4

MEDIA USE IN DISRUPTED EVERYDAY LIFE

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes what happens to media use when everyday life is suddenly disrupted, focusing on how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed work, socializing, communication and everyday living. The empirical case is changing media use in Norway during the pandemic, building on a qualitative questionnaire survey conducted in early lockdown, and follow-up interviews eight months later. Expanding on the ideas of destabilization of media repertoires developed in the former chapter, this analysis discusses transforming media repertoires as more digital, as less mobile (but still smartphone-centric) and as essentially social. The chapter further explains new concepts for pandemic media use practices, such as doomscrolling and Zoom fatigue.

Can you remember when you first heard of COVID-19, and did you think it would change your life? 'They started talking about it on the news', said Inger, a Norwegian woman nearing 70, whom we interviewed in late 2020. She continued: 'I still found people were quite relaxed. Who would have thought such a thing could happen to the whole world? It is like science fiction'. 'We talked about it when they speed-built that hospital in China', said Einar, a man in his 40s working in the cultural sector, 'but no one thought it would come here. Former epidemics happened elsewhere'. He added: 'It is like that with a lot of things'. School employee Karla remembered a conversation at work about the need for kids to stay home at the smallest sign of cold symptoms: 'Parents would never get to work! We laughed about it, thinking it was impossible. And then it took three weeks, and the country shut down'.

This chapter analyzes what happens to media use when everyday life is suddenly disrupted by dramatic societal events, focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and how it transformed practices of work, education, socializing and conducting daily life. As part of all of these changes, everyday media use was reconfigured.

As in the former chapter, I draw on the notion of *destabilization* to understand processes of disruption and changing media use. I argue that destabilization tends to push towards increased reliance on digital media, as available and adaptable resources for reorientation in daily life. Whereas the former chapter focused on individual life phase transitions that are often expected or desired, such as starting a family, this chapter focuses on the collective shock of a global crisis, affecting people differently in their everyday lives.

To analyze changing everyday media use in the pandemic, I analyze data from two connected studies conducted in Norway: A qualitative questionnaire from the first national lockdown in March and April 2020 (see also Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021b), and a follow-up interview study towards the end of the same year. The questionnaire from early lockdown is analyzed to understand sudden processes of shock, destabilization and reorientation, while the interviews provide insight into how people started to conceive living with the pandemic over time and reconfiguring their lives for the long run. These interviews include some of the same informants who talked about an ordinary day with media (pre-pandemic or in the absence of heavy restrictions) in Chapter 2. The chapter draws extensively on emerging scholarship on changing media use in the pandemic from other countries and contexts.

First, I discuss how the pandemic crisis became part of everyday life. I argue that the early lockdown constituted a shared moment of urgent destabilization of media repertoires, and that the reconfigurations that took place can be characterized as *more digital, less mobile, still social*. After discussing each of these, the next section delves deeper into life with media in the pandemic over time, looking at two pandemic media experiences: 'Zoom fatigue' as overload from multiple domains becoming mediated, and 'doomscrolling' as overload from scary news across digital platforms. Both of these are contextualized in terms of how people reconsidered social and existential dimensions of everyday life in the pandemic, expressed through reconfigurations in everyday media use. I conclude by discussing the notion of 'the new normal' and how profoundly the pandemic has changed media use in digital everyday life.

A GLOBAL CRISIS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

At some point, COVID-19 became part of everyday life. At first, it was an acute health emergency to some and a distant news story to others.

With spreading infections and large-scale lockdowns, the pandemic disrupted everyday life for considerable numbers of people. More than two years later, it is a bit more difficult to discern if the pandemic should be considered a disruptive event with a particular timeframe, or a more profound reconfiguration of society. It is, regardless, an example of a global crisis people all over the world have encountered in the context of their everyday lives.

The World Health Organization declared a global pandemic on 11th March 2020, having pronounced COVID-19 a severe international health risk since January the same year.[1] In Norway, Thursday 12th March 2020 stands out as the singular most dramatic day of the national pandemic timeline[2]: This was the day when everyday life was turned upside down. The first Norwegian COVID-19 case had been confirmed on February 26th,[3] and several new cases followed over the next days, mostly related to ski tourists returning from Italy and Austria after a school holiday.[4] Restrictions on large public events were instituted, along with advice to the population on how to avoid disease. Then things happened fast: The first non-traceable infections were confirmed on March 10th, neighbouring country Denmark declared a national lockdown on March 11th, and in the morning of March 12th municipal authorities in several Norwegian cities decided to close schools and kindergartens.[5] Some hoarded food and toilet paper, workplaces and universities sent people home, and in the afternoon of March 12th, the Norwegian government held a press conference which marked the start of the first national lockdown.

In this press conference, prime minister Erna Solberg announced what would famously be known as 'the most intrusive measures ever imposed in peacetime', including closed kindergartens, schools, universities, cultural events, sports, pubs and bars, hairdressers and fitness centres, as well as strict border control and quarantine measures, and advice to work from home and practice social distancing. In her speech, the prime minster used the word 'hverdag' which means 'everyday' three times, saying: 'In this period, the everyday will be different for all of us', 'For many, the everyday will be turned upside down' and 'These are measures that directly infringe upon our everyday life and the workings of society'.[6]

The Norwegian strategy to control the pandemic had several similarities to that of Denmark, and differed from the response in Sweden (Ohlsson et al., n.d.; Yarmol-Matusiak et al., 2021). Beyond Scandinavia, there were some similarities but also important differences between Norway and other European countries in lockdown in the same period. The first Norwegian lockdown only lasted for some weeks, with several measures gradually lifted towards summer. There was no curfew, and instead the government encouraged outdoors activities, although a short-lived ban on visiting holiday homes

received considerable critique. As the pandemic continued, geographical and socioeconomic differences in Norway came to have strong bearing on the level of infections as well as counter-pandemic restrictions, for instance with the capital Oslo in a tough lockdown all through winter of 2021. Overall, the rates of infections and deaths were comparatively low in Norway, and an evaluation of the government response pointed to both successes (such as securing vaccination) and failures (such as protecting children from the most radical measures).

Before all of this was known, however, people were suddenly sent home on a mid-week afternoon in mid-March 2020, when everyday life was turned upside down. We will see what happened to media repertoires in this situation.

DESTABILIZED MEDIA REPERTOIRES IN EARLY LOCKDOWN

To understand how media repertoires transform when everyday life changes, *destabilization* is an important keyword. Destabilization implies that external circumstances push towards change, or that foundations or frameworks are unsettled, leading people to reconsider elements or compositions of media repertoires. Destabilization could lead to big or small manifest changes in the form of new experiments, new priorities, or even new habits, and to leaving old ones behind. A media repertoire is not necessarily a house of cards that comes tumbling down with one stroke, but perhaps closer to a sandcastle under construction. We could imagine the pandemic as a tidal force or as a slower erosion.

Emerging research on media repertoires in the pandemic emphasize the value of an organic rather than technical approach: The question is not just how compositions changed, but how people interpreted events and adjusted to the pulse of what was happening (Vandenplas et al., 2021). Analyzing news habit reconfigurations in the pandemic, Marcel Broersma and Joelle Swart (2021) underline the complexity of how habits are formed, through a series of emotional, social and contextual cues and negotiations, drawing on media psychologist LaRose (2015) who argued that habit formation is about moving 'from exploration to exploitation' (LaRose in Broersma & Swart, 2021). In a qualitative cross-country study, Emiliano Treré (2021) has analyzed changing media use in this period through the useful categories of *intensification, discovery* and *abandonment*.

When the first national lockdowns were instituted, many aspects of everyday life changed suddenly and dramatically. For some, 'going to work' no longer meant leaving the house in the morning, but instead clearing a place

for a laptop at the breakfast table to try log on to a new digital platform, while simultaneously helping kids with home school assignments. For others, connections to important social domains were not just transformed but lost: They were unemployed, at least temporarily, and arenas for physical public life were effectively shut down, with severe ramifications for social relations and shared experiences. Importantly, the early phase was not yet another dreaded lockdown met with growing pandemic fatigue, but a novel set of strange circumstances invading daily life in an unprecedented manner. People did not know how the pandemic would develop or how long it would go on. Vaccines were a distant hope, knowledge was limited, and the new recommendations were foreign. Neither did people know how they would come to use the media: Platforms like Zoom were still select business applications rather than household names.[7]

In these circumstances, media repertoires were destabilized and reconfigured. In a qualitative questionnaire conducted in the first weeks of lockdown in Norway, we intended to capture immediate experiences and reflections, through an online form soliciting respondents to write in their own words, at their own time, in open-ended answers. The questions we asked as prompts concerned changes to everyday life, for instance if people worked from home or took care of children, and changes to media use and communication. Approximately 550 people replied between March 24th and April 2nd. I will focus on three reconfigurations of media repertoires, under the headings *more digital, less mobile,* and *still social*, and examine each of these in turn.

MORE DIGITAL

Media repertoires became more digital, intensifying the blurring of boundaries between social domains in everyday life. The first lockdown was a period when people quickly transformed their uses of digital media platforms, including chat and messaging, phones and videoconferencing, delivery and shopping services, social media, news and entertainment, and platforms for work and education. Many had to learn new tools as workplaces and schools moved online. Consumption of online news spiked, indicated not just in our study but now firmly established as a general pattern (see for instance Van Aelst et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021). Streaming and television numbers went record-high.[8] In Norway, as also found in the comparative Reuters Institute Digital News Report, changing media use in the early pandemic has been characterized as an exacerbation of the digital turn (Newman et al., 2021, Kantar 2020).

So, we know that media use became even more digital, but what did this mean for users in everyday settings? In line with the overall arguments of this book, I consider that the adaptability of digital media was essential to the moment of the acute crisis: People were forced to quickly reorient themselves in changing circumstances, and turned to digital media to do so. Smartphones are adaptable, aggregating, and always-near, and these capacities make the phone a ready resource, also when life is unsettled. In early lockdown, a series of other digital devices and platforms joined the smartphone in taking on such roles, their more constant presence grounded in increased homelife.

Individual users reconfigured their media repertoires so that digital media took up more time and attention, more central to a variety of purposes. For instance, people's public connection became more singularly dependent on digital media, whether connecting to public spheres of news and culture, or to work, education and social communities through digital platforms. Some of our questionnaire respondents wrote:

> *I have been thinking about how lucky we are to have today's technology. It really is an important tool in the current crisis. Not just practically, but for human relations! The best experiences these days are found in the blossoming creativity and supportive tone permeating the communication. (On disability benefits, W, 40–49)*

> *With friends and family, the contact runs in social media and on texts, nearly as usual. In addition, we meet digitally on video for social purposes (which is new and nicer than expected). At work: an enormous amount of the same thing to replace meetings, having variable experiences with that. (Manager, M, 40–49)*

> *Time spent on the mobile up by 53 percent, according to the screen time log. I am now on the phone five hours a day, which is a lot. Easy to scroll when you are bored. Reading more online news, checking more newspapers than just the one I subscribe to. I normally do not watch much tv series, as I easily become to immersed and prone to 'binging', but now I watch more series. (Web designer, W, 20–29)*

As we see here, experiences diverged between different aspects of intensified digital media use, with the most positive statements made about opportunities to remain socially connected. Many expressed appreciation for what digital alternatives could offer under the circumstances. But some also experienced digital media as intrusive, distractive and overwhelming. A student who isolated due to COVID-19 symptoms exemplified both tendencies: 'I spend

more time on media than usual, and not in a good way', she wrote, explaining that she found it hard to focus, that it was too easy to binge TV and games, and that she checked online news constantly, even though this made her anxious. When it came to social contact, however, she wrote:

> *Except for a few conversations through the window all social contact has been on the phone and in social media. Usually, I don't care for social media, and spend less time on it than others my age. But now I am constantly following social media. I prefer face-to-face and really miss seeing people, but am surprised at how good the replacement has been! I have been to digital study groups and dinners and had countless video chats. (Student, W, 20–29)*

Reconfigurations of media repertoires required normative and practical reconsiderations. Intensified digital media use was experienced as part of a less organized everyday life, with routines dissolving. Those who were unemployed or strictly isolating experienced significant losses of social domains in everyday life, while others felt that they had too much on their plate. Parents with kids at home wrote about juggling different roles, striving to re-work routines and temporal organization:

> *The dividing lines between weekdays and weekends are diminished, largely due to all the screen time. I can sense this also in the kids, as they are now really stuck in front of a screen all day, except for dinner and a walk we go on every day. (M, teacher, 40–49)*

> *The whole family has become more digital, for work, school and entertainment. We are not concerned about screen time anymore, but thinking of the balance between learning and play. (Teacher, W, 30–39)*

It was not just children whose screen time went through the roof, as respondents reported on more online news, more social media, more digital platforms, more messages, more streaming, more mobile games, more phone- and videocalls. Digital media use expanded to fill the blanks left by cancelled activities, and crept into new contexts and situations, breaking down barriers between work and leisure, and rendering established norms and practices difficult to navigate by. One woman wrote the following about being distracted – by media and by the situation:

> *Finding it hard to focus on one task, whether a game or knitting or a newspaper, and it is usually the smartphone dragging me away. Not because it rings, but because I am checking if there are*

> *any news. Could be related to how I am technically at work but not spending all my time by the computer, because I have nothing specific to do. If I sit down with something that is not work-related, I still have to pay attention all the time. Also generally concerned about the unstable and unpredictable situation, making it hard to focus on trivial matters. My media use has otherwise not changed much – well, I check news a lot more online, I guess I mentioned that. (W, advisor, 50–59)*

The smartphone was instrumental to this tendency, but it was joined by a myriad of other digital platforms that offered news feeds, updates, messages and liveness. Internet and media technologies enabled people to work from home and stay in touch during lockdown, keeping up to date with an evolving global crisis, and was central to the reconfiguration of daily practices, assisting and distracting people in their attempts to cram multiple social domains into heightened levels of everyday messiness.

LESS MOBILE

Media repertoires in early lockdown became less mobile, remaining smartphone-centric but also re-centering the domestic sphere as even more fundamental to media use. For people all over the world, including many of our respondents, lockdown was an experience of being more at home. What *home* meant – student accommodation or family houses, inner cities or rural countryside, big families or single households, stable or precarious conditions – would soon become key to divergent pandemic experiences between different social groups. While health care workers and many other professions continued to go out to work, the prominence of the domestic sphere was accentuated for all through reduced mobility and cancelled activities. This had a series or repercussions on daily media use. One might think that people would use their smartphones less when they were no longer on-the-go, but as we have already seen, that was not the case: 'I definitely use the smartphone A LOT more', one respondent wrote, 'I have not seen my friends since this thing started'.

In a qualitative study from Eastern Europe, conducted in the same period, Sabina Mihelj and colleagues (Mihelj et al., 2021) emphasize the home-bound nature of lockdown life as the key explanation of changing pandemic media use: Individual media use became more dependent on family members, live televised press conferences became a temporal structuring device, print readership diminished as people were not out picking up the paper. They observe how the role of

media in the pandemic was initially framed as an 'infodemic' of abundant misinformation driven by new digital platforms – a notion that has also been critiqued by others (Simon & Camargo, 2021) – but found that everyday experiences conveyed a more traditional image of media in the pandemic in terms of people, at home, watching TV together and trying not to quarrel too much.

In our questionnaire material, 'more at home' was a central topic. Many expressed how much they missed physical social life, sharing sentiments of how ingrained movement between different locations, arenas and activities had been to pre-pandemic everyday life:

> *My partner and I are both doing the home office thing. […] What I find to be the biggest change is that we are much more at home in the evenings. I usually would be out doing things (concerts, cinema, dancing, attending talks, drinking wine, having dinner) about five nights a week, and now I am stuck at home feeling restless. (W, academic, 30–39)*

> *Work situation: Home office. Life situation: Cancelled all plans to travel, attend events and concerts. Staying in touch with friends digitally. (Work qualification program, M, 20–29)*

> *The first days were fine, but as time goes by, I feel the need to physically see the person I am talking to (not just on FaceTime). Going to work gives me a feeling: There is a world out there! (Midwife, W, 30–39)*

Being more at home meant new negotiations of social and spatiotemporal aspects of media use, to adapt to a situation of home as the default place from which all activities would take place, either alone or with partners and children. People had to balance conflicting norms and needs:

> *I'm not a person who talks on the phone a lot, usually just quick messages. So, it's a transition to sit down and have a conversation on the phone. It feels rude to sit in the living room (when my partner is there), so that I have to go somewhere else (he does that too). Then, the phone conversation does not become the main activity, as a physical conversation would be, but instead something I do while cooking or watering my plants. With more people it works better, then it would be on the sofa with a glass of wine and feel more social. (PhD student, W, 30–39)*

These experiences underline that digital media use is also physical: It does not imply freedom from constraints of physical space. Instead, the adaptability

of connecting from anywhere requires effort, even when the 'anywhere' is restricted to home. Less mobile media repertoires did not imply that space became less important, just that locations and options became limited. In this context, smartphones were portable on a smaller scale (inside the home), and remained adaptable and across the variety of purposes they were used for. It is therefore not surprising that people continued to use the smartphone a lot. However, an important shift was that smartphone use increasingly blurred with other kinds of digital media, and even live television, into a stream of constantly available connectivity, requiring new forms of navigation inside the domestic space.

STILL SOCIAL

Media repertoires were still social, as people countered the loneliness of lockdown by accentuating connective capacities of digital communication and shared experiences of media. As we have already seen, our respondents underlined the importance of socializing and connecting, whatever the means. People reached out to others more often through phones and messages, gathered the household around the television, increased uses of social media, and appreciated what they could find of sociable qualities of work-related digital platforms. The importance of public and personal connection through media use was accentuated, as people found it intensely important to follow what was going on in the world, and how people they knew were doing.

Research on pandemic media use has explored the connective capacities of digital technologies in this precarious situation, analyzing digital alternatives for sharing cultural experiences (Rendell, 2020) or keeping in touch with family (Abel et al., 2020). A US survey found that voice or video was more positively received than e-mail or chat messages, arguing that differentiated social presence explains such variations (Nguyen et al., 2021). A Norwegian study explored young people's internet use, finding that digital technologies offered social support while respondents also reported negative outcomes on their wellbeing, such as lack of concentration or sleep (Brandtzæg & Luders, 2021). As opposed to decades of research investigating digital media use with face-to-face as a presumable alternative, at least to some users or contexts, the pandemic lockdown meant this option was no longer accessible. Many of our respondents observed that the situation constituted a moment in which it was possible to reconsider set practices, both in terms of who to contact, how to communicate, and what social contact meant:

> *Lots of phone calls, some video group chats. Facebook messages. I find that video works well. Experiencing that talk on the phone runs deeper than usual. We all have something big in common now. (Technical worker, suddenly unemployed, M, 20–29)*

> *I use Skype and Messenger to keep in touch with colleagues beyond the strictly work-focused collaboration. I also find myself being more considerate in work-emails and meetings, as I get a glimpse into the lives of people working from home. Privately I am connecting more often on social media with people I have not talked to in a long time […]. One does wonder how they are all doing. (Project manager, W, 40–49)*

The extraordinary situation led to reconsiderations of established practices for everyday media use and sociability, taking up or re-instituting new communication modes, and changing or re-affirming values and connections. Even though many found lockdown life demanding, most were careful about balancing their troubles and concerns against the bigger picture of a societal crisis. This directly influenced the portrayals of media as part of lockdown life: The worries people expressed were about what the pandemic would mean for society and for their lives, as they voiced fears for health, jobs and societal stability, and the loss of valuable social contact. Digital communication was not necessarily considered part of this problem – just partly lacking as a solution.

The remainder of the chapter discusses two pandemic media experiences – Zoom fatigue and doomscrolling – that encompass some of these ambivalences about digital media use, while also considering what happened after the first lockdown.

LIVING THROUGH SCREENS: ZOOM FATIGUE AND MEDIATED IMPOVERISHMENT

Digital communication can be tiring, especially over time. 'A drink with friends on Zoom can be nice', one respondent wrote, 'but you do not make a night of it'. Another wrote: 'After a week of digital meetings, I got a sense of something unreal. Did we say these things, or did I dream them? Like plastic film between myself and others'. This plastic film – the digital mediation of communication – and the tiredness it caused are at the heart of what has been described as 'Zoom fatigue'. I argue that this pandemic media experience became tangible when multiple social domains were mediated, but that it ultimately was a reflection upon pandemic loss in a broader sense rather than

struggles with technology as such. Further, the notion of Zoom fatigue speaks to the double position of digital media as part of both problems and solutions in pandemic daily life.

Harvard Business Review wrote about Zoom fatigue as a search term on the rise in April 2020, highlighting the distractions of work-from-home settings as well as the constant gaze of videocalls (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020).[9] Academic research in cyberpsychology, human computer interaction and communication studies has explored Zoom fatigue with reference to COVID-19. Jeremy Bailenson identifies four explanations: 'Excessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility' (Bailenson, 2021). He also observes that just like the term 'googling', the success of Zoom means this brand name will be stuck as the emblem of the problem, while others argue that computer-mediated communication exhaustion is a more suitable term (Nadler, 2020). A recent study takes a similar approach to Bailenson in identifying dynamics of changing social interactions, with different arguments on whether too much or too little eye contact is part of the problem (Aagaard, 2022). One study in applied phycology investigated Zoom fatigue in pandemic work-from-home conditions in several countries, with some interesting conclusions: Participants emphasized the losses they had experienced in lockdown, not finding the pandemic situation comparable to videoconferencing at great frequency in other settings (Nesher Shoshan & Wehrt, 2021). This corresponds with studies investigating experienced wellbeing effects of physical and digital social contact during the pandemic (Newson et al., 2021).

In media and communication studies, the question of what it means to communicate through digital media technologies is one of the most central to the field. Notions of a strict online-offline divide have been critiqued (Jensen, 2011) and the prototype status of face-to-face communication has been questioned (Fortunati, 2005). A key contribution is Nancy Baym's (2015) *Personal connections in the digital age*, providing a historical and thematic overview of key perspectives on digital communication. She uses the phrase 'mediation is impoverishment' (p. 58) to capture assumptions – found in historical discourses and amongst users – of a hierarchy of different forms of communication, with in-person at the top and as the norm. Digital alternatives easily come off as poor replicants with fewer social cues, lacking the ability of body language to convey intentions. Likewise, the presence norm which is central to the idea of digital disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020), references sentiments that experiences away from screens are deeper or more truly social. On the other hand, Baym also argues that alternative social cues are a key feature of digital communication, and that facilitating communication without

co-presence was key to the inception and proliferation of media technologies in society.

Consequently, the phenomenon of Zoom fatigue can be understood as not being exclusively or even primarily about videocalls, but as a reflection on how to uphold meaningful co-presence in challenging circumstances. Conducted in the first month of lockdown, replies to our questionnaire included numerous statements of 'it is not just the same', as people expressed appreciation for digital alternatives while maintaining that face-to-face was superior:

> *I miss the speed of oral communication at work. I miss talking about unnecessary things, asking each other for advice or developing an idea together. With digital tools, we only communicate about the bare necessities. I met friends on a digital platform, did not enjoy, it was like attending a meeting. With the time delay we nearly had to ask for turns speaking. (Journalist, W, 50–59)*

> *I talk a lot on the phone with friends and family, and over social media with larger groups of friends. I don't feel much of a difference in the connection, other than being continually 'starved' for face-to-face conversation and socializing. (Student, M, 20–29)*

These responses frame physical co-presence as a symbol of what was lost when then pandemic uprooted everyday life. People expressed how much they missed immediacy, serendipity, humour, small talk and informality, in the workplace and amongst friends. As one respondent wrote: 'I miss running into colleagues in the hallway… even those I don't know or like'. These aspects were difficult to replicate as the uptake of digital communication tools seemingly steered towards efficiency, with meeting-like behaviour creeping into social settings. In a study of new mothers using digital technologies for support in the perinatal period, Ranjana Das (Das, 2022) develops the concept 'approximation' to explain attempts – fraught by fatigue and unsettled emotions – to replicate lost social contact in heavy pandemic restrictions. This idea holds considerable explanatory power in capturing strategies and ambivalences in the turn to digital technologies.

Suddenly being on Zoom all day was draining, but as we now know, the first lockdown was just the start. As the pandemic went on, overall pandemic fatigue was bound to increase, and also drain people's energy for digital experimentation. This was illustrated when we interviewed some respondents again in late 2020.

Susanne, a communications worker who had been unemployed, had responded to the questionnaire with an account of her hectic digital life in

early lockdown: She reconnected with friends all over the world and attended 'choir practice digitally, Friday after-work drinks, playing cards with my nephew on FaceTime, there are concerts, singalongs and dance parties', while ending with '…but what I really miss is to give people a hug'. When interviewed in late 2020, during the second wave in Norway, she reflected retrospectively about why she had embraced digital socializing:

> *I think it was about managing… We were not able to understand that it would last so long and what it would mean… so, it was more a spirit of continuing to do what we did before, but that is not the case now. The misery of it… I was striving to have just an active* digital *life as I had a* living *life before. (Susanne, works in communication, 40–49)*

She characterized the early lockdown as a period of optimism, togetherness and 'silliness', as people did not know much about the pandemic, but were eager to help each other: 'This spring we were *on*, now we are… more divided'. After first trying to approximate her pre-pandemic life on digital platforms, she had reached a point of more profound reorientation: building a freelance career instead of waiting for a return to her old job, becoming more selective and skeptical in her news use, and more pessimistic about the pandemic development: 'One is getting tired… it has lasted so fucking long and it is so undecided'. She still used digital platforms for work and communication, but prioritized a few physical one-to-one encounters over an intense digital social life.

This story indicates how long-term struggles of coming to terms with the pandemic involve multiple forms of loss and fatigue, problems that go far beyond digital platforms and cannot be solved by them, but that are expressed through feelings and practices of daily media use. A similar argument can be made regarding another pandemic media experience – doomscrolling.

LIVING IN A GLOBAL CRISIS: DOOMSCROLLING TOWARDS AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

'News is addictive, even more so when the world is unsettled' is a quote from Silverstone (1993, p. 589) on the role of television and ontological security in everyday life. During the pandemic, the term *doomscrolling* came to signify new levels of intensity in the addictive capacities of news, in states of global and personal turmoil in. In the first year of the pandemic, Canadian journalist Karen K. Ho started posting regular reminders on Twitter to 'stop

doomscrolling', a service that was appreciated by thousands of new followers. In the same period, articles on doomscrolling started to appear in Vox, Wired, Wikipedia and on the Merriam Webster Dictionary website. So, what is doomscrolling?

Based on the questionnaire from early lockdown, Hallvard Moe and I wrote a journal article in which we provide a research-based definition of doomscrolling, connecting the term to scholarship on news monitoring, news avoidance and digital news in the attention economy. We define doomscrolling as

> *a combination between (1) the content of dark unsettling news, (2) monitorial news use patterns centered on the smartphone, and (3) attention economy news streams, creating emotional drain through a flow which users find hard to get out of. (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021b)*

Our analysis focused on a specific question on news and information. Here, we saw less of the relative optimism and togetherness that characterized people's uses of digital media for communication and social contact, as discussed previously in this chapter.

News use in early pandemic lockdown, we argued, was characterized by the experience of navigating an endless stream of continually updated and scary news. People lived in an information environment with pandemic news coverage everywhere, on the television screens in the homes they were stuck in, and on the digital devices they depended on for work or socializing. We found a pattern in people's stories: first intensified news use, soon overload and fatigue, then new coping strategies mixing monitoring with avoidance. Similar patterns have been found in other European countries (Broersma & Swart, 2021; de Bruin et al., 2021; Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2021; Nguyen et al., n.d.) and in Australia (Mannell & Meese, 2022).

When we later interviewed some respondents again, we asked them to recount their pandemic news experiences since they first heard of COVID-19, reaffirming that the first lockdown was a distinct phase where the shock of uprooted everyday circumstances led to intensified news monitoring. As one informant said: 'The greatest change was the need for information. The first days, when so much was happening, it was just about keeping up'. This was Michael, a student abroad who wondered what would happen with his possibilities to continue his education, if and when he should travel to and from Norway, and what was happening to people he knew here and there. Susanne, the communications worker quoted earlier, talked about early lockdown as 'breathing and living inside the news, all the time' – until she, in her own words, 'overdosed'.

Earlier in the chapter, I also quoted informants who recalled the early stages of learning about COVID-19, realizing that the virus crept closer to their own lives. These excerpts emphasized the difficulty of grasping the impact of the pandemic, moving through a process of considering it as a scary but distant event, to disbelief and growing unease, before the shock of the lockdown. Others in the same study said:

> *On March 12th, when the shutdown happened, that made an impression on everyone. Suddenly, what had been further away in Europe was right close to us. Understandably, my generation and the generation before… we have never experienced anything similar. (Kåre, 40s, M, on disability benefits)*

> *I have these flashbulb memories, as they are called, of empty capitals and tourist attractions in Southern Europe, completely void of people… The visual aspects were shocking, they created this 'oh fuck' feeling. (Sven, 30s, M, psychologist)*

Flashbulb memories, the term the latter informant uses, was a concept introduced in psychology in the 1970s to denote memories that are particularly vivid and resilient, concerning significant societal events (Conway, 1995). The textbook example is people who have clear memories of televised images and personal circumstances when learning John F. Kennedy had been shot, and the term has also been used in connection with the September 11 attacks in the United States and the July 22 terror in Norway.[10] Another informant compared the emotional impact of the pandemic to terrorism, saying 'It was like 9/11 one day, and then the next, and then the next… a very emotional and painful experience'. She had family in one of the countries that was severely affected early on, and followed news from home with worry, grief and alarm, also before the lockdown started in Norway.

The feeling of doom instituted by news use could involve concern for oneself and loved ones, but also for the world at large, and for what the pandemic would mean to future prospects. Several respondents talked, in this context, about becoming more selective and critical in their news use as the pandemic went on. A concurrent topic was the practical and mundane dimensions of pandemic news use: Keeping track of shifting guidelines, adapting everyday practices, and trying to plan short and long term. In the early phase news had been essential to this purpose, but eventually people relied more on direct information from workplaces or local institutions, reducing their dependence on news for practical navigation in daily life. These experiences can be understood as moving towards regaining a sense of normalcy (Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2021), or, in the terminology of this book, as destabilization

followed by re-orientation. However, the unclear endpoint did not allow people to fully slip back into a ritual mode of news use, in which one checks the news to confirm that the world still stands, before getting on with other things (Moe et al., 2019a). Instead, they were living with a crisis that formed an emotionally strained connection between the news and their daily lives. As with Zoom fatigue, doomscrolling exemplifies how changing practices of everyday media use can be expressions of working through societal and personal problems that are not primarily about the media in question.

CONCLUSION: A NEW NORMAL?

Media use is embedded in the ordinariness of everyday habits, and connected to social identities and relationships in our daily lives. When the pandemic disrupted societies across the globe, people in suddenly unsettled circumstances were faced with the additional task of adapting communicative practices in their daily lives, but also turned to media as resources for managing the situation.

This chapter has shown that while the pandemic destabilized media repertoires, people's reorientations were dependent on communicative resources and ideals established beforehand. Communication scholarship predominantly underlines the deep integration of digital communication in social relations (e.g. Boyd, 2014; Couldry & Hepp, 2017), while trends such as digital disconnection revolve around the perceived superiority of interaction away from screens (Brennen, 2019; Syvertsen, 2020). These tensions were accentuated by the pandemic situation, creating an unprecedented situation that contextualized the opportunities and limitations of digital communication. Media use contributed to both problems and solutions in life in lockdown: News updates were critically important but emotionally draining, digital platforms were essential but not adequate, television viewing was distracting but also a needed focal point in the home.

As the pandemic continued, the most intensified aspects of media use diminished as compared to early lockdown, allowing for periods of increased activity outside the home, and for solidified familiarity rather than hasty experimentation in the uses of digital platforms. Instead of 'living and breathing inside the news' or experiencing '9/11 every day', to quote some of the informants, people eventually developed strategies for balancing information needs and other aspects of life.

In the interviews towards the end of 2020, the uncertain timeline of the pandemic was a challenge many grappled with. They did not know if the events of the past months should be considered a scary interlude or a new

world order, if and when they could make plans, and if problems and losses they experienced would come to remain with them over time. The emotional and existential aspects of understanding if everyday life would ever return, be re-invented, or remain in a state of flux, were accentuated through pandemic media use.

NOTES

1. World Health Organization. (2020). Rolling updates on coronavirus disease. https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen

2. The Norwegian Government. (2022). Timeline: News from Norwegian Ministries about the Coronavirus disease COVID-19. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/Koronasituasjonen/tidslinje-koronaviruset/id2692402/

3. NRK. (2021). When the coronavirus came to Norway. https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/xl/26.-februar-er-det-ett-ar-siden-det-forste-tilfellet-av-koronaviruset-covid-19-kom-til-norge-1.15392592

4. Wikipedia. https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norge_under_koronaviruspandemien

5. Barnehage.no. (2020). https://www.barnehage.no/koronaviruset/stenger-alle-barnehager-og-skoler-i-oslo-og-bergen/139356

6. The Norwegian Government. (2020). The prime minister's speech for the press conference about new restrictions to prevent coronavirus disease. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/statsministerens-innledning-pa-pressekonferanse-om-nye-tiltak-mot-koronasmitte/id2693335/

7. Pierce, D. (2020). How Zoom won 2020 - and how 2020 changed Zoom forever. https://www.protocol.com/how-zoom-won-2020

8. Futsæter, K.A./ Kantar. Never have media use changed so dramatically. https://kantar.no/kantar-tns-innsikt/aldri-har-mediebruken-endret-seg-sa-dramatisk/

9. Fosslien, L., & Duffy, M. W. (2020). How to combat Zoom fatigue. https://bond.edu.au/nz/files/4829/How%20to%20Combat%20Zoom%20Fatigue.pdf

10. The Norwegian Encoclopedia: Flashbulb memory https://snl.no/flashbulb-minner