THE MEDIATED CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book brings to a temporary resting point more than ten years of shared discussion and enquiry.

When we met and discovered each other's work in 2003, we also quickly realized that we had a shared interest in social theory, and a dissatisfaction with the limited dialogue existing between social theory and media theory in the UK, Germany and elsewhere. For a decade we have been organizing and writing together, with various interruptions; but only in mid 2012, during a Visiting Fellowship by Andreas in the Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, did we conceive the idea of something more ambitious: a jointly written book, where we would try to answer that dissatisfaction by setting out the social theory we saw as necessary for an age of digital media. We were inspired in part by the tradition of social phenomenology, but by many other sources besides, and provoked by the clear inadequacy of the treatment of media and communications in a famous offshoot of that tradition, Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, which marks the half-century of its publication this year. A particular inspiration for us both had been listening to a keynote talk by Hubert Knoblauch at the Mediatized World Conference at the University of Bremen in April 2011, which suggested a more satisfying way of reconnecting the UK and German traditions of social theory than had been found before. After Nick moved back to the London School of Economics in September 2013, it was fortunately possible for Andreas to return to London during 2015 and 2016 as a Visiting Senior Fellow in LSE's Department of Media and Communications, in order to help focus on an intense phase of the book's writing. We thank both the LSE and Goldsmiths departments for their support for these two fellowships, the University of Bremen and, especially, Andreas' colleagues at the ZeMKI for making possible two longer stays abroad in such a short time.

A word on how the book was written: while a first rough draft of a chapter was written by one of us, we discussed and reworked such drafts intensively, contributing on such a basis further parts to the chapters,

which were discussed and reworked again. By that method we hope to have developed a consistent analytical approach across the whole book. As writers, we have been shaped by different intellectual traditions that have distinctive writing styles: we have debated each turn of the argument along the way, and hope to have integrated the best of each tradition. We are happy for our distinctive voices to be discernible in each chapter, and hope as a reader you will be too.

During this book's researching and writing, we each had to contend with many other responsibilities. We must single out for thanks a number of people without whom this book could not have been written on this time-scale. Most notable is Anthony Kelly, Nick's research assistant from November 2013 to October 2015, who did vital work on the literature searches underlying Chapters 5, 6 and 8, and who provided much support on other related topics and projects during this time. We are also very grateful to Miriam Rahali, who took over as Nick's research assistant during November 2015, providing invaluable help in pulling together the book's references, and also reading the manuscript just before final submission. Nick also wants to thank for her support Natalie Fenton, who was joint Head of Department with Nick at Goldsmiths during the first year of preparing the book's ideas. Our work for Chapters 2, 3 and 4 was very much supported by literature searches conducted by Ulrike Gerhard, student research assistant at the University of Bremen. Later in this role, Anna Heinemann and Linda Siegel undertook many final checks of references. Organizationally, all our work was supported by Heide Pawlik and Leif Kramp at the ZeMKI, University of Bremen.

We are grateful to various institutions for giving us the opportunity to present ideas from the book: the Time, Memory and Representation Group, Södertörn University, Stockholm, March 2014 (thanks to Hans Ruin and Staffan Ericsson); the Institute for Advanced Studies, Helsinki (thanks to Johanna Sumiala); the Perspectives of Communicative Constructivism Conference, Berlin, November 2014 (thanks to Hubert Knoblauch and Jo Reichertz); the Media and Social Theory Research Network, LSE, which we launched with a joint talk in May 2015; the Reflexive Mediatization Workshop, the Technical University Dortmund, April 2015 (thanks to Ronald Hitzler and Michaela Pfadenhauer); the Meaning Across Media Conference, Copenhagen University, May 2015 (thanks to Kjetil Sandvik); the Social Ontology of Digital Data and Digital Technology Symposium, by the Warwick University Centre for Social Ontology, London, July 2015 (thanks to Mark Carrigan); the ECREA Doctoral Summer School, Bremen University, August 2015; the New Directions in Mediatization

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Nick would like to dedicate this book to the memory of John Edwards, much loved father-in-law (1926–2015). Andreas would like to dedicate this book to Beate Köhler.

We are deeply grateful to our partners, Louise Edwards and Beate Köhler, for their love, patience and support during our many absences. A special thank you to Beate for supporting us with the cover picture of the book – and her willingness to stay at various times in London.

Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp
London and Bremen, February 2016

1

Introduction

Suppose the social to be mediated – what? This question (with apologies to Nietzsche)[1] has hovered over social theory, and everyday accounts of the social and public world, since the late nineteenth century. When not ignored, the question has received myths or slogans for answers: the few serious answers have tended to be based on a reading of social infrastructures at least a quarter of a century old. This is a book of social theory that tries to do better than that.

So, how do we rethink the character of the social world (including 'sociality', 'socialization', 'social order', 'society'), starting out from the principle that the social is constructed from, and through, technologically mediated processes and infrastructures of communication, that is, through what we have come to call 'media'? Since our 'reality' as human beings who must live together is constructed through social processes, what are the consequences for that reality if the social itself is *already* 'mediated'; that is, shaped and formed through media? These questions generate our book's title: the *mediated* construction of reality.

The basic terms of these questions need some discussion. *'The social'*? This term has been attacked in recent decades from many directions. Quite apart from neoliberal attacks on the 'social' – Margaret Thatcher's notorious slogan 'there is no such thing as society' – the importance of the social as an object of *theoretical enquiry* has increasingly been displaced by other priorities in the social sciences. So, for example, the philosopher and sociologist of science, Bruno Latour, has sought to deconstruct, or at least reassemble, 'the social' as a sociologist's fiction, that generally obscures from us the actual material arrangements by which various entities, human and non-human, are connected for various purposes and on various scales.[2] Latour's key target was the sociology of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim[3] argued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that society is a fact constructed out of the acts and imaginings of human beings; a 'fact' just as much as the 'facts' of natural science. Durkheim's reference point for this notion of society was primarily the emotional and cognitive

reality of the face-to-face gathering. Durkheim did not live to consider how the notion of society must change when it is presented to us, in part, through technological processes of mediation that, in turn, are necessarily outcomes of economic and political forces: clearly this is an omission that needs correction. In addition, other writers have seen a problem in Durkheim's emphasis on the work that *representations* of the social do in reproducing its reality, looking elsewhere for forms of connection, friction and resonance that bypass 'meaning' altogether (Thrift, 2008). Still others want to shift our focus away from human interactions to the 'posthuman' from which perspective 'the social' can seem quaintly parochial (Hayles, 1999). At the very least, the term 'social' needs some repair work – if, that is, the project of social theory is to be renewed.

What of *'media'*? Serious reflection on how media institutions represent – perhaps distort – the social already requires us to put certain versions of 'the social' or 'society' within scare quotes. The problem multiplies in the digital era when the most promising source of new economic value appears to be what are called *'social media'* platforms. The very term 'media' masks huge changes. In the mid to late twentieth century, debate about media's implications for the values and realities on which social life was based focused on television and film,[4] that is, the consequences of *particular* news frames or *exemplary* images. Only radio in the age of mass media plausibly involved a *continuous* form of social shaping, although Tarde's (1901) suggestive work on the continuous influence of how news circulates through newspapers already pointed in this direction.[5] But the expansion of internet access via the World Wide Web from the 1990s and its move to smart mobile devices from the 2000s profoundly changed the questions that social theory needed to answer about media and media theory about the social. Particularly with the introduction of social media networks from the mid 2000s, 'media' now are much more than specific channels of centralized content: they comprise platforms which, for many humans, literally *are* the spaces where, through communication, they *enact* the social. If the basic building-blocks of social life are potentially themselves now shaped by 'media' – that is, the contents and infrastructure derived from institutionally sustained technologies of communication – then social theory must *rethink* the implications of 'media' for its basic term, 'the social'. 'The digital revolution' as it is often called – but it involves much more than digitalization and the internet – must, as Anthony Giddens (2015) has argued, be answered by a major transformation in sociological thinking too. That transformation in sociological thought and its reorientation towards these key changes in media *and* social infrastructures is the principal focus of this book.

For that reason – that is, our double focus on the mutual transformations of media *and* the social world together – we will give less emphasis to specific media texts, representations and imaginative forms than we might do in a book focused exclusively on media themselves. For the same reason, when we discuss 'reality' in this book, we refer not to specific media representations or enactments of reality (for example 'reality TV'), but to the achieved sense of a social world to which media practices, on the largest scale, contribute. In this, starting out from the detailed scholarship of media and communications studies, we hope to make a substantive contribution both to media *and* social theory. Indeed our point is that social theory is no longer viable, unless it has been, in part, transformed by media theory.

Yet, once we have acknowledged the complexity of the institutional 'figurations' we now call 'media' (we will come back to the term 'figurations') and deconstructed the various representations of the social that different power blocs make, some might be tempted to abandon the term 'social' entirely. But that would be a huge mistake. For the term 'social' is one we cannot do without if we are to grasp the complexities that interest us. The term 'social' points to a basic feature of human life: what historian and social theorist William Sewell calls 'the various mediations that place people into "social" relations with one another'.[6] Indeed the word 'social' signifies something fundamental that even recent detractors of the social would not deny: the basis of our human life-in-common in relations of interdependence. These always include relations of *communication*: as Axel Honneth says, 'the process of social construction can [. . .] only be analysed as a communicative process' (Honneth, 1995, p. 58). The fundamentally *mediated* nature of the social – our necessarily mediated interdependence as human beings – is therefore based not in some internal mental reality, but rather on the *material* processes (objects, linkages, infrastructures, platforms) through which communication, and the construction of meaning, take place. Those material processes of mediation constitute much of the *stuff* of the social. As a result, Sewell argues, the social is always double in character: both form of meaning *and* built environment.[7] Yet this inherent complexity of the social is lost if we abandon the term 'social' and go off to analyse either meanings or technologies of connection in isolation. Meanwhile, the infrastructures of the 'media' that help constitute the social get ever more complex.

Our argument involves new conceptual and historical work. For example, in Part I of this book, we introduce the reading of communications history on which our conceptual framework is based, and adapt the term 'mediatization' as shorthand for *all* the transformations of

communicative and social processes, and the social and practical forms built from them, which follow from our increasing reliance on technologically and institutionally based processes of mediation. Quite clearly such transformations are complex, meaning that 'mediatization' is not just one type of thing, one 'logic' of doing things; indeed it is best understood as not a 'thing' or 'logic' at all, but as the variety of ways in which *possible* orderings of the social by media are further transformed and stabilized through continuous feedback loops.

Particularly important as a mid-range concept for grasping those more complex transformations is the term 'figuration', which we borrow from the late work of Norbert Elias in the 1970s and 1980s. We find it encouraging for the long-term project of social theory that concepts developed decades ago have their full analytical power only today. Now we can appreciate their openness to processes that, on a larger scale, are gaining in importance today, when the 'stuff' of the social is being transformed by data-based processes, largely automated and on vast scales, something that could not possibly have been anticipated when those concepts were developed. Much about today's infrastructures of social interaction seems alien to most earlier versions of social theory, as discussed further later in our argument. Yet this growing interdependence of sociality *on system* – the growing 'institutionalization' of both self and collectivity (as reflected in the book's third part) – is at root hardly contrary to the vision of social life that Georg Simmel had, already, at the dawn of the modern media age. In a chapter on 'sociability' Simmel offered an insight into the paradoxical – certainly complex and recursive – nature of mediated social life:

> the world of sociability [. . .] is an artificial world [. . .]. If now we have the conception that we enter into sociability purely as "human beings", as that which we really are [. . .] it is because modern life is *overburdened* with objective content and material demands. (1971, p. 133)

This captures well the tension between our ever-changing sense of who 'we' are (and what our lives together mean) and the material demands of our technologically supported lives in view of, and in touch with, each other. The more intense our social life feels, the greater its recursive dependence on technological media of communication. We must sharpen our grasp of this paradox, and that is the purpose of this book.

Towards a Materialist Phenomenology of the Social World

We want in this book to understand better the construction of everyday reality as part of the social world. We agree with philosopher of science Ian Hacking when he writes (1999, p. 49) that the concept of 'construction has become stale. It needs to be freshened up'. A theory of the construction of *social* reality must at the very least pay attention to a key element in the construction of social life today, which is mediated communications. This simple recognition turns out to have profound consequences for social theory.

Our goal is to develop *a materialist phenomenology* of the types of social world in which media play an obvious and unavoidable part. Let us unpack this a little more. The word *materialist* refers back to an approach called 'cultural materialism', linked closely with the writing of Raymond Williams (1980). Williams' main point was to include the *material* as well as the *symbolic* aspects of everyday practices when analysing culture as a 'whole way of life'. Williams (1990) himself demonstrated the importance of this point of departure when he discussed television as both (material) technology and (symbolic) cultural form. It is not a matter of positioning the material against the symbolic, but of grasping both in their interrelatedness, as part of a proper analysis of how media and communications contribute to the construction of the social world. We need, in other words, to consider media both as technologies including infrastructures *and* as processes of sense-making, if we want to understand how today's social worlds come into being. By using the term 'materiality' we want to emphasize this full complexity.

We offer a *phenomenology* of the social world, because we believe that, whatever its appearance of complexity, even of opacity, the social world remains something accessible to interpretation and understanding by human actors, indeed a structure built up, in part, *through* those interpretations and understandings. Weber's definition of sociology as 'the *interpretative* understanding of social action' (1947, p. 88) has much more than definitional force, since social life, as Paul Ricoeur (1980, p. 219) wrote, has its 'very foundation' in 'substituting signs for things': that is, signs that embody interpretations. Phenomenology, however, goes further in taking seriously the world as it appears for interpretation to particular *situated* social actors, from *their* point of view within wider relations of interdependence. There is an implicitly humanist dimension to phenomenology by which we fully stand.[8] We do not claim however to have done detailed phenomenological empirical work behind every claim in our book: not

only would that have been impossible, given the range it tries to cover, but it would ignore the excellent literature on how a mediated social world appears to social actors that already exists. Our account throughout however, even where based on secondary literature, is developed from the standpoint of a *possible* phenomenology that is oriented to empirical research.

A fully *materialist* phenomenology is able to bypass some standard and important objections to what has been associated with the 'classic' tradition of social phenomenology. Take, for example, Michel Foucault's firm rejection of phenomenology for giving 'absolute priority to the observing subject' (Foucault, 1970, p. xiv), or Pierre Bourdieu's related objection to symbolic interactionism for 'reducing relations of power to relations of communication' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 167). With our materialist phenomenology we hope to commit neither of these sins. If the social world is built up, in part, of interpretations and communications, as phenomenology insists, our account of that world must look closely at the material infrastructures *through which, and on the basis of which*, communications today take place. Phenomenology cannot then *only* focus on how the world appears for interpretation by particular social actors.[9] What is needed instead is a full-blown rethinking of the social construction of everyday reality, in all its interconnectedness, for the digital age. That means reoccupying the space associated with Berger and Luckmann's well-known book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, published exactly half a century ago and one of the most read sociology texts of the 1960s and 1970s. But our aim is emphatically *not* to rework Berger and Luckmann's book, or even to reinterpret it. Our aim instead, starting out from something like their basic ambition, is to build a different but comparable account of how social reality is constructed, an account that is adequate to the communicative forms of the digital age.

There is incidentally still much to admire about Berger and Luckmann's book, developing as it did the mid twentieth-century's tradition of phenomenological sociology into a satisfying version of the sociology of knowledge. Yet this book seems very distant from us now. A basic reason is that Berger and Luckmann say almost nothing about technologically based media of communication. Take for example this rare passage where media are mentioned obliquely in a discussion of the lifeworld's dialectic of near and far:

> The reality of everyday life is organized around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present [. . .] Typically my interest in the far zones is less

> intense and certainly less urgent. I am intensely interested in the cluster of objects involved in my daily occupation [. . .] I may also be interested in what goes on at Cape Kennedy or in outer space, but this interest is a matter of private, 'leisure-time' choice rather than an urgent matter of my everyday life. (1966, p. 36)

Media feature in passing here, but only as the window onto a distant world of fascination that helps us while away our leisure hours. Berger and Luckmann do not even consider the importance of media-based narratives for shaping our sense of everyday reality. Was this plausible even in the 1960s? Probably not, and it had long since ceased to be plausible by the 1990s when we both became researchers, after which the embedding of media in the fabric of daily life has intensified considerably. Not surprisingly, therefore, Berger and Luckmann's work has not had much influence on the international cross-disciplinary field of media and communications research.[10]

Our challenge is in any case quite different from Berger and Luckmann's: it is to build a fully materialist phenomenology that starts out from the fact not just of digital media but also of the new data-driven infrastructures and communications on which today's social interfaces increasingly rely. It means understanding how the social is constructed in an age of *deep* mediatization when the very *elements and building-blocks* from which a sense of the social is constructed become *themselves* based in technologically based processes of mediation. As a result, the ways in which we make sense of the world phenomenologically become necessarily entangled with the constraints, affordances and power-relations that are features of media as infrastructures for communication. We explore the concept of 'deep' mediatization further in Chapter 3, but we signal now that it involves a fundamental transformation in how the social world is constructed, and so can be described. Offering such an account will involve returning as much to Berger and Luckmann's predecessor, Alfred Schutz, who had insights already into the consequences of media technologies for social reality that Berger and Luckmann failed to develop.

Our reworking of Berger and Luckmann's legacy has consequences for this book's position in the history of sociology. Step by step we extend the scope of Berger and Luckmann's original project – 'The social construction of reality' – to acknowledge the fully mediated character of today's everyday reality. And while Berger and Luckmann originally sketched a 'sociology of knowledge' itself (as they subtitled their book), we develop instead a sociological account of how media and communications are embedded in everyday life, as the basis for a new account of how the social world and social

reality are constructed in an age whose communications infrastructure is radically different from what Berger and Luckmann knew[11] This is the reason why we called this book 'The *mediated* construction of reality'. In that sense, this book can also be read as a contribution to the sociology of knowledge, although our argument at no point depends on making that claim.

Our Inspirations

Before we get started on our analysis, we would like to explain some wider sources that have inspired this project, and note some others that we have tended to avoid.

A surprising source of inspiration for our reinterpretation of Berger and Luckmann comes from the great Jesuit priest and radical educator, Ivan Illich. The last book he wrote before he died offered a reinterpretation of the shift in the communicative lifeworld during Europe's twelfth century that *preceded* the more celebrated transformations that flowed from printing technology. Illich describes the shift from a world where written manuscripts served as the inert repository where revered texts in sacred languages were stored for eternity – while being kept alive through oral recitation, often from memory (compare also Ong, 2002) – to a world where writing itself became the site where *new meanings* were made. Writing became used for storage, but also for contemporary expression, and in *any* language, including meanings intended by the 'ordinary' literate person (for example, a note-taker or diary-writer). Illich describes a complete reorientation of how humans make meaning through technologies of storage: this shift took place over half a century, and introduced a new type of reading, writing, speaking and thinking self. Illich characterized the change involved as a change in 'the relations between *the axioms of conceptual space and social reality* insofar as this interrelationship is mediated and shaped by techniques that employ *letters*'.[12]

We only need to extend Illich's term 'axioms' to today's techniques that employ codes and hyperlinks, and we have an elegant phrase for capturing the superficially simple, yet radical, nature of the digital age's transformations. Illich's word 'axioms' has its root in a Greek word, 'axioma', meaning 'what is *valued*'; in mathematics, Aristotle used this word to refer to what is valued so much, as knowledge, that it can be taken for granted in building an argument or proof. If we have a suspicion that, in the digital age, the things we take for granted in our imaginative and practical relations to the world – our 'axioms' – are *changing*, what better time to revisit the sociology of knowledge with Illich's historical work in mind?[13]

Social theory has offered various routes for making sense of the transformation in the axioms of everyday life through media, but each has its limitations. Niklas Luhmann's 'systems theory' appears to offer insights into the digital world, insofar as the latter can be reduced to the operation of an interlocking set of systems. But the theoretical price paid for adopting Luhmann's system theory is very high: not only assuming that the *lived* world of everyday experience and social meaning *is* generally systematic and functionally differentiated, when in reality it may be much more complex and pluri-centred than that, but also masking from view the highly motivated and institutionally directed attempts to *impose* (or powerfully propose) systematicity that are increasingly an important feature of the digital communications infrastructure.[14] Another route to making sense of these transformations must be found.

It is more promising to trace the stretched-out patterns of technological formation and linkage that *underlie* how our external actions are organized in the world. Here Bruno Latour has had enormous influence in reorienting our sense of what is sociologically interesting. Deeply sceptical about wider notions of 'society' and the 'social', Latour has rightly insisted we pay attention to the huge variety of ways in which people and objects become associated with each other. This is a promising way of registering innovations of practice at a time when the basics of what we value (the 'axioms' of daily life) are being stretched and transformed by our uses of a new digital infrastructure. But here too there is a cost, since Latour, in his scepticism towards sociology's claims of explanatory order, seems to lose touch with what remains at stake for everyday actors in *interpreting* the spaces of interaction ('the social') in which we are entangled. 'The social' is not a space, necessarily, of order; but it is a space *where order is at stake*, and where the absence of order brings severe costs. This is one key contribution of phenomenology: to insist that there is something fundamentally (and, we might say, *naturally*) at stake for us, as human beings, in the order that we manage to make in and of the world, an order whose normative force goes far beyond the particular arrangements that, as individuals and collectivities, we assemble. We must therefore hold onto that sense of what is at stake in 'the social' if we are to register the human dilemmas of the digital age, dilemmas which stem from our continuing attempts to *preserve* agency and some satisfactory degree of order under ever more complex, perhaps contradictory, conditions.[15]

We do, however, follow Latour in abandoning the modern idea of 'society', if by that we mean a *sui generis* 'human' construction somehow built up 'against' nature. Latour is not the only writer to see problems

in this modern view of nature, science and society.[16] Indeed two major philosophical traditions – the Aristotelian tradition, recently revised in neo-Aristotelian form, and the Hegelian tradition – have insisted on the need to understand the social not as something opposed to 'nature', but as a 'second nature' into which, as human beings, we grow:[17] a contingently evolved but, as such, natural tendency to develop institutional arrangements within which a common life can be lived. Media and communications infrastructures have become part of this second nature and, as such, may, or may not, be evolving in ways that are congenial to other human needs and goals. It is not easy to find a word for this evolving second nature, but it remains important to hold onto a sense of how the shaping of meaning, over time, takes on cumulative and inherited forms without which human life is impossible (McDowell, 1994, p. 95). For this we propose the term 'figurational order', building on the word 'figuration' which we introduce shortly.[18] This figurational order has always been socially shaped, but potentially now is being dislocated by the impact of new contradictions, with radical implications for the sustainability of existing ways of life and forms of social order.

At the root of our concern as social theorists, therefore, is the question of how we come to be embedded *in* a world: that embedding carries for us a moral and ethical charge. Technologically based media of communication are now fundamental to the construction of everyday reality, that is, to building and replicating the world in which we are embedded, but in ways that are producing new costs, tensions and pain. As Anthony Giddens put it more than two decades ago, 'in conditions of late modernity we live "in the world" in a different sense from previous eras in history' (1994a, p. 187). The phenomenological task of following how the world 'hangs together'[19] for us as human actors – as beings who have no choice but to be dependent on others – is, we propose, the best route to grasp the sense of contradiction that we feel in relation to many of the deep transformations within what Jose van Dijck (2013) has called 'the age of connectivity'.

The sociologist who offers most towards understanding the phenomenological contradictions of our digital age is Norbert Elias. His analysis of modern society's increasing 'civilizing' of the body and mind does not separate the individual from society. Elias was interested in how a certain form of civilized 'subject' is linked with a certain form of society. This way of thinking becomes much clearer in his later books such as *The Society of Individuals* and especially *What is Sociology?*. Here Elias understands the social not as static and given, but as articulated in an ongoing process. To analyse the process of building and sustaining the social, Elias introduces

the term *'figuration'* as a conceptual tool to grasp the complex problems of interdependence that living together in large numbers generates, how those problems find solutions. Social change is always in part, Elias argues, a change at the level of figurations. It is here too – in the detail of specific figurations, and more complex figurations of figurations, and in the overall web of the 'figurational order' that such figurations constitute – that the consequences of technological processes of mediation for our *possible* social worlds are best traced.

Are the figurations of social life today becoming less positive, *more disordered*, than those of the past? If so, what *social* resources can we find to address this? And what if, as yet, there are none? These are the unsettling questions that our book tries ultimately to pose and at least begin to answer.

When we pose such questions, we become aware how far social theory has ignored until now this emergent media-derived complexity in what it was meant to theorize: 'the social'. That standoff is no longer defensible. For the social *is* mediated, and that mediation is increasingly *sustained* by manifold technologies of communication: by 'manifold', we refer not just to the plurality of today's media channels and interfaces, but also to their interlinked nature, and to the many-dimensional order that results and that encompasses our whole media environment.[20]

The Shape of the Argument to Come

The chapters of Part I of this book are devoted to unfolding the various layers of this relationship between 'the social', 'media' and 'communication' on a broad, historical scale. We start in Chapter 2 by reflecting on the social world as a communicative construction. On the basis of this we move into a historical analysis of the different waves of mediatization that cumulate in the current stage of deep mediatization (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4 we move to the level of everyday living and analyse how we live with the complex figurations of a mediatized social world. In this way, Part I of the book offers an overall understanding of the construction of the social world under conditions of deep mediatization.

We are then ready in Part II to explore the implications of the social's mediation for the dimensions of the social world as building-blocks of everyday experience: for the *spaces* in and over which the social is enacted (Chapter 5) and the *times* in and through which the social occurs (Chapter 6); for our grasp of the types of complexity which the social now displays, because of the increasing importance of *data-based* processes

that operate, as it were, behind the scenes of everyday interaction (Chapter 7).

This, in turn, provides the basis in Part III for considering agency in the social world and the larger organizational forms that are built 'on top of' this mediated social, as worked through in our practices as 'selves' (Chapter 8), as 'collectivities' (Chapter 9), and as institutions that attempt to order, even govern, the social world (Chapter 10). Only through these various levels of analysis can we get into view the wider question with which the book ends: is our ever more technologically mediated life together sustainable, or at least compatible with maintaining good relations of interdependence? If not, how can we begin to remedy this?

Across this set of arguments will be a normative trajectory that underlies our book's analysis as a whole: while we want to avoid any naive criticism that claims deep mediatization is *per se* 'good' or 'bad', we reflect throughout on the question of how far certain forms of mediatization offer agency to certain figurations of people and institutions, giving them particular opportunities in the construction of the social world, while limiting the agency of others. In this sense, we are concerned with how far, at the highest level of complexity, today's 'figurational order' has negative or positive implications overall for human lives-in-common. The first part of this book provides the foundation for such a kind of analysis. In the second and third parts of the book we reflect from many angles on these questions of agency in times of deep mediatization. We bring together our sense of how the figurational order of the digital age fits with the normative demands that humans are entitled to make of *any* way of life in Chapter 11, the Conclusion.

Part I

Constructing the Social World

2

The Social World as Communicative Construction

In this chapter we introduce our approach to understanding how communication, and specifically mediated communication, contribute to the construction of the social world. This is the essential starting-point, if we are to explain how the social world *changes* when it becomes fundamentally interwoven with media. What does it mean when the social world, as we know it, is constructed in and through mediated communication? A way of capturing this deep, consistent and self-reinforcing role of media in the construction of the social world is to say that the social world is not just mediated but media*tized*: that is, *changed* in its dynamics and structure by the role that media continuously (indeed recursively)[1] play in its construction.

We do not mean by this to say that the social world is totally 'colonized' – to use a Habermasian term (Habermas, 1984 [1981], p. 117) – by the media, or subjected throughout to something as simple or direct as a 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Nor do we intend to imply that the salience of media in the construction of the social world operates in the same way everywhere: of course, the *degree* of media's interweaving in the social varies in different regions of the world, as does even what we mean by 'media' (Slater, 2013, pp. 29f.). We *do* mean by this that the social world has significantly more complexity when its forms and patterns are, in part, sustained in and through media and their infrastructures. Even if we do things without directly using media, the horizon of our practices is a social world for which media are fundamental reference-points and resources. This is the sense in which we speak about the social world as 'mediatized'.

The term 'mediatization' can be further explained by a more basic reflection on the concept of communication. Communication is a process necessary to the construction of a social world: as Hubert Knoblauch puts it, 'communicative action [is] the basic process in the social construction of reality' (Knoblauch, 2013b, p. 297). This does not mean that all practices within the social world are communicative (they are not), but it means *more* than saying that communication is just one of many acts

we do in the world (of course it is). Because communication is the set of practices through which we 'make sense' of our world, and build arrangements (simple or complex) for coordinating our behaviour, the communicative dimension of our practices is critical to how the social world *becomes* constructed. Some social constructivism, as formulated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) for example, rather underplayed *communication* in general, in the course of overplaying '*language* as the empirical medium of action' (Knoblauch, 2013b, p. 298). As a result, that approach was poorly placed to grasp the sheer variety of communicative practices through media. But the inadequacy of that position becomes all the clearer with deep mediatization (see Chapter 1) when more and more aspects of our daily practice are saturated by new forms of mediated communication.

Our first step therefore is to build an approach that understands the social world as *fundamentally interwoven with media*. Already, we turn away here from the original thinking of Berger and Luckmann. We also establish another key difference. While Berger and Luckmann understood their book as a 'treatise in the sociology of knowledge' (its subtitle), defined in a rather universal manner, our starting-point in understanding the construction of the social world in an age of digital media is fundamentally different. *Because* media have changed the reference-points of human practice so dramatically, it is now obvious not only that the social world is something *constructed* by us as humans, but that those processes of construction can only be understood if seen as *historically located*, with one of the main recent historical changes being the increasing social relevance of technologies of mediated communication. In this chapter we sketch the consequences of this for understanding the social world. The terminology we introduce – everyday reality and the domains of the social world, institutional facts, and communicative practices by which we construct the social world as meaningful – will be the basis for our critical reflection on social agency that we develop over the course of this book.

We cannot analyse the social world via a simple division between 'pure' face-to-face communication and a separate presentation of the world to us 'through' media. Many of the communicative practices by which we construct our social world are media-related ones. Our daily communication comprises much more than direct face-to-face communication: mediated communication – by television, phones, platforms, apps, etc. – is interwoven with our face-to-face communication in manifold ways. Our face-to-face interaction is continuously *inter*woven with media-related practices: while we talk to someone, we might check something on our mobile phones, get text messages, refer to various media contents.

Sonia Livingstone (2009) sums this up as 'the mediation of everything'. However, because the social world is not just a series of discrete things laid alongside each other (a first-order complexity) but a web of *interconnections* operating on a huge number of levels and scales, 'the mediation of everything' automatically generates new complexities, since each part of 'everything' is itself already mediated. This huge *second-order* complexity is what we try to capture by the term 'media*tization*', and it derives from the mediation of the communicative practices that at every level contributes to the construction of the social world. If we are to grasp how processes of communicative construction take place across a variety of different media, our analysis must go to a higher dimension of complexity than is possible by concentrating on the 'face to face' and 'here and now'.

To ground an approach like this we make a three-step argument. First, we clarify what we understand by 'social world': what does this term imply? Second, we outline how the construction of the social world and its everyday reality takes place. And third, we develop an understanding of the complexity of media and communication's role in this process of construction.

2.1 Theorizing the Social World

In everyday language, as well as in social sciences, the term 'social world' is a more or less widely used concept. It sometimes requires no further explanation, indicating the 'common dimension' of the world – the 'empirical world' in which we as human beings live. In this sense, for example, Herbert Blumer wrote about the 'empirical social world' (Blumer, 1954, p. 4) in his famous article entitled 'What is wrong with social theory?' This is also the very general sense in which Tim Dant (1999) described 'material culture' as part of the 'social world'. In contrast to such general understandings, a very specific concept of the social world can be found in symbolic interactionism with its so-called 'social world perspective' (Clarke, 2011; Shibutani, 1955; Strauss, 1978). From this perspective, society consists of various bounded 'social worlds'; for example, the social world of football playing, the social world of schools, or the social world of the family. Each of these social worlds – so the argument goes – is defined by a 'primary activity', by certain 'sites' where these activities occur, and by 'technologies' and 'organizations' that are involved (Strauss, 1978, p. 122).

In our view, these understandings of the social world are either too generalized (more or less a metaphor for human togetherness) or too narrow (understanding certain social domains as social worlds).[2] Our definition of

the social world is both inclusive and focused at the same time. The social world, put most simply, is the overall outcome of our joint processes of social – specifically, communicative – construction. Through the variety of our sense-making practices, we construct our social world, as something 'common' to us from the beginning. It is in this sense that the philosopher John Searle (2011) discusses the construction of social reality as 'making the social world'.

Such a definition of the social world echoes the reflections of social phenomenology but in a more historically sensitive way. We can trace this understanding back to the book *The Phenomenology of the Social World* by Alfred Schutz (1967 [1932]). If we follow his arguments, the social world is an intersubjective world, that is, a world we share with other human beings (Schutz, 1967, p. 9). This creates the possibility that the social world is 'meaningful, not only for those living in that world, but for its scientific interpreters as well' (Schutz, 1967, p. 9). Schutz attempted to reconstruct the fundamental phenomenology of the social world, using in his later work the concept of the 'lifeworld' to emphasize its rootedness in our 'unproblematic' and 'natural' experiences of everyday reality (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). Berger and Luckmann picked this up in their approach to the social construction of reality, which for them, too, is based in 'everyday life' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, pp. 31–62). While we will have some critical things to say about the limits of some work in this classic tradition of social phenomenology, there are three fundamental points we can learn from it.

1. *The social world is intersubjective.* Describing the social world requires an analysis that considers the various subjective perspectives of the different actors within the social world, but, at the same time, taking into account that the social world has an existence beyond (that is, independent of) the individual. The social world existed before we as individuals were born, and it will last when as individuals we are gone. Various media are important means towards securing the intersubjective character of our social world. Media offer the possibility to communicate across time and space, developing a shared understanding of the social world and representing the social world for further reflection and action. Media here include not only so-called mass media, which, in the form of broadcasting and print, for a long time constituted the dominant definitions of the social world. Media here also include the various digital platforms we use to communicate with our friends and colleagues and to represent these social relations. The intersubjectivity of today's social world is something we articulate to a distinct degree through our many media in structures of connection or, as we will call them later, figurations.

2. *Everyday reality is the foundation of the social world*. According to Schutz, everyday reality is *constitutive* for our living in the social world. What does this mean? As Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann formulated it, everyday life 'is the province of reality in which man [sic!] continuously participates in ways which are at once inevitable and patterned' (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 3). It is the 'region of reality' in which we can engage as individual human beings and which we can change through our bodily operations. Berger and Luckmann went further, describing this everyday reality as deserving the title of the 'paramount reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 35), which grounds the possibility of a social world. It is important here, as elsewhere, to be clear on what we are, and are not, saying if we follow this classical phenomenological position. Because we have bodies and it is *only* through the capacities of our bodies that we act in the world, there is no other possible grounding of our social world than our embodied actions: by 'everyday life' we mean then, quite simply, what each of us *does* in the world, individually and in relation to each other. But what we do in the world is not somehow separate, or cut off, from the technological means by which we act in the world. Berger and Luckmann, as was common in sociology for a long time, wrote as if there is *first* face-to-face 'everyday life' *and then there is a supplement*: what we do, technologically, to mediate that everyday life. This was hardly true through most of human history, at least since the discovery of writing, but today it would simply be bizarre to ignore how the reality of everyday life is inseparably linked with media, when supermarket checkouts read our credit cards with our personal data, when our everyday communication happens to a high degree via mobile devices, platforms and interactive systems, and when children learn to play through the means of internet-connected tablets. Under these circumstances it makes no sense at all to think of everyday reality as a 'pure experience' that can be contrasted with a (somehow secondary) 'mediated experience'. Everyday reality, from the beginning, is in many respects mediated, which means that the complex social world of *interconnections* constructed from everyday life's foundations is mediatized.

3. *The social world is internally differentiated in domains*. The social world is not one homogeneous thing; 'it is internally diverse, exhibit[ing] a multi-form structure' (Schutz, 1967, p. 139). The structuring force of the social world is quite consistent with much of our everyday life being de facto lived within 'sub-universes of human existence' (Luckmann, 1970, p. 580), 'a variety of small "worlds"' (Luckmann, 1970, p. 587) like, for example, single-purpose communities, or work and leisure groups. This perhaps sounds like symbolic interactionism's 'social worlds perspective'