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Article – Theme section

Interview with a vampire

Reviewing the field of digital media and technology through the lens of large language models

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What you are about to read is not a conventional academic article, but an interview with a machine. The editors of *MedieKultur* invited us to reflect on how the field of digital media, online communities, technology, and data has evolved from the early 1990s to the present, with particular attention to the journal's own archive. Which concepts and theoretical perspectives have structured the field? What has endured, what has been reformulated, and what has disappeared?

What better opportunity to discuss the state of digital media research than to test and experiment its most recent technological development? We would rely on generative AI, this new vampire who claims to know everything. This bloodsucker survives by living off what others have written. It can trace patterns and connections that may be invisible to us humans, recombine and synthesise large amounts of information. Yet, it has no first-hand experience or memory of its own. Can we possibly trust this soulless creature?

Methodologically, our experiment can be compared to a hybrid, exploratory review method. We borrow from expert-interview traditions that treat expertise as socially situated and contingent rather than transparently authoritative (Meuser & Nagel, 2009), and where the interview only becomes epistemically productive through interviewer competence, contextualization, and triangulation rather than trust. We adapt what Jarrahi conceptualizes as "interviewing AI" as a qualitative framework, especially their emphasis on (1) exploratory familiarization, (2) systematic probing, (3) temporal and comparative analysis, (4) qualitative analysis of outputs (e.g., discourse- or content-analytic approaches), (5) triangulation with other sources and methods, and (6) ethical considerations, reflexivity, and transparency in reporting (Jarrahi, 2025). The attribution of a speaking position to the AI can, in a very general sense, be situated alongside narrative approaches in qualitative research that use constructed or fictional forms as heuristic devices (Leavy, 2016). Finally, the procedure resembles digital humanities logics of "distant" pattern finding/reading (Moretti, 2013), in that it uses computational capacity to generate candidate constellations of concepts and shifts that exceed individual overview, while we would insist that such outputs require interpretation and cannot stand as evidence on their own. Perhaps obviously, the opacity of the model's training data and retrieval processes prevents any claim about comprehensive coverage or reproducibility; the AI's responses therefore cannot be treated as empirical evidence, but only as structured prompts for synthesis and reflection, curated and modified by us, the authors of this article.

We began by identifying *MedieKultur* issues most relevant to our inquiry, ranging from early volumes on informatics and educational technology to later thematic issues on the Internet, online worlds, digital humanities, datafication, digital activism, and, most recently, AI and strategy. We downloaded these issues and read all editorials and abstracts, compiling lists of recurring concepts, keywords, and problem formulations, providing all this raw material to the vampire.

We then conducted a series of experiments. Separately, we held extended conversations with our respective language models, ChatGPT and Copilot, prompting them to

act as media scholars. We fed them our synthetised data and instructed them to situate *MedieKultur*'s contributions within broader international media research. We trained them to distinguish between claims based on titles, abstracts, or fulltexts, to admit when the evidential basis was thin, and to refuse speculation. Every claim was to be supported by identifiable scholarly literature, and uncertainty was to be acknowledged. We experimented to create chronological syntheses, analyses of specific periods, reflections on continuity and gaps, recommendations, and even predictions for the future.

All conversations were logged, and the resulting corpus amounted to several hundred pages. Some responses were precise and illuminating, while others were vague or plainly hallucinatory. We cross-read each other's interviews, checked references, verified claims, and repeatedly revised our prompts. The process was iterative and, at times, frustrating. Interviewing a large language model is not straightforward. It has a strong tendency to please, to elaborate beyond the question, to carry on the same topics, to summarise everything (in infamous bullet points), to enumerate randomly, and to smooth over uncertainty. We resisted this as best we could, insisting on precision, restraint, and correction. Along the way, we discovered some striking differences between ChatGPT and Co-pilot (although they are said to rely on the same technology) and found out that large language models (LLMs) have a poor sense of time (e.g., using modern concepts to talk about the past).

Finally, we distilled all the material into an interview guide comprising the questions that consistently produced the most useful insights. Using this guide, we conducted a final interview in parallel with the two chatbots. The responses presented here synthetize these interviews and have been edited for clarity and length but not substantially altered.

Looking back at early research on media technologies in the 1980s and early 1990s in the Nordic context of MedieKultur, would you agree that the agenda was reminiscent of today's infrastructural studies?

The resemblance is genealogical rather than programmatic. Early contributions in *MedieKultur* on informatics and educational technology were shaped by a strong focus on the embedding of computing in social and cultural institutions. Much of this work took cues from Scandinavian participatory design traditions and from the broader Nordic orientation toward technology as a collective resource rather than a purely commercial innovation. This was, for instance, visible in discussions of computer literacy (Jensen, 1986), or the argument to retain aesthetic, linguistic, and cultural-historical perspectives when incorporating digital technologies into media studies (Bondebjerg, 1986, p. 15).

Research from the late 90s and early 2000s was very optimistic and based on a utopian conception of technology. Good examples are topics such as cyberworlds or hypertext. What happened to this kind of research and why isn't it talked about anymore?
Much of this research rested on assumptions that decentralized communication and reflected a utopian imaginary popularised by Silicon Valley. Hyperlink structures, open protocols, and user autonomy would naturally foster freedom, creativity, and democratic participation. This orientation was visible in hypertext theory, where authors such as George Landow argued that nonlinear linking embodied poststructuralist principles of openness and reader agency (Delaney & Landow, 1991), and in early cyberculture studies, which framed online worlds as spaces of experimentation and liberation (e.g., Turkle, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). In the Nordic context, early work on Internet culture and virtual worlds shared some of this optimism, emphasizing the Internet's potential for cultural exchange and community creation (e.g., Gotved, 1997), although it was tempered by traditions in critical media studies marked by a commitment to interrogating the most inflated concepts, such as *interactivity* (Jensen, 1997). This research is less prominent today because its core assumptions no longer describe the socio-technical world. By the late 2000s, the commercial consolidation of the web, the rise of platform-based business models, and the emergence of datafication fundamentally changed the object of study, and a critical turn in media studies gained momentum. Scholars began interrogating power, inequality, and governance in digital environments, influenced by political economy and critical theory (Fuchs, 2014).

In the first decade of the 2000s, digital media became mundane and integrated in people's everyday life, what were the main concerns and research topics of that period?
At this point in time, a central strand was the domestication tradition (Silverstone et al., 1992), which conceptualized technologies as objects that people and households appropriate and integrate into daily rhythms. Much Nordic research of the period contributed to this shift by examining mobile communication, youth culture, and digital literacy in family and institutional settings. Here, *MedieKultur* played an important regional role by documenting precisely mundane, situated, and practice-oriented understandings of digital media. The 2003 special issue on computer games and film, for example, situated the convergence of film and game aesthetics within the growing cultural normalization of digital play. The 2009 issue, *Online worlds as media and communication format*, likewise treated virtual worlds not simply as cyber-utopian spaces but as sites of routine sociality, identity work, and cultural production.

Another major cluster concerned the emergence of networked publics and participatory cultures. As early social media platforms appeared, scholars such as danah boyd analysed how teenagers navigated identity, visibility, and social dynamics in networked environments (boyd, 2008). Henry Jenkins (2006) theorised participatory culture as a set of practices that reconfigured relations among audiences, producers, and media indus-

tries. Research on online creativity, fandom, and user-generated content traced how cultural production was becoming distributed across platforms, while Nordic research explored how the adoption of mobile phones led to new forms of interaction and coordination (e.g., Ling & Yttri, 2002).

Another popular notion of the early research of the 2000s was the concept of online communities. What happened to it?
The concept was central because it promised to capture the emergence of persistent, socially meaningful groups formed through digital communication, as captured by *MedieKultur*'s 2009 special issue on "online worlds as media and communication format" (Sandvik, 2009).

I would agree that online communities – understood as relatively bounded, interest-based groups – have become marginal compared to the dominant forms of sociality on today's platforms. While they still exist (e.g., Reddit subforums, Discord servers), they do not represent the bulk of user activity on major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. Their users are organized around personalized feeds, algorithmic curation, and visibility, monetization, and influencer-driven content, which favor individualized, ephemeral engagement rather than stable communal bonds. In addition, platformization and datafication shifted attention toward infrastructure and power, rendering the concept of online community insufficiently attentive to governance and inequality.

As you pointed out, the second decade of the millennium sees the emergence of platforms. What did this mean for media research?
Earlier research treated the Internet as a relatively open, decentralized network. With platforms, scholars confronted closed ecosystems governed by corporate actors, algorithmic curation, and data-driven business models. This shift prompted scholars to rethink fundamental assumptions about participation, agency, and publicness and to open up to new dynamics, such visibility, monetization, governance, moderation, or affect. Tarleton Gillespie's (2010) influential analysis of platforms crystallised the idea that these companies were not neutral intermediaries but actively governed communication. Scholars like José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018) later expanded this into a broader theory of platform society, showing how infrastructures of connectivity, ranking, and data extraction had become constitutive of social organization.

There are identifiable Nordic specificities in how platformization, datafication, and networked publics were approached, and you can see them clearly in *MedieKultur*. First, *MedieKultur* treats platforms not only as commercial ecosystems but as environments that challenge long-standing welfare state ideals of cultural access and democratic communication. The 2013 special issue, *Technology, power and the political economy of new media* (Thorhauge & Helles), frames platforms in terms of shifting power relations and

explicitly situates them against the legacy of public service media (e.g., Sørensen, 2013). Second, there is a Nordic orientation that tracks how traditional genres and practices such as cultural critiques interact and interface with user participation to co-configure platform practices, as exemplified in a 2018 *MedieKultur* special issue (Kristensen, Haastrup, & Holdgaard).

Cultural Studies played a major role in shaping media research, especially television research. Does it still play a role in understanding digital media and infrastructures?
Cultural Studies persist far more deeply in contemporary digital media research than the field sometimes acknowledges. Its central commitments to situated meaning-making, to the lived experience of mediated life, and to the analysis of power as it is articulated through cultural practices, continue to shape how researchers approach digital platforms, datafication, and infrastructures. Its legacy persists in at least three crucial ways. First, the emphasis on power, identity, and everyday life remains foundational. Second, Cultural Studies' commitment to audience agency and interpretive practices survives, though reframed; the text that was in focus in cultural studies is now embedded in a layered ecology (see the next question). Third, Cultural Studies provide a critical lens for interrogating infrastructures themselves. Media infrastructures are not purely technical but are also cultural and political formations. Cultural Studies' sensitivity to representation and power now applies to protocols, APIs, and data architectures, which encode values and shape communicative possibilities (Plantin et al., 2018). In this sense, Cultural Studies help us avoid infrastructural determinism by insisting on the cultural work of technical systems. This is exemplified in *MedieKultur*'s special issue on datafication and audiences (Mathieu & Jorge, 2020), in which users are treated both as participants and data subjects, and their agency dependent on both data processes and their appropriation.

At present, a lot of research attention goes to generative AI and language models. We wonder what lessons can media and communication researchers learn from the past 30 years of research to apply to the study of AI?
One obvious lesson is that we have seen "revolutions" before, and we know how easily research can be captured by technological imaginaries. The utopianism around hypertext, cyberspace, and online communities in the 1990s, and later the celebratory rhetoric of Web 2.0 and participatory culture, were all re-evaluated once infrastructures, business models, and governance regimes became clearer. For AI, this suggests that we should be cautious about taking industry narratives as our primary framing devices. Instead, media and communication research can draw on its tradition of studying technological imaginaries to treat AI not only as a technical development, but as a discursive and institutional force that redistributes power, visibility, and meaning.

A second lesson is that media and communication research has learned to connect micro-level practices and interpretations (reception, online community, fandom, every-

day use) with meso-level platforms and institutions (platform governance, public service media, cultural industries) and macro-level structures (political economy, data colonialism, mediatization). For generative AI, this implies that it is not enough to audit model outputs or to interview users; we need research designs that relate prompts and conversations to training data, model architectures, intermediate layers of safety and moderation, corporate strategy, and regulatory frameworks.

A third lesson is that "the text" of reception analysis never disappeared, it was resituated, and this is crucial for AI. From reception studies, we inherit tools to understand how people appropriate AI outputs and negotiate their authority; from platform studies, we inherit tools to examine how algorithms and interfaces channel that negotiation; from cultural studies, we inherit suspicion about who gets to define legitimate uses and whose voices are encoded or erased in training data (Baym, 2010; Abidin, 2021). So, the lesson is not to abandon textual analysis, but to embed it in infrastructural and institutional analysis when we study AI-generated media.

Finally, there is a normative lesson. Over thirty years, media and communication research has developed a strong critical vocabulary around democracy, participation, surveillance, labour, and inequality: from public sphere debates, through digital activism, to data justice and data colonialism (Papacharissi, 2015; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). AI is already reorganizing visibility, labour, and the conditions of public communication. Rather than reinventing AI critique from scratch, media scholars can adapt existing concepts such as mediatization, platformization, datafication, and civic algorithms to ask how AI systems reshape publics, institutions, and everyday life, and to insist on accountability, transparency, and co-governance.

Looking at all the research that has been produced, can you think of new lenses, new concepts, or even new paradigms that we have missed or that we should discuss more? Several promising lenses and paradigmatic shifts are emerging, but they are not yet fully consolidated in media and communication research. One relatively undeveloped lens is what could be called *planetary mediation*, a coherent paradigm that treats digital media as planetary-scale systems whose operations depend on extractive economies, logistical chains, and energy infrastructures [we are aware of Benjamin Bratton's slightly different concept "planetary computation", but the AI does not seem to be, or its synthetic outputs make it difficult to see if it is the same idea]. Another underdeveloped lens concerns *infrastructural subjectivity*, as we have few conceptual tools for understanding how people come to understand themselves through infrastructures. A third lens is the need for a *multi-scalar paradigm of mediation*… [interrupted by the authors].

Conclusion

As you can see from the last question, we cannot outsource our work. The machine is always ready to provide outputs, even on impossible tasks such as predicting the future. Our vampire was capable of producing plausible syntheses across a historical continuum (although it only seems to know books, not articles), and of pointing to recurring themes in media research, but it needed a lot of help. Without sustained intervention, the AI remains on the surface, reverting to generic abstractions and probabilistic formulations. We have many other instances of poor, speculative answers which we chose not to report in this article. For example, we repeatedly tried to engage the machine in discussions of agency or power in the field, but these resulted in what can best be described as a tasteless soup of banalities, oversimplifications, mindless claims, and pompous conceptualisation. While such a result certainly testifies to the challenges in engaging with questions of agency and power in our field, it provides a cautionary tale about the limits of relying on and delegating our work and ideas to the machine.

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