

# **Analysing ‘Adults Media Lives’: Time, Change and Dynamics of Media Literacy**

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## **About this document**

Since 2005 Ofcom have conducted a qualitative, small-scale, longitudinal study on media literacy. The study is commissioned to the Knowledge Agency whose reports are available online (<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media-literacy/adults/>). At the beginning of 2015, we spent 3 months viewing and analysing the interview archive of the study, seeking to understand how both generational and biographical factors are at play in people’s media practices. We identified a subsample of 4 participants whose stories and circumstances over time were particularly relevant to the questions we had about the social and cultural aspects of media practice. This report reflects our observations based on this analysis. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of Ofcom.

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**Dr Sarah Cefai & Professor Nick Couldry**

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## **Analysing 'Adults Media Lives': Time, Change and Dynamics of Media Literacy**

### **OVERVIEW**

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Since 2005, the Adults Media Lives study has compiled a longitudinal archive of semi-structured, video-recorded interviews on media use. Conducted by the Knowledge Agency, Adults Media Lives currently interviews 19 participants, most of whom have been interviewed annually for 7 years or more. While not representative of the UK population, the class, gender, and demographic range of the participants provides an opportunity to examine how socio-cultural factors shape people's changing media practices.

Longitudinal data of this sort is rare. Conducted at home, the interviews provide an opportunity to view people's descriptions of their media practice *in situ*. As scholars in Media and Communications, we were particularly keen to examine this rich archive. Our retrospective analysis seeks to complement Ofcom's annual reports (<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media-literacy/>).

Over three months in 2015, we viewed, annotated and analysed over 100 hours of digitally recorded interviews with 15 participants. The core of our study focused on the longitudinal analysis of 4 participants, selected on the basis of the insight that these participants' stories offered into the social, cultural and political ramifications of life with media over a course of time. Our analysis focused on identifying the challenges presented to participants by the radical transformations in media and communications. We observed how the participants navigated, coped with and enjoyed new practices of media and communication, particularly with regard to consumption, surveillance, and socialisation. This report presents an account of these observations, highlighting how over time, participants' media practices are shaped by certain 'catalysts of change'.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Adults Media Lives archive allows us to observe how people have grown increasingly accustomed to digital media, finding their own ways to manage the pressures of constant contact, as well as seeking out and taking advantage of new opportunities for communication. Much of what we were able to observe in the Adults Media Lives archive confirms what we already know about the use of media: digital media are increasingly integrated within people's everyday lives, across a spectrum of personal and social contexts. Our enquiry into the 'social stratification' of media use—the organisation of media practices by social categories and distinctions—lead us to consider the importance of time. People's use of time, we suggest, is a tangible outcome of their employment, as well as their personal, social and living arrangements. As an effect of social stratification, we hence claim that *time is key to media literacy*—not only to what people *do* with media, but to how they *understand and reflect upon what they are doing*.

We reviewed video recordings with 15 participants in the Adults Media Lives project but our interest in the changes to media-related practices was best served by focusing on a smaller number of participants in detail. We hence chose four case studies: the media lives of four individuals tracked from 2008 to 2015 (data being unavailable for the 3 years prior to 2008).

Our analysis identifies the changes to media use that participants discussed, as well as the implications of these, emphasising the role of media as *catalysts of change*. In recent years, radical changes to media and communications have introduced new types of social action within familial and domestic environments and many of these have been rendered necessary by the broader context of change. In short, the creation of possibilities for social contact and creativity is accompanied by the rise of new definitions of social responsibility within the communicative sphere. In response to market-driven and other pressures to integrate media-related practices within the everyday, participants adopt a variety of strategic responses. By learning new skills or incorporating new practices of communication, the boundaries of people's everyday lives shift. The resistance of participants to new ways of doing things, to new terms and ways of comprehending the role of computer-mediated communication, as well as to new expenses, shapes the boundaries of media and communication within everyday life.

Key underlying catalysts of change are, unsurprisingly, the changing technological affordances of media and communications, but, also more subtly, demographic factors (especially linked to work and retirement from working life) and life changes (to family, living arrangements and social mobility). Such factors work together to produce people's changing relationship with media. In turn, people's use of media and communications has profound implications for opening up, closing down, and modifying other aspects of their lives.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Digital media are increasingly integrated within people's everyday lives and, while observable as a 'social trend', this integration is always particular to people's individual circumstances. Participants describe different catalysts for changes to their media practices—both significant and minor changes in life circumstance. Catalysts might also be the social interactions that make familiar what was previously unfamiliar, or the new functionality that is introduced by specific technology. In contrast, complex functionality (not just of technicality but of social expectation) can act as a deterrent to people's interactions with media. Both inter-generational interactions and social interactions with peers can catalyse changes in attitudes and values. People form new attitudes towards media in relation to their media practices.

### 2. NEW DEFINITIONS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

The ways in which people learn about and understand media and communication are changing. People learn by proxy and are exposed to new practices and definitions via work, family and friends. Pre-existing mediums, such as television, are a reference point for the introduction of new platforms. As well as industry-led definitions, people also make reference to the communication practices of public institutions such as schools, the National Health Service, local government, social services and public service broadcasters. People's reflections on their media-related practices reveal their awareness of the superabundance of possibilities for media and communication.

People are aware that they use media not only to communicate, but to create 'mediatised' environments. People choose media-based environments that will provide a sense of company, a sense of solitude, distraction from the present, or insulation from the outside world. Participants often regard the sensory environment that media provide with ambivalence: no matter how enjoyable or rewarding, encounters with digital technologies are never entirely free from certain anxieties and frustrations. Such experiences are linked to changing media literacies and the limits to understanding how media technologies work. For instance, people increasingly lack the ability to anticipate or control the outcomes of their media and communication choices. These frustrations are also linked to the cultivation of a critical attitude towards certain media practices—the expression of suspicion or scepticism about the media they consume.

Notions of time are key to new definitions of media and communication. People value time through elevating the notion of 'efficiency', or through seeking to avoid 'wasting time'. The importance given to saving (time) and managing (time) corresponds to a generational difference in how the value of the individual is understood (as based on the principles of the free-market and expressed by the rhetoric of consumer choice). Employment, living arrangements and moral values, also contribute to how people value time. The time that people have, as well as

how people think about time, shapes what they do with media, as well as informs their understanding of what they are doing. In this context, as well as afford new opportunities for relating, communicating and consuming information, digital media place new pressures on people to 'manage' their media practices (as a way of 'managing' their time). People's attitude towards time is also key to the uptake of new practices. People construct new definitions implicitly (through the time that they spend undertaking particular media-related activities), as well as explicitly (through self-reflexively interpreting various media and communications activities in relation to notions of time).

### **3. IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL LIFE**

Today's more complex and continuous modes of contact are not always welcomed, even by people who are more conversant with media and communications technology. The use of mobile digital devices produces new individual, interpersonal and social contexts. New practices involving media are themselves new ways of relating to people as well as ways of interacting with the outside world (of consumption, public services, leisure activities). Many people who were initially resistant to taking up mobile and Internet technologies in the home have now done so, but through processes of change rooted in these social contexts. New media affordances, such as locative media technologies, web browser history and algorithmic targeted advertising, all afford new types of interpersonal surveillance. This leads to questions about the ethics of media practice. Mobile and social media have created new ways of spending time and paying attention. Certain new practices, such as managing digital self impressions, watching the social media actions of friends and family, and communicating with unknown others, have implications for the norms of communicating and relating that shape intimate and family life.

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## 1. AIMS AND CONTEXT

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Ofcom's Adults Media Lives archive consists of video recordings of partly structured interviews with between 12 and 19 respondents, conducted every year since 2005—approximately 2000 hours of footage. The archive captures people's accounts at a critical time of change, recording media-related change but also people's accounts of their practices changing.

The analysis of the video-recorded interview data took place over three months (late January to April 2015), although reflection on this analysis has occurred up until this point. Our analysis of people's default media choices took a 'practice' approach—we looked at what people did, what was habitual to them, and how this changed over time. In particular, we examined how media practices constitute particular ways of paying attention that inform people's ways of coordinating work, family responsibilities and leisure.

Our research design sought to use the longitudinal data to capture both gradual and abrupt changes to people's media habits, as well as the spatial, temporal, cultural and subjective configuration of these changes. Coached into reflexivity by the yearly anticipation of the Adults Media Lives interview, over time participants' data becomes increasingly anticipatory and reflexive. Our analysis sought to distil different catalysts for change—catalysts that are endogenous to people's individual lives (such as, changes in interpersonal relationships or types of work) as well as those that are exogenous (such as, the generational socialisation of technology). In this way, our analysis points to the social dynamics of changes to media lives.

A key challenge for media and communications research has been to understand the social dynamics of change given that people's media use involves highly individualised habits as well as media permutations and permeations that embed the whole social field. It is, for example, ever more difficult to make assumptions about something as everyday as 'watching TV', given that neither 'watching' nor 'TV' are the same thing for different audiences, even at the level of protocols. Rather than focus our analysis on particular mediums, platforms or habits, we opted to analyse the factors shaping the attention that people pay to, or in relation to, media. People's personal and social interactions with and through media are both limited and enabled by their capacity for attention. The opportunity for an in-depth focus on a limited number of people's descriptions of their selective attention to some media practices rather than others, proved key to our analysis of how social formations shape media choices and in turn inform the ways in which media practices develop.

To organise our review, we started out from three lines of enquiry (see Appendix 1):

- 1) What are people's default uses of the wider set of media possibilities now on offer, and how do these default uses open or limit other variations?
- 2) What types of attention do people's uses of media display?
- 3) How does the distinctive use of and attention to media relate to people's distinctive a) spatial habits, and b) temporal habits?

## 2. CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

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### 2.1. Overview

This section identifies some of the catalysts for changes to media practices reported by our subsample of participants. Catalysts for change vary from the very personal to the technological, as well as occur over different durations of time—some changes can occur after a gradual build up or wearing down, while others are the quick result of an interaction or the introduction of a new technology. The following are examples of catalysts of change:

- the death of a family member
- the birth of a child
- being offered an upgrade by a telecommunications company
- being repeatedly encouraged by family members to take up something
- being repeatedly requested by organisations to make contact via the Internet
- being shown how to do something by a friend or family member
- becoming more familiar with the ambient presence of certain technology
- moving to a location that has specific restrictions (e.g. no mobile signal)
- a change in profession or job, or the job's location
- a change in relationship status
- moving into/out of a household with an existing provider
- a change in living arrangements (a family member leaves, a person cohabits with their partner)
- a change in attitude towards leisure time

Some of these catalysts for change occur from within the social milieu of participants' everyday environments and are experienced as a direct 'pressure' to modify media practices (e.g. advertising or suggestions from friends). Other catalysts for change are indirectly related to media practices and occur as a result of the way in which people's media habits are extensions or intensifications of their social relationships (e.g. moving in with a girlfriend who likes to watch TV and so watching TV more as a way to spend time together).

### 2.2. A change in life circumstance

A change in life circumstances can indirectly change the media practices that occur in the context of those life circumstances. This catalyst for change is particularly notable for all participants in their discussions of changing familial and working relationships. The following outline of the changes to life circumstance experienced by Dean illustrates the relay effect between life circumstance and media practice:

#### **Instability at home and work**

Much of Dean's TV viewing is shaped by constraints over time that are directly related to other constraints—financial constraint, as well as spatial constraint (within the parental home and the various other places where



Dean lives). When Dean lives in a bedsit, independently of his parents, he enjoys being able to come home late and watch the TV without disturbing anyone. When he rents a room in a 'share house', he enjoys the Virgin Media package. When he lives with his parents, he spends a lot of time at his girlfriend's place to watch the television with her. If he had a computer, he would get WiFi. Dean's job and living arrangements change almost yearly. His media use is constantly changing in relation to the default options made available at home. Dean's use of media is also shaped by what he does for work, and how his working environment incorporates media practices. For example, when working as a driver he listens to music—at one stage he makes his own CDs. Later, this is supplemented by the use of YouTube on his mobile phone. Dean's use of his mobile phone is fairly consistent. Over time, he uses the mobile phone for more and more.

Changes in work impact people's media use, but so do changes in personal relationships and living arrangements. Economic factors are always significant but always interpreted in relation to other factors, such as necessity or enjoyment. While many of the participants' interests remain stable over time (such as participants' interests in sport), how they engage their interests is both variable and stable. For example, while the way in which Dean uses his mobile to consume media is continually changing and adapting to the changing functionality of technology in relation to his changing lifestyle, what remains constant is his reliance on the mobile phone. The mobile phone is substituted by whatever else Dean can locate in his environment—the television that shows sports at work, or the television that his landlord, parents, or estate agent provide in the home. As an effect of life circumstance, how Dean watches television is highly variable, whereas his use of the phone is a constant.

### **2.3. A change in life stage**

Life stage—living, working and the defining priorities of personal relationships—shapes the quality of time people have available and what they are seeking to do with their time. The following outlines illustrate how we understand changes in life stage to catalyse changes to media practice:

#### **The death of a partner**

Retired and a widower, Cathy adjusts to doing more for herself: "I think I'm doing a lot more for myself rather than for other people. Most of my life, I've spent my time caring for others, so this year I, my daughter said right, learn to say no and enjoy yourself. So I've been enjoying myself quite a bit" (2014). Cathy now has a new laptop at home that she uses on a daily basis and she watches particular television programmes that appeal to her. While Cathy was caring for her terminally ill husband, she avoided watching TV series—she did not want to start watching a series with her husband when her future with him was uncertain. She had also avoided computers because she associated them with activities that would have involved her husband, like booking holidays. Although Cathy continues to do and like a number of

things—listening to the radio before bed, watching her favourite television programs—her life circumstances have changed what these activities mean to her and how, together, they build a picture of her new life.

### **Moving up in the world and settling down**

When Daniel joins the study his undergraduate days are fresh in his mind and he often contrasts his media habits to those he had while at university. As a student Daniel used the Internet for leisure, but increasingly he associates it with specific activities:

The Internet's not so much a thing I use to pass time. I think for me now it's more functional. Whilst I was at university with sort of free time on my hands it'd be something, it'd be like the TV, a stop gap ... Now it's, it has a purpose. (2008)

I used to listen to the radio almost as company like you'd have it on in the background ... living with somebody that you're around all the time changes that because you don't need that kind of company. (2013)

In a year that Daniel gets a promotion at work, he describes watching TV "in a more focused manner" (2010). For this, he turns to digital television streaming services.

### **Becoming a parent**

When Dean becomes a father (2011) his uses of all media change. As his daughter grows older, he uses his mobile phone in different ways: he lets her play with it while he is driving the car, or he uses it to communicate with her mother to co-ordinate childcare. His perceptions of 'social media' focus on the risks that they present to her and an anticipation of his lack of control over what she will be exposed to.

### **Fear of an empty nest**

2014 brings a big change for Sally. Her son has moved out and her 16-year-old daughter is in college full-time. The house is suddenly empty, too big, and she needs to "occupy" her time. Media are no longer part of the parental control that Sally previously exercised (e.g. deciding which programs her daughter is able to watch), but become a source of company in the absence of her children. What she actually does with media devices does not change much as a result of this, but Sally is aware that her use of media has a different significance to her and is no longer a significant aspect of the way that she would relate to her children as a parent.

## **2.4. A change in access**

Changes to access can also act as catalysts for change, such as when Dean and his girlfriend have no mobile phone reception in their house. The lack of mobile phone reception was particularly impactful because Dean uses his mobile phone often

and for many things—he relies on his phone for Internet access. The combined lack of mobile phone reception and Internet access at home deterred friends from visiting. (These problems might have been mitigated by a landline, in relation to which there might have been a financial barrier.)

Issues of access are clearest in Dean's experience. Dean is beset by insecure, low paid employment, frequent changes to accommodation, and significant changes in responsibility (having a child). Issues of work, family and accommodation always trump the specific capabilities of particular technologies. Prior to getting his own laptop and while living at home, Dean had to wait in line to use a household computer. The introduction of wireless Internet access, in conjunction with a new laptop, afforded Dean more independence at home. This was later superseded by an upgrade to his mobile phone that allowed for greater use of mobile Internet—a much more affordable option than an upgrade to a laptop.

### **2.3. A change in attitude**

Notwithstanding specific differences, from 2008 to 2015 there is a general change in attitude amongst participants. Participants are increasingly accepting and embracing of digital media and communications technologies within the home—there is a process of demystification and growing confidence, that is often a source of enjoyment even when it has come about reluctantly. We see this for example when Cathy, who got herself a laptop, reluctantly and after years of resisting, tells us about how she enjoys online shopping. In 2014 Cathy reflects on her prior inhibition: "I just was frightened that something would go wrong, I wouldn't be able to print or I wouldn't be able to get online".

#### **Growing confidence**

By 2015, Sally's use of the Internet has evolved from a cautious purchase of clothing from a UK high street retailing to the purchase of a holiday—flights, hotel and transfers. This is the first time Sally's family have organised their holiday independently of a travel agent.

Inhibitions are broken down. More cautious participants become comfortable with a platform one by one, or even with one functional element of a platform, such as 'buying' on eBay. The use of platforms is also supported by the socialisation of media. For example, Sally speaks to the "mums" at the school gate. Social relationships bring into view the kinds of sites that might interest participants, creating familiarity with new platforms and devices.

#### **A change in perception**

Notions of necessity and functionality reoccur in participants' descriptions. Daniel reports that his Internet and mobile phone use are increasingly associated with functionality or necessity rather than leisure: "I actually use it less but I think it's more important" (2012). He suggests his purposive use "arguably makes it more important to me than it was before" (2012).

Attitudes can change following changes to home life. Sally's daughter spending more time away from home brings about a change in her attitude towards television:

[A]nd I think that goes back to now, I've just suddenly realised why, it's just come to me, it's because I'm seeing people on a screen, because I'm so used to having, it comes back to coming in and being, nobody being here, so I think that's why, and I've probably done that subconsciously, not realised, because I'm actually looking at people. (2014)

This doesn't necessarily mean that Sally is watching more TV, but it does suggest she sees the television differently.

### **A change in functionality**

Attitudes can be changed by the functionality of particular devices. While mobile phones were discouraged from the dinner table, Sally embraced the tablet on holiday—with the tablet “every day was an adventure” (2013). The tablet gave Sally access to Internet platforms and locative media without the interruptions of mobile phone calls and texts.

### **3. NEW DEFINITIONS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS**

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#### **3.1. Overview**

As media and communications change, so do the ways in which people learn about and understand media and communication. This section highlights some of those changes and how they give rise to new definitions of media and communications, and the challenges facing media users, particularly given: the pace and complexity of change (the need for new language to be developed to reflect technological advancement); the influence of industry in shaping people's ways of speaking about media technologies; the importance of friendship and various other peer networks in terms of up-skilling, and; the important role that institutions play in legitimating and allowing people to feel comfortable with certain uses of media within the everyday.

As well as gaining new skills or changing their media habits, participants are also changing the way in which they understand the role of media within their lives. From 2008 onwards, we see how participants are engaged in the self-reflexive activity of renewing their understanding of various media practices, devices and platforms. As well as evaluating what they see and hear in 'the media', participants think about their own media habits. The rise of digital media increasingly puts the value-laden nature of journalism in view. Participants' accounts suggest that people not only adopt a critical attitude towards media industries, but continually revise this attitude in light of changing cultural norms and media environments.

#### **Media are increasingly intangible**

In 2015, Daniel expresses a more nuanced observation about the intangibility of media. Thinking about how his parents understand the Internet and data analytics he suggests: "they have no real grasp of what it is, they understand the words but not the concept". The increasing intangibility of digital media—the increasing presence and significance of processes that people are unable to know or understand—perplexes people. It is in relation to this perplexity that people produce new understanding, often seeking reassurance that they are practically able to do what they need to do despite not knowing what is going on 'behind the scenes'.

#### **3.2. Learning by proxy**

Participants learn new skills from within an immediate social milieu. Learning by proxy is linked to trust. For example, Daniel (2008) links the trustworthiness of particular sites to word of mouth: "I would really be looking for somebody to say, oh I'm using this one, I heard from this person and he heard from this person, I've never had a problem with it; and then I'd be quite happy to go and go it myself". By 2015, however, Daniel is much more confident about using both his mobile phone and tablet to purchase online. As Sally grows more confident using particular sites, she starts to provide advice to other mothers waiting at the school gate. This suggests that social networks are key to the adoption of new media-related practices.

Some participants tended to learn how to use one platform at a time. For example, Sally described YouTube, shown to her by her son, as opening up her world: "I never thought I'd do that", "[i]t was like this new world had opened up" (2009). Then she started using eBay, but only to buy, not sell. In this case, familiarity with one platform opened the way to another.

Learning by proxy, however, does not ameliorate all the gaps in understanding, particularly where functionality plays a part. For example, peer learning was not able to ameliorate the sense of alienation and incomprehension that Sally associated with the Smart TV.

### **A decrease in the reliance on others**

Over time there is a general decline in comments on the role of third parties in setting up devices (Dean's friend connecting his laptop to the wireless at home, or Sally's contractor who sets up the wireless, or Cathy's daughter who accompanies her to the shop to purchase items).

### **3.3. Institutional, industry & advertisers' talk**

Participants link language and the use of specific terms to "getting caught out", for example, being charged more than expected. As well as being wary about the terms of contracts or purchasing online (e.g. using free trial periods of streaming services), the subsample also highlighted concerns regarding technicality—the rapid pace of change (the exponential introduction of new functionality into the market) and the technical complexity that places constant demands on the person who uses technology.

#### **Incomprehensible terms**

The use of language is also connected to participants' sense of vulnerability in relation to media providers. Terms such as 'cookies' and 'algorithms' are either unknown or little understood. People can easily become overwhelmed by terms they do not understand:

It's the thought of the hassle of calling them up and they start off their jibberish and I haven't a clue what they're talking about. (Cathy 2008)

[S]ometimes I think when I go into a shop and ask, it's all way over my head, talking about gigabytes and megabytes and I don't want that, I just want to be able to plug it in and you know. (Cathy 2011)

All of a sudden, we're at this generation that don't understand. (Sally 2013)

I don't know gigabytes and terabytes, I just think how long can I use the internet for? ... I don't understand it too much, I just said give me the cheapest one so that's what they did. (Dean 2014)

Not understanding how terms such as 'gigabyte' and 'megabyte' translate into usage has implications for the costs associated with mobile and Internet services.

The requirement to know information (e.g. passwords) can be an inhibitor. Stripping away the need to know, understand, or give information (e.g. 'one click' purchasing) is an incentive to use some devices rather than others. In 2012 Sally reports being "railroaded" into buying a Smart TV, which she later describes as an "absolute nightmare" (2013) in part because the functionality of the technology far exceeded the capabilities of Sally and her husband. Sally reports getting rid of the Smart TV almost as soon as she had bought it because the functionality was too complex.

Overall, participants showed virtually no understanding of the technologies that are linked to their own control of devices (such as preferences on software applications), the data that is produced by devices they use (such as by cookies), as well as to the way in which content is predetermined by software. Given the participants' lack of familiarity with current terms—including those used by the advertisers—it is difficult to envisage how people will keep up. Rather, we can assume that people's inability to understand the underlying processes on which they are dependent will increase.

### **Confidence with industry talk**

The language used by media and communications industries has a key role in shaping participants' understanding of the technologies they use. Among the participants in the subsample, there is a marked difference between Daniel's way of speaking, which displays confidence by using the language of advertisers, and the other participants, who admit a lack of confidence by saying they do not understand certain terms. There is little middle ground between Daniel's confidence and the other participants' wariness about terminology and functionality.

### **Visibility of public services**

Public services also play a role in familiarising people with the Internet and with the functionality of various mobile technologies. Whereas both Sally and Cathy learn about ways of using Internet technologies from family and friends, they also identify the use of Internet platforms with the exposure to the Internet that they encounter through health and education (schools). Cathy speaks about the repeated contexts in which she found herself being asked to look up information online. Social institutions such as school, the National Health Service, local government, social services and public service broadcasters were all given as examples of organisations with online communication.

### **3.4. Mediated environments**

Participants are aware of how they use media and communications technologies not only to 'communicate' with others but to mediate their working and living environments. There are many examples of this in participants' discussions of how they use sound to create a background:

Because I can do other things. The only thing I can do when I'm watching television is knit. And I'm not knitting any more, 'cause I've not got any little children to knit for. [laughs] Whereas if I'm listening to the radio I can do other things. (Cathy 2009)

I still watch bits and bobs regular TV ... It's very much kind of circumstantial ... Quite a lot of the time it's um, one of the first channels that I look at is sports. So, if there's football on or some kind sport that I'm interested in or even Sports news I'll probably have that playing in the background while I'm doing anything else. (Daniel 2014)

Sound in the background is framed as the 'presence of others'. The presence of others creates the affect of *socialising* the home. This is particularly so in relation to broadcast media. Although Daniel does not live alone, he continually uses media in this way. Of note is the sense of comfort that radio stimulates in its listeners through the sound of the human voice: radio is "someone talking in the background" (Cathy 2011). Throughout the study, Dean has used media to shape his working environment. Most recently, Dean has taken to streaming music through YouTube, on his G4 connection on his mobile phone.

### **3.5. A critical attitude: suspicion and scepticism**

Participants maintained a critical attitude towards media and communications, whether towards broadcast media or telecoms companies, or towards people's media-related practices. For example, Dean links his dislike of social media to its social and moral repercussions: the police are investigating things that are happening on the Internet rather than things that are happening in real life (2014). Dean also repeatedly speaks about the peer pressure to use social media, and the distrust that his lack of social media inspires within his peer group. Dean gives the example of partners who question his lack of social media presence: "she keeps trying to set me up one" (2015).

Although Dean and Daniel share little in the way of educational background and work experience, they do share persistent, gendered misgivings about social media. They cite their sceptical attitude towards social media as the reason why they do not use social media accounts:

You know, Facebook is very much one of those sites, a popularity thing ... I'm not really that interested. The way I see it is you've got your group of friends and anybody that you'd consider your real friend uh is probably going to have your number or have another means of contacting you. (Daniel 2008)

I'm one of them people that I do not like Facebook anymore, I used to like it, I don't anymore because I think it's so, people nowadays don't realise, kids don't realise, how seriously dangerous it could really be. (Dean 2010)

Over the years, Dean becomes increasingly averse to the possibility of using social media, while Daniel keeps a distance despite his repeated claim that he might



experiment with certain platforms (such as Twitter). In 2015, Daniel also more critically reflects on his own engagement with media content as that which reflects “views similar to your own” rather journalism that might be called “objective”.

A sceptical attitude is also a way of declining new media platforms and devices: “What for? What would I need this for?” asks Cathy (2008); “I’m sure there’s a whole lot more than we could be using it for if I’m totally honest but do we want to? I think that’s the question” (Sally 2008). As digital media become increasingly integrated within the everyday, the articulation of this scepticism changes, although its ‘objects’ remain the same—i.e. we are encouraged to buy things we do not need; we are encouraged to use media in a way that compromises our existing social integrity; we cannot ‘trust’ these media practices even though we enjoy them or they are necessary.

### **3.6. Self-management within superabundance**

Participants increasingly understand themselves as consumers of media and communications who are responsible for providing a mediated environment at home, as well as maintaining their own capacity for mediated communication. This points to how people are increasingly compelled to make decisions regarding services and service provision, preferences for communication within the intimate domain and the use of Internet platforms to engage in quasi-public forms of self-representation. People are increasingly positioned as managers of their own mini-media enterprise.

#### **A feeling of inadequacy**

Participants are aware of the vast gap between the functionality of the technologies (their design specifications), and how they actually use them. They interpret some of their own actions in relation to what they imagine to be the unfulfilled potential of what they are able to access: “I don’t fully use its functionality, I don’t use the things it’s advertised to be able to do ... if I took as a percentage the amount like how much I actual use its functionality, it’s probably below 20%” (Daniel 2010).

#### **Fed up and frustrated**

Participants’ media choices are accompanied by specific affective responses. Frustration was a recurrent feeling, for example in relation to pop-ups, passwords, or devices simply not working. Participants tell stories of failed attempts at resolutions with retailers and service providers. When technology does not work, people encounter their dependency on retailers and service providers, or simply on systems beyond their control. Frustration can quickly turn into exhaustion and a need to give up. The pattern of frustration, resignation, withdrawal and subsequent reconnection is an example of the thoughts, feelings and actions that are brought on by the requirement to self-manage that is necessitated by the superabundance of media and communication.

### **3.7. Time as an effect of social stratification**

### **Valuing time**

Participants' reflections on how they understand media and communications repeatedly invoke thoughts on the value of time. Participants define time through notions of 'efficiency' and through not wanting to 'waste time'. Although these are related notions, they reflect a class and generational difference, with the younger participant who works in banking most often elevating notions of efficiency: "You're almost trying to leverage as much as possible out of one point in time and to do that you kind of get involved in doing several things at the same time" (Daniel, 2010). In contrast, while Cathy notes that her Freeview box can "condense the programme to a quicker time" (2012), aside from avoiding commercial breaks, such functionality is never of particular significance to her. Cathy relates multitasking to saving time: "I'm always doing half a dozen things at once ... because I'm running out of time" (2011). Whereas Sally links her multitasking to convenience and enjoyment: "Quite often, um, if, I'll sit on the settee to check the emails and watch the television. I have, the television will be on in the background. Or, if I'm checking emails first thing in the morning, I'll do it in the kitchen where I've got the radio that's on so, I think there is a certain buzz" (2008).

### **The value of watching in 'real time'**

Daniel, Cathy and Sally all speak about variously preferring to watch TV in 'real time'. The significance of this 'immediacy' is likely to continue in the digital media age. Except in the case of sports, Dean is much less concerned about 'real time': his schedule revolves around work and socialising with friends after work or looking after his daughter. There is no time in Dean's schedule for the timeliness of media.

### **Media to facilitate activity**

Time is also defined in relation to activity. Participants value media in relation to the activities they allow people to do or conversely stop them from doing. When media practices accompanied other activities, participants viewed these as facilitating a better use of time. Media are less likely to be viewed as a compromise of time when they are in the background (in other words, background media can increase media consumption).

### **Worry about wasting time**

Cathy's concerns about time wasting are confirmed by her utilitarian view of computers as devices to be used for shopping and finding information. Once Cathy begins to use the Internet more for these activities, she associates the technology with saving time. On a trial period with Sky, Sally is dissuaded because the abundance of programming presents a threat to her time: "And then I panicked because there was just access then to absolutely everything. And it was quite frightening how a TV could actually take over people's lives" (2008). It is not clear whether this is an attitude that we will see change in the era of YouTube, however, people are quite aware of how they relate to media in terms of notions of time:

[W]ith all these fantastic modern gadgets that we've got, we should have loads of spare time, but I feel as though we cram more and more into our time so it should be the other way around with modern day technology it should allow us more freedom to spend doing the things that we like to do. (Sally 2010)

In the earlier years Sally initially associates YouTube with related anxieties, describing herself as "quite addicted to it", and the quantity of time she spends on it as "outrageous" (2009). However, YouTube content often invokes activity (instructions, recipes, reviews, film trailers, etc.) and is viewed in relation to *doing* something. In later interviews Sally refrains from articulating this anxiety and instead focuses on the changing significance of her media use at home.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL LIFE

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### 4.1. Overview

New definitions of media and communications have implications for personal life. This can be seen in the link between participants' discussions about media practices and home life. There can be little doubt that the ways in which we live with media now are more intimate than ever before. Certainly, participants would have no way to speak about their media-related practices, without speaking about their lives with intimate others.

### 4.2 Attention & attachment

Participants' media choices increasingly relate to the potential for constant contact facilitated by digital platforms. Constant contact and the increasing complexity of the types of contact over which people are compelled to preside is not entirely welcome, even by those who are more conversant users of media. While the general trend from 2008-2015 is for participants to become more confident practitioners of Internet based communication, people's increasing comfort with certain online platforms does not mitigate their anxieties about privacy or their sense of being overburdened.

The introduction of constant contact into the everyday can be experienced as an unwanted pressure, as "quite intrusive" (Sally 2010). Whereas the social expectation of Internet communication leaves Cathy "forced into a corner" (2011)—forced to go online. Both Daniel and Dean distance themselves from the activities of 'friends' on Facebook: "if my real friends want to contact me they can ring me" (Dean 2008).

[The distraction of mobile media constantly interferes in Dean's personal life:]

When I'm out I don't want to be taking pictures of myself ... If I'm on one on one with anyone, and they get their phone out, and look on Facebook, like I think that number one I'm boring them, and like I know I'm trying to say "put your phone away I'm going home" straight away. (2015)

Dean's friends' attachments to their mobile media distract their attention away from experiencing the 'social present' with Dean.

While the pressure to be online appears to subside as the participants gain more confidence with Internet platforms, participants experience a niggling anxiety that they lack control over their own practices of communication, not knowing exactly how or when to turn off. In this context, a lost mobile phone can be a temporary relief.

I do feel sometimes overwhelmed, I think oh I've got emails to reply to, I've got to check then the work's mobile to check that everything's okay with work, um I need to check you know I always check the answer phone for [my partner's] business and I do sometimes think it's too much. (Sally 2010)

Furthermore, communicating online introduces new pressures and moral anxieties:

People should be responsible for things that they put in the public domain.  
(Daniel 2014)

[I]t's easy to say something over a computer to someone whereas if you say it face to face, half the people who say this over the computer wouldn't say this to people's faces, they say it over the computer because the computer's, you're not speaking to some real person, you know? (Dean 2014)

While Daniel and Dean remove themselves from these practices they remain involuntarily implicated by them—Dean's girlfriend and family share photographs of his daughter; Daniel keeps tabs on old university friends and lifestyle trends. The participants narrate these pressures whilst at the same time the difficulty of extricating themselves from being online (contactable and present, but also observers of others' behaviour). As younger generations use social media more and more, these implications only gain in significance. The pressure to maintain constant contact can be an effect of the media practices of others. Participants hence express varying degrees of resistance (scepticism and suspicion) towards the ways in which social and familial relationships are qualified by network platforms.

Participants also share a broad anxiety about the lack of control in a communicative environment in which they might prosper but are also involuntarily implicated.

[Interviewer: Do you see people who you think are over-connected now?]

100% mate, 100%. About 80% of the people who I work with are, my girlfriend is totally hooked on the Facebook and the Internet, she could, she wouldn't move her phone from her face if she didn't have a daughter. It's horrible and it stops being from doing things, I don't personally like it, I think it's gone too far. (Dean 2012)

This matters for Dean because: "She'll sit there all day just on facebook, not even speaking to me" (2010).

### **4.3. Surveillance**

The capacity for mutual and asymmetrical surveillance within intimate and family life is a key implication of digital and mobile media. New capacities for surveillance continually present participants with new situations. The capacity for surveillance afforded by mobile devices introduces uncertainty over interpersonal boundaries. Our subsample varied widely in their awareness of possibilities for surveillance.

Examples of surveillance include a participant setting up a social media account for a family member, as well as a participant discussing the use of locative media on mobile phones to 'track' their whereabouts. While in a relationship with his girlfriend, Dean describes Facebook as "bait-book", because "you get caught for everything"

(2010). Dean's girlfriend asks him why he is "speaking to other girls" (2010). In turn, Dean is displeased that she accepts "friend requests" from "guys" (2010). These examples suggest that media devices are linked directly to the encroachment on privacy, not according to abstract notions of 'rights' but to people's anxieties.

#### **4.4. Mediated intimacy**

As well as managing their own media choices, participants are involved in managing the media choices of others. Sally often comments on her efforts to facilitate her partner's literacy: "When he [partner] couldn't understand, how it didn't work, or how it came together, it creates another problem on its own. It was always the worry at the back of my mind" (2013). As participants share their media practices, these practices became part of intimate relationships.

When 19-year-old Dean first acquires his own laptop in 2008, he uses it to 'chat to his mates' and watch YouTube videos. Still living with his parents, the laptop affords him the privacy of his own bedroom—he no longer has to wait in line behind his mum and older sister before gaining access to the desktop. As well as producing a communal experience, for example when Dean and his girlfriend watch the television together, or he watches YouTube with his friends, media can also be a mode of achieving a limited spatial autonomy. Since Dean has started working he is out of the house more. He sends about 50 texts a day to 2 or 3 people. He often watches television while he is using his phone. When next interviewed in 2010, Dean tells us that he texts his parents a lot. He has moved out of the parental home. In 2011 texting is primarily a means of communicating with his girlfriend, with whom he has had a baby. As Dean and his girlfriend live apart, texting is an ongoing medium of contact. The mobile phone is too a site of control: Dean and his girlfriend surveil one another's locations and contact with others. When they live together in 2012 they are still in constant contact regarding the care of their daughter: Dean bought his girlfriend a phone so that they could stay in touch. When Dean moves back with his parents in 2013 and then moves again to live with his dad's friend in 2014—each time changing jobs—he continues to use his mobile to text and call his friends. In 2015 the mobile phone is Dean's only way of using the Internet. As he lives away from his daughter, the mobile is also central to childcare arrangements.

This description provides a snapshot of the intimate origins of media practices within personal life. Dean's use of the mobile phone is shaped by the social relations that form through his working life and that form as a result of becoming a single parent, as well as his own resistance to particular media pressures (notably, the pressure to use social media applications). The implication of media and communications here is the reliance upon the mobile phone for communicative activities that are related to personal and family life. Hence, while of all the participants Dean makes the clearest distinctions between media and 'real life', his intimate relations (with his daughter, with his friends) are still to an extent mediated by his use of media technology—as exemplified by his use of the mobile phone.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**1) Types of use:** *What are people's default uses of the wider set of media possibilities now on offer, and how do these default uses open or limit other variations?*

- how do people's default uses relate to 'new forms of convenience and social embedding' (Couldry 2012)
- what are the hindrances to adopting other uses; how do people narrow their uses; to what extent do people's 'genres of use' (Bakardjieva and Smith 2001) determine their media choices
- how do default uses of media 'structure the everyday' (Gauntlett and Hill 1999)
- how are media practices 'anchored' (Couldry 2012) in other non-media related practices
- how do media users 'creatively appropriate' (Bakardjieva and Smith 2001) default technologies

**2) Types of attention:** *What types of attention do people's uses of media display?*

- how do certain types of attention arise through media use and how should these be understood (e.g. what are 'entertainment', 'relaxation', 'distraction' and 'communication')
- how do various types of attention relate to the position of media (e.g. in the foreground or background of specific social activity)
- how do types of attention produce or respond to people's broader needs
- what affordances arise through media-related attention, and how do such affordances relate to changes in life stage and life situation

**3) Spatial and temporal habits:** *How does the use of and attention to media relate to people's distinctive a) spatial habits, and b) temporal habits?*

- when are people a) directly oriented to media, b) doing activities that involve media, or c) doing something whose possibility is conditioned by media
- what are the unique spatial and temporal coordinates of these types of interaction with media
- how do people's uses of media create specific practices of temporal distinction, such as having 'time-out', or 'showing and presencing'
- how do people's uses of media create specific practices of spatial distinction, such as 'screening out' (avoiding media input)
- how do people make decisions in relation to memory and retrieval
- what types of social action are facilitated through keeping 'in touch'

#### References

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## APPENDIX 2

### METHOD

We obtained the Adults Media Lives dataset in January 2015. Knowing that we would be unable to view the complete dataset, we devised the following selection strategy:

1. Watch all excerpts of video cut by the Knowledge Agency to gain an overview of the study.
2. Enrich the overview by annotating a full interview of each participant for 1 year.
3. Select 4 interviewees who had participated for longer than 5 years watch all available video.

We quickly progressed beyond the first stage, as the excerpts of the interviews cut by The Knowledge Agency were too decontextualised for analysis. We then moved to watch and annotate all video content recorded in the most recent year—at the time, the year of 2013. This gave us a sense of each of the available participants in the sample. In order to maximise temporal variation and our sense of the scope of change, we then did the same for the earliest year for which the complete videos were available—2008 (2009 and 2010 for 2 of the 15 participants). We made detailed notes on each of the interviews to build a 'profile' of each participant that would both a) aid the selection of 4 participants for longitudinal analysis, and b) bring into view the questions and observations that would guide our findings.

We selected the following 4 participants, identified by pseudonyms:

| <u>NAME</u>   | <u>AGE</u> | <u>WORK &amp; LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OVER TIME</u>  |
|---------------|------------|--|
| <b>Dean</b>   | 19 – 26    | Lifeguard – warehouse worker – driver – bar manager. Lives with his parents – in a bedsit – with his girlfriend – with his parents – with a family friend – with 2 housemates (including a co-worker). |
| <b>Daniel</b> | 25 – 32    | Banker. Lives with a housemate – his girlfriend – his parents – a housemate.   |
| <b>Sally</b>  | 42 – 49    | Part-time housing officer. Lives with male partner, son & daughter, until son moves out between the 2012-13 interviews.  |
| <b>Cathy</b>  | 64 – 68    | Full-time carer (retired from working in administration in the civil service). Lives with husband until 2009, then alone.  |

This information was collated through a combination of information garnered from the Knowledge Agency (commissioned to conduct the research) and the interviews. Details of the class stratification of this subsample can be found at [Appendix 3](#). The initial annotation and transcription of sections of the interviews was conducted by Helen Trail.



### APPENDIX 3

We have analysed the class position of the participants in our subsample through reference to the Ericsson-Goldthorpe scheme as operationalised in the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (the NS-SEC) (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-3-ns-sec--rebased-on-soc2010--user-manual/index.html>). We based our analysis on descriptions of the participants' occupations. This schema identifies classes not in a strict hierarchical sense, even though classes one and two have advantages over the higher numbered classes. According to the Ericsson-Goldthorpe schema, the classifications are as follows: Daniel is classified as 1; Sally and Cathy are classified as 3; Dean is classified as 9. Although the NS-SEC is designed for large statistical samples, this measure combined with other occupational factors suggests that the subsample of our study differed across a class scale, with Dean and Daniel providing the lower and upper limits to our distribution and Cathy and Sally sitting comfortably in the middle.