



Making, managing and experiencing ‘the now’: Digital media and the compression and pacing of ‘real-time’

new media & society
2020, Vol. 22(9) 1680–1698
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DOI: 10.1177/1461444820914871
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms



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Abstract

Digital media time is commonly described as ‘real-time’. But what does this term refer to? How is ‘real-time’ made, managed and experienced? This article explores these questions, drawing on interviews with UK-based digital media professionals. Its specific concern is with how accounts of the time of digital media indicate a particular, yet supple, temporality, which emphasises ‘the now’. I draw on current literature that explores how real-time is a temporality capable of being stretched and condensed, or variously compressed and paced. While much of this literature focuses on the technological fabrication of real-time, I explore how ‘the now’ is produced through the interplay between human and non-human practices. Through discussion of the interviews, the article concentrates on social, cultural and affective dimensions of ‘the now’, fleshing out more technologically focused work and contributing to understanding of a prevalent way in which time is organised in contemporary digital societies.

Keywords

Digital media, live, real-time, social media, temporality, the now, the present, time

A common way in which digital media are described is as ‘real-time’. But what does this term refer to? Does it overlap or resonate with what is also often described as the ‘liveness’, ‘instantaneity’ and ‘always-onness’ of digital media? How? How are these states or qualities made, managed and experienced? This article explores these questions, drawing on interviews with digital and social media professionals based in the United

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Kingdom, including Digital Directors, Social Media Managers and co-founders of digital documentary projects and creative collectives. Its specific concern is with how accounts of digital media as real-time, live, instantaneous and always-on indicate a particular, yet supple, temporality, which emphasise ‘the now’, or the present.

My argument in this article is threefold. First, it is that experiences of ‘the now’ are becoming prevalent in contemporary digital societies, and thus the making and managing of these nows require theoretical and empirical attention. In concentrating on ‘the now’, I therefore centre the temporality of the present. In doing so, I suggest that the present is not completely separable from the past or future – indeed, it often involves their folding together. Nevertheless, here I begin not with digital media temporality in general, nor with the past or future in particular, but rather with the present. This is an attempt to take seriously ‘the now’ by considering its specific temporalities.¹ Second, drawing on existing literature on real-time, my argument is that there is not one single now but a *range of nows*. Theoretical and empirical research, then, needs to be able to account for how ‘the now’ is not unified or coherent, but pliable and changing. Third, I argue that while existing research has shown how different platforms and practices produce and shape these ‘nows’, there is less attention on the people who manage and make judgements about these platforms and practices and thus are also involved in the generation and rhythms of ‘the now’. I concentrate on how ‘the now’ is a temporality produced through the interplays between humans and non-humans, understanding humans not as ‘users’ or ‘controllers’ of digital media but rather as in entangled relations with them. Digital media ‘do things’ to humans just as humans ‘do things’ with media. It is in this way that I am interested in the experiences or embodied affects that are generated through the relations between digital media and the professionals who work with them. Drawing on what was discussed in the interviews, digital media are understood broadly, and encompass social media, the Internet and World Wide Web, television streaming services and apps that track and monitor various activities.

In the first part of the article, I discuss how and why it is important to understand ‘the now’ in contemporary digital culture. I pay particular attention to the ways in which academic literature has highlighted the significance of ‘real-time’ in understandings of digital media, and how real-time connects with live, instantaneous and always-on temporalities. I discuss how ‘real-time’ has been theorised as differently *compressed* (Hassan, 2003) and *paced* (Weltevrede et al., 2014), complicating notions of it as immediate and concurrent with ‘real-life’ events,² and instead attending to its malleability. The second section provides an overview of the interviews, including the wider project from which they were conducted, which are analysed further in the third section. In order to examine some of the different senses of ‘the now’ that emerged in the interviews, I structure this third section in terms of five themes that cut across understandings and experiences of real-time, live, instantaneous and always-on temporalities, offering examples of how ‘the now’ is variously discussed in terms of (1) its happening, (2) communicating: sending and responding, (3) keeping up, (4) checking and (5) scrolling. In each of these sub-sections, the focus is on how interviewees articulate their senses of making and managing ‘the now’, including of their own and others’ professional strategies for administering, dealing with and experiencing them. Importantly, the article does not aim to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of different ‘nows’, but

rather to provide instances of their discussion in the interviews and to consider them in relation to 'now' times, thus highlighting non-conformity and non-cohesion. In the final section of the article, I offer some conclusions as to what this analysis contributes to an understanding of how time is made, managed and experienced in contemporary digital societies, including an attention to the interplay between human and non-human entities through which 'the now' is created and lived out.

Theorising 'the now' in digital societies: digital media and real-time

That there is an intimate relationship between media and scales, perceptions and experiences of time is well-established. In Benedict Anderson's (1991) theorisation of the emergence of the printing press and imagined communities, for example, is an analysis of how the ability to access news at roughly the same time of day was part of the construction of a nation. When video recorders became mass-market goods in the West in the 1980s, commentators coined the term 'time-shifting' to account for how viewers were able to record broadcast television to be watched later on and more than once (Cubbit, 1991; Gray, 1992). For David Harvey (1991), globalisation functions through the time-space compression that new communications technologies enable. Scott Lash and John Urry (1993), Manuel Castells (1996) and Barbara Adam (2006) are among those who have argued that media technologies can function to issue in changes to economic, social, cultural and political systems. They have pointed to the emergence of a relationship between 'instantaneous time' and 'glacial time' in 'disorganised capitalism' (Lash and Urry, 1993), 'timeless time' (Castells, 1996) and the challenge to clock time brought about by the temporal spectrum of communications technologies that 'range from nanoseconds to millennia, from the speed of light to eternity' (Adam, 2006: 119). In the early 21st century, then, the embedding of digital media in everyday life has led to a series of concepts to understand what Robert Hassan (2003) terms 'the latest technological temporal form' (p. 231).

While many of these concepts note the importance of the present, they often do so in relation to the future or past. Mark Hansen (2015), for example, discusses the prehensivity of digital media, including how its 'presentification' (p. 7) is always in the process of feeding-forward (p. 30, see also Clough et al., 2015). Analysing the role of algorithms in the making and securing of borders, Louise Amoore (2013) argues that they 'incorporate the very unknowability and profound uncertainty of the future into imminent decision' (p. 9). Beginning with the 'increasing speed and immediate character of digitally enabled communication, especially through social media', Anne Kaun (2015) argues that the digital archive involves a specific temporality of 'permanent updating and real-time processing while memory becomes permanently transitional' (p. 5401). While the present or the now' is inherent in these accounts – as 'presentification', 'imminent decision' and 'immediacy, [...] newness and presentness' (Kaun, 2015: 5401) – the specificities of this present are understood in relation to past and future and temporalities – the lure of the future in prehension (Hansen), the uncertainty of the future (Amoore) and memory and the archive (Kaun). While it is, of course, impossible and undesirable to segregate the present from the past and future, what can happen is that

the present as a temporal quality, condition or state is somewhat overlooked. What is required then is not a disregard of the past and future, or the organisation of the relations between them and the present, but rather an approach that begins with an attention to the present itself. For the concerns of this article, such a focus enables a clearer understanding of both the prevalence and significance of ‘the now’ in contemporary digital societies (Coleman, 2017), and the ways in which ‘the now’ is made, managed and experienced in multiple ways.

One starting point for this approach is with the concept of ‘real-time’, which, as Kaun’s argument indicates, has been an important and consistent way of understanding digital media temporalities (see also Hellsten et al., 2006; Kaun 2016). Hassan argues that this term became popular at the turn of the century to account for the information and communications technology (ICT) revolution, and tends to refer to ‘[s]imultaneity in the occurrence and the registering of an event, sometimes called synchronous processing’ (Heim, 1993: 157 in Hassan, 2003: 231).³ Hassan (2003) notes that this definition of ‘real-time’ implies ‘a cancelling-out of temporal duration between events’, ‘as “simultaneity” suggests “happening at the same time”’ (p. 231). Central to such an understanding of ‘real-time’ is not only immediacy and fast speeds, but also a ‘non-time’, captured in Paul Virilio’s (1997) argument that ‘the teletechnologies of real-time [...] are killing “present” time by isolating it from its here and now, in favour of a communicative elsewhere that no longer has anything to do with our “concrete presence” in the world’ (p. 10 cited in Hassan, 2003: 232). Hassan (2003) takes issue with the timelessness that such simultaneity implies, arguing that this is a misnomer that bears little resemblance to ‘actual day-to-day existence’ (p. 232). Instead, he proposes an understanding of ‘network time’, which seeks to account for the infrastructure of devices and applications via which a network is connected and temporal duration is made:

Network time is digitally compressed clock-time, and as such operates on a spectrum of technologically possible levels of compression. This spectrum is open ended. At one end this may last from a few minutes or seconds, when waiting for a download or for chatroom text to reach the recipient, to, at the other end of the scale, nano- or picosecond transmissions, which are one billionth and one trillionth of a second, respectively. (Hassan, 2003: 233)

Hassan’s argument is that the real-time of ICT networks is not simultaneous with the real-time of events, but instead is *compressed* according to the capacities of the network (and the event) (see also Mackenzie, 1997). This compression may be tighter or looser, so that real-time is stretched and/or contracted. Thus, ‘real-time’ may be as quick as a ‘nano- or picosecond’, or as slow as a ‘few minutes or seconds’.

It may seem that Hassan’s argument, written in the early 2000s to account for the advent and spread of ICTs, needs updating in the context of the increasing speed of computer processing; faster processing would seem to indicate that the spectrum of compression coalesces at the tighter end. However, Esther Weltevrede et al.’s (2014) more recent analysis complements that of Hassan, by arguing that ‘[m]edia do not operate in real-time, devices and their cultures operate as pacers of real-time’ (p. 127).⁴ For these authors, time is not external to media (networks, technologies, devices, platforms, representations) but is produced through them. For example, a Twitter feed or stream will

produce a ‘real-time’ that is different to a Google search. These differences are understood through the concept of *pacing*, a concept that is developed from how pacesetters in sport or cardiac pacemakers in medicine ‘strategically organise the speed at which movement and change occurs, bringing attention to the collaborative fabrication of speed and time’ (Weltevrede et al., 2014: 135). In the context of digital media, the concept of pacing ‘calls attention to the ways in which fresh content is delivered by web devices’, and how ‘that freshness and relevance create different paces and [how] the pace within each engine and platform is internally different and multiple in itself’ (Weltevrede et al., 2014: 135). As such, while the trend may be for tighter real-time compression, there is still variance in how engines and platforms pace this real-time; real-time is not a ‘non-time’ but is different and divergent.

The central points to take from this discussion of real-time so far for this article are that (1) real-time is an important way in which to understand digital media; (2) digital real-time is not necessarily synchronous with event real-time – indeed, ‘real-time’ is always mediated; (3) real-time is produced through specific digital media, and hence; (4) digitally mediated real-time is ‘internally different and multiple in itself’; it is compressed and paced. Furthermore, as Weltevrede et al. (2014) argue,

[r]eal-time experience is no longer limited to the elimination of a perceptible delay between the request, processing and presentation of information; instead, it informs modes of engagement, interaction and the speed at which responses to one’s own actions are being shown. (p. 129)

The emphasis here on engagements, interactions and responses to real-time is important in terms of how ‘the now’ temporalities were discussed by interview participants, who focused not so much on its technical aspects as how they saw different media platforms as producing it, the various ways in which they managed these media, and how they experienced and felt about these nows. In particular, as I examine in more detail below, their explanations of these dimensions of real-time were developed in relation to other key ways in which digital media are frequently described as live, instantaneous and always-on.

In many ways, liveness and instantaneity are synonymous with real-time in indicating simultaneity. Indeed, discussing the shift from an Internet organised around pages to the streams of digital media more widely, David Berry (2011b) notes that ‘streams are computationally real-time and it is this aspect that is important because they deliver liveness, or “nowness” to the users and contributors’ (p. 142). In other words, updates, refreshes and notifications are experienced as being delivered as the event that they are updating, refreshing and/or notifying of is happening. This real-time ‘is a mediated construct’ and ‘the mere passing through computation creates some latency or data lag, which is different for each system, that marks it as already in the past before the user receives it as a feedback loop’. However,

this latency in real-time response, which may be micro or milliseconds, may also be disguised from the user through various forms of design transitions, computational techniques or anticipatory processing which makes the experience of real-time feel as if it is truly real-time. (Berry, 2011a, n.p.)

For Berry here, then, the latency or lag that is inherent in digital real-time may be ‘disguised’ so that real-time feels live and immediate. Similarly, discussing how multi-platform reality formats (such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*) extend existing broadcast conventions of liveness and eventfulness, Espen Ytreberg (2009) argues that a key component of liveness is ‘its instantaneous transmission of events and happenings’ (p. 477) and that ‘televsual liveness can be readily compatible with the web’s experiences of immediacy and its strong sense of the now’ (p. 478).⁵

Berry’s argument indicates how real-time is stretched or contracted, drawing attention to the divergence within real-time. Ytreberg (2009) also stresses how multi-platform reality formats ‘coordinate a wide range of temporalities, linking the liveness of instantaneous transmission, the immediacy of web surfing and the continuous unfolding of participants’ everyday lives’ (p. 480). As with the understandings of real-time, then, here liveness and instantaneity are multiple and operate differently according to specific platforms:

Thus multi-platform reality formats encompass a range of ways to construct temporal co-presence, from the live moment strictly speaking to the looser forms of continuity offered around it on digital platforms. One may experience the compact instantaneity of *Pop Idol* live voting, the occasional visit to the *Pop Idol* chat where that vote is discussed, and the continuous unfolding of a *Pop Idol* discussion group thread, coterminous with the temporality of one’s everyday life over weeks and months. Somehow the format facilitates this whole range of temporal structures. It also makes possible a segueing between temporalities, where the time structure of one platform can be experienced as complementary rather than conflicting with that of other platforms. (Ytreberg, 2009: 479)⁶

Ytreberg’s analysis points to a network of platforms that are constantly available, or ‘always-on’. In her analysis of the shift from broadcast to digital television, Patricia Ticineto Clough (2000) argues that television is ‘part of an expanded and intensified teletechnology’, so that ‘[t]ransmitting both entertainment and information, television will always be on’ (p. 96). This always-onness has both extended and intensified in today’s digital world, and Clough (2018) argues that the constant availability of networked, digital technologies is transforming embodiment, subjectivity, the unconscious and sociality.

These analyses of real-time, live, instantaneous and always-on temporalities can be understood in terms of an attention to the present or ‘nowness’ of digital media time. As Weltevrede et al. (2014) put it, ‘real-time entails the promise of an experience of the now, allowing platforms and other web services to promote the speed and immediacy at which they organise new content and enable user interaction’ (p. 126). Importantly, as I have indicated, ‘the now’ is not a reductive or single state but is multiple, diverse, different and differentiated, a series of compressed and paced qualities. In this sense, as Raymond Williams (1977) argues, the ‘temporal present’ is ‘active’ and ‘flexible’ (p. 128).

Drawing on and also developing this conceptual framework to understand ‘the now’, my aim in the rest of this article is to analyse some of the ways in which digital media professionals explained their understandings of real-time, live, instantaneous and always-on, which involves discussing how they make, manage and experience these ‘nows’. In particular, I take up Hassan’s argument about the spectrum of temporal duration – that

'the now' may be more or less compressed – and Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz's conception of the various paces of digital media and how they are engaged and interacted with and responded to. In each section, I examine the practices and experiences that such stretching and contracting of 'the now' involve and generate. However, crucially, in both Hassan's and Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz's arguments, compression and pacing are understood in terms of the capacities and affordances of media technologies. While in these arguments technology is understood as socially, culturally and economically situated, in each the concern is with how compression and pacing are produced by media technologies. For example, Hassan (2003) proposes that '[t]he "embedding" of ICTs in the world is also embedding network time into our everyday lives' (p. 234), with the result of '[n]etwork time constitut[ing] a new and powerful temporality that is beginning to displace, neutralise, sublimate and otherwise upset other temporal relationships in our work, home and leisure environments' (p. 235). Weltevrede et al.'s (2014) analysis is conducted through a device perspective. While this approach 'does not solely focus on [device] technicity but considers their agential capacities as informed through the social arrangements, cultural practices and politics that online technologies incorporate and enable' (p. 130), it does concentrate on how it is that devices organise and fabricate specific temporalities such as real-time (p. 135). Pacing, for instance, is produced differently according to the specificities of different online engines and platforms. In the context of these arguments, the contribution this article seeks to make is to emphasise the social, cultural and human aspects of 'the now', not to refute but to flesh out the more technically focused research. Indeed, what the interviews with those who work with digital media begin to open up further is how compression and pacing are produced through a constant interplay between media technologies, social, cultural and organisational contexts and experiential and embodied situations. Hence, this article seeks to understand 'the now' in its situated, everyday making, managing and experiencing, which involves an examination of the relationality and assemblage of human and non-human technologies, (work and personal) cultures, embodiment and subjectivity.

Mediating presents study

The interviews that I discuss here are part of a wider project on the ways in which 'the now' is mediated, produced, managed and experienced. One part of the project, on which this article is based, involved interviews with 20 industry professionals, comprising of a mix of men and women and those coming from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.⁷ All participants were based in London and the south east of England. They worked across the sectors of financial services, marketing, branding, the arts, transport, publishing and higher education, and their roles ranged from sales and marketing manager, content and social media managers and consultants, directors or heads of digital teams, managing directors, and co-founders of creative collectives, digital arts projects and their own businesses. They thus encompassed a wide range of experience, with some participants having been in their roles for 2–3 years and others having worked with media, both broadcast and digital, for over 20 years. The sample of participants was not designed to be representative of age, race or gender; rather, participants were approached on the basis of including a diversity of roles, experience and sectors in the

research. The only pre-requisite was that they all worked with digital media (broadly understood) on a daily basis. Given this sample, and that the research was designed to explore the qualitative experiences of the participants, this article does not suggest that the discussion here is generalisable. Rather, through close attention to some of what was discussed in the interviews, my aim is to examine some of the ways in which the compression and pacing of the real-time of the now is understood and experienced by the participants.

Participants were recruited initially through personal contacts, with a snowballing technique enrolled to recruit further interviewees. I contacted all participants via email with a brief explanation of the project's focus on digital media and time and asking whether they were interested in exploring their thoughts on this. At the beginning of each interview, participants read and signed an informed consent form, and we discussed appropriate ways to anonymise interview data. Discussions on anonymity were returned to at the end of each interview, and I also sent participants copies of the transcripts to provide them with the opportunity to review them and change, clarify or remove points if necessary. In this article, I have changed the names of participants and removed any reference to their workplace, instead talking in terms of the sector in which they work.

The interviews took place face-to-face at participants' workplaces, in my office and at cafes and communal workspaces. They were semi-structured; I had a list of 10 open-ended questions, which I selected from depending on the participants' role and responses to previous questions. I also followed up on participants' responses and their particular lines of interest and expertise. One question asked participants to discuss their understandings and experiences of the terms, 'real-time', 'live', 'instantaneous' and 'always on', whether any specific platforms stood out as involving these terms, and whether they thought other terms were required to understand the 'times' of digital media. Because of its concern with these specific temporalities, this article draws primarily on responses to this question, although other points in the interviews that touched on these terms are also discussed.

Now times

As I have discussed, a central way in which temporality and digital media are framed is in terms of 'the now', an expression that refers to that which is happening in and as the present. However, as I have also discussed, 'the now' is not necessarily bounded in consistent ways but rather is flexible. This section is divided into further sub-sections to explore specific themes that emerged in the interviews, all of which draw attention to the multiplicity and diversity of 'the now', and how this temporality is compressed and paced differently. My emphasis is on how digital media professionals make, manage and experience 'the now' through various social, cultural and technical relations, and each section explores a specific practice that was discussed in the interviews. Rather than structure the article by separating out the terms real-time, live, instantaneous and always-on, or specify a complete classification of different 'nows' or firm definitions of the terms of real-time, liveness, instantaneous and always-on, the following sub-sections instead respond to how there was overlap and slippage between them, as well as some significant distinctions. Hence, discussions of real-time, and its relations with liveness,

instantaneous and always-on appear across the sections, and I examine how they sometimes indicate distinctive temporalities and temporal qualities and at other times collapse or blur into each other. In this way, the article gestures towards the flexibility and activity of 'the now', and how it was expressed in sometimes vague and tangled ways.

Happening

In the interviews, the diversity and divergence of 'the now' emerged in how participants explained their understandings of 'real-time', 'live', 'instantaneous' and 'always-on'. For example, one participant, Giles, who used to work as a journalist and now runs a creative collective, described 'live' in terms of 'broadcasting, so I think of video footage, whereas real-time, I think more of a series of snippets being fed to you'. Another participant, Janet, who works in the arts sector as a Digital Director, explained,

Live is something that I would say, 'We've got a scheduled event. So at three o'clock we've got a curator talking about this work of art [...]'. Real-time might be more there's something happening. We're just streaming. More live streaming rather than we're focusing.

Another participant, Nicky, who co-founded a digital documentary project, talked about how 'instantaneous' referred to 'that ability to find what you want straight away [...]'. It doesn't mean it's happening right now, it's more instant access'. She went on to explain that

Always-on, I suppose, relates to that in that it doesn't matter when you're trying to find what it is you need, you'll be able to find it straightaway.

Live and real-time feel slightly different, but I think it's a very small detail. Live is happening right now. Live, to me, says something ... It feels like broadcast. I suppose that relates to Facebook Live and things like that, it's a live feed of something that you can consume. Real-time relates more to a flow of information, I think. I suppose I'm thinking of things like real-time news, so as it happens. Live, I suppose, is something that is happening now and you're going to watch it unfold. Real-time is, 'This is all the information we have, we'll update it as we get more'. It's not the full picture, the picture will emerge. Live, I suppose, relates more to a story that's going to be told or a happening that's going to happen.

In these extracts, Giles, Janet and Nicky provide different accounts of what real-time, live, instantaneity and always-on refer to or relate to for them. Drawing on his background in journalism, Giles distinguishes between 'live' and 'real-time' where live is understood in terms of video footage that may be shot live but not broadcast live – there may be a delay – and 'real-time' as snatches of information that are 'fed to you'. Live for Janet refers to the communication of an event taking place at a specific time and real-time to 'something happening', 'streaming rather than [...] focusing'. Nicky explains that instantaneous and always-onness involve 'instant access' and being able to find what you are looking for 'straight away', whereas live and real-time 'feel slightly different'. In discussing live and real-time, she explains liveness is 'something happening right now' that is consumed and will unfold as you are watching it, and real-time is 'a flow of

information' being 'update[d] as we get more'. These terms both refer to immediacy, although what is immediate may not be broadcast or communicated instantaneously. For Nicky, there seems to be a hesitancy about whether and how to delineate 'real-time' and 'live', suggesting a slippage between what they refer to and involve.

Across these accounts is an understanding of real-time, liveness, instantaneity and always-onness of 'the now' in terms of 'something happening'. While this term describes both live (Nicky) and real-time (Janet, Nicky), it seems to indicate both the immediacy of 'the now' and its constant unfolding; the flow or streaming of 'the now'. In these senses, it points towards Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford's (2012) characterisation of the contemporary social world in terms of its happening – 'its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness' (p. 2). Drawing attention to how participants discussed the multi-faceted quality of 'the now' as happening – it is both immediate and ongoing, instantaneous and expansive – provides a backdrop for exploring their explanations of the making, managing and experiencing of 'the now' through particular modes of pacing and compression.

Communicating: sending and responding

Real-time, liveness, instantaneity and always-onness were discussed in the interviews in terms of the compression and pacing of communicating. The industry professionals discussed communicating through digital media in terms of putting out messages and responding to them. For example, one participant, the Managing Director of a marketing agency, talked about 'live responding to things', 'real time [...] reacting to news' and 'crisis management' where 'we would have to respond to [something] in an instantaneous way' (Lucy). Another, discussing teenagers' use of Snapchat, reflected that 'there is a, sort of, social and emotional sense around "always on", which is, if you don't respond to someone's Snap within an hour, it means you don't like them very much. I can't imagine what that must be like' (Giles).

In these explanations, 'the now' is expressed in terms of the need to react or respond to something quickly. However, what constitutes the requisite speed at which something should be responded to is not consistent. In these extracts, responses are framed in terms of 'live', 'real-time', 'instantaneous' and 'always on' times, which may be very fast, as with the sense given in the example of crisis management or 'live responding to things', and up to an hour as with the example of Snapchat. Other examples of the compression and pacing of responding 'immediately' include one participant, a Sales and Marketing Manager in the food sector, noting how social media produced a sense of needing to respond not only quickly but also at all times of the day:

[Group instant messenger] Slack means that you are literally always on all the time, because, you know, if something pops into your head [...]. It could be 11 at night, and there'll be like, 'Blah, blah, blah, blah', in the group, and then you see that on your phone, and it's just like, 'Oh God, why now? Why are you talking about that now?' (Mila)

Another talked about 'not send[ing] an instantaneous reply [to an email from a client] because I don't want them to get into the habit of, "Oh well I'm going to get that back within 10 minutes"' (Lucy).

The immediacy of ‘the now’, then, may be differently compressed and paced. Indeed, one participant, Melissa, who worked in the financial services sector noted that

because we’re a heavily regulated financial services business, we can’t be instantaneous, we can’t really do real time and can’t really do live because everything that we put out has to be reviewed by risk and compliance.

[...]

You can tell them ahead of time that an event is going to be live, ‘We want to live tweet’. They’ll do their best but by the time we’ve gone through all those processes, maybe half an hour or an hour has passed. It’s very difficult to be live. It’s definitely very difficult to be real time and we’re definitely not instantaneous (Melissa).

While, on the one hand, the possibility of communicating in live, instant and real-time are refuted here, on the other hand, the business does endeavour to live tweet and the delay might only matter, or be evident, to those putting out the tweets: ‘I think to people who are not at the event anyway so they don’t really know the timing so I think we get away with looking like we’re live’ (Melissa). Others noted how events required urgency:

the other night we had a launch event [...]. We knew that we had a certain amount of influencers and the media there so we would be checking to see in real time what their feedback was, if they were enjoying themselves and if the content they said they were going to put live had gone live and all of that. (Lucy)

These examples indicate how the compression and pacing of ‘the now’ is not only produced through digital devices; it is also shaped through workplace cultures and regulations, the specificity of events (launch events, conferences), and who may be doing the communicating and in what contexts (social media influencers at launch events, professionals in the financial industry). They demonstrate both the temporal stretching of ‘the now’ and how this compression and pacing is made and managed in specific socio-technical, human and non-human, relations.

Keeping up

How participants felt about the pacing and compression of ‘the now’ also emerged as significant in the interviews, drawing attention to the embodied experiences of working with digital media. Some, as with the example of Slack, talked about always-onness as pressured and tiring. This was often referred to in terms of ‘keeping up’. One participant, Giles, said ‘it’s just exhausting to try and keep up with everything. That is a feeling of pressure and obligation’. Another, Nicky, whose online documentary series raised funding through a Kick Starter campaign, said that she and her partner felt an awareness of and responsibility to be always-on: ‘We have the ability to put our phones down if we want to, but the knowledge that people were following on all of these platforms meant that we were always-on as people’.

Janet, who has worked with digital media in the arts sector for over 20 years, discussed the ‘growth of social media and activity on it’ and how ‘the amount of bandwidth it takes to engage intelligently is more than I have spare in my daily life’:

I find that, as I have less time to keep up with whatever is happening, it is harder to engage because you’re not on top of everything. Staying on top of everything is a full-time job, and I have a full-time job. [...] Instead, I have private social media channels. I’m part of a community using Slack. We talk there, we share links there, that’s where I keep up with what’s happening. It’s a useful filter, actually. Some of them are very, very, active on social media. So they’re a useful filter. If something is kicking off or emerging, or an interesting link is going around, I’ll find out about it through them rather than going direct to source.

She described how, as a digital professional, ‘I am interested. [...] I can’t let go. I can’t walk away from it but, at the same time, I have to put some filters in place to be able to be effective in the rest of my life’. This strategy of filtering she described as enabling her to ‘keep a weather eye on what’s happening’.

Keeping up – and developing strategies for keeping up just enough to ensure an overview of what’s happening – was also discussed in the interviews in relation to posting and adding to media streams and platforms. For example, Adam, a Head of Digital in the Higher Education sector discussed ‘keeping our accounts vibrant, so there are things happening’. Other participants talked about the number of times they posted on social media sites. For example, ‘[i]f you want to get a good social media following, you have to be strict with how many times you post, what times you post in the day. You have to look at your analytics to see when you’re getting the best traction, because then that will get you more followers’ (Mila), and another spoke about how ‘[o]n LinkedIn, we try to keep it about four or five posts a day because if we do more than that it looks like we are spamming people’ (Melissa). These examples point to how compression and pacing of ‘the now’ is both platform-specific and requires professional knowledge, understanding and analysis of what constitutes ‘keeping [...] accounts vibrant’ without ‘spamming’. As an aspect of digital media strategies, compression and pacing are thus not only produced through devices and platforms and their affordances, but also through judgements and the management of these devices and platforms. This management functions both in terms of, and works across, quantitative and qualitative judgements; the quantity and qualities of communication work together to provide a sense of ‘things happening’. While strategies may be developed to ensure a good pacing for consumers of content, the comments from Mila, Giles, Nicky and Janet indicate that for those working with digital media, compression and pacing may be too immediate and too quick or right to ‘keep up’ with.

Checking

The example above about the feelings of always-onness from Slack messages gives a sense of how digital media require frequent examination: there are notifications that can potentially alert someone at any time to something that may need responding to, perhaps generating an anxiety about keeping up, and there is a sense that something is happening whether or not a social media feed is open, producing the need to keep these feeds

'vibrant' and/or an obligation to stay up to date. These various feelings were discussed in terms of 'checking'. For example, Lucy discussed 'just having a phone in hand':

I'm much more aware of it now that I've got a child. I know that I'm really guilty of looking at my phone too much. If a WhatsApp message pops up then I can't help but be like, 'Oh'. What I should do probably is put it in another room but I don't. I've become really aware of how much he [her son] sees me and my husband on our phones, particularly if we're going through busy periods at work and we're looking out for things. I've got into the habit of putting it to the side so he can't see me looking at it, doing it secretly. I'm like, 'Well if he can't see the phone while I'm looking at it and I'm looking at it'. It is hard. The lines do really blur. It's not like you leave work and switch off your phone, switch off your social channels and WhatsApp and all of that. Also, because I'm aware for my team that it's not easy for them to switch off either, I feel like I have to be there for them if they need anything. I mean they tend not to call me for anything in the evenings but there will be the occasional, 'Did you see that email from the client? I'm a bit worried about it'.

Checking phones can be because of a responsibility to others or because of a pull towards the lure of notifications, as indicated here by Lucy. It might also be because of the lure of checking and the potential good feelings that it might generate, as Alex, co-founder of the creative collective mentioned above puts it:

There is the well-known serotonin boost. When someone, for example on LinkedIn, likes the piece I've ... That's recognition from my peers which ... makes me feels good and is also good for my business. So I get a little, every time I check it, and I'm checking it loads. I get a little moment. The flipside, when no one is responding to what you're doing, is a kind of low. The interesting thing is, for that little high of serotonin when someone shares it, the rest of the emotions are negative. They really are ...

Some participants discussed their strategies for avoiding constant checking, in order to curb the always-onness of digital media and the negative feelings they might engender. Giles discussed how he was 'starting to try and redesign my life and my behaviour to avoid it':

For example, now, my phone is on the table facing down and I've got it on loud, so if someone calls me I can hear it. I can't leave it face up because it will keep bugging me. I think all of us are, I would hope, learning the upsides and downsides of social media and developing our own strategies to cope with it, because the social media companies don't have our best interests at heart.

John, who worked as a social media manager in different roles across the publishing sector, also talked about his strategies for managing checking and spending time on digital devices:

I use an App called Moment on my phone, for instance that shows how often I check my phone. I spend a lot of time auditing my own social media use to control it. But the auditing itself takes time. I wonder if these responses to the checking, that first feeling of it being always tempting, I've developed these responses to them, but are the responses undermining my temporal autonomy in a really subtle way?

Both Giles and John describe specific changes to their behaviour that they've put in place; placing the phone face-down on the table, installing apps to monitor how many times a phone is checked. While Giles describes how, through deleting his Facebook and Instagram accounts, the 'psychic load of having another thing to check has disappeared. So, that's been a relief', John comments that monitoring checking can itself be another thing to do, noting that 'the auditing itself takes time', and asking whether this 'response' to the checking also poses its own problems in terms of his 'temporal autonomy'. Giles' strategies, then, seem to produce a pacing of his everyday life that is more in keeping with how he would like it to be; not checking is a pacing that is a 'relief' to the amount of checking he was previously involved in. For John, the auditing of how often he checks his phone creates a new pacing. While this pacing might be different to that of checking his phone, it may not provide relief, because the auditing itself requires checking.

Scrolling

Scrolling through and refreshing streams or threads were discussed in the interviews in terms of how 'the now' may be paced and compressed. The example above about the delay to live tweeting due to industry regulation gives a sense of how 'the now' may be stretched or elongated: the pacing is slower than with some of the other examples of liveness discussed above, and the compression is at the looser end of the spectrum. In one way, such practices insinuate a fast or simultaneous now, in that content is constantly updating. In other ways, however, content that is always being refreshed can lead to what John called 'mindless scrolling' because there is seemingly no end to the feed. There is always more. For John, mindless scrolling,

depletes your capacity to focus on anything else, so it becomes a solution to the fact that you can't focus. The more you are using it, the more it stops you from focusing, and you just fall into this kind of mindless scroll, which of course is something that very smart people have sat around trying to design as an intended outcome.

The mindless scrolling explained here is a kind of elongated now in that it stretches out 'the now'. The present is 'fall[en] into' and the lack of focus that John describes spreads the moment out. The now of scrolling, then, refers not only to how the present may be extended in terms of how long it lasts but also because of its affective and experiential intensity. John, for example, also talks about social media in terms of 'a really unpleasant, off-putting' 'attentional lure', where 'you realise you've spent half an hour mindlessly clicking through people's profiles':

my experience of Facebook was that when it gets into your brain, it gets deep inside your mind in a really horrible way. I think I associate 'always on', yes, not as 'always on' [but as] 'always tempting'. Those platforms that have that capacity to always have that capacity to tempt.

John describes this attentional lure or temptation in terms of 'a kind of repression of the present': 'if I get sucked into something like that, that's when it does feel oppressively real-time, because you can't control what's happening, but you also can't make it

unfold faster, just be refreshing, so you end up not being able to move on from anything else'. The intensity of this particular now, then, is at once a stretching out of the present and a sucking into a present that won't 'move on'. Scrolling and refreshing here involve an updating or 'clicking through' that folds together the now and the next so that they become an intensive temporality; a temporality that cannot unfold linearly or extensively into something else.

Another participant, Giles, discussed refreshing in terms of how, 'I think, conceptually, you're sitting in the current moment but you're anxious to get to the next thing, so you scroll up to see what's happened. [...] I mean [...] I think FOMO [Fear Of Missing Out] is so crucial'. For Giles, the anxiety of the folding together of the now and the next creates 'a disconnect between the reality of what's happening' and the following of what is happening on digital media:

News is an interesting category for me because since I've stopped using social media, I've switched a lot of my time to using news apps. I'm not sure that's any better, but [...] it's that sense that it's a story. A story unfolding in real-time, and it has drama but it's not very real. There's something unreal about it.

Here, then, real-time does not guarantee a sense of authenticity of a story. There is a 'disconnect' between the story and its storying, which makes the story seem 'not very real'. For Giles, there is something unsatisfactory in following a news story through live or real-time blogs or updates. Both Giles and Alex, co-founding partners of the creative collective, discussed such real-time reporting and reading as providing 'snapshots' and 'snippets' and producing reactions that were 'knee-jerk':

I think one of the problems with this is that there is not enough thought. When you're taking in content at this speed, there is not enough time to process it properly. An interesting one was I was following the midterm elections [in the United States in 2018], reading the BBC's coverage. I obsessed with trying to see ... Actually, quickly looking at it, it was just telling me little bits. In the morning, when I woke up, I was able to read an article that someone had spent a bit of time, and thought, and given their point of view. My point of view changed dramatically when the person had time. (Alex)

Although not synonymous with the 'mindless scrolling' discussed above, the refreshing of content described here shares similarities with it in its generation of a feeling of thoughtless responses. For example, Giles described how,

if the platform demands an instantaneous response all the time, then to keep up, you have to say the first thing that comes into your head, go on your basest instincts and you're not engaging any other of those slightly more maybe rational or empathetic faculties. There's so little empathy because of that instantaneousness.

Alex talked about 'need[ing] a bit of time to process it. The way that gives you more brain space is to have experts processing it, lots of other people can then digest. This is just constant ...'. John also discussed how he had 'developed tactics' to avoid being 'overloaded' with the amount of content he needed to engage with to fulfil his various professional roles. These include 'spend[ing] a lot of time auditing my own social media

use to control it', and learning and applying skim-reading and more engaged reading strategies as appropriate for different content and what it was intended for (sharing, blogging about, analysing, for example).

In these senses, 'the now' of scrolling and refreshing may refer to a looser compression between an event happening and a digital media response to it being posted and engaged with. The mediation of the now has a slower pace. For Giles and Alex, recognising tightly compressed and quickly paced digital content and responses or reactions was an attempt to draw boundaries around them to enable longer time-frames to 'process', 'digest' and develop 'those more maybe rational or empathetic faculties'. This had also spread to how they mobilised social media as part of their creative collective:

As an organisation, we have quite a difficult relationship with digital media because we feel that a lot of digital media is pervasive into people's daily lives. We don't communicate about ourselves that much on it. We know we need to use it for some of our clients or partners, because they still need it.

[...]

For us, in many ways, it's a necessary evil that we need to use but we use it with ... From our point, [...] we use it with a modicum of restraint. (Alex)

Conclusion: the now as a contemporary 'techno-social temporal form'?

This article has explored how 'the now' is both a prevalent time in contemporary social life and is variously compressed and paced as 'nows' that are stretched and contracted. In particular, it has examined this range of nows through how 'real-time', 'live', 'instantaneous' and 'always-on' times are both multiple and diverse, referring not only to immediacy and simultaneity, or tight compression or fast pacing, but also to nows that may be delayed and elongated. In this sense, the article has aimed to contribute to research on the times of digital media societies, and especially to that work that develops an understanding of 'the present' not as separable from the past and future but nevertheless as a distinctive temporality that requires conceptual attention. A second contribution the article has sought to make is to research on 'real-time'; taking up Hassan's and Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz's arguments regarding how 'real-time' is produced through technical and device-specific processes of compression and pacing, and hence may not involve simultaneity or the production of a 'non-time', I have examined 'the now' as flexible and active.

Moreover, drawing on interviews with digital media professionals from a variety of sectors, a third contribution the article aims to make to research on digital media temporalities is to expand a focus on how 'the now' is produced, drawing attention to its making and management through a wide range of technical, social, cultural and institutional practices, strategies, and judgements, and how it is affectively experienced (as feelings, embodied responses, habits, strategies, for example). While much of the literature on real-time argues for a socio-technical understanding of digital media technologies, it

tends to concentrate on the role of these technologies in producing and patterning time; the discussion of digital media professional's understandings of these processes and practices in this article is thus intended to highlight how the affordances of digital media platforms and devices are only one part of a broader assemblage of human and non-human entities through which temporality emerges and is patterned. Importantly, this approach does not see time as somehow external or background to these human and non-human assemblages, but rather as made, managed and experienced through them. Thus, while Hassan (2003) argues in the early 2000s that 'networked time' is the techno-social temporal form' (p. 213) characterising the ICT revolution, the question raised by the in-depth qualitative study at stake in this article is whether and how 'the now' is (or is becoming) a dominant way in which temporality is constituted and organised in today's digital societies.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to those who agreed to be interviewed and to Sidd Khajuria, the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this Special Issue for sharpening my thoughts on 'the now'.

Author contributions

The author's contribution to *New Media and Society* Special Issue on 'Making Time in Digital Societies: Considering the Interplay of Media, Data and Temporalities' was edited by Christine Lohmeier, Anne Kaun and Christian Pentzold

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The research discussed in this paper is funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, Mediating Presents: Producing 'the Now' in Contemporary Digital Culture, 2018–2019.

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Notes

1. It should also be noted that, in taking the temporality of 'the present' as a subject/object to be analysed, this focus on 'the now' or the present is distinguished from what historians such as Francois Hartog (2016) calls 'presentism'.
2. Indeed, in arguing that 'real-time' is compressed and paced, attention is drawn to how digital media time/s and 'real-life' time/s are co-constitutive; that is, digital media are not neutrally reflecting or reporting on 'real-life' but are, in part, productive of them. This point is expanded on below.
3. A longer history of real-time media is also notable here. As the references to the printing press and television and video recorders indicate, the relationship between time and media might be partly understood in terms of the coincidence between 'real-life' time and mediation. See also footnote 6.
4. See also Paasonen (2014) on network failures.

5. In the context of research methods, Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (2012) argue that one of the strengths of live methods is the potential for simultaneity in research and the possibility of re-ordering the relationship between data gathering, analysis and circulation. This can be done collaboratively in real time to produce a pluralisation of observers, which opens up new possibilities for 'crowd sourced' or transactional data. (p. 7, see also Back et al., 2013).
6. There is a huge body of work on liveness and televisual broadcasting, including (but not limited to) that by Stephanie Marriott (2007), Philip Auslander (2008), Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood (2008) and Paddy Scannell (2014). While it is beyond the scope of this article to expand on this point, it is important to note that this work, as Ytreberg's argument suggests, demonstrates that there are strong continuities between digital and televisual temporalities. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for making this point clearer to me.
7. The second part of the project works with group and individual interviews, visual and auto-ethnographic methods to explore how those who engage with media platforms and apps understand and experience the news produced by, for example, disappearing images on Snapchat and the concentrated focus on the present encouraged by online Mindfulness courses.

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