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Media Love

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With sincere thanks to friends and colleagues, especially Johana Kotišová (Mazaryk University/University of Amsterdam) and Belinda Middleweek (University of Technology Sydney), for giving fabulous feedback on the first draft. Parts of this paper appeared earlier in Dutch in my book "Leven in Media" (published in 2017 with Amsterdam University Press). The perspective developed here is inspired by roughly two decades of experiences teaching large undergraduate courses on media and everyday life, by the work of Leopoldina Fortunati - who has warned media studies against 'theories without heart' (2009), as well as the work on media literacies of esteemed colleagues such as Henry Jenkins, Carlos Scolari, Divina Frau-Meigs, and Sonia Livingstone, who continually advocate for the voice, rights and pleasures of every individual media user.

Abstract
Love is all around. This may be somewhat of a cliché, and like all platitudes contains a kernel of truth. Our relations with media are profoundly personal, and this intimacy plays a powerful role in explaining the significance of media and communication in society and in everyday life. However, love as a concept or driving force in the mutual shaping of media, society and the day-to-day tends to be rarely acknowledged in media and (mass) communication scholarship – and when it does, it is often seen as a problem rather than as a natural, let alone helpful phenomenon. In this essay, a theory of 'media love' is proposed in recognition of its profundity, particularly in terms of both the mediation and mediatization of love as distinct processes changing the role and meaning of media in society and everyday life. In conclusion, the implications of love for the development of media and information literacy are discussed.

Author bio

Mark Deuze is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam's (UvA) Faculty of Humanities in The Netherlands, with courtesy appointments at the University of Technology in Sydney (Australia) and Northumbria University in Newcastle (United Kingdom). Before that he worked as a journalist and academic in the United States, Germany and South Africa. Publications of his work include over ninety papers in academic journals and eleven books, including most recently "McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory" (7th edition published by Sage in May 2020, co-authored with Denis McQuail), "Beyond Journalism" (February 2020; co-authored with Tamara Witschge, published by Polity Press), and "Making Media" (January 2019; co-edited with Mirjam Prenger, published by Amsterdam University Press). He is also the bass player and singer of Skinflower.

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Media Love

In this essay, I outline a theory of 'media love' based on the presumption, that love undergirds many, if not most research and theory in the field of media and (mass) communication. This perspective is established first through a consideration of love-related topics and themes featured in media studies and communication research, second through an assessment of the field's continued concern with the impact and effects of mediated communication from a perspective of love, and third through an appreciation of John Durham Peters' (1999) celebration of love in communication – not as the aspiration to 'perfect' communication, but rather its opposite: as an embrace of the possibilities and potentialities of mediated interaction based on the imperfections inevitable in all communication.

Given love's paramount position in media and communication scholarship, I move on to explore the contours of a categorical appreciation of media love, following a distinction between *media practices* related to love, the *mediation* of love, and the *mediatization* of love. Using this taxonomy, I outline the various ways in which we can map and consider media love with examples from everyday media use and popular culture. In conclusion, I draw the various strands of thinking on media love as explored in this essay together to consider their usefulness to current debates about media (or 'transmedia') literacy, in the hope that this may contribute to more imaginative, co-creative, collective and playful approaches - with reference to the works of Sonia Livingstone (2004; 2021), Divina Frau-Meigs (2012), Carlos Scolari (2018; et al., 2018), and Henry Jenkins (2019).

In all of this I tread lightly when it comes to defining love. My use of 'love' in, for and through media is broader than its generally liberating and progressive connotation (in the context of romance), and includes people's potentially problematic attachments to technologies, services and experiences. It is also an approach to love that bypasses its various nuances and classifications – such as love for a romantic partner, love as care, love as sexual drive and passion, and so on. Defining love is not my aim in this essay – *using* it is. Roughly speaking, the literature diverges between either strictly defining or deliberately 'undefining' love. The first tradition loves a definition – often inspired by a spirited dinner conversation documented in Plato's Symposium (Levy, 1979) – that draws distinctions between *what* and *who* we love, *how* we love, and what kind of love is superior. The second approach involves a wholehearted embrace of any and all interpretations and manifestations of love. Here, love can be a *condition* as well as an *emotion* (or rather: a range of emotions – from passion to desire and lust, including jealousy, anxiety and rage), perhaps even a *syndrome* (de Sousa, 2015), as well as a source of energy and *power* (Jónasdóttir, 2011). In the project at hand, I am tempted to follow the second path, aiming to make each instance of 'media love' I find explicit as I move along.

We Love Media

We love media. Couples, sports teams (and their supporters), even entire revolutionary social movements have their favorite song signifying their passion and commitment, teenagers experience symptoms of depression and anxiety when going offline for a while, parents use the threat of shutting down their kids' game console as a way to exert parental

authority, fans fawn over their favorite character in a book or television series, motion picture or digital game, many households have storage boxes in garages and attics full of 'ancient' media technologies that are not discarded because they have some emotional significance. Our media are intimate, and intensely personal (Deuze, 2012). We genuinely care about media and about the experiences we have in and through them: the friendships we make and maintain, our triumphs and failures and those of the people we follow, what we have learned and what we can escape from – even if it is for just a moment. And let's not forget it is not just the users of media that are so deeply enamored – the people who make media are generally in it for the love, too. "I can't believe I'm getting paid to do this!" expresses a common sentiment among those who get to make media for a living (Deuze, 2007). Media love, in all its manifestations, truly is everywhere.

For me, the question is what we, as media and communication scholars and students, can do with all this wondrous love. For sure, this is not just a naive celebration of media love, as the media professionals' passion for the work in part contributes to their exploitation, and people's problematic media use can sometimes lead to addiction or disorder. Yet I do use 'wonder' as an adjective for love deliberately, because I acknowledge the increasingly significant, transformative, creative and altogether powerful role love plays in life, both at the particular level of the individual, when we consider society and its institutions, and more generally when imagining the future of humanity (Jónasdóttir, 2011; Ilouz, 2012; Ferry, 2013). As the lyrics of a famous song from 1965, written by American lyricist Hal David, go:

> "What the world needs now
> Is love, sweet love.
> It's the only thing
> That there's just too little of.
> What the world needs now
> Is love, sweet love-
> No, not just for some
> But for everyone."[1]

Admittedly, when I started doing the research for this argument, my working hypothesis was that our field had a blindspot when it comes to media love. How many direct, definite or overt references to love did I know? None, for sure. I was ready to write a scathing critique of media studies in its reluctance to recognize that "Love is all around" (as the lovely song from 1967 by British band The Troggs goes, covered by Scottish group Wet Wet Wet for the soundtrack of the 1994 romantic comedy "Four Weddings and a Funeral"). But I was wrong. In fact, it can be argued that love runs through pretty much all research in media and communication – it is just not generally made explicit, nor has it been developed into a cohesive theory (or grand narrative) informing our work and explaining our findings. In his very personal introduction to the study of media, Roger Silverstone (1999) calls on scholars to consider the significance of 'erotics' as a product of any relationship between the makers of media, the content of the media, and the audiences of media. He regrets, however, that we generally do not discuss all the associated feelings of the erotic – sensation, desire, pleasure, excitement, so on and so forth – in our theories. "The erotic escapes. Shame and reason conspire to repress it. The body disappears behind the curtain of the mind" (1999: 49). Yet he goes on to argue that eros is everywhere in media – that all our media and all

our experiences with media inevitably contain elements that arouse us, that bring us pleasure, that inspire and seduce. “There is bliss in mass culture,” Silverstone writes (ibid., 55), and we should make it explicit when studying media.

When we study people and their media devices, the way people respond and give meaning to mediated messages, how people make media professionally, we are studying love. Yet we rarely recognize this. Scholars either problematize such love – passionate media professionals are clearly blind to their own exploitation, fans are suckers for corporate franchising practices, device love gets classified as addiction – or bury all the love we have under euphemisms such as ‘care’ or ‘passion’, and redirect through a theoretical discourse of affect. I wonder, with Margaret Toye, to what extent this resistance to, reluctance about, or redirection of the topic of love in research is connected to the association of love “with the realm of women, the home, the private, the apolitical, the ‘not serious’ and therefore any work that analyses these areas also bears such gendering and stigma” (2010: 41). As Judith Williamson has suggested, love (and personal relationships, sex and sexuality) as well as the realm of mass culture “stand for the side of life that seems to be outside of history” (1986: 101). Another, perhaps more benevolent explanation might be that love as a field of study – love studies (Jónasdóttir, 2014) – is a nascent field, its practitioners still experiencing uncomfortable or surprised emotions when presenting or trying to publish their work (Ferguson and Toye, 2017: 8).

Media Love as a Problem

Generally speaking, media and (mass) communication theory and research (McQuail and Deuze, 2020) tends to take love either as a given, it is studied in ‘extreme’ manifestations (for example in studies on fandom), or otherwise seen as troublesome. Consider for example work on media dependency, limited capacity information processing and overload, on various addictions and disorders associated with problematic media use. Other references to our media love pop up in recurring debates about whether we feel more or less now that our lives become digital – including the question if our feelings in media are even genuine or just performed, and always over-the-top (Jameson, 1991; Massumi, 2002).

Beyond such explicit references our field is suffused with love. I would challenge any media and communication researcher to show that their project and work is not, in one way or another, about love! Its subterfuge may be because we feel some discomfort, embarrassment and shame about this, so we explain it away – or we turn it into a problem to be solved. Consider for a moment the current worldwide research fascination with fake news, misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Love may help us explain the problem of misinformation and the persistence of what psychologists consider a widespread ‘conspiracy mentality’ (Imhof and Bruder, 2014) in both Western and non-Western societies. Why would people willingly and voluntarily ignore the truth, even when confronted with irrefutable evidence as provided by the falsified work of scientists, the reasoned voice of institutional authorities, and diligent fact-checking efforts by journalists? One answer could be that people are more loyal to (the people and ideas they) already know and love – including a slightly narcissistic self-love fueling the feeling of being ‘right’ - than to the rational discourse of strangers.[2]

Similarly, the widespread concern noted throughout the popular as well as scientific literature about filter bubbles, echo chambers, telecocoons and other forms of social polarization and fragmentation online that are seen as either determined or at the very least amplified by technological affordances seems to involve love, in that people are considered as either loving themselves and people like them too much - or as not having enough love for those that look and act differently. As empirical evidence tends not to support a diagnosis of widespread polarization online (Borgesius et al, 2016), perhaps we underestimate the complexity our love in and through media.

A subsequent popular topic for the scholarly community is a global concern about the ongoing and seemingly unstoppable datafication and automation of society and everyday life, where algorithms, artificial intelligence and machine learning are seen as increasingly running the show. Underneath this apprehension lies the opposite of what fuels concerns about misinformation: when it comes to AI and all matters of automation, many are worried that people are not guided by love anymore, as we apparently outsourcing the loving bonds that inspire people to care about each other to the indifference of machines. Furthermore, such uneasiness about technology love at times seems to be equated with a thinly veiled preference for 'real' or 'true' communication between human beings without any mediating influence or interference – which is a questionable assumption to make about the quality and success of interpersonal communication. Some kind of self-love is likely at work here as well, in that we recoil at the thought of having software making decisions for us, even though the computer bases those decisions on data produced by our own actions (and those of other people) – and is therefore just as flawed, prejudiced and messy as we all are.

It is my contention that many, if not most of the real or perceived problems associated with media and (mass) communication would benefit from a more explicit articulation with love, broadly conceived. This would not negate existing approaches, theories or methods, but add a significant repertoire of possible hypotheses, stories and explanations to the field at a time when the world, shaken to the core by a parallel pandemic and infodemic, needs us to help make sense of what we have lost, and possibly gained, from staying at home, managing the complexity of our life stuck behind the screens of our media devices (Fuchs, 2020). For example, the fact that bicycles sold out worldwide during 2020 is a hopeful sign that a 'life on the screen' (Turkle, 1995) is simply not good enough for us, as is the popularity of video conference software (such as Zoom, Teams and Skype) an expression of our desire and comfort with being 'alone together' (Turkle, 2011) in media throughout it all. Media love is not an *either/or* between humanity and technology – it is a *not only, but also*.

Media Love as Desire for Communication

Beneath the largely latent and oblique relation with love runs another current throughout all the research and theorizing about media: our implicit yet heartfelt obsession with what John Durham Peters (1999) saw as 'angelic' communication: the desire for perfect union with one another, a true fusion of souls – whether between romantic partners, between citizens and society, or all of us together in humanity vis-à-vis the vast emptiness of the cosmos. Peters' notion of communication as *desire* is perhaps the fullest articulation of media love I have found anywhere in the literature of media and (mass) communication

research (beyond Silverstone's embrace of erotics) – a find that I owe to Paddy Scannell's (2004) brilliant reading of Durham Peters' work. Desperately wanting perfect communication to be possible – in our shared all too human quest to be heard, seen, understood and recognized – we turn to the rigorous study of media and communication in order to control, fix or restore the process. The origins and foundation of the field of media and (mass) communication studies can be characterized as a quest to solve the profound problem of communication: its imminent imperfection. Hence the more or less exclusive direction of early 20th century studies toward media effects, focusing either on achieving those that were preferred, or on preventing those that were considered to be problematic.

To this day, almost all our worries about communication and its inherent failures stem from our "continued longing for 'true' communication" (Scannell 2004: 95). When media and communication scholars ask questions about influence, impact and effects, about how to improve the transmission, distribution and reception of messages, about how people process and give meaning to content, so on and so forth – they are giving expression to a deep-seated desire for perfect communication. Whenever we privilege or express a preference – in our theoretical frameworks, analyses of findings, in the discussions and conclusions to our work – for dialogue, for direct social contact, for body-to-body communication over mediated communication, for preferred reading over aberrant decoding, for intimacy and reciprocity over the indiscriminate nature of mass media and broadcasting, we are projecting our anxieties about the lack (or loss) of 'angelic' communication (Peters, 1999). But what, Durham Peters asks, if we let go of this notion, and instead embrace the imperfections of all communication – its polysemy, the inevitable breakdown of communication, and acknowledge how miscommunication is intrinsic to all forms of communication? What if the failure to communicate is in fact the starting point for real communication? This would require a 'listening across difference', as Tanja Dreher (2009) has put it, and could evolve into an affective ethics of listening and engagement, as Herman Wasserman (2013; 2021) advocates throughout his work. It would require, in other words, true love for one another so that we may "treat each other with justice and mercy" (Peters, 1999: 268) with full respect for each other's fundamental difference.

Love is not just something media scholars articulate, however implicitly, in their work on popular culture, fandom or problematic media making and use, nor is solely a smoldering fire inspiring so many questions, concepts and themes in media and (mass) communication research - it can also be considered to be the underlying energy fueling the field as a whole. I would therefore like to argue that what could perhaps be a useful addition to the literature is a categorical appreciation of how our love for media is everywhere. How it is not some idealist expectation of beauty and perfection, but rather a much more messy, mundane, and banal part of our 'everydayness' when it comes to media life (Deuze, 2012). Especially during the global coronavirus crisis of 2020 (and onward) we have witnessed variations of 'media love' in full swing during the various lockdowns and social distancing protocols policies and experiences around the world. Consider for example the exponential growth of videocalling, streaming services (for games, film and television) enabling connections and shared experiences. Another example would be the rapid rise of telemedicine and digital health applications such as smartphone contact tracing apps, as well as social media hashtag campaigns and activism - including #StayHomeStaySafe and #YoMeQuedoEnCasa - connecting us all in the fight against the virus. Even the rise of social movements around

conspiracy theories, ‘conspirituality’ (Ward and Voas, 2011) and other so-called ‘alternative’ truths can be seen as an expression of love – even if it is a perhaps too passionate love, for only a particular side of the story that is the global coronavirus crisis mixed and merged with a version of self-love. It is all indicative of our desire to connect and communicate with ourselves and each other, and of our inexorable interdependence with information and communication technologies.

Media Love and Media Life

Early in 2020 something significant happened, which fast-tracked my interest and work on the concept of media love. The World Health Organisation (WHO) described the disinformation swirling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as a “massive infodemic” - a major driver of the pandemic itself. “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”, said WHO Director–General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at the Munich Security Conference on 15 February 2020. A study by Raúl Magallón Rosa (2020) who reviewed trends in international misinformation and media coverage during COVID-19 concluded that “stopping the spread of misinformation was more important than providing - partial and incomplete - information about the evolution of the crisis.”[3]

This public recognition of how the realities inside and outside of media have collapsed, how there is indeed no ‘outside’ to media anymore, was eye-opening for me. Such an appreciation of the inevitable interwovenness of the real and the virtual was once theorized by Manuel Castells in 1996 as an emerging culture of ‘real virtuality,’ where the online world of appearances would become part of everyday lived experience instead of just existing on our computer and television screens. Before that, I only know of such a dissolution of the boundaries between media and life from the 1992 novel "Snow Crash" by American science fiction writer Neal Stephenson, in which the protagonists attempt to prevent a group of religious fundamentalists from unleashing a virus onto the world that not only affects computer networks, but also acts on a biological level as it reduces those who come into contact with it to people babbling nonsensically - all in the same language, all slaves to those who can manipulate this primal language. This biolinguistic virus is called Snow Crash. Throughout the book, Stephenson's characters make sense of their world in terms that confuse, remix, and altogether erase the boundaries between software, hardware, and the body, living systems and computer systems. This gets referenced in the novel as ‘bioware’, reminding me of Eugene Thacker’s (2003) techno-philosophical construct of ‘biomedia’ with which he calls our attention to the ongoing technological reconditioning of the biological – of looking at our bodies in technological and informational terms in “a constant, consistent, and methodical inquiry into the technical-philosophical question of ‘what a body can do’” (53). With the WHO announcement of a parallel pandemic and infodemic in February 2020, we have significantly moved beyond the realm of science fiction and techno-philosophy into the humdrum of the day-to-day.

Such recognition of the porous, disintegrating or even disappearing boundaries between the real and the virtual - between media and life – potentially opens our eyes to the deep love we have for media, and how intimate our relations with and through media have become. In doing so, we gladly (or begrudgingly) accept that our lives have become enmeshed with media to the extent that we can finally move beyond arguments about forceful *separation*

toward a discussion about meaningful *cohabitation*. It is at this point, at this stage in the evolution of media studies, that my suggestion for our field to take love seriously comes in – as is happening in many of the disciplines for which media studies and communication research act as "intellectual trading zones" (Waisbord, 2019: 127), including as (parts of) philosophy, literature studies, and more recently biology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science (Gunnarsson, García-Andrade and Jónasdóttir, 2018). Perhaps we can even argue, following John Durham Peters, that what sets media and communication studies apart as a 'post-discipline' (as Silvio Waisbord calls it) is its love for its trading partners: not merging with them, but relishing in their difference, appropriating various concepts and methodologies all while developing a common language and identifying common questions.

Considering love's paramount position in media and communication scholarship, a categorical appreciation of media love could consider love's significance in the various ways in which people use media in everyday life, in the circulation and appropriation of information and ideas via media as institutions about and regarding love, and how in this process both our understanding of media and love develops. This tripartite classification of media love follows a conceptual taxonomy developed by Alice Mattoni and Emiliano Treré (2014) between *media practices* related to love, the *mediation* of love, and the *mediatization* of love. Within each of these areas of investigation, I offer examples as potential building blocks of an overall theory that enable us to make media love explicit, and puts it to work to describe and explain our evolving relationship with media.

Depending on where you look, contemporary research on media and (mass) communication seems to be either all about how people use (and make) media, identifying complex processes of media influence and effects, or about the structural transformation of society, its institutions and the arrangement of everyday life in the context of omnipresent media. While many scholars do not necessarily make their choice explicit in this taxonomy of practices, mediation and mediatization, most would acknowledge that their work addresses one or more aspects covered by these three core concepts of the field. Theories of media and (mass) communication and the role they play in the world would need to 'work' across media as practices, mediation and mediatization in order to stick and be useful, for example when it comes to debates about (the need for) media literacy, with which I will briefly conclude this essay.

Media Love as Practice

As Thomas Pentzold (2020) notes, a focus on what people do with media – on a praxeological perspective – has a rich genealogy across a variety of disciplines, becoming more established in media and communication research since the start of the 21st century. A practice perspective is particularly useful for the study of media as it prevents us from becoming perhaps a bit too 'blinded' by the deluge of shiny new toys that the global consumer electronics industry incessantly produces, instead focusing on not just what people do with all these technologies, but also how these practices arrange, combine, and more generally intersect with other social practices (Mattoni and Trere, 2014: 259), how people talk about and make sense of their media practices (Couldry, 2004: 118), and how the use and appropriation any particular medium fits with the broader media ensemble or

'repertoire' of all other media we use in all kinds of routinized and recurrent ways (Pentzold, 2020: 2978). A practice-oriented point of view reminds us of the embodied nature of everything we do with media, of how bodily skills (such as reading and writing) are involved, and how we express ourselves in as well as about media. In all of this, we should acknowledge "the world-making capacity of practices" (ibid.: 2969), as by using media in certain ways and giving such practices specific meanings, people also produce a particular way of being in the world.

A specific example of media love as practice would be the use of media to find and maintain romantic love. In the current context, this has led to much interest for the ways in which people use dating sites (such as Badoo and Plenty of Fish) and mobile applications (including Tinder and Bumble).[4] Finding love in media, whether through dedicated services or via all the other ways in which people come into contact with each other, has become a common, normalized aspect of romantic life – and certainly is not particular to the online environment as love letters, talk radio programs, and dating reality television programs predate the current 'platformization' of love online (Helmond, 2015). Online dating, as an industry, gets little love from scholarly observers, maligned for its muddying of romantic waters with cold-hearted mass consumption, endless choice, efficiency and standardization (Illouz, 2007). As one dating entrepreneur comments: "In what other industry is a happy customer bad for business?" (quoted in: Slater, 2013). On the other hand, the ultimate goal of people using these services is still to meet someone new, a stranger – and "this alone makes the sites potential reservoirs of resistance, of troubling and revivifying otherness, of necessary self-dismantling."[5] This confrontation with otherness in the pursuit of love is perhaps the closest we can come to a definition of true communication.

An extension of our quest for love in media is the practice of enacting, sublimating, automating sex and sexuality in media – from consensual sexting, consuming (and producing) pornography to using teledildonics to be in touch despite distance, all the way to the 2018 launch of the world's first commercially available sex robot (called Harmony). I also want to acknowledge in this context the at times devastating consequences of sexting without consent, rampant exploitation in the porn industry, and the arguments of the Campaign Against Sex Robots (starting in 2015, see: campaignagainstsexrobots.org) about the objectification and commodification of the human body. In all these activities, media play a formative role, and in the process our ideas about love and sex both change – yet also stay very much the same, requiring careful attention to detail, and respect for all possible positions. The research on sex robots signals the continuation of established practices and routines – for example the reinforcing of the 'coital imperative' in the design and marketing of devices for virtual sex (Faustino, 2018). On the other hand, Belinda Middleweek (2021) found in her study among male users of Harmony quite nuanced, emotional and reflexive expressions of doll relationships, contesting normative definitions of masculinity. In reviews of sexting studies among adolescents, girls were found to be judged and criticized much more than boys, both if they practiced sexting, and also if they did not want to (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017: 553). This continuation of traditional gender stereotypes and expectations is further complicated by sexting research showing no significant gender differences in sexting practices. Porn studies tend to highlight the emergence of new, often playful yet also sometimes exploitative rituals around romance and sexual activities (Jacobs, Janssen and Pasquinelli, 2007). Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, when introducing the new

scholarly journal of Porn Studies in 2014, outright rejected "either antagonistic or celebratory" research, and warned against "assumptions about porn as essentially oppressive or corrupting, liberatory, subversive, conservative, empowering, harmful or dangerous. (4), instead suggesting that we should simply take all the different ways in which sex is produced and consumed in media seriously.

Beyond dating apps, sexting, pornography and sex toys, media play all kinds of roles in love life, such as through music – with couples identifying their love through particular tunes that played when they met, when they made love for the first time, and when they got married, or when romantic lovers draw on various media to express their adoration (for example, when one lover says to another 'You are the Mork to my Mindy', 'the Kirk to my Spock' or 'the Bella to my Edward'). Tama Leaver (2017) additionally identifies "intimate surveillance" as an example of where the use of media in love extends existing routines and introduces new ones, for example through parental monitoring of children through their media, or between (potential) partners - as Ilana Gershon (2010) explored in-depth when she studied media's complex role when people break up.

Beyond such literal instances of media love, scholars can ask questions about what can happen because of our love for media – especially when such attachment leads to problematic media use (see McQuail and Deuze, 2020: 568ff). Excessive media use has often been viewed as harmful and unhealthy, leading to addiction, dissociation from reality, reduced social contacts, diversion from education and displacement of more worthwhile activities. Television has traditionally been the most usual suspect, and before that films and comics were regarded similarly – even radio was once considered harmful to children (Eisenberg, 1936), and book reading before that. Today, digital games, the Internet and social media have become the latest perpetrators. Specific genres – especially those related to sex – tend to be singled out for concerns about media.

Given people's love for their media, recognizing the fact that we spend the majority of our time concurrently exposed to media, and considering how these devices converge and become increasingly mobile and personal in an always online capacity, substantial attention and scholarship has been dedicated in recent decades to the question of media addiction, with Internet gaming disorder, for example, added to the authoritative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; a primary classification system for psychiatric disorders) in 2013, and discussions abound on issues such as problematic Internet use, pornography addiction and smartphone addiction. Media addiction tends to be defined either as a psychiatric disorder, or as part of a broader set of behavioural disorders involving excessive human–machine interactions. Such disorders differ in definition across the literature but generally contain two main components: compulsivity (the inability to control a certain type of media use) and impairment (how such media use harms or interferes with a person's life).

Overall, there is much debate about the difference between addiction and 'high engagement' with media, about the appropriateness of addiction criteria, the neglect of context, and a general lack of expert consensus on how to approach and measure disorders and addictions regarding media content and use (Kuss and Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). What is uncontested, however, is that people's relationship with media is increasingly intimate

which at times can lead to problematic media use (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). While many media scholars would hesitate to contribute to the medicalization of media use, it would behove our field to stay mindful of our intense, intimate and indeed loving relations with (our) media in all their various forms and manifestations.

The Mediation of Love

Mediation or, as John Thompson (1995: 46) suggests, 'the mediazation of culture' is a concept for media research generally inspired by the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993) and Roger Silverstone (1994; see Couldry, 2008). Although the study of mediation would most certainly include what people do with media, the concept tends to get used more broadly to account for the various ways in which "media supports the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in societies" (Mattoni and Trere, 2014: 260). Silverstone somewhat similarly defines mediation as "the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication … are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life" (2002: 762). Barbero has urged researchers to move from studying media to exploring 'mediations' in order to account for how people enact resistance and resilience to whatever they experience in and through media.

From a mediation perspective, meanings are formed and social and cultural forces operate freely according to various logics, with no predictable outcome. The process of mediation inevitably influences or changes the meaning received, and there is an documented tendency for 'reality' to be adapted to the demands and criteria of media presentation rather than vice versa (Aguado, 2009). In this context, the concept of mediation inspires us to look at the different (re-) presentations of media love in for example literature and cinema. Examples of love and sex in media are countless – it is safe to say that it is the dominant theme in the world's literature, in music, film and in television. That said, it is remarkable that the two most popular media genres featuring love – popular romantic fiction novels and soap operas on television – are generally taken less seriously in the academic literature than, for example, work on political and economic structures (such as democracy and capitalism). While this is a critical observation, I do want to acknowledge a wealth of scholarship on these and related romantic genres and media forms, as exemplified by dedicated scholarly journals – the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* (www.jprstudies.org) started in 2010 – and hugely influential analyses of soap opera audiences (Ang, 1982) and readers of women's magazines (Hermes, 1995), including more recently work on the history of romance writers (Larson, 2019). A detailed discussion of pornography and its evolution in contemporary genres such as female-led erotica and the rise of 'real sex' films (Tulloch and Middleweek, 2017) is also appropriate here, yet time and space constraints force me to be more premature in my argument.

To reconstruct a general picture of the stories we tell and are told about love, and how we in the process construct an idea of what love is regrettably falls beyond the scope of this essay. Here I would like to focus on the specific issue of love for and with media as a theme in popular culture. Consider for example narratives about the human love for artificial beings, dating as recently as Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro's 2021 novel "Klara and the Sun" about the love of an 'Android Friend' for children from the perspective of a non-human actor, and as far back as E.T.A. Hoffmann's influential short story "The Sandman" from 1819,

wherein the protagonist falls in love with an automaton (see also Deuze, 2012: 20ff). Hoffmann's narrative is particularly interesting, as its profound sense of uncanniness is generally considered to be one of main sources of inspiration for the contemporary science fiction genre, such as the computer Hal in Arthur C. Clarke's 1968 novel "2001: A Space Odyssey" (and in Stanley Kubrick's famous film version of the book), and the biologically engineered humanoids called 'replicants' in Ridley Scott's film "Blade Runner" from 1982 (with a script based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 short story "Do androids dream of electric sheep?", followed up by the 2017 film "Blade Runner 2049" directed by Denis Villeneuve).

Hoffmann's story centers on the rapturous love of the young poet Nathanael for Olimpia, the daughter of Spalanzani, a famous professor of physical sciences. The poet meets Olimpia at a ball – after first noticing her across the street through a pair of binoculars – and immediately falls in love. Although friends warn him that Olimpia is nothing but a dummy, Nathanael proceeds to ask her hand in marriage. When he finally finds out she is an automaton, Nathanael goes berserk. This theme, of the incompatibility of humans and machines, recurs across the literature and the arts more generally, at least until the 2000s, when more generous readings of our intimacy with technology emerge. Consider for example the role of cybernetic organisms such as the Cylons (short for 'cybernetic lifeform nodes') in the "Battlestar Galactica" TV series and movies (in 1978, 1980 and 2004), the Terminators in the "Terminator" franchise of motion pictures and TV series (from 1984 to 2009) and the Borg collective as part of the "Star Trek" universe (originally appearing in 1989 in the second season of "Star Trek: The Next Generation"). Cyborgs were originally depicted as cold, heartless villains, murderers and assassins, reflecting the kind of deep-seated anxiety about human–machine mixing also found in Hoffmann's work, whereas in later iterations of these respected franchises more personal, even intimate relationships between humans and cyborgs evolve, featuring Cylons, Terminators and even the Borg as creatures capable of love and being loved.

The history of human sexuality as interfaced in all kinds of fascinating ways with technology finds glorious expression in the genre of speculative fiction, as it gives artists considerable freedom to imagine alternate universes, different societies, and spectacularly atypical realities. A prominent theme running throughout late 20th century and early 21st century popular culture is that of technologies providing people with sexual pleasure - such as the 'orgasmatron' in the 1964 French science fiction comic book created by Jean-Claude Forest, and its motion picture adaptation "Barbarella" (from 1964, directed by Roger Vadim and starring Jane Fonda), an electromechanical cube also called 'orgasmatron' in Woody Allens' film "Sleeper" (1973, starring Allen and Diane Keaton), and high-tech headgear intended to substitute sexual intercourse in "Demolition Man" (from 1993; directed by Marco Brambilla, starring Sandra Bullock, Wesley Snipes, and Sylvester Stallone). In all instances people achieve sexual pleasure by outsourcing their orgasms to machines. In "Barbarella" the orgasmatron was designed for torture but conquered by Barbarella for pleasure, whereas the orgasmatron in "Sleeper" and the simulation headgear in "Demolition Man" are a rather mundane feature of people's sex lives in a near-distant future. Despite this normalization of human-machine relations, there still seems a slight unease at work - as exemplified by Sandra Bullock's character in "Demolition Man" who appears appalled (as are all other people in her time) by the idea of sexual intercourse without mediation:

> "John Spartan [Sylvester Stallone]: Look, Huxley, why don't we just do it the old-fashioned way?
> Lenina Huxley: [Sandra Bullock] Eeewww, disgusting! You mean... fluid transfer?"[6]

Another fascinating example of media entering into our innermost feelings and experiences related to love and sex is the 2013 film "Her" written, directed, and produced by Spike Jonze (who won an Oscar for the screenplay), where the main character (Theodore Twombly, played by Joaquin Phoenix) develops a romantic relationship with Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson), an artificially intelligent virtual assistant living in the operating system of his (and everyone else's) computer. It is both an unusually warm and intimate story about human-machine relationships, as it is a stark reminder of technology's 'otherness' in that Samantha in the end abandons Theodore, leaving him desperate and alone.

The mediation of love (and sex) in media can be articulated with an evolution of media love from scary, unsettling and even hostile to ambivalent, sometimes reciprocal and possibly benign. This is not a linear progression, of course – I am reminded of the Oscar-winning 2014 thriller "Ex Machina" (written and directed by Alex Garland, starring Domhnall Gleeson, Alicia Vikander, and Oscar Isaac), where a computer programmer falls for the intelligent humanoid robot Ava who ultimately manipulates and betrays him, in the process making him question his own humanness.

Mediatization of Love

In recent years, it has become clear to many, if not most scholars that media and mass communication are not just acting upon established processes in society, but are also creating routines within and across society's institutions on their own. In order to grasp the far-reaching consequences of this double articulation of media and society, the concept of mediatization has been introduced (Hjarvard, 2008; Couldry and Hepp, 2013). Mediatization can be seen as a conceptual extension of mediation, not a replacement theory, adding awareness about historical co-evolution and parallelism between the role of media and other meta-processes in society such as globalization and individualization (Lunt and Livingstone, 2016). In a relatively short time, it has been taken up far and wide in media and mass communication research, inspiring work in 'institutionalist' and 'constructionist' directions (Hepp, 2013). In institutionalist accounts, mediatization is seen as a process in which non-media social actors have to adapt to "media's rules, aims, production logics, and constraints" (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 249). In social constructionist accounts, it is seen as a process in which changes in media, information and communication technologies influence and shape the way culture and society function and evolve.

The mediatization of love manifests in two ways. First, as a consideration of the pervasive and ubiquitous role media play in all aspects of life, including specifically in the arrangement, experience and expression of our intimate feelings. Most scholars in the field today would acknowledge that it has become less than useful to study media in isolation and out of context, suggesting that our relationship to media has become too intimate – both in a technological sense, as our devices feel and 'live' quite close to us, and in an affective sense, as we clearly love (and sometimes hate) our media. Although such an approach to media as an ensemble of devices and activities collectively constituting how

people feel about, give meaning to and co-ordinate their everyday life has been advocated in the literature for many decades (Bausinger, 1984), only quite recently such arguments have become more common. This inspires comprehensive theoretical approaches such as 'media life' (Deuze, 2012), 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller, 2013), considering the totality of 'communicative figurations' (Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink, 2018), and understanding media as an all-encompassing 'digital environment' (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2021). In the process, we scramble to find appropriate concepts, labels and metaphors for such a weighty role, looking at media as 'territories' (Tosoni and Tarantino, 2013), as 'repertoires' (Haddon, 2016), and variably as 'architecture', 'choreography', 'potentialities', and 'intentionality' (Verbeek, 2008). All of this is, mostly implicitly, intended to grasp what happens when we use and engage with the media we love so much, over time, in all aspects of society and everyday life.

Next to a more institutionalist account of the affective role media play in people's lives – focusing on how our digital environment rearranges all our interactions with each other and the world around us - a more constructionist view would carefully consider the love people feel for their media. Clearly, we all have strong feelings for and about our media. These are feelings of frustration, anger, fear and hate as well as very warm, affectionate, pleasurable and even passionate emotions. Capturing such feelings, exploring what they tell us about our relationship with media, and considering how this contributes to our understanding of the role of media and (mediated) communication in society and everyday life, is doubtlessly of great significance.

Since 1998 I have been teaching a course about our life in media to undergraduate university students.[7] These courses generally attract between 300-600 students, with on average at least one-third of students coming from countries outside the one I happen to be teaching in. As part of my pedagogical approach, I regularly conduct an exercise inviting the students to talk about why they love (their) media so much. They for example do this by posting their personal answers on the group weblog "Why I Heart My Media" (whyiheartmymedia.com), which I started in 2011. Beyond love, students are free to share their concerns or fears about media as well – the exercise is all about unearthing the full bandwidth of feelings about media. After perusing the responses of these young people over the last decade or so, the affective motivations they have for (their) media can be divided into four thematic categories: self-expression, identity, belonging, and passion. These are four themes that are part of what it means to be human, and in which humanity media play a formative role.

First of all, my students love media because these devices allow them to express themselves. This can be done by sending or uploading something yourself - such as making a video and putting it on YouTube or keeping a photo gallery on Instagram - but also by simply enjoying a nice movie or cool game. As one student puts it, "I like media because it allows me to escape from everyday problems." One could argue that media are primarily so seductive because they offer us the opportunity to express ourselves and thus be ourselves (in whatever form or version of ourselves), and media companies and professionals tend to make good use of that temptation.

In addition to self-expression, the ability to discover who we are explains a large part of our strong feelings about media. “Media is my life,” writes one of the students, “I wouldn't know what I would do without media.” Another student has added: “I don't exist without media,” referring to maintaining a profile on social networks such as Facebook. Others note that media benchmarks their existence, for example by recording the places they have been, including the people they were there with at the time. We furthermore associate media with who we are - our identity - mainly because we can use and shape media in all kinds of ways as we please: “media is practical, it is entertainment, media is really whatever you want. Maybe that's why I love media: the way media can adapt to any lifestyle, including the kind of life you'd like to lead.” Here one of the students points out something significant: in the game that we play with our identity in media, we can give free rein to our hopes and ambitions. From a critical perspective, we might raise questions about how we create a fantasy world for ourselves in media, and lose all sense of ‘reality’ in the process. A more optimistic look at this phenomenon considers how media provide a space for people to be themselves in a way that is perhaps not safe elsewhere (especially at home) because of issues related to their identity, such as (aberrant) sexual orientation or (lack of) religious beliefs.

Looking around to see where you belong and how you fit into the group is a natural desire to us as social animals. A third aspect of our media love concerns all the feelings that accompany this aspect of (wanting to) belong somewhere. “I love my media because it keeps me in touch with my family and friends,” says one student after another. One of them further explains: “Last night when I was in my room my phone stopped working. I felt lost and cut off from everything and everyone. It’s sad but my phone is my connection to the world. That's why I love media.” For many people, their significant others - loved ones, friends and relatives - are scattered everywhere, across the country, region and world. For them (and especially in pandemic times for all of us) media are indispensable.

Beyond self-expression, identity play, and developing a sense of belonging, a fourth love for media can be distinguished from the various accounts on the WhyIHeartMyMedia website: the ability to have, express, and give meaning to ‘extreme’ emotions. The chance to express strong emotions, to be passionate in whatever shape or form, for which there is or seems to be no space elsewhere, makes media powerfully attractive.

This is by no means a complete or comprehensive study on media love, but I hope this account of the mediatization of love – in institutionalist terms as the ways in which media scholars come to talk about and conceptualize our affective digital environment, and in constructionist terms how we, in everyday life, give expression to our love for media – may be useful to further explore the concept, make it explicit, and contribute to our understanding of media.

In Conclusion: Media Love as a Media Literacy

In conclusion, I would like to advocate a particular use of the ‘media love’ concept as roughly outlined in this essay: to inspire and inform a particular approach to (developing and teaching) media literacy. In recent years, organizations, governments, educational institutions and scholars coming from a variety of academic disciplines have been

developing numerous approaches to media and information literacy (MIL) all over the world. There seems to be an emerging consensus among policymakers and educators alike that some form of MIL should be part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools, and interest in adult learning and the inclusion of senior citizens in MIL protocols is growing. Despite my enthusiasm for all of this, a sincere concern I have is that much of the various approaches to MIL tends to be rather instrumental and driven by fear. It is instrumental, as it limits MIL to learning how to navigate the technological affordances of media (e.g., 'button-pushing'), and it is fearful as it seems to be largely inspired by a desire to protect people against media. While relevant, such approaches tend to bypass or ignore the most fundamental aspect of the relations we have with (our) media: love.

Roger Silverstone, in his earlier mentioned exploration of why we should study the media, called attention to the 'erotic' dimension of mediation: to seriously consider the pleasures we derive from using (and making) media, imploring us to consider emotions as much as the intellect when making sense of the media. When we do take love seriously, as I have argued in this paper, we first recognize the porous boundaries between the media and life, opening our eyes to the intense feelings we have for and about media, and how intimate our relations with and through media have become. Second, we begin to appreciate how love is not just something sometimes studied directly or indirectly, but that it can be considered to be the underlying energy fueling the whole field of media studies and (mass) communication research. When operationalizing media love as practice, we can take this literally and explore the use of media to find and maintain romantic love, or ask more fundamental questions about what happens because of our love for media – for example when all this infatuation leads to problematic media use. When exploring the mediation of love (and sex) in media, we find an evolution of love between humans (wetware) and media (hardware and software) from scary, unsettling and even hostile in the past to mostly ambivalent, sometimes reciprocal and possibly benign in contemporary literature, music, film and television. Finally, when considering the mediatization of love, we appreciate the affective role media play in people's lives through increasingly complex discursive renderings of these relationships across the scholarly literature, while also developing an empathic appreciation for the various reasons people have for loving (their) media.

It is for all these reasons why I consider love as the central organizing concept of looking at, understanding and using media – both in scholarship, in everyday life, and when considering the way society and its institutions function. When it comes to literacies developed in the context of omnipresent media, I cannot help but wonder whether love might be a more useful teacher than fear – while acknowledging that choosing to love always includes an element of risk.

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Endnotes

[1] Source: http://www.haldavid.com/words.htm.

[2] This hypothesis is based on longitudinal trust research which suggests that people are most likely to trust people they know, who live and work locally, and that share the same values – over the voice of authorities and institutions (such as government and journalism). See the Edelman Trust Barometer surveys (at https://www.edelman.com/trust; last visited: March 15, 2021), reporting the results of an annual online survey in 28 countries with 33,000+ respondents.

[3] For an English summary, see: https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2021-03/ucid-ram030421.php (last visited: March 15, 2021).

[4] Source for most-visited and most-downloaded online dating services worldwide provided by Statistica: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1115157/most-popular-dating-sites-globally and https://www.statista.com/statistics/1200234/most-popular-dating-apps-worldwide-by-number-of-downloads (last visited: March 15, 2021).

[5] Source: Horning, R. (2013). What does OKCupid want? *The New Inquiry/Salon*, February 16. URL: https://www.salon.com/2013/02/16/single_servings_partner (last visited: March 15, 2021).

[6] Source: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106697/quotes (last visited: March 15, 2021).

[7] First a few years as a guest lecturer in The Netherlands and Germany, then nine years in the United States as an assistant and later on associate professor, today back in the Netherlands at the University of Amsterdam, and in between through workshops and seminars at universities all over the world.