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Keeping Up the Live

Recorded Television as Live Experience

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Abstract: Increasingly new media platforms are making claims to liveness. Looking back in television history we also find programmes that were recorded, but kept up the claims of being live. This raises the question as to what accounts for the attraction of the live? Focusing on *Ein Platz für Tiere* and the *Netflix Live* spoof of 2017 this article discusses disparate articulations of the live and addresses the need to balance freedom, chaos and control on the part of media producers. For their greatest challenges is that boredom and chaos haunts their output simultaneously. It clarifies also how liveness is not a given property of any technology, but in fact hard work.

Keywords: liveness, television, online media platforms, Netflix Live, animals, control.

Liveness has always been a key aspect of television. In the Thirties and Forties television was broadcast live-to-air, at the same moment as the transmitted events unfolded in front of the camera. After World War II, live anthology dramas became the prestige programming of television, resulting in the designation of this period as television's first Golden Age.[1] Drawing on the experiences of Erik de Vries, director of the Dutch television series *Pension Hommeles* (1957–1959), Sonja de Leeuw mentions the challenges that such live broadcasts posed to the production team.[2] With the introduction of videotape recording in the late Fifties (and the increasing use of filmed programming)[3] the standards of television production changed significantly. Yet, live television never vanished. It still characterizes particular genres (news, sports, media events) even if they are not 'fully live.'[4] In today's participatory culture television shows like

1 For a discussion of the concept of the 'Golden Age of TV' see for the US: William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics,* Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993; Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States,* Thomson, 2007, p. 160; Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status,* Routledge, 2012; and for Western Europe: Jérôme Bourdon et al, 'Searching for an Identity for Television: Programmes, Genres, Formats,' in Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, eds, *A European Television History,* Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, pp. 101–126, 106–113.

2 Sonja de Leeuw, *De man achter het scherm: De televisie van Erik de Vries*, Boom, 2008, p. 148.

3 Focusing on the U.S. Janet Wasko discusses the relation between the film and the television industry, arguing that 'the market for subsequent release [...] was a major factor in the acceptance of filmed TV programming by the networks'. Janet Wasko, 'Hollywood and Television in the 1950s: The Roots of Diversification,' in Peter Lev, ed, *Transforming the Screen, 1950–1959*, Univ. of California Press, 2003, pp. 127–146, 137.

4 For a gradation of liveness see Jérôme Bourdon, 'Live Television is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise,' *Media, Culture & Society* 22, 5, 2000, 531–556.

The Voice (2011 - present) accentuate their liveness by inviting the audience to interact with and around on-screen through social media.

Various studies show how the meaning of 'live' has changed over the course of time. Liveness signified 'being alive' (i.e. not dead) and was therefore considered a "prosthetic form of life".[5] It was associated with 'immediacy' and linked to the ability of seeing at a distance.[6] As it was designated to anthology dramas, liveness also elevated television's cultural status.[7] As a feature of media events, it characterized a shared experience that united viewers.[8] With the emergence of social media, liveness is being negotiated once more, and this renegotiation draws upon the varied meanings of 'live' that have been associated with broadcast media over time.[9]

Nick Couldry relates liveness to the symbolic power of the media.[10] It can be argued that media "legitimize and maintain the uneven distribution of symbolic power" by claiming to be live and to connect people.[11] Although we consider the political and social implications of these assertions as highly relevant and important to explain its present-day revival, we will approach liveness from a different perspective to point out that the reasons to emphasize liveness are disparate and manifold.

In what follows will explore the continued vested interest of television and increasingly of online platforms, in liveness. We will focus on two examples from different 'eras' of television which both accentuate their liveness, despite being recorded. Although our examples are rather marginal they both reflect on the particular articulation of the live in their resepctive historical context. By juxtaposing their disparate intentions for keeping up (or imitating) the live we aim to illustrate varying notions of liveness. Bringing two very different examples together also uncovers that liveness is characterizes by a tension between unpredictability and control.

We will first discuss how the German programme *Ein Platz für Tiere* ('A Place for Animals') maintained the appearance of liveness long after it stopped being technically live. The programme shows that one of the pleasures of watching live television derives form its unpredictability and illustrates the work that is necessary to creating liveness. Subsequently, we will reflect on Netflix's April Fools joke in 2017, which poked fun at televisual liveness to differentiate itself from television. Whereas *Ein Platz für Tier* puts effort in emphasizing the unpredictability and imperfection of a live broadcast, *Netflix Live* stresses the uneventfulness of live television, thereby confusing immediacy with liveness. The April Fools joke shows that it's not only television that has a recurring interest in keeping up liveness, as the interest for social TV formats indicates. Online platforms such as Netflix also need liveness to define themselves in relation to traditional television.

1 *Ein Platz für Tiere*: Animals Out of Control

In the 1950s Professor Bernhard Grzimek, director of the Frankfurt zoological garden, became an irregular guest in the studio of the German regional television station Hessischer Rundfunk (Hessian Broadcasting Corporation, *hr*). At a time when television institutions were still heavily experimenting with scheduling and programming forms, he started to present an educational programme on animals and wildlife conservation. *Ein Platz für Tiere* ran nationwide until Grzimek's death in 1987. In its early years the programme consisted of slides or short documentary films that Grzimek commented live on at the moment of their broadcasting. Later on, Grzimek's voice-over was recorded and

5 John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication,* Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 218.

6 Jostein Gripsrud, 'Television, Broadcasting, Flow: Key Metaphors in TV Theory,' in Christine Geraghty and David Lusted, eds, *The Television Studies Book,* Arnold, 1998, pp. 17–32, 19.

7 Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status,* Routledge, 2012, p. 20–21. This cultural status came along with a hierarchy amongst genres, since only certain kinds of programming were distinguished as 'live'.

8 Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History,* Harvard Univ. Press, 1992, p. 28.

9 See Karin van Es, *The Future of Live*, Polity, 2017.

10 Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals*, Routledge, 2003.

11 Karin van Es, *The Future of Live*, Polity, 2017, p. 18.

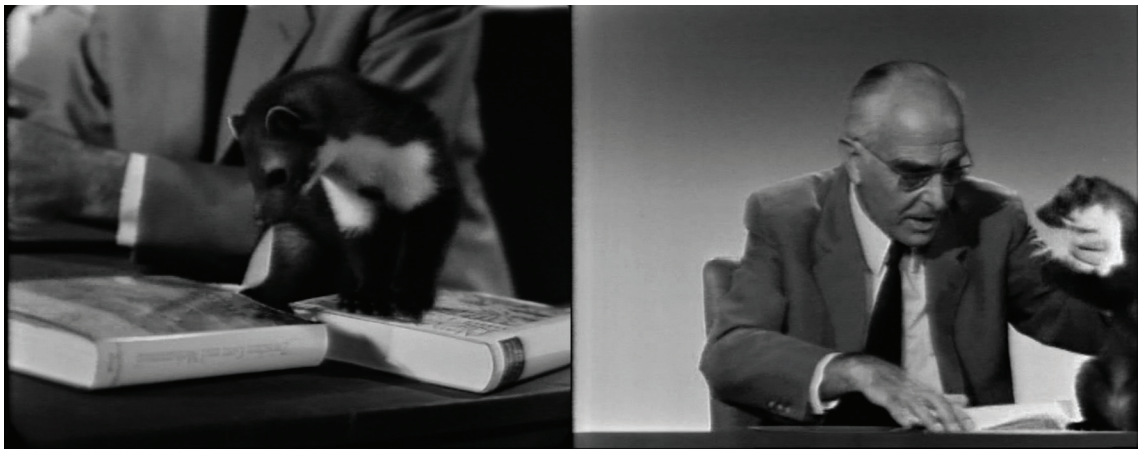

Figure 1. *Ein Platz für Tiere,* November 18, 1969.

mixed with the documentary's soundtrack. In the beginning, the programme's topics included zoo walks, the presentation of a flea circus or lectures on mythical creatures or wild animals like lions, hippos, and giraffes. Later *Ein Platz für Tiere* presented spectacular wildlife documentaries and scientific films.[12]

A distinctive characteristic of *Ein Platz für Tiere* was a living (zoo) animal that accompanied Grzimek to the television studio. Documents at the *hr* archives indicate particular arrangements that had to be made to host the respective animal. Grzimek asked, for example, for a studio without false ceiling to prevent a bushbaby (Galago) from hiding; he reminded director Ekkehard Böhmer to cover his desk with elastic rubber or demanded a particular lens for the studio cameras to be able to film small animals full screen.[13]

During the broadcasts the animals would roam freely through the studio, which sometimes caused considerable disturbances. On November 18, 1969 viewers could watch how an unruly marten caused chaos on the program.[14] Already at the beginning of the show, when Grzimek presented his studio guest, the cute little animal didn't want to sit still and wriggled in his hands. Later it wandered around Grzimek's table, occasionally slipping on his manuscript and biting on his hand. Shortly after Grzimek described the marten as tame, the animal ripped up the cover of a book, and a few minutes later they grappled with each other about a page of Grzimek's manuscript that the marten had stolen from the table.

In another episode broadcast on October 23, 1963, a cheetah interrupted Grzimek while he was live commenting a short documentary film.[15] Television viewers could clearly hear the turmoil that the big cat caused in the studio.[16] Eventually Grzimek paused his comment while the film images kept running, to explain the (off-screen) noise to his audience. At some point the director of *Ein Platz für Tiere* decided to stop the film and switch to the studio camera that captured the cheetah sniffing and gnawing at the studio equipment, playing with cables and chewing on a carpet. Despite the animal's uncontrollable behaviour Grzimek lost his composure only for a short moment, when the cat jumped up at him.

Many viewers who watched *Ein Platz für Tiere* were waiting (and hoping) for such moments when the animals obstinately took over the studio and airtime, and threw the distinguished Professor off balance. By pointing to the unpredictability of animals - introducing a particular studio guest as "not really tame" or mentioning that he is not sure what the animal will do to him or the camera crew - Grzimek fostered the viewers' expectations for uncontrolled events.

12 For more on this program see Judith Keilbach, 'Ein Platz für Tiere: Fernsehen zwischen Häuslichkeit und weiter Welt,' in Sabine Nessel and Heide Schlüpmann, eds, *Zoo und Kino als Schauanordnungen der Moderne,* Stroemfeld, 2012, pp. 161–178.

13 Written documents archive, Hessischer Rundfunk, Frankfurt, program files, notes of Bernhard Grzimek on May 6, June 1 and July 9, 1959.

14 'Ein Platz für Tiere', November 18, 1969.

15 'Ein Platz für Tiere', October 23, 1963.

16 For more about the relevance of sound in creating liveness see Jérôme Bourdon, 'Live Television is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise,' *Media, Culture & Society* 22, 5, 2000, 531–556, 541–544.

Figure 2. *Ein Platz für Tiere,* October 23, 1963.

2 *Ein Platz für Tiere*: Recorded Live

The moments described accentuated the liveness of *Ein Platz für Tiere*. The loss of control over the animals (or even the promise thereof) assured the viewers that the events were brought to them instantaneously as they unfolded in the studio. These uncontrolled moments added to Grzimek's direct address and informal way of welcoming the audience: he opened each episode with the words "Good evening, my dear friends", both of which indicated liveness.[17] Moreover, Grzimek prided himself of being the only person who dared to speak on television without a script.[18] In fact, he tried not to *read* his script but to memorize it. When he got stuck he stared in the air trying to remember his lines or peeked at the pages that laid on the table in front of him. This resulted in incorrect sentences and moments of awkwardness.[19] Grzimek's mistakes and his awkwardness contributed significantly to the programme's liveness since they suggested that the events in the studio were transmitted directly, without retakes or any other intervention.

However, *Ein Platz für Tiere* was not broadcast live. Since the introduction of the Ampex videotape machine,[20] all episodes were recorded on tape weeks before the programme was scheduled to air. However, the programme seemed still to be broadcast live because it was recorded in real time, i.e. continuously and without break, and therefore didn't differ visually from live-to-air transmissions. It is not clear if the pre-recording was meant to manage uncontrollable situations before they were broadcast, or to solve scheduling problems. Grzimek's travel activities made it difficult to schedule the production of the program. Videotapes provided the flexibility to record an episode at his convenience and broadcast it whenever it fit the television schedule. Such pre-recordings allow us today to analyse historical television programming since naturally, due to their ephemerality, live broadcasts can't be found at the archives.[21]

Looking at archival records reveals that viewers were not aware of (or didn't care about) the pre-recording. Letters sent to the *hr* spoke of the programme as 'refreshing' in times of 'the perfect and canned'. Viewers acclaimed the spontaneity of the live programme and praised that *Ein Platz für Tiere* occasionally took even its producers by surprise.[22]

17 For more one textual indices of liveness see Jérôme Bourdon, 'Live Television is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise,' *Media, Culture & Society* 22, 5, 2000, 531–556.

18 Written documents archive, Hessischer Rundfunk, Frankfurt, program files, note from Bernhard Grzimek on June 10, 1959.

19 Scannell points to the 'awkward effect' of live broadcasts when discussing a *Person to Person* episode from 1953 with the Kennedys. See Paddy Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of Live*, Polity, 2014, p. 130–135.

20 For more on the introduction of Ampax video recorders in West Germany see Siegfried Zielinski, Zur Geschichte des Videorecorders, Spies 1986, 131–135. Records at the hr archive suggest that videotaping of *Ein Platz für Tiere* started in 1959.

21 Before the introduction of videotape live broadcasts were sometimes recorded on film by mouniting a film camera before the television screen. Television archives like the Dutch *Beeld en Geluid* hold a number of these 'kinescopes', or 'telerecordings' as the Dutch call them. See wiki.beeldengeluid.nl/index.php/Telerecording.

22 Written documents archive, Hessischer Rundfunk, Frankfurt, program files, letter by viewers, H.G. 24.5.1960.

According to Jérôme Bourdon the belief in liveness is linked to the text, the characteristics and the situation of the viewer, and the moment of viewing.[23] In the case of *Ein Platz für Tiere* viewers might have assumed that television was generally broadcast live, as the *hr* didn't make explicit that the programme was recorded on tape. Most of all, however, the belief in the programme's liveness resulted from its textual features: Grzimek's intimacy, his mistakes and awkwardness, the visualizable noise in the studio, the unruly animals and the (warning of a possible) loss of control.

Paddy Scannell suggests that liveness is an effect stemming from the work of managing sound and images.[24] In *Ein Platz für Tiere* this work was done collaboratively and included the production team who kept the noise in the studio audible, filmed the unruly animals and switched at the right moment to the studio camera; Grzimek who tried to give the impression of speaking without script; and the unsuspecting animals. Their collective effort led to a programme whose 'look' differed significantly from filmed television productions and created its liveness.

3 Live is Still Alive

In today's media landscape the difference between 'live' and filmed programming is of great importance. Exploring the meaning of liveness in the 1990s and early 2000s Elana Levine argues that, similar to Golden Age anthologies, live programming was used to distinguish certain shows from the rest of television.[25] By broadcasting live episodes of scripted series like *Will & Grace, ER* and *The West Wing* the television industry targeted the attention of critics and 'quality audiences', who legitimized the cultural value of the programming. Given their carefully crafted extraordinariness, these live episodes can be understood in terms of what John Caldwell calls "Emmy baits".[26] While live episodes add to the hierarchies between television texts and genres, liveness is also used to distinguish between television and other media. Inge Ejbye Sørensen shows how the BBC has used liveness as a strategy to compete with video on-demand platforms such as Netflix, YouTube and Amazon, in order to reclaim some of their forgone power.[27]

We currently witness how the contemporary media landscape is flooded with claims to live. Not long ago media that require recording started making their own claims to live. The animation series *The Simpsons* (1989–) embarked on a stint with live animation. During the last 3 minutes of the 595th episode (May 15, 2016) broadcast on the East and the West Coast, the animated character Homer answered live on air questions by various phone callers. And in an even more startling turn of events Hollywood actor Woody Harrelson made his directorial debut with the live film experiment *Lost in London* (January 19/20, 2017) in which a single camera followed the events of a night out in London. The film was shot in one take and screened live in the US in selected movie theaters. This was preceded by equally remarkable initiatives relating to Live Cinema, such as the live broadcasting of opera and ballet from the Royal Opera House to cinemas across the globe.

Liveness can no longer be attributed exclusively to broadcast media. Nowadays even digital media platforms make their claim to live through services such as Facebook Live, YouTube Live, Snapchat Live Stories and Periscope. It can be argued that streaming platforms and applications like Periscope and YouTube Live replace television since they provide everyone with the technology to 'broadcast' live events. At the same time Facebook

23 According to Bourdon the belief in liveness is linked to the text, the characteristics and the situation of the viewer, and the moment of viewing. See Jérôme Bourdon, 'Live Television is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise,' *Media, Culture & Society* 22, 5, 2000, 535.

24 See Paddy Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of Live*, Polity, 2014, p. 99.

25 Elana Levine, 'Distinguishing Television: The Changing Meanings of Television Liveness,' *Media, Culture & Society* 30, 3, 2008, 391–407, 395.

26 John Caldwell uses the phrase 'Emmy bait' to describe stylistic and narrative distinctions in programs of the late 1970s/early 1980s. See John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television,* Rutgers Univ. Press, pp. 61–67.

27 Inge Ejbye Sørensen, 'The Revival of Live TV: Liveness in a Multiplatform Context,' *Media, Culture & Society* 38, 3, 2016, 381–399.

and Twitter have managed to position themselves as companions to broadcast television by facilitating online water-cooler conversations during the broadcasting of a programme.

How can we explain this explosion of claims to live? In his work on media power Nick Couldry contends that the live is caught up in naturalizing media power – that is, the heavy concentration of symbolic power in our principle media institutions.[28] With the fragmentation of audiences across platforms and spaces – a development that challenged the position of those 'central' institutions – liveness helps situate (new) media platforms as necessary, suggesting that they provide access to experiences we cannot miss out on. Both 'old' and 'new' players in the media landscape are attempting to establish (or re-establish) themselves through live.

Sometimes 'old' and 'new' media even collaborate, as is the case in social TV, where broadcast television employs the real-time of social media in pursuit of higher ratings. This particular marriage, however, has not fully stabilized, and television broadcasters continue struggling with the challenges it poses, such as the liveness of live shows in countries with multiple time zones using tape delay. In this light it is worth noting that in the US, where East cost live programming is recorded to be re-broadcast later for viewers in other time zones, NBC decided in 2017, after more than forty years, to broadcast the late-night comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (1975) live coast-to-coast.

In the light of 'live' travelling from a feature of broadcast media to networked media, it is fruitful to unpack a spoof of television liveness that Netflix released in 2017.[29] Here the video-on-demand platform decisively related traditional television to live and, in a somewhat ironic way, positioned itself in competition to it. In its humorous imitation of television, this qualifies as a spoof, yet underneath its jokes stems the pressure to incorporate - in some way or another - liveness in its service.

4 Netflix: Spoofing Live

Video 1. Promotion video introducing *Netflix Live* in March 2017. Go to the **online version** of this article to watch the video.

28 Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals*, Routledge, 2003.

29 Networked media are a form of mass communication where individuals/groups can shape and circulate media content.

On 31 March 2017 Netflix released an episode of the series *Netflix Live*. The series centered on Will Arnett commenting 'live' on mundane objects and activities, including toasters, microwaves, pencil sharpening and parallel parking. The playful mocking of the live turned out to be Netflix's annual April Fools joke and, judging by the online buzz it generated, its most successful yet. The timing of the spoof is hardly a coincidence, but rather a direct response to the popularity of 'live' (social) media features such as Facebook Live. The teaser for the series sarcastically welcomed its viewers to "the future". It pointed to an exciting future wherein Netflix goes live, at a moment that the live is already widespread in networked media (and perhaps not worth all the fuzz). The humor of the series was accomplished through, repetition, the use of hyperbole and paratexts, which provides insights into the current understanding of 'live'.

Upon 'cancelling' *Netflix Live*, Netflix joked that it had miscalculated how many people would binge-watch microwaves, explicitly identifying "Dave from analytics" as the culprit for this mishap. This way, Netflix shrewdly capitalized on its Big Data reputation, gained by using analytics to create shows like *House of Cards* (2013) and by using sophisticated algorithms to help find 'relevant' content for viewers.[30] In doing so, Netflix sought to put user preferences at the center of the viewing experience, and allowed them to control when and what they watched, free from the restrictive schedules of linear television, therefore, supposedly, making it far more exciting than live broadcasting. More succinctly, the cancellation notice activated the binary oppositions between the 'old' versus the 'new', markedly positioning Netflix as the 'future' of the medium once known as television.

Apart from its timing, the spoof is telling in terms of how Netflix relates to liveness. Most notably the ephemerality of the live - a quality on-demand services are less susceptible to even though the Netflix catalogue is always in flux - was mimicked by making the episode available for only 24 hours. On the whole, *Netflix Live* portrays liveness as an utterly dull and undesirable characteristic of the media. The idea of liveness centered on Arnett sitting in a room talking to the audience about mundane objects and practices. The camera cuts back and forth between remote locations introduced through Arnett's voice-over and on-screen appearances of the presenter. At times the presenter is to be heard communicating with the production staff, for instance when he asks for a confirmation whether what could be seen in the image was indeed a burrito, an act that alluded to the chaos associated with the live coverage of unexpected events. In another instance, the presenter receives word about a great shot of a puddle, which points to the live as unfolding and in the now.

Video 2. Will Arnett talking about mundane objects and practices in part 1 of *Netflix Live.* Go to the **online version** of this article to watch the video.

30 Using Big Data collected from its subscribers, Netflix knew that director David Fincher, actor Kevin Spacey and the British version of *House of Cards* (1990) were popular. Combining these insights they were convinced that buying the rights to the American version of the series would be a safe bet. Moreover, user browsing behavior crunched by algorithms helps Netflix in deciding what content to recommend to its subscribers.

By emphasizing that contrary to the excitement of reporting on events as they unfold, little is really happening, Netflix' persiflage portrays live television as uneventful and debunks liveness as an empty promise. To make this point abundantly clear, Netflix did so by using instant replay: slow motion was effectively employed to lengthen the passing of time and to dramatize nothingness. The message, here, was that it doesn't get much more boring than this.

Despite Netflix's statement that liveness is overrated, the show also underscores the value of the live for the media industry. This transpires especially in how the liveness of the series is reiterated to a peculiar degree. As a whole, the series is promoted as 'live' – but so is the stream, the commentary and the presence at the toaster. On the whole the characteristics the programme alludes to relate to traditional ideas of liveness associated with broadcast television.

5 Conclusion: Between Freedom, Chaos and Control

In the spoof Netflix ignored how the capacity for disruption, rather than uneventfulness, gives live broadcasts their particular allure. In *Ein Platz für Tiere* it was the uncontrollable animal that promised unexpected situations. In scripted series that are broadcast live-to-air it is the possibility of things going wrong (actors forgetting their lines, technical difficulties etc.) that captivates television viewers. By mocking the boredom of live television and exaggerating nothingness Netflix confused the quality of immediacy with liveness.[31] In an unintended twist, it actually showed that the production of liveness requires work and that it thrives on a tension that emerges between control and chaos.

There is something important *at stake* in the study of liveness which *Netflix Live* inadvertently draws attention to. Here the tensions between control and freedom are of utmost significance. It's a slippage that burdens the governance of social platforms like Facebook and YouTube that facilitate live streams by users and are confronted with their distribution of publicly broadcast crimes and suicides.

This relationship was also strained in *The Voice* (2011). Celebrated as the hallmark of audience participation, successive sessions of the show gave increasingly superficial opportunities for viewers to influence the on-screen action.[32] The tension links liveness directly to harvesting interactivity and participation around and with symbolic content.

Our examples of emerging forms of liveness show the need to move beyond one-dimensional conceptions of the live, or beyond dismissing it as either industry rhetoric or audience affect. We need to take the disparate and manifold ways into consideration in which media (attempt to) balance the tension between freedom, chaos and control.

Biography

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31 Scannell elaborates on this difference in relation to surveillance cameras. See Paddy Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of Live*, Polity, 2014, p. 98.

32 See Karin van Es, 'The Promise and Perils of Social TV: The Participation Dilemma in NBC's The Voice,' *Television and New Media* 17, 2, 2016, 108–123.

of television, new media and datafication. She is the author of *The Future of Life* (Polity 2017) and co-editor of *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

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