

After supersynchronisation: How media synchronise the social

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Abstract

The multiple nature of time has by now been well established across a wide range of scholarly traditions in the humanities and social sciences. The article takes that insight as a starting point, in order to discuss the tools, work, sites and contestations involved in common temporal frameworks and structures that cross and join together time's multiplicities. We thus articulate and discuss key components of synchronisation, a concept with significant potential for understanding common temporalities and social orders. Our emphasis is particularly on media, their technological and representational affordances for synchronisation. The article's approach to social and mediated times presents an alternative to Hartmut Rosa and François Hartog's influential theories about the temporal configuration of the present historical moment. Their understanding of the present tends more towards unity and uniformity, particularly by means of chronology. We follow Luhmann in arguing that 'there is no supersynchronization' producing such privileged, unitary temporal orders. We propose pursuing an understanding of both present and past through investigations

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of synchronisation itself, which always exists in plural, always involves different synchronisations in competition with each other, is subject to social and historical contingencies. The article combines theoretical and conceptual arguments with historical and contemporary cases. We investigate the synchronisation of national collectives by means of broadcast media, of individuals in everyday life by means of social media, and the recalibration of various contemporary media to a global scale in order to tackle the issue of climate change. These cases move from past and relatively comprehensive forms of synchronisation, via more localised forms today, to highly uncertain and heterogeneous ones in the future.

Keywords

Synchronisation, supersynchronisation, multiple temporalities, media, work, social order

Introduction: Starting from multiple temporalities

That time should be considered in the plural, rather than the singular, has become a widely accepted fact in the humanities and social sciences (Adam, 1990; Jordheim, 2014). The shift from a singular time was inspired by advances in the natural sciences from relativity theory to quantum mechanics (Galison, 2003). Primarily, however, it has resulted from processes within the disciplines themselves, in sociology (Gurvitch, 1958; Zerubavel, 1985), history (Braudel, 1973; Koselleck, 2018; Pomian, 1984) and philosophy (Bergson, 1946; Deleuze, 1986; Derrida, 1973). Those processes have given rise to critical terms like ‘time layers’ (or ‘sediments of time’, Koselleck, 2018: 3–9), ‘social rhythms’ (Zerubavel, 1985) ‘heterochronicity’ (Moxey, 2013: 37–49), ‘chrononormativity’ (Freeman, 2010) and many others. All draw on basically the same conclusion, which could be taken as an inversion of Newton’s claim from the *Scholium* (Newton, 1960: 6): that time in social, cultural and historical settings is always multiple, relative and highly dependent on external factors. However persuasive, this basic insight leaves open the question of how and why different temporalities and orders arise. This, in short, is the question of synchronisation, the forms it takes and the stakes involved in it for society.

Importantly, contributions within socio-historical theory that aim to diagnose and criticise the contemporary world, particularly those who forefront the workings of media, have tended to be more interested in the unifying of time than in its plurality. A rich tradition of media criticism has honed in on the tendency of new media to impose uniform temporal regimes. Electronic media have been accused in various ways of enslaving audiences to a tyranny of the moment (e.g. Baudrillard, 1994; Eriksen, 2001; Nowotny, 1994; Nora, 1972). A similar critique of temporal uniformisation by the media forms the backdrop for the work of

historian François Hartog. Since 1989, according to him, Western civilisation has seen the collapse of the ‘modern regime of historicity’, and its specific organisation of the relationship between past, present, and future. It has been replaced by a ‘monstrous present’, which is absorbing the past and the future into it, leaving us unable to relate meaningfully to what has been and what will come (Hartog, 2015: 217). Thus, Hartog argues for ‘presentism’ as the single all-dominant temporal framework of today, according to which all other temporal experiences and practices are synchronised. A similar line of argument, combined with a similar pessimism on behalf of our present historical moment, comes to the fore in the sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s theory of acceleration. According to him, modernity has outrun itself, so that we have reached a point of standstill, when Western societies experience a ‘de-temporalisation’ of both life and history. In this version of the present, only situational decisions are possible. The temporal stability of identity gives way to social fragmentation and disintegration (Rosa, 2013: 270).

Although they have a lot to offer in terms of historical and sociological insight, the approaches of Hartog and Rosa suffer from the same flaw. They replace theories of one, singular, homogeneous time, the Newtonian, with a theory derived from socio-historical scholarship that is similarly singular. At the same time, they effectively ignore the plurality of competing processes and practices of synchronisation at work in any society, at any time. In his essay on synchronisation from the fifth volume of *Soziologische Aufklärung*, Niklas Luhmann insists that ‘[s]ynchronisation ties the medium of time to forms [...] and tries to find suitable forms’ (Luhmann, 1990: 109; authors’ translation). Crucially, Luhmann adds: ‘But there is no supersynchronisation, which could bring order to the act of synchronisation [*das Synchronisieren*] itself. This was once the role of the concept of destiny’ (Luhmann, 1990: 110). In their work, both Hartog and Rosa ignore Luhmann’s warning, and introduce presentism and acceleration as ‘supersynchronisers’. In many ways, such theories of supersynchronisation can be considered contemporary expressions of an established tendency: whereas the understanding of space has lent itself to recognising the fact that places are endlessly many, the understanding of time in contemporary societies has tended more toward unity and uniformity, particularly by means of chronology.

Our interest, on the other hand, is in Luhmann’s ‘act of synchronisation’ itself, more specifically, in their plural forms. Via a combination of theoretical discussion and exemplary cases, we take the plurality of time as a starting point for exploring how time is also always subject to ordering in the name of societal cohesion, and how this ordering will always be contested, hence heterogeneous and changeable. In short, we explore how one might conceive of synchronisation after one accepts Luhmann’s argument that there is no supersynchronisation.

Synchronisation as theory and methodology

The aim of this article is to offer an elaborated concept of synchronisation that can be used to analyse the specific social and historical practices by which common times are produced. It seeks to help us move beyond the oversimplified idea that time is either normatively uniform or endlessly plural. In the original Greek, the term ‘synchronisation’ is composed of the prefix *syn-* and the word *chronos*, literally ‘together time’. An order of synchronisation is a shared temporal framework, or a temporal standard, with which people align and adapt their own individual times (Jordheim, 2014). Processes of synchronisation that establish such orders should not be taken as abstract, idealistic or purely theoretical; they are always historically and socially located, involving constellations of people, communication, behaviour and technologies.

At first glance, synchronisation seems to presuppose a mechanical, even mechanistic understanding of time: whether what is synchronised are time-keepers, like clocks or movements, like those of a marching band or dancers (McNeill, 1995), the goal is a kind of mechanical precision, for which the clockwork or the production line might be the most effective images (Thompson, 1967). Mechanistic synchronisation can happen both transitively and intransitively: either someone or some things synchronise with each other, or they are synchronised by some kind of external force. This can either happen at a singular moment, as with the deadline for a tax report, or regularly, at a specific rhythm or rate, as in the case of a marching band.

Even though the concept of time mobilised by practices of synchronisation might be mechanical, the activities involved are social and historical. Rather than emphasising and reiterating the much-repeated distinction between mechanical time, or clock-time, which also doubles as ‘absolute’ or ‘universal’ time, on the one hand, and experienced, or phenomenological time, on the other, the focus on synchronisation and its practices questions and suspends this dichotomy. Synchronising human behaviours means synchronising the mechanics of physical movement as much as the phenomenology of experiences and emotions.

Paul Ricoeur and others have suggested bridging this dichotomy by introducing social and historical time as a ‘third time’, in which the subject/object dualism is suspended (Ricoeur, 1988, vol. 2: 192). Famously, he bets on narrative as the genre that is best able to bring about this kind of ‘third time’, arguing that ‘time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of narrative» (Ricoeur, 1988, Vol. 1: 3). A related way of thinking about synchronisation would be to place it in the category of ‘third time’, which avoids thinking about time in terms of an opposition between the technological/objective and the experiential/subjective. In the work of synchronisation, all three times, in Ricoeur’s sense, are always already in play, deployed for the purposes of bringing

about workable temporal arrangements able to organise social and political communication behaviour.

The perhaps most comprehensively studied form of synchronisation has been media's ability to deliver a simultaneous and shared moment in time to people who are not physically co-present (Anderson, 1991; Kern, 2003; Thompson, 1995). This synchronic approach to synchronisation, bridging collectives so to speak across the chronological flow of time, is certainly key. Importantly, however, media also synchronise diachronically, in the rhythms, intervals and sequences they impose on communication, and in the forms of orientation they enable to the past and future. This has been pointed out by Christian Kassung and Thomas Macho in their multi-authored study of synchronisation as *Kulturtechnik*, 'cultural technique': 'On the one hand, synchronisation aims at the production of simultaneity (as when using the clapboard at a film set or a starting pistol at a race) [...]; on the other hand, it wants to achieve a kind of rhythmisation [*Rythmisierung*], that is in reality an avoidance of simultaneity, for example at stock markets and on highways' (Kassung and Macho, 2013: 15; authors' translation). To invest social processes with rhythm is one of the most prevalent functions of synchronisation in societies through history and across the globe.

Work, tools, sites and contestations

In the following, we will suggest that 'acts of synchronisation', to use Luhmann's term, can be analysed according to four parameters: What is the *work* performed by these acts? What are the *tools* employed to complete this work? At what *sites* – in space and time – does the work of synchronisation take place? And what kind of *contestation* does it give rise to – or with a catchphrase, what is in each case the 'politics of synchronisation'?

Our most basic claim is that synchronisation is *work*. Shared collective time frames come about through practices with the purpose of creating order (Jordheim, 2014). The concept of work is often associated with the historically expanding harnessing of labour by capital (Thompson, 1967), which is certainly key to understanding the development of centralised industrial production, including media industries like those of Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Work is here also more broadly considered as what we do together to synchronise our common life (cf. McNeill, 1995) at different scales. Nations synchronise themselves by means of news and election cycles, global communities by the circulation of capital (Altwater and Mahnkopf, 1996: 21; Sloterdijk, 2006: 221). The synchronisation of what families and circles of friends do together requires communicative work to find out when to meet up; it also requires the physical action of actually meeting in a place and time. Sarah Sharma describes social time as configured by people's different relationship with labour, from taxi drivers and cleaning personnel to business travellers and yoga instructors. Between such

profession-based social groups, Sharma discovers a ‘temporal interdependence’, in other words, a set of ‘[r]elationships of synchronisation’ (Sharma 2014: 20).

The work of synchronisation is performed by the means of *tools* (Jordheim, 2019). Among the most important ones, historically and at present, are clocks and other timekeepers, calendars, and more recently, messaging and social media apps. In addition to synchronising us mechanistically to the same universal clock-time, these tools are evidently phenomenological and social. In reference to Ricoeur, Fornäs suggests that we operate with something he calls ‘third-time tools’ (Fornäs, 2016). In this article, we consider synchronisation as a mediated process, a social process, and as an amalgam of the two. Media tools of synchronisation, like clocks, watches, or smartphones, are always already based in social and historical processes and thus replicate human experiences, communicative and social needs. The tools of synchronisation considered here include both technological media from print, electronic to digital, and so-called logistical media that coordinate and organise action, as do for instance clocks and bell towers (Peters, 2015).

Synchronisation is vitally dependent on these technologies; media are thus key tools for synchronising human behaviour and activities, although there are others, such as concepts and genres (Jordheim and Wigen, 2018). Media synchronise on scales running from person to person mediated communication to the mesoscales of national communities, and the macroscales of global ones. In the work of Geoffrey Bowker, a main tool of synchronisation is the archive, where various bits of the world are brought together ‘into a single archival framework’. The archive, Bowker argues, permits ‘the cohabitation of astronomy, political economy, industry, and geological science’ and thus the ‘synchronisation of the social and natural worlds to the same temporality’ (Bowker, 2005: 37). He argues that as these archiving practices have turned digital, the database has emerged as the most recent and most effective tool of synchronisation, replacing 1830s archives and 1960s cybernetics.

Identifying how the work of synchronisation unfolds at different scales is not sufficient, however, to locate this work and the tools involved in social and historical space. In addition, all work of synchronisation, we suggest, is specific to a *site*, in terms of a geographical or topographical location, at a specific historical moment. The site of synchronisation can be parliaments, news buildings, urban spaces, airports, as in Sharma’s research, or nature-culture landscapes, like natural reserves or landfills. These sites are places of interpersonal, crowd and mediated communication; thus, they can be physical, virtual or a combination of these. Sites serve as stages, or backdrops to the work of synchronisation, as in the case of protests and demonstrations, or are themselves designed to bring people into a common time frame, a ‘choreography’, to use Charis Thompson’s term (Thompson, 2007), as with churches or shopping malls. In the last example, as in the case of Bowker’s archive, the site itself becomes as tool of synchronisation.

As opposed to the de-spatialised abstraction of universal time, social acts of synchronisation are site-specific as much as they are historical. In this sense, the study of the work of synchronisation serves as a counterpoint to the universalising strategies involved in much sociological theory, especially modernity and modernisation theory, as in the already discussed case of Rosa. Starting from Walter Benjamin's insight that 'one of the characteristics of modern society is the synchronisation of various temporalities into a unified, homogenous, and empty time' (Tanaka, 2004: 1), Stefan Tanaka discusses how the synchronisation of Japan 'into the same temporal system as Europe and the United States facilitated interaction of the new nation-state into the international (and imperialistic) arena'. Then, Tanaka shifts his attention from clock-time to other temporal arrangements, and adds: 'This reconfiguration of society, the "rise of modern Japan", was driven by the desire to synchronise the archipelago with liberal-capitalist codes of the burgeoning international system' (2004: 2). Related and interesting discussions of how the introduction of Greenwich Mean Time after 1884 led to a desynchronisation of time on a local level, when different synchronisation practices came in conflict with each other, can be found in works by Ogle (2015), On Barak (2013), and Wishnitzer (2015).

Finally, in order to complete our mapping of synchronisation as theoretical and methodological framework for the study of social and historical time, we add the element of *contestation*. Because they are tool-dependent and site-specific, all acts of synchronisation are contestable and contested, by competing acts of synchronisation as well as by desynchronising activities, breaking up existing time frames, in order to replace them by others, or by none at all. Here, generation and contestation are two sides of the same coin. Synchronisation is a key means of making orderly arrangements in a society; hence, it is deeply implicated in the business of imposing discipline and distributing scarce resources, which in its turn produces contestations between different temporal orders.

Such contestations contribute to making the societal orders in question contingent and heterogeneous, as for instance, Thompson (1991) has argued for the workings of ideology and power in the context of the modern media. On the other hand, the work of synchronisation is just as important for destabilising and in the end removing these orders, as in the case of revolutions, from the American and French Revolution onwards. As demonstrated by William Warner in his book *Protocols of Liberty* (2013), revolutionary agency is completely dependent on the ability to synchronise both opinions and actions, often at large distances. In his case, the tools were letters and newspaper articles, while in a contemporary case like the Arab Spring, social media like Facebook and Twitter played much of the same role, only at a much higher speed and saturation.

A more general theory of synchronisation and revolution was developed by the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in his 1935 book *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*. In a society fundamentally out of sync with itself, the Weimarer Republik, both

National Socialists and Marxists were involved in a politics of time. Whereas the first summoned a haunting, unredeemed past in order to mobilise aggression and rage in the German people, the second resynchronised the present into a revolutionary now, in which a not yet realised future was contained and could be released by revolutionary action (Bloch, 1985: 122). In other words, the politics of synchronisation should not be simplified as only a matter of the synchronising work performed by those in power and desynchronising activities only by those who want to break free from oppression. On the contrary, both are constantly involved in work of synchronisation, often with similar tools and at the same sites, working to gain control of social time in the name of the old order, or a new one to replace it.

To sum up, we propose a theory of synchronisation which should also be taken as a set of methodological steps, where mediated acts of synchronisation are analysed according to the work they perform, the tools they use, the sites they inhabit and the ways they are contested. In the following, we discuss three cases: the synchronisation of national collectives by means of broadcast media, of individuals in everyday life by means of social media, and the deployment of various contemporary media on a global scale in order to tackle the issue of climate change. These cases move from past and relatively comprehensive forms of synchronisation, via more localised forms today, to highly preliminary ones in the future.

Synchronising the nation with broadcasting

The work of forging communities on a national scale in the era of national broadcasting monopolies is perhaps the best-known historical case of mediated synchronisation. A large body of media-historical and media-theoretical work has discussed the powers of radio and television to unite a national audience across time and space, by virtue of these media's programming and mass reach (e.g. Freedman and Goblot, 2018; Frith, 1988; Mihelj, 2011; Raboy, 1995; Scannell, 1989; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). This synchronisation was a work to make industrial and capitalist societies cohere. In the West, industrialisation and urbanisation had produced crowds that seemed to lack the coherence and public orientation of the 19th century. The early 20th century discourse on the so-called mass was one of the concerns over fragmentation and atomisation. In a later commentary on mass culture, Raymond Williams would contribute the concept of 'mobile privatisation', family units traversing a pipeline between workplaces and family homes in their cars, isolated from each other and wider society (Williams, 2003). Broadcasting offered a set of tools to deal with these conditions of fragmentation and isolation.

The link between the temporal affordances of mass media and national collective imaginaries of course runs historically much deeper than broadcasting; it

was famously excavated by Benedict Anderson back to the 18th century, with its links between early nationalisms and that time's periodical print media. Newspaper would be consumed at regular intervals and more or less at the same point in time by a collective of consumers who were physically distant, yet co-present in an imagined sense, via their consumption of the same newspaper edition. Thus was created what Anderson calls a 'remarkable confidence of community in anonymity that is the hallmark of modern nations' (Anderson, 1991: 36). Broadcasting offered a number of improved technological tools to counteract the greater fragmentation and still more pressing anonymities of 20th century audiences: a centralised mode of production, a highly efficient and uniform mode of distribution, and a reception apparatus that after the first decades became available to a great majority of the population in Western countries.

Then, there were broadcasting's time tools: its affordances for instantaneous connection between senders and audiences, its regular scheduling rhythms and its powers to convey an imagined sense of community for absent and scattered audiences. Perhaps the most influential theorist of televisual liveness, Paddy Scannell has argued forcefully for broadcasting's success as being rooted in its affordances for uniting audiences in an experience of 'presence in absence' that cuts across time, space and social contexts. Although he is by no means the only theorist to extol the powers of broadcasting's synchronising tools, Scannell has perhaps been their foremost academic spokesperson: '... television does indeed, really and truly, furnish us with access to the public world that lies over and beyond the immediate life world of, in each case, my immediate experience'. (Scannell, 2014: 177) Arguing in the face of critical theorists who would see broadcast synchronisation as an imposition of dominant power, Scannell insists on an existential and affirmative approach; according to him, modern societies present particularly acute challenges of synchronisation, and broadcasting has been able to come up with the tools to do the necessary work. Scannell's affirmation of television echoes a more popular view of television as a unifier and leveller; everyone brought together, on equal terms, experientially speaking.

Much less explored in theoretical work on broadcasting, but equally important, were the tools it developed for synchronisation specific to a site. In effect, broadcasting involved the gradual development of sets, conventions and roles for an entire virtual world, that of the studio. Charlotte Brunson and David Morley's analysis of the long-running news magazine *Nationwide* (1978) is a seminal study of the studio-world that gathered mass audiences in the heyday of broadcasting and is still very much in use. They zone in on how the studio setting of *Nationwide*, where the host presented the program's segments and defined a national centre, by virtue of the host's enunciative powers and standardised language registers. The individual segments of *Nationwide* provided a cavalcade of regional particulars, leaving the host to define a generalised place of national centrality. In the present article's terms, the segments synchronised

through an edited rhythm, while the host enabled synchronisation with the audiences in the form of a direct, live address. That mode of address – the host looking into the camera and greeting the audience from the here and now of a studio – provided a simultaneous link between the moments of production, distribution and reception. Equally as important as this synchronising via a rhetoric of liveness was the insertion of programmes like *Nationwide* in a regularised broadcasting schedule. The fixed grid of the television schedule ensured a regular rhythm of broadcasting that was an adaptation to viewers' everyday temporal rhythms, while at the same time also shaping those rhythms.

The synchronisation of the nation by means of broadcasting was a social construction of significant and lasting power, but it had several limitations. As has been pointed out by Frith (1988), in historical terms, the BBC's articulation of nationhood was premised on middlebrow culture and tended to exclude working-class experiences and tastes. One might add that it excluded families that were extended and those that did not conform with heteronormativity. In technological terms, 'liveness' delivered strong experiences together with absent others. Live transmission strictly speaking was only the predominant mode of broadcasting in the earliest stages of radio and particularly television. In the post-war heyday of television, a great number of broadcast hours, genres and formats were in practice not broadcast live. This included not only all narrative fiction but also for instance much news and actuality output. The time-shifting facilities first of videotaping and remotes, later of various on-demand digital options, further undermined the premise of an instantaneous connection between the moments of mediation. If it is possible to speak of broadcast media as actually characterised by liveness, then it is more as a promise or as a latent possibility (Boudon, 2000; Lupinacci, 2021; Marriott, 2007).

What Scannell describes as a supersynchronising feat of unification by technology could also, and better, be seen as a historical high water of mediated synchronisation; all the more impressive to those in favour, all the more repressive to those who felt marginalised. In hindsight, after commercialisation and digitalisation ended the heyday of broadcasting, it has become easier to see the limitations of broadcasting's synchronising orders, both in political and technological terms. With first the 1980s commercialisation of television and then its convergence with digital and social media from the 1990s, Western societies moved to our present situation, when the media supply is fragmented across channels and platforms to match the fragmentation of audiences. The era when broadcasting synchronised the nation lives on primarily as a yardstick for more recent synchronising efforts that have to be done with more limited media tools.

Synchronising individuals with social media

The contemporary social media offer ample illustration of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) well-known individualisation argument; as individuals

become unmoored from traditional and larger societal institutions and collectives, their media diets become personalised, more tailored to their everyday life in families and circles of friends. More radically still, it may be argued that an individualisation process is going on in these social micro-contexts as well. During the last decades, family viewing of television has become at least in part replaced by individual consumption, in bedrooms and on the go, with mobile and locative media. With this process of fragmentation, monopoly broadcasting's scale of synchronisation is no longer available. While broadcast media synchronised social collectives with the nation as a reference point, social media synchronise collectives predominantly with the individual as a reference point. And in some respects, the tools and sites offered by social media on a micro level synchronise the individual in much more pervasive ways than was the case with broadcasting.

Above we have argued that generally speaking, synchronisation happens both as individuals are synchronised by some kind of external force and as they synchronise with each other. So it is with social media, but this complexity tends to be obscured by a discourse of individuals as the privileged yardstick of synchronisation. [Rothenbuhler \(2005\)](#) has said of the media in general that they are the 'church of the cult of the individual'; this is eminently true of social media, which have been accompanied by an insistent celebration of individual freedom and personal choice. That celebration is at least in part a result of media-industrial ideologies voiced by figureheads and hype-makers who cast social media personalisation technologies as an empowerment of individuals. According to this highly ideological notion of individuality, social connection and social order is the result of individuals' inner drive to connect and communicate via social media. That drive in its turn becomes the engine of synchronisation in everyday life.

There is no doubt that social media have become important tools for self-expression and self-presentation. Since the 1990s, self-narrations of individuals' everyday lives have become key content on blogs, on social media accounts and YouTube channels, so much so that researchers have termed these 'personal media' ([Lüders, 2008](#)), vehicles for a 'filtering' of the self that is both cultural and algorithmic ([Retzberg, 2014](#)). Personalisation is further boosted by mobility, which makes mediated synchronisation available not only anytime but also anywhere the signal reaches. Social media boost the individual's everyday communicative reach, enabling a reordering of everyday social interaction with the individual as a privileged reference point. The process is still fundamentally a social and reciprocal one; we become the individuals we are on Facebook by lining up our profile with our circle of 'friends' in mind. The work of posting in a rhythm of calls and responses, and the occasional participation in 'Facebook live' segments, synchronises individuals to each other. In this way, one's own time becomes synchronised with that of others, as we act upon others and are acted upon by them, as well as by the context-defining algorithms of Facebook.

The update posting is a key time tool in social media; on blogs, microblogs such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram pages, for instance, they allow users to produce a virtual diary that reflects and reflects on their daily life. Following an account means synchronising with that individual's life – more specifically in a diachronic synchronisation that unfolds dynamically and loosely within the rhythms of everyday life. Comments and 'likes' allow for an interactivity that synchronises in the experience they provide of catching up with and reaching out to others. This form of synchronisation is perhaps at its most powerful when happening in 'real time', a concept that names the way social media seem able to synchronise diachronically and synchronically at the same time, always updating the moment (cf. [Weltevrede et al., 2014](#)).

At the same time, there are continuous tensions and instabilities in these collectively shared temporal arrangements, as has been amply illustrated in public controversies over false identities online. It is less obvious that synchronisation can falter between individuals acting in good faith. People suffering from serious illness will often initiate an online presence from ideal motives of opening up about one's condition, sharing experiences of a life with illness, providing information and support for others in a similar position, as recent research has investigated (see e.g. [Conrad et al., 2016](#); [Orgad, 2005](#); [Stage, 2017](#)). The strongly positive tenor of online comments people with an illness receive on social media stands in contrast to the decidedly mixed response received by those who use such media for more controversial purposes, such as 'influencers' and 'micro-celebrities' who are perceived to crave fame and fortune.

The same social media affordances that extend the communicative reach of people with an illness can make it difficult to connect with distant others, however. The automatic archiving of posts is one such affordance; as it stretches interactions out in time, the archive of a medical patient's digital diary will contain postings that feature a strong and affective sense of present-ness, while actually belonging to a time (the experience of an operation, for instance) that the patient has left behind. This may cause temporal complications in relation to that diary's audiences. In documented cases ([Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg, 2020](#)), sufferers from the same illness have checked out the archive, found a past posting that resonated powerfully with their present condition, and sent a message that invited a strong emotional connection. This made the individual owning the account withdraw from responding in kind, out of a need for emotional self-protection. In such cases, then, the impulse to share and connect causes acts of desynchronisation.

Such troubles notwithstanding, synchronisation with the tools of social media have proven to be relatively efficacious in the micro-contexts of everyday life. Syncing up to larger collectives, on the other hand, has proven more fraught. In earlier reflections on the Internet, there were hopes that phenomena such as 'hive minds' and 'weak ties' ([Granovetter, 1973](#); [Shirky, 2009](#)) could make possible

collectives on a macroscale. As recent public debate has amply demonstrated, however, early enthusiasms for social media's contributions to public debate have been largely replaced with suspicions of echo chambers, hyper-partisanship and the exploitative surveillance of industry actors. Such collectives have come to seem both less desirable and less achievable. In this article's terms, reflection on digital and social media has gone from sync optimism to sync pessimism.

Synchronising the globe in the Anthropocene

Ambitions for global synchronisation have existed at least since 1884, when 41 delegates met in Washington for the International Meridian Conference to determine the prime meridian and divide the world in time zones (Bartky, 2007; Ogle, 2015). That this coincided roughly with the Berlin Conference, which formalised the partitioning of Africa between the European colonial powers, gives a further hint about the entanglements between time and power (Forster et al., 1989).

In reality, the work to synchronise the world goes much further back, to Christian chronology and the Paschal cycle, as well as to Early Modern historiography, in addition to the more mundane practices of trade routes, mail services, and colonial administrations (Jordheim, 2017). During the last twenty years, however, the global has taken on a different meaning, and so has synchronisation. In response to global warming and climate change, the idea of the global has been scaled up to encompass the entire earth system, severely affected by emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, as documented by IPCC reports. Concomitantly, time has been scaled up to include not only human history but also the 4.5 million years of so-called geological time, which has become a highly relevant diachronic context for present-day human decisions and actions (Chakrabarty, 2009). Finally, as the pressure is mounting to act in order to stop climate change before it is too late, so is the need for synchronising our global 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation', to borrow phrases from Koselleck (1985: 255–275). The question is whether the kind of global synchronisation necessary to enable decision-making and changes of practice at a global level is at all possible, and, in the terms of this article, what could be conceived of as the work, the tools, and the sites involved.

As for media tools, it is a well-established fact in contemporary research on international media that they fall far short of delivering a truly global coverage (see e.g. Schiller, 1992; Thussu, 2018). For notions of media that synchronise globally, one would have to consult media theorists of a more visionary and speculative bent. For Marshall McLuhan (1994; 2011), television plays this role in a contemporary 'electronic age', in more limited formulations also the computer. He emphasises the powers of both to synchronise a global collective – his famous 'global village' – in powerful experiences of an absolute form of

simultaneity. The flip side this vision, as has often been pointed out, is that McLuhan almost entirely disregards question of social context, power and contingency. At present, these are exactly the questions at stake. Climate change requires that political collectives of deliberation and decision-making be synchronised at a global level, yet the synchronising tools are not available, or at any rate, not at all up to the formidable task at hand (Hulme, 2009).

This raises the question of what enables the work of synchronisation at the largest possible scale, involving not only all humans but also every other living being on the planet, as well as non-living actors, such as minerals and chemical substances. What means may conceivably be available for allowing future synchronisations to take place, scaled up to a global level and at the same time expanded to cover longer temporal durations and rhythms, beyond both national and individual histories? It seems there is a need to look for different kinds of tools, beyond established media, but still dependent on various contemporary media tools. In the following, we will discuss two such tools that have emerged during the last decade to synchronise future social behaviours and political actions. One is a concept, more specifically a neologism, the other a staging of civil disobedience. These are both mobilised by, and mobilise, people in different social and political contexts across the globe. Both exist by virtue of their ability to synchronise the ideas, experiences, expectations and movements of large groups of people – although their actual achievements in the realm of climate change are so far limited. In part, they are preconditioned by digital infrastructures and the possibility of instantaneous communication that coordinates participation and involvement.

The conceptual form of the ‘Anthropocene’, analogous to what Reinhart Koselleck and others have termed a ‘historical keyword’ or *Grundbegriff* (Koselleck, 2011), originated in the scientific discourse among climate scientists and geologists, but swiftly spread into cultural and political language (Scherer and Renn, 2015; Zalasiewicz et al., 2011). The Anthropocene concept mobilises 4.5 billion years of geological time so that the work of synchronisation it performs takes place at a scale unmatched since the collapse of Christian chronology in the 16th and 17th centuries. Originally a rather technical term of geological periodisation, the Anthropocene caught the imagination of politicians, intellectuals and artists in need of a way to give climate change and climate emergency a conceptual form (Sörlin, 2014). At present, the Anthropocene dominates global climate discourse as the most powerful conceptual tool for effectively synchronising – adjusting and adapting – a wide range of times and temporal arrangements. By turning humans into geological agents, this concept synchronises human history with natural history, thus reversing the splitting up of these historiographical endeavours, which took place at the end of the 18th century (Chakrabarty, 2009). But this work of synchronisation spans even wider. Moving between different kinds of texts – scientific, bureaucratic and political –

the Anthropocene helps synchronise the times of future climate disaster with the times of political decisions and planning in the present. The concept brings a hitherto almost unknown and politically seemingly irrelevant timescale into political discussion, in terms of the millions and billions of years of earth history, which in the last centuries of human life on earth has gone through a change so radical that it warrants a new periodisation (Chakrabarty, 2018).

This conceptual work of synchronisation is correlated with other more embodied, affective, and not least situated practices, which also help us to identify some of the sites of global synchronisation, for example, schools. In the fall of 2018, the Anthropocene concept was coordinated with a particular form of staged civic action, or even civil disobedience, when geological agents insisted on their right to also be political agents. Millions of pupils and students around the globe went on school strikes to show the politicians and people in power their dissatisfaction with the lack of real action to combat climate change. The call to arms was issued by people like Greta Thunberg, who quickly became both spokesperson and symbol of the global movement. Thunberg's UN address went viral in social media, aptly illustrating how other, radically new communicative forms emerge within these new conceptual and discursive frameworks. The anger and almost prophet-like rhetoric with which Thunberg addressed the UN council and a global audience represents a search for genres and forms of communication equivalent to the exigence of the situation. The school strikes and Thunberg's address also illustrate how climate change interventions harness a range of digital and news media, in order to build eventfulness and a sense, albeit very provisional, of collective global experience (Briggs et al., 2020).

Here also, synchronisation breeds contestation. The school strikes demonstrate how temporal arrangements that coordinate forms of protests come in conflict with temporal arrangements that synchronise the everyday lives of the societies in question. More concretely, the digitally mediated calls to join the protesters in the centres of European cities clashed with school schedules. Pupils skipped classes to show their resentment toward the political elite for doing nothing of real consequence to save their future. The politicians objected, arguing that the young people need their education to cope with and ideally change that very same future, and that a school strike was thus counterproductive. At least since the late 1960s, civil protest and education institutions have represented conflicting temporal arrangements, each synchronising biological, generational, historical and political times in a specific way, thus producing radically different futures. The realities of climate change have raised the stakes of this conflict radically. A clash of synchronisations is taking place in which pasts, futures and presents are at stake.

Discussion: Thrown into crisis and contingency

These three cases together indicate a historical trajectory that takes us from a past in which both social and media orders were relatively comprehensive and institutionalised, into a future where these orders appear much more partial, local and contingent. At the same time, they strive to address issues and enable forms of agency at a global scale. The sociopolitical and symbolic institution of the nation came about through extensive and durable forms of synchronisation by means of broadcasting. Social media, on the other hand, are fitted to and have been producing individualities that are at the same time expansive and fragmented, struggling to reconnect with broader social collectives, such as public stagings of school strikes. In the present and moving into the future, temporal collectives emerge which constitute themselves through new acts of synchronisation. These do harness social and digital media, although at present, it is hard to claim that such media are able to synchronise globally.

This article has moved from the mesoscale of broadcasting via the microscale of individuals synchronised by social media, to a global macroscale that involves the greatest of future collective challenges, climate change. Already in the case of the two former, we are not really dealing with a neat continuity of scales, one nested within the other. In spite of operating at the microscale of the individual, rather than at any kind of societal mesoscale, the diffusion and range of social media by far surpasses anything ever achieved by 20th century broadcasting. Also, global synchronisation should not be analysed as anything like a merely scaled-up version of the work of synchronisation taking place at the national or individual level. But neither timescales nor life scales are continuous or nested. At each scale, synchronisation is qualitatively distinct and should be understood in its own right, both spatially and temporally (Tsing, 2012). Neither actors nor media are scalable; rather they form part of distinct synchronising practices, with their own tools, sites and forms of contestation.

Today, the dream of a supersynchronisation that synchronises all the partial and contingent acts of synchronisation may live on in nostalgia for the era of national newspapers and public broadcasting. In reality, however, acts of synchronisation are without exception local, contextual, and historically contingent; they are highly political and often contested. Supersynchronisation, on the other hand, comes with a global ambition to synchronise processes and life rhythms on the earth as a whole. They are given a common direction, speed and rhythm, even an inherent meaning, as indicated by Luhmann's example of 'destiny'. In pre-modern traditions as well as today in individual lives, 'destiny' refers to a necessity of temporal progression, by which other possibilities, other trajectories into the future, are closed off. Time is turned into a linear movement towards a specific goal, either joyous or frightening. 'Progress' is another example of

a supersynchroniser that came to dominate historical time in the 19th and 20th centuries; so is, more recently, 'globalisation'.

Our propensity to allow supersynchronisers, including temporal signs of alarm such as 'acceleration' and 'presentism', to dominate the analysis of the multiple times of societies as well as the work of synchronisation, is not just the effect of nostalgia for simpler and more unified temporal frameworks. The belief in a single unified time also represents the last remainder of the Newtonian legacy, which we need to get rid of before we can fully embrace a new analytical framework based on multiple times as well as contingent and changing acts of mediated synchronisation. To analyse social and political events and processes in terms of their inherent temporal structures does not mean fitting them into a unified chronological framework or plotting them onto a timeline pointing from the past into the future. On the contrary, it means analysing in historical and contextual detail the work of synchronisation done by means of media, in order to produce times to live by.

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