrowitz. Discussing radio, he argues:

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 1986, 90)

And so, even when a broadcast has been recorded, its transmission is “live,” in that programming can be interrupted at any given moment. This is how liveness is now commonly understood (Couldry 2004; Ellis 2000).

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The argument that liveness is television's ontological essence has been joined by more recent claims that liveness is the ontological essence of new media. Margaret Morse (1998), for instance, considering interactivity, has written:

Feedback in the broadest sense...is a capacity of a machine to signal or seem to respond to input instantaneously. A machine that thus 'interacts' with the user even at this minimal level can produce a feeling of 'liveness' and a sense of the machine's agency and—because it exchanges symbols—even of a subjective encounter with a persona. (18)

This is a clear case where technology is seen to cause liveness. Philip Auslander initially subscribed to this position in the second edition of his *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008), where he aimed to situate live performance in our mediatized culture, providing a historical overview of the concept. There he claimed that the definition of liveness is rearticulated when a new technology is introduced. Discussing "digital liveness" in relation to interactivity, Auslander suggested that the feedback of real-time interaction is what monocausally establishes liveness.

The notion that liveness is connected to a medium's capacity for instantaneity seems convincing, but due to the ambiguity permitted over how "simultaneous" transmission and reception needs to be (Mimi White 2004), it is flawed. Consider, for instance, how there may sometimes be a slight temporal delay perceptible between different realizations of the same broadcast (e.g., your neighbors are cheering seconds before you see the goal scored on TV). All these media, indeed, are equally understood to provide "live" broadcasts. The accepted ambiguity over what is understood as "live" implies that liveness isn't simply a property of a particular form of technology. Accounts that conceive of liveness as the ontological basis of a particular medium tend to overlook the social dimension of liveness.

That liveness is a social construction cannot be ignored when one considers the implications of the controversy over Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime show in 2004, broadcast live on the CBS television network in the United States and elsewhere

around the world. During the show, one of Jackson's nipples was revealed, sparking public debate about indecency on network broadcasting. The incident resulted in the passing of the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act by the U.S. Congress, signed by President George W. Bush into law in 2005. This act enabled the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the U.S. government agency responsible for telecommunications regulation, to levy high penalties to broadcasters of profane and/or indecent material between the hours of 6 AM and 10 PM on network television.¹ A breach of the act can result in a \$325,000 fine per incident, with a maximum of \$3 million per day. The networks have generally responded to these stricter regulations by building short delays into their live broadcasting, allowing for offensive material to be preempted. ABC, for example, implemented a five-second broadcast delay for all live entertainment in 2004, even before the act became law.² Yet even after the introduction of transmission delays, these broadcasts continued to be promoted as "live," and that's what they continue to be called in popular discourse.

The perspective that considers liveness as ontology is problematic, because liveness cannot be reduced to a technological fact alone. In making this claim, I do not deny that electronic media share a capacity for instantaneity, but I want to insist that there is more to liveness than that. I develop this argument further in chapter 4, where I compare and contrast liveness to real time in the context of the music-collaboration platform eJamming. For now, it is sufficient to understand that media platforms considered "live" vary in terms of which elements are in fact simultaneous (production/transmission/reception, production/transmission or transmission/reception), and even allow for flexibility when it comes to how simultaneous these elements need to be.

Phenomenology

There are also accounts of liveness that view it as primarily an experience of the viewer or user (Auslander 2008; Dixon 2007; Marriott 2007; Scannell 2014). In 2008, Auslander argued that the emerging definition of liveness (associated

with digital technologies) was increasingly built around the audience's affective experience. Initially, however, he saw this as a direct outcome of technological properties. Later, he revisited this claim (Auslander 2012), stating that he regretted the implications of his original formulation. By claiming that the affective responses elicited by media can be explained in terms of their ontological distinctions, he stated, one commits the fallacy of technological determinism. Even so, Auslander thought he was onto something, and his 2012 work continues to view audience experience as the key to understanding liveness.

To solve the problem of technological determinism, while continuing to associate liveness with affective response, he offers the following alternative:

The benefit of a phenomenological perspective is that it enables us to understand that digital liveness is neither caused by intrinsic properties of virtual entities nor simply constructed by their audiences. Rather, digital liveness emerges as a specific relation between self and other, a particular way of 'being involved with something.' The experience of liveness results from our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us. (Auslander 2012, 10)

The updated definition avoids the pitfall of liveness being reduced to a property or effect of a technology. His revision addresses liveness as a construction, effecting the relation between the technology and its user.

Although I applaud Auslander for making this conceptual move, his recent work continues to raise some issues. When Auslander discusses the historical development of the live in his 2012 book, he links types of liveness to particular cultural forms, suggesting a one-sided relationship between liveness and medium and implying that each new medium provides a complete break with other forms of liveness. Instead, it is arguable that media borrow from and refashion earlier conceptions of liveness through a series of "remediations" (Bolter and Grusin 2000). Moreover, Auslander's term "digital liveness" conceals the fact that diverse manifestations of liveness are possible within such a cluster (e.g., live-tweeting and live-blogging might offer two distinct constructions of liveness).