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### [Review of: T. Markham (2020) Digital Life]

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**DOI**

[10.1177/02673231221121648](https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231221121648)

**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

European Journal of Communication

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**Citation for published version (APA):**

Deuze, M. (2022). [Review of: T. Markham (2020) Digital Life]. *European Journal of Communication*, 37(5), 569-572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231221121648>

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## Book reviews

European Journal of Communication  
2022, Vol. 37(5) 569–578  
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Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/02673231221121648  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc



Tim Markham, *Digital Life*, Cambridge, UK/Medford, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2020; 208 pp.: £55.  
ISBN: 9781509541058

**Reviewed by:** Mark Deuze, *University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

In December 2021, Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Ann Moss embarked on a public relations tour to promote both the release of the fourth Matrix film (titled *Resurrections*) and the earlier release of the Unreal Engine 5 tech demo *The Matrix Awakens*. The film continues the plot-line of questioning boundaries all-too-easily drawn between humans and machines, and between reality and a computer simulation thereof. The demo features a minigame where you play as Reeves and Moss, fighting off agents while driving through a vast photorealistic city. In one of the interviews – with American technology news website *The Verge* – the two actors discuss the uncanny experience of seeing themselves as avatars, pontificating about a possible future where they can just ‘stay home’ while their avatars star in all kinds of projects.<sup>1</sup> The conversation quickly moves on to philosophizing about the digital world ‘that is becoming more and more real’, for example, addressing the already well-established practice of archiving one’s digital self for future reference (and commercial exploitation). When asked how they feel about this near-complete blending of the virtual and the real, Keanu Reeves offers an anecdote of having dinner at a friends’ house and trying to explain the premise of the Matrix franchise to a clueless teenager. As he talks about the struggles of his character – Thomas Anderson or Neo – figuring out his life in a virtual world and a real world, his friends’ daughter asks him why this is important: ‘who cares if it’s real?’ Reeves considers her indifference ‘awesome’ to whether a digital life is more or less real than an analogue, embodied and physical one, whereas Moss remains quizzical.

In a nutshell, the girl’s trivialization of any meaningful distinction between the real and the virtual in the context of digital life, Keanu Reeves’ awe of how much such a perspective opens up opportunities for expression and experience, as well as Carrie-Anne Moss’ incredulity – strike at the heart of the point Tim Markham makes in *Digital Life*. Markham defines digital life as ‘the condition of existing amongst and through [digital] manifestations, processes, mechanisms, environments and infrastructures’ (p. 25), embracing the notion that ‘humanity and technology are mutually constitutive’ (p. 4). To find our way among this co-determined and invariably messy digital context we need to develop a ‘sceptical agility’

(p. 4) to navigate the frothy waters of our ocean of media. Crucially, Markham argues, this is a collective ability – not an individual one. His call on us to find ethics and politics within (and not outside of) the digital is inspiring, and his argument about how the inevitably mistake-prone and promiscuous nature of our lived experience online is both meaningful and useful exactly because it is so chaotic, which is both reassuring and encouraging.

In what follows, I would like to briefly touch upon some of the main points Markham makes in this important book – which, at its heart, significantly contributes to defining the significance of media studies to contemporary concerns about what it means to live meaningfully and ethically in a ‘superconnected’ world. Thereafter I briefly discuss the potential consequences of Markham’s reliance on Martin Heidegger for the development of his perspective. In conclusion, I touch upon a question about this book, and about so many other works in contemporary media studies – including my own: what can (and should) we do about the general lack of diversity in our referencing and sampling for arguments made about humanity, technology, and the world?

The opening chapter of the book is a thoughtful exploration of all the key arguments developed throughout the work. Markham lays down a case for a new ‘digital ontology’ (p. 3) that would lead to ‘new ways of assessing what it means to live well’ (p. 4), as long as we are all on board with, well, simply ‘diving in’ (p. 6) to the digital rather than desperately trying to stay away from it. He calls on us to embrace ‘the mess of daily digital life’ (p. 7), to accept that technology and humanity (and everything that we associate with these terms, including digital and life) are and have always been mutually implicated, right from the very beginning of human interaction with its environment. While this is a perspective expressed many times before (going as far back as the feverish discussions benchmarking the start of modern philosophy in the late 17th and the early 18th centuries, including figures such as Hobbes, Leibniz, Descartes, Offray de la Mettrie and others) about whether there is an essential difference between humans and machines, Markham updates our appreciation of this fundamental premise with rigor and ease.

Once we accept that we are constituent parts of the very technologies we consider as making us inauthentically artificial or less-than-human, Markham asks us to take our feelings about the digital seriously: ‘feeling our way through digitally saturated worlds is productive’ (p. 14), and it is through the messy, haphazard, inattentive and inconsistent ways we feel our way through digital life that we can find mutual respect, solidarity and ethics. This ‘generative’ reading of our affect (p. 43) considers how we continually produce all kinds of versions of ourselves in the endless ‘digital selfings’ (p. 17) enacted through practices of selfhood online. In the process, we are neither slaves to surveillance capitalism, nor are we effective parts of the resistance against it – elements of surveillance and struggle are part and parcel of digital life, and by continually coming to terms with it we all develop unique (and always changing) ways of living with (and in) it.

Markham, in so many words, asks us to love and forgive ourselves (and each other) for our inauthenticity, our failures to use media the way we are supposed to. He takes the pressure off. Instead, he asks us just to take all of this seriously, and to see it – all of it – as having potential for shared practices, narratives and ethics. In subsequent chapters, all of this gets explored in greater detail, as Markham explores an embrace of messiness as the groundwork for a new way of thinking about digital life (chapter 2), considers what it means that we are always in a process of becoming and that the work of sensemaking is

therefore never finished (chapter 3), and suggests that it cannot be up to the individual to successfully engage with the complex issues of data privacy and surveillance culture, instead reframing autonomy as a collective, networked value (chapter 4).

Subsequently, we are called upon to love the mundane everydayness of digital life and to consider how the endless noise of the online world is not anathema to coming up with interesting and inspiring ways of making sense of it (chapter 5). Chapters 6 and 7 turn our attention toward what to do with all of this, and continue a deliberately hopeful point of view – as ‘it remains possible to live creatively and critically’ (p. 27) in a generally rather bleakly corporatized digital environment. In conclusion, Markham argues that each of us – as we live digitally – is implicated in the struggle of sensemaking, for living ethically. There is no alternative, and no outside to digital life – and perhaps, concludes Markham, our politics should be just as provisional and improvisational as digital life is.

While all these chapters are certainly worthy of in-depth study, just carefully reading the opening chapter would suffice for most, as it contains the essence of the author’s compelling argument. It is a testament to the kind, calm and clear voice of the author, who genuinely intends to help us move forward. Markham himself relies for support throughout the book on the work of Martin Heidegger. We encounter the prominent German thinker, either directly or indirectly, almost on every other page.

Heidegger is one of the most influential, and continually inspiring philosophers of the 20th century. He was also a member of the Nazi party, incorporating anti-Semitism into his thinking (as explicitly expressed in his *Black Notebooks*), and a father to sons serving in the German military in its Russian campaign during World War II. Safe to say, it is impossible to disavow Heidegger’s seminal work, just as it is futile to ignore his failures as a human being. This conundrum does not disqualify the use of Heidegger, but it does demand adopting it with caution. The German thinker’s work is such a dominant reference in *Digital Life*, that admittedly with each link my unease grows. At some point, one would perhaps expect some critical engagement with Heidegger’s problematic predilection for totalizing claims and narratives, including his assumption that nothing much can be expected of people’s own volition when making their (way through the) world. Similarly, what needs to be questioned are his rather ridiculous opinions about media (such as the radio and printing press) serving solely to enchain people, making them swallow whatever messages get transmitted. What is relevant in the context of Markham’s book and overall argument would furthermore be a recognition of the idiosyncrasy of the experience (and impact) of digital life – something that a Heideggerian framework tends to remain somewhat blind to. While all of us may stumble and fall in our ‘digital wayfaring’ (p. 143), clearly such practices unfold and *feel* quite differently for everyone, and such differences really (...) matter. Contemporary media scholarship excels in highlighting the unique and unequal nature of digital life, showing how our worlding in media produces vastly different realities – a crucial awareness that would add significantly to the various arguments developed in this book.

Heidegger clearly benchmarks the overall argument in *Digital Life*, yet the philosopher is of little or no use when it comes to articulating the diversity of people’s experience of digital life. This is where Markham’s reliance on Heidegger becomes problematic because the media scholars drawn upon to extend Heidegger’s exploration of the possibility of relying on technologies while not becoming enslaved to them are not used to highlight issues of power (or lack thereof), the complications of intersectionality for one’s ability to make a life online, or the possibility of communal forms of agency and activism (e.g. against the profoundly problematic biases of the

software and statistics underpinning much of digital life). Indeed, eminent colleagues such as Shaun Moores, Amanda Lagerkvist and Paul Frosh, as well as Annette Markham, Lisa Parks, Sarah Pink, Sonia Livingstone and Jose van Dijck are primarily used to further Markham's (and, by extension, Heidegger's) points, rather than enter into a fundamental discussion on the issues raised by them.

There is little or no mention of scholars from most of the world (Africa, Asia and Latin America) although the book is clearly ambitious in its scope and scale of argument. And again, I am troubled: of course, I am not expecting every scholarly publication to be a true representation, in its referencing, of the world. On the other hand, I do feel it is impossible not to acknowledge the importance thereof, especially as we are moving well into (and in *Digital Life* explicitly claiming) a profoundly interconnected world of the 21st century. While I am deeply sympathetic to the author's attempt to contribute to the return to grand narratives in media studies – our field needs assured voices as disciplines across the academy start to colonize media and communication research – this comes with great responsibility. Tim Markham's book is of such importance that I, as a fan, crave a more explicit engagement by the author with the world.

An inspiring example in that respect is 'The Citation Diversity Statement' introduced by Zurn et al. (2020): adding a short paragraph to any publication in which the author(s) consider their own biases, and quantify the equitability of their references. Especially when our aim is to help people from all over the world – from a bewildering variety of backgrounds and contexts – to make sense of their digital lives, we cannot be but mindful of what sources, arguments, examples and cases we use to talk about them.

In conclusion, what sets Markham's book apart from many other titles is the same thing what makes the interview with Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Ann Moss mentioned at the start of this review essay so compelling: it offers an empathic and unapologetic sense of wonder about the digital environment – a digital life that indeed seems to evolve faster than science fiction can keep up with, especially regarding how we feel about the new media context within which we live. This is what media studies uniquely have to offer. As just about every academic discipline these days studies (and makes claims about) media and mass communication, the difference is that while these fields – such as psychology, anthropology, political science, philosophy, including neurobiology and medicine – see media as something that happens to us, we consider how we make worlds happen in and through media. Markham extrapolates this position beautifully. I would love to see just a bit more distance between Heidegger and Markham – indeed, we need a more explicit statement from the author himself to hear where he stands on all of this. As a fellow media scholar, I cannot wait to see *Digital Life* picked up and articulated to the lived experience of different parts of the world, from different walks of life. While we all live digital lives, we do not all get to be digital equally .

## Note

1. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OK80eljWrs>.

## Reference

- Zurn P, Bassett D and Rust N (2020) The citation diversity statement: A practice of transparency, a way of life. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 24(9): 669–672.