Encountering the comment:
A phenomenological approach to reading the news online

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Abstract

Newspaper reader comments are those short, fragmentary, frequently polemical and mostly anonymous 'replies' posted to online newspaper articles. And while online comments have attracted much attention in recent years, the experience of reading them has yet to be explored. Newspaper comments have been examined in detail from two key perspectives in the scholarly literature, but by focusing almost exclusively on the text, both journalism studies and public sphere theorists have overlooked the situated sense-making of the reader herself. This study aims to fill this gap by focussing on the embodied know-how and everyday practices through which readers make comments mean. To do this, it draws on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1970), Martin Heidegger (1962) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) as well as the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975).

The research underpinning this thesis was structured around in-depth interviews and digital-observation methods with four reader-participants, two of whom are Irish and two Spanish. Travelling to visit each individual in one of their own everyday settings, I observed and took field notes on their media practices, both print and digital, and interviewed them about their experience of reading a newspaper article and its corresponding comments. The articles we read together were selected from either *The Irish Times* newspaper or the Spanish *El País;* the participants' own newspapers of choice. The articles and their comments centred on aspects of the housing crises that were rapidly unfolding in each country at the time of the interviews and this context came to play a central role in understanding how the readers made sense of those texts.

For several months after these initial interviews I maintained email and video correspondences with each participant, asking further questions and talking through ongoing media experiences. I also carried out an auto-hermeneutic exercise that involved video recording my own media practices and 'free writing' responses to the same media texts used in the interviews. In a thematic analysis designed around the concept of the hermeneutic circle, I developed a phenomenological interpretation of three core themes that emerged from this 'data'. These themes highlight the significance of the readers' own referential systems for structuring their

daily encounters with the news media; they point to a fundamental contrast between the way the readers engaged with the newspaper article and how they engaged with the comment; and finally, they highlight the role of the white space around the comments in facilitating a 'conversational' experience in reading them.

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List of Abbreviations

ECT – Encounter - Context Table

EU – European Union

UGC – User-generated content

UK – United Kingdom

U&G – Uses and Gratifications

Preface

> Understanding begins…when something addresses us.
> (Gadamer, 1975, p. 299).

This address might come suddenly, in the form of a question, disrupting our immersion in the world around us, or it might have been there for years, lingering and nagging (Moules et al., 2014). I wrote up the proposal for this research at the age of 36 because by then, a particularly tenacious cluster of questions had been pursuing me for several years already. In the seven years prior, I had been living in Barcelona. During all of that period I had been involved in various protests and strikes against the Spanish government's introduction of austerity policies after the Global Financial Crash in 2008. I had been involved in political activism as a young person in Ireland, where I grew up, but the huge wave of grass roots resistance I witnessed in Barcelona forced me to look again at Ireland. In contrast to the mass movements unfolding across European cities in the years after the crash, a distinctly stoic mood fell across Irish society. To answer the question of this apparent stoicism I joined filmmaker Treasa O'Brien of *Stinging Hornet Films* to produce the film Eat Your Children (2015).[1]

Eat Your Children (2015) is a documentary film based on footage O'Brien and I captured during several trips around Ireland between 2009 and 2012 interviewing activists about protest. We took an 'action research' approach and turned a loosely Marxist and anarcho-feminist lens on neoliberal Ireland. However, by the time we had toured with the film, speaking and debating at a number of independent film festivals and activist events, I realised I was living in something of an echo chamber. Despite our curiosity about the absence of protest and our attempts to reach outwards, we had spent most of our time spiralling back inwards, talking and debating with people who were having similar experiences to our own, some more optimistic than others, but all of us with the same critique about the impacts of capitalism and austerity.

As I made my way to pursue research opportunities in Liverpool, the questions I needed answering by that time were something like the following: What is it like to experience anti-

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[1] Password to watch this film on Vimeo: Bolivia

capitalist protest when you had not deliberately gone out to find it? What do non-activists make of anti-capitalist protest and propaganda when they happen across it? Where, even, would you meet it if you don't normally attend protests or seek out alternative media online?

Figure 1 Poster for EYC Film Showing (Eat Your Children, 2015)

As a starting point for research I considered how the internet provided a space where different ideas and voices could meet and debate, but in my own life I had already noticed how even on the internet – or especially on the internet - the echo chamber effect was difficult to overcome. Without consciously intending to, I always ended up in an enclosed circle of like-minded people. Finally, it occurred to me where someone might come across voices that were really antiphonal to her own and without having sought them out deliberately. As a former journalist I was aware of the tensions in newsrooms around reader feedback in the form of online news comments. Comments were fast becoming notorious for their sharp and often rancorous debates, but for those in favour, they are an important mode of public contestation and

deliberation, and especially for providing feedback for journalism itself. Others felt, however, that newspapers had blithely handed a loudhailer to that small but energetic portion of society - latterly known as 'trolls' - to disseminate malicious bigoty and hate speech. Unsurprisingly then, the nature of the comments and the identity of the posters draws the most attention in both popular and scholarly inquiry. However, it is the non-posting readership, the silent majority less likely to get involved in debate online that I was most interested in. And as it turned out, those who have received the least attention.

As an anti-austerity activist focussing on mainstream newspaper comments then, my initial research questions arose out of my curiosity about the potential for these texts to pose a counter-discourse to mainstream media's neoliberal agenda. Inspired initially by critical theory and empirical media studies, these early questions would have asked of newspaper readers, What do you think about this critical comment here? Would you agree with it? Might it change your mind about accepting austerity? But by the early stages of my literature review, and with helpful contributions from my supervisory team, I realised that I was jumping too far ahead, not to mention overlooking important questions of ontology and epistemology.

Simply put, there is no existing research that goes and speaks to non-posting readers of newspaper comments. *All* of the research on newspaper comments makes claims about 'the readership', or even sometimes about the public at large, but this is (almost) always based on an analysis of the comments themselves (see for example Coe et al., 2014; Jayachandran, 2015; Meyer and Carey, 2015; Santana, 2015). That means that our primary understanding of what newspaper comments *mean,* comes from that tiny snippet of disembodied, decontextualized, digital-sign fragment. Moreover, much of the qualitative research on newspaper commentary homes in on the vitriol, bigotry and hate speech, leaving out the everyday debate happening in less sensationalist tones (Musolff, 2015; Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; Steinfeldt et al., 2010).

While a desire to understand what the comments say, and why some of the posters are so cross with people unlike themselves is reasonable, the most striking fact about this research is its evasion of the 'One Percent Rule.' Only one percent of the users of any website contribute new content; nine percent adapt or change existing content; while a full 90% of internet users spend their time online 'consuming' or 'lurking,' and therefore *not posting* (van Mierlo, 2014).

Furthermore, by the time the British newspaper *The Guardian* carried out an extensive analysis of the comments posted to its own online edition, it revealed that only two percent of their 70 million comments had been blocked by in-house moderators (Gardiner et al., 2016). If we are for the moment to accept the principles for respectful debate that newspapers set for their comment posters, then the two major questions become: 1) Where is the research focussed specifically on the everyday debate which characterises the bulk of newspaper commentary? And 2) Where is the research on the vast membership of non-posting readers and their experiences, opinions, and understandings around the comments?

Accordingly, this research takes the everyday experience of non-posting newspaper readers as its starting point and sets about exploring how they (we) encounter the online newspaper comment in its less malevolent modes and in the midst of busy, everyday lives. While primarily concerned with the detail of 'in-the-thick-of-it' media engagement, it also examines these encounters within the broader historical and socio-cultural horizons within which they are embedded (Allen, 2007). Rather than texts, discourses or opinions, however, it focuses on the much more immediate, but often wordless realm of *experiences*, *emotions*, *practices* and *preunderstandings*. In order to do this, I draw on the traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics in Continental Philosophy, both of which I explore in detail in the following chapters. My own position in this research then is not one of outsider, indeed I begin with my own experience as an avid reader of online newspaper comments, a one-time activist and former journalist (Trigg, 2013). My own meanings and presumptions are subsequently interrogated and often upended and extended throughout the research and especially as they come into contact with those of my fearlessly candid participants. By way of an introduction then, I hope to have outlined some of the motivations, interests, and personal transformations that characterised the early stages of this project. The following pages guide the reader through the research journey and the resulting interpretations as they unfolded over the following four years.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

This study explores the lived experience of reading online newspaper comments; those short, fragmentary, often polemical and mostly anonymous responses posted to online newspaper articles. Most regular readers of online newspapers will be familiar with reader comments, most mainstream newspapers now include such a platform. Indeed, some like myself will acknowledge that digital urge to scroll downwards after reading one or two paragraphs of a news story to find out what people 'really think'. But what *is* that encounter between reader and comment really like? How is it experienced? How is it different to reading the newspaper article, indeed, if it is different at all? Moreover, if such short, fragmented, 'non-professional' commentary is now part of our everyday encounter with the mainstream media, how does that contribute to how we make sense of the media, of ourselves and of our lives together?

In this study I offer a phenomenological interpretation of this encounter by exploring the fine-grained details of its unfolding in the midst of everyday life. Phenomenology is a philosophical method that can be adapted to qualitative purposes and is especially sensitive to the immediacy of lived experiences. In pursuing this method, I carried out an 'existential investigation' involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, email correspondences and video calls with four newspaper readers (van Manen, 2016). Between September 2017 and July 2019, I travelled between four different countries to visit each of the four participants, Maggie, Lola, Alice and Jedser. Together we read a newspaper article selected from *The Irish Times* or the

Spanish broadsheet *El País* (*The Country*), their own papers of choice, and scrolled through the corresponding reader comments sitting in one of their own everyday settings. I travelled to see the participants 'at home' so that I that I could take notes on their immediate surroundings, their daily media practices, and their gestures of hand, thumb and body as they moved with and through their different media technologies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

During our face-to-face meetings we discussed the newspaper article and the reader comments in much detail, all of which was audio recorded. During the following months the participants either sent emails conveying their thoughts on recent news reading experiences or met me on online video calls to talk about their recent media encounters. All of the resulting data was collected, stored and organised using *Microsoft Word* on my home computer and saved as four individual 'Research Dialogue' folders, one for each participant. Added to these were the field notes, memos and video recordings I had already made of my own media practices. To interpret and analyse this data I developed a hermeneutic method based on the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) and Max van Manen (2016). This involved immersive, line-by-line readings, interpretative 'free writing' and the identification of patterns, themes and interrelations. The themes that I developed out of this analysis form the basis of Chapters Six, Seven and Eight and communicate the underlying structures of experience and sense making that structure the participants' news media and comment encounters.

Firstly, however, this introductory chapter aims to give a sense of the wider context around both the newspaper comment and the research itself. To do this I offer an overview of the comment as one manifestation of User Generated Content (UGC), the digital material produced and disseminated online by non-media-professionals. I tackle the issues of online abuse within newspaper commentary over the last number of years and look at the newspaper industry's own responses to these issues. I also offer a short genealogy of the comment from Homeric *scholia* up to the more recent 'letters to the editor'.

Before concluding, I consider the *topic* of the newspaper articles that I had read with the participants during the field work: Housing. I preselected articles on the theme of housing for two reasons: 1) I wanted to have a certain commonality of discursive theme across the interview transcripts and 2) because my preliminary surveys revealed that comments posted to news

stories on the theme of housing consisted of markedly fewer instances of abuse and insult than topics like gender or race for example. However, while the theme of housing was relatively uncontroversial among comment-posters when I first set out on my field work, both Ireland and Spain entered full blown housing crises by the middle years of this research (Hearne, 2017). This development meant that housing became a much more emotive topic in the news and in the online commentary as well as a personal issue for both the participants and I. Nonetheless, there was little evidence in our regular newspaper reading at the time that news comments on the crises were descending into the insult or abuse associated with topics like gender and race. Thus, as both a central discursive theme and an important historical background to the research, I examine the housing crises in Ireland and Spain in some detail later in this chapter. But first, the comment.

The online newspaper reader comment

In media and internet studies, newspaper comments are considered a form of User-Generated Content (UGC). UGC refers to the texts, images, video and audio material produced by non-media professionals and made available for free on the internet. This material is aimed at either public or group access (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent, 2007) and we are probably most familiar in the west today with *Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat* and *Tik Tok* as well as mainstream newspapers as the major platforms that facilitate the sharing of this material. 'Users' are the people who create and distribute the material and are defined by their non-media-professional status; profit is not their aim in producing and sharing this content and their contributions are characterised by some degree of personal 'creative effort' (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent, 2007). Forwarding or providing links to other material does not on its own count as UGC (Naab and Sehl, 2017).

Newspaper reader comments are one of the most common forms of UGC (Naab and Sehl, 2017). They initially evolved out of communities of readers gathered together in stand-alone internet message boards to discuss different issues in the news (Santana, 2011). These forums became increasingly popular and gave birth to separate 'citizen journalism' websites such as

the US based *Huffington Post*, but their popularity also enticed the newspapers themselves to open up their own websites to reader feedback.[2]

In 1998, the North American newspaper, *Rocky Mountain News,* was the first to offer same-page space for reader comments on its online articles (Santana, 2011). The basic commenting model involved newspapers providing space for readers to post their responses below a story written by a professional journalist and published on the newspaper's website (Santana, 2011). Most of the feedback software required some form of registration, but in the early days the personal details required of posters were minimal and almost all newspaper commenting systems allowed posters to provide anonymous avatars or identities. Comment threads usually comprise short, written responses to a newspaper article, but also facilitate intra-responding, where posters can carry out conversations responding to one another. Longer conversation threads can be folded in and out so readers first arriving at the webpage can only see the comments posted in direct response to the story. Most newspapers also have some form of moderation system in place.

Moderation is the term used to describe the job of reviewing the comments for inappropriate content and is usually carried out by a newspaper staff member or some form of moderation software. Moderation involves either reviewing all content before it is posted online or responding to alerts directed to the moderator about particular comments after they have been posted, these alerts usually come from the readership, but most often form other posters. This task became increasingly difficult for larger newspapers to manage as comments began flooding in in huge numbers. Today, most newspapers use a combination of pre and post-publication moderation approaches. If a comment is deemed to violate 'community standards', then it is usually removed from the website. A study by the *World Editors Forum* which surveyed 104 news outlets from 63 countries found that news outlets 'delete or block an average of 11 percent of comments left on their sites, because the content is offensive, irrelevant or spam' (Goodman, 2013, p.12). Most newspapers have established some form of

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[2] The *Huffington Post* was originally set up and run on content produced by unpaid volunteer 'citizen journalists'. It was eventually sold by the original founder. The question of the free labour upon which it had been built and later sold is discussed in Scholz (2012).

commenting guidelines which urge posters to abide by basic standards of polite and legally accountable interaction. However, such non-legally binding guidelines are notoriously difficult to both define and impose while also allowing for free debate. The libel laws around newspaper comments in terms of apportioning responsibility are difficult to untangle and are currently under review (Batza, 2016). However, the success of online commentary in its broadest sense is widely attributed to the lax laws around accountability for comments posted online by internet 'users' who are not bound by the same restrictions as professional journalists employed by newspapers (Batza, 2016).

Deliberating or trolling?

By 2004 newspapers across the world had thrown open their doors to reader comments (Hughey and Daniels, 2013). Since then, two major themes have come to dominate the academic and popular debate about online commentary. On the one hand, much scholarly work hails the participation, deliberation and expanded democracy that the internet offers by allowing ordinary citizens to question topics of public interest and enter new issues for media debate (Benkler, 2006; Burns, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2004; Papacharissi, 2010; Shirky, 2009). On the other hand, the offensive nature of much of this activity quickly earned its authors the neologism 'trolls.' In contrast to the optimism of the participation paradigm, others worry about the dark side of online commenting: '[I]t feels as if comments uphold power structures instead of subverting them: sexism, racism and homophobia are the norm' (Valenti, 2015).

In response to concerns that trolling is disproportionately directed at women, the British newspaper *The Guardian* (2016) commissioned a study into the 70 million comments that had poured into its own website since it first began publishing reader responses in 2006. Two percent, (1.4 million comments), had been blocked by *Guardian* moderators for violating the paper's community standards (Gardiner et al., 2016). *The Guardian's* community standards consist of principles such as 'We welcome debate and dissent, but personal attacks (against authors or other users), persistent trolling and mindless abuse will not be tolerated' (Gardiner et al., 2016). Comments that are deemed to violate any of the principles are removed from the website by staff moderators. In their analysis they found that most of the removed comments contained some form of abuse (insulting language or personal attacks) and one of the most

common forms of abuse was 'author abuse'; 'demeaning and insulting speech targeted at the writer of the article or another comment' (Gardiner et al., 2016). Of the ten most abused writers, eight were women and the two men were black, regardless of the topic of the article they had written (Gardiner et al., 2016).

The role of online commenting platforms in the propagation of misogyny and racism is an urgent question and is being vigorously pursued by academics, journalists and campaigners across the media. However, in my commitment to the mundane, rather than more heated or liminal media experiences, these issues fall outside the scope of this research. I briefly review research into a number of these themes in the next chapter and confront the issue of a potential gender bias in my own framework in Chapter Eight, however, the topic of housing was carefully chosen in order to allow for the largely banal, everyday aspects of our online engagements to predominate in the research dialogues. The high visibility of these issues in the media however, eventually forced newspapers to reconsider the comment.

In 2015, the editor-in-chief of *TheWeek.com*, Ben Frumin made the following statement. His words reveal how the practice of public commenting online had become socially accepted, while at the same time, from his business perspective, it was in fact quite bizarre (Frumin in Ellis, 2015).

> If I was painting a picture of a site we were going to have, and then at the end I said, 'Oh, by the way, at the bottom of all our articles we're going to prominently let any pseudonymous avatar do and say whatever they want with no moderation' — if there was no convention of Internet commenting, if it wasn't this thing that was accepted, you would think that was a crazy idea.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, beginning in 2013 a number of major news institutions began switching off the commenting facility on their websites. One of the first organisations to shut down its comments was *PopularScience.com*, the news arm of the US-based quarterly science magazine. By way of explanation they cited a survey of readers' interpretations of the comments: 'Uncivil comments not only polarized readers, but they often changed a

participant's interpretation of the news story itself' (LaBarre, 2014, p. 2), something they deemed deeply problematic from a scientific perspective.

The following years saw a rash of shutdowns. In North America, the *Chicago-Sun Times* began restricting comments to news stories that they predicted would receive racist and abusive comments before later abandoning comments altogether. The Canadian newspaper groups the Sun chain and titles owned by Postmedia Network such as the *National Post,* all shut down their comments in 2015. The same year *Reuters.com, TheWeek.com* and *News.Mic* shut down theirs. In the first stage of this research, while I was considering seeking out readers of the Irish daily broadsheet *The Irish Independent,* I woke up one morning to find that the comments had been shut down over night. The paper's parent company, Independent News Media, cited legal risks and Ireland's 'draconian libel awards system' as the reason for the shutdown (Hamilton, 2017). I quickly shifted focus to *The Irish Times* whose comments were still up and running. However, I now felt my research was under more time pressure and might in the end also contribute to understanding whether newspaper commenting had any future left at all.

Meanwhile, however, many news outlets have begun to look at ways of sustaining the best of the 'dynamic conversation and exchange' that newspaper comments sections had sparked (Etim, 2017). *The New York Times* announced in June 2017 that it would 'sharply' increase the number of articles open for comments by utilising new technology for moderation (Etim, 2017). The software they introduced had 'reviewed' the details of the comments that human moderators had accepted and rejected in the past. As the new software moderates the incoming comments in real time it searches the content for trigger words and phrases, only publishing comments that pass through the filter. The technology continues to 'learn' how to judge incoming comments for 'obscenity' and 'toxicity' and automatically publishes or rejects them (Etim, 2017). Questions about free speech, civility, and the very human assumptions that get built into moderating software are topical (Crawford, 2016). *The Guardian* was reluctant to shut down its own commenting platform and in 2016, the newspaper launched a public debate series called 'The web we want' to analyse and discuss comments publicly and to find a prescription for reader engagement (The Guardian, 2016). This series is ongoing.

The two newspapers I focus on in this present study, *El País* and *The Irish Times* both have active commenting platforms on their main newspaper websites. However, during the period of this research both papers made significant changes to their online products. Both are currently moving towards a partial subscription model for their internet media content. After reading a number of articles on their websites for free, the reader is encouraged to 'join' the paper by paying a monthly subscription fee (between €10 and €50 per month) to access further content. On irishtimes.com, only subscribers can now comment. On elpais.com, commenting is not yet restricted to subscribers, but a verification process requires applicant posters to enter personal details to an online registration system at the website.

All of these factors constitute significant limitations on what could have been called in its early days, a radically open platform for public debate. However, the online newspaper-commenting landscape changes rapidly. There is as yet no available analysis of how recent changes may have affected the style, number or content of the comments for the *New York Times*, *The Irish Times or El País* and the scene globally remains unsettled. [The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers](#) is a useful source for following the details of this changing landscape today, however, a brief look at the history and evolution of commenting and newspaper-reader feedback provides some clues as to future trends.

A genealogy of the comment

Scholia

The oldest practice that most resembles online newspaper commentary comes in the form of ancient *scholia*. Scholia is the name given to the notes or annotations written into the margins and line spacings of ancient literary texts (Nünlist, 2011). Between the fourth and sixth centuries, during the Byzantine period, scribes compiled and selected extracts from older, independent commentary 'notebooks' on Greek texts and transcribed them in tiny lettering into the margins of the text to which they referred (Reynolds and Wilson, 2013). Usually the scholia in any one text form a 'haphazard assembly' of scholia from other sources discussing the same text, and their origins are unsurprisingly the subject of ongoing debate (Snipes, 1988).
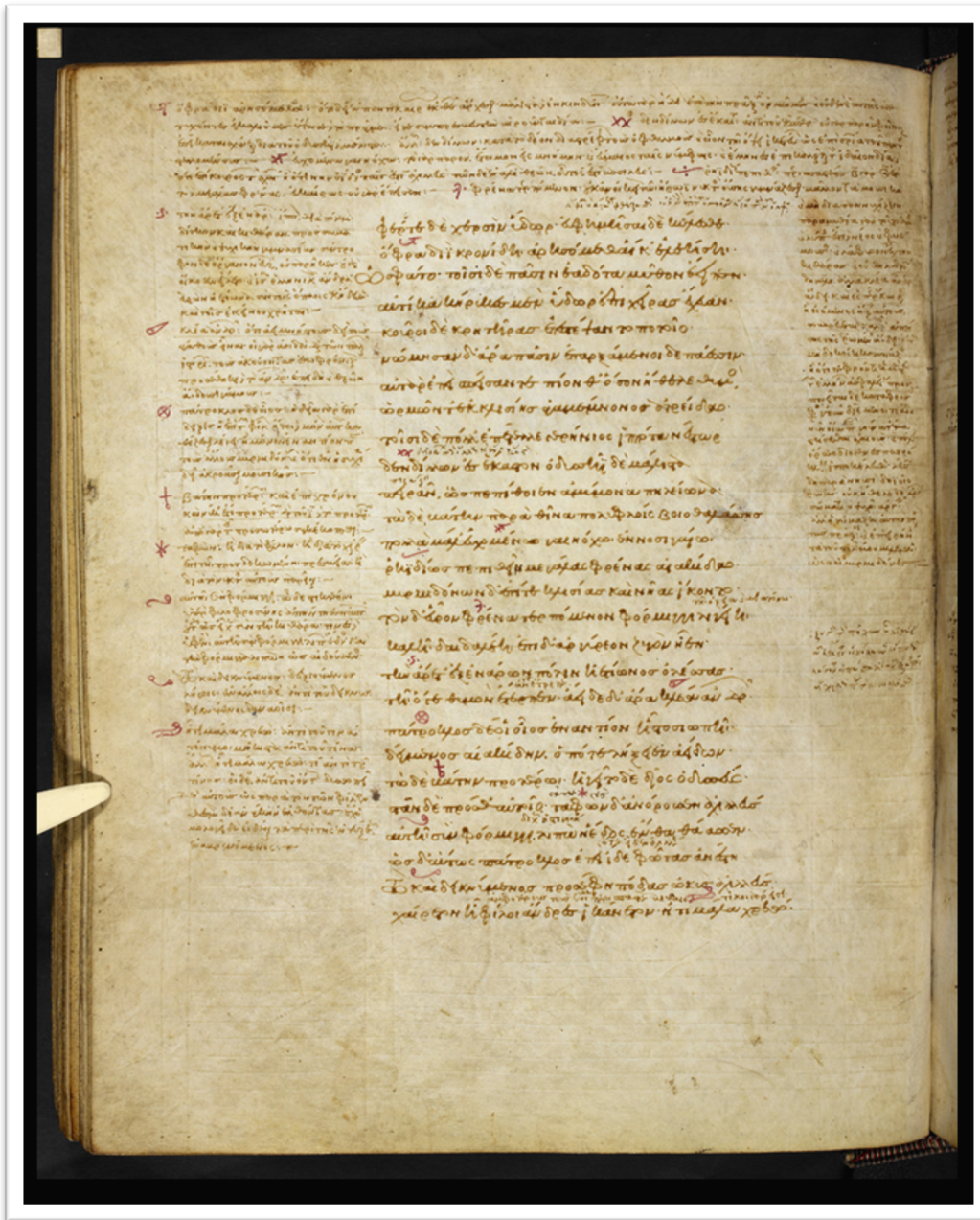
Figure 2 A page from the 'Townley Homer' consisting of the text of Homer's Iliad and marginal and interlinear scholia (The British Library, 1059)

The introduction of scholia is thought to have been facilitated by the transition from scroll to codex, the book-like format, but some of the earliest commentaries have been found on papyrus texts dating from antiquity (Nünlist, 2011). Homeric poems were the most widely read and

commented-upon literature throughout antiquity and the Byzantine period. Modern compilations of scholia on the *Iliad* for example, amount to some 4,000 pages when printed together (Nünlist, 2011). Scholia were usually written in a smaller script than the poem itself and often surround the text on three sides. Sometimes they were squeezed in between the lines of the poem, occasionally written over parts of the original text, and could involve secondary commentary on the outer margins of older scholia (Snipes, 1988). Scholars in Ptolemaic Alexandria went to great effort to annotate and preserve Homeric texts while teachers and schoolmasters jotted notes and allegories on their own copies as the poems became part of elementary education (Snipes, 1988). Scholia are variously described as explanations, interpretations, paraphrasing, quotations from other sources and parallels or allegories (Nünlist, 2011). Contemporary critics dismiss much scholia as 'stupid', 'incorrect' or 'irrelevant' (Reynolds and Wilson, 2013, p. 52); but as Snipes (1988, p.198-199, 204) observes, others are beginning to regard them as 'perceptive', 'astute' and 'discerning', a debate echoing the different views on online newspaper comments today. Different forms of commentary on original texts have rich histories in both cabbala and biblical traditions of textual interpretation. However, we can see the tradition of 'letters to the editor' as the most direct descendent of the online newspaper comment.

Letters to the Editor

A review of the history of 'letters to the editor' in Western Europe and the Anglo-American traditions shows how the format has changed in form, content, purpose and authorship over the centuries. Jürgen Habermas' 1989 study of the development of the bourgeois public sphere offers a detailed description of how modern journalism evolved out of 'news letters'. In seventeenth-century England, letters sent between private individuals contained detailed reports of 'Imperial Diets, wars, harvests, taxes, transport of precious metals, and of course, reports on foreign trade' (Habermas, 1989, p. 20). The very first printed journals which appeared in the mid seventeenth century then relied on access to these private 'news letters' for their own content (Habermas, 1989). The first journals to appear were known as 'moral weeklies' and were disseminated in the coffee houses of London (Habermas, 1989). The appearance of similar publications at around the same time and in similar format in Germany

and France indicated to Habermas (1989, p. 42) the rise of the 'self-interpretation' of the bourgeoisie through debate on art, music and theatre as well as morality, tolerance and religion:

Figure 3 The Tatler, Addison and Steele (eds), www.rarenewspapers.com (Addison and Steele, 1709)

When Addison and Steele published the first issue of the *Tatler* in 1709, the coffee houses were already so numerous and the circles of their frequenters already so wide, that contact among these thousandfold circles could only be maintained through a journal. At the same time the new periodical was so intimately interwoven with the life of the coffee houses that the individual issues were indeed sufficient basis for its reconstruction. The periodical articles were not only made the object of discussion by the public of the coffee houses but were viewed as integral parts of this discussion; this

was demonstrated by the flood of letters from which the editor each week published a selection. When the *Spectator* separated from the *Guardian* the letters to the editor were provided with a special institution: on the west side of Button's Coffee House a lion's head was attached through whose jaws the reader threw his letter (Habermas, 1989, p. 42).

Here Habermas describes how the emergence of the modern press was an 'organic outgrowth of private letters made public', responding initially to the need for trade and commercial news and evolving into publications that on the one hand provided useful 'factual' information and on the other, a moral and political press characterised by the 'critical opinion [letter-]essay' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, p. 43). In England, the *Daily Spectator* edited by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele made letters to the editor a central feature of the paper and published them under the title 'The Roaring of the Lion', but the published 'letters' were usually written by professional writers such as Daniel Defoe and then printed anonymously (Habermas, 1989, p. 260). The editors themselves also published opinion pieces under pen names implying they had been received by the paper from concerned and informed citizens. Nonetheless, other periodicals emerging at this time made a deliberate effort to engage more directly with a growing audience through inviting letters and constructing a sense of dialogue between editors and readers and even between readers themselves (Shevelow, 1989, p. 44).

The introduction of prohibitive stamp duty in 1712 forced many periodicals to close down. From this point on, newspapers survived primarily through political party funding (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). *Mist's Weekly Journal* supported by the Conservative Party in Britain carried a 'letters introductory' section which continued the tradition of printing letters ostensibly received form ordinary readers. Here again Defoe penned most of the 'letters' and expounded on everything from education to tyrannical monarchs, remaining all the while just on the right side of revolutionary (Hart, 1970, p. 140). More intrepid publishers like those of the *Daily Gazetteer* printed anonymous letters advancing openly radical ideas and continually fended off legal challenges for doing so (Hart, 1970).

Before independence, early periodicals in the North American colonies replicated the business and commercial news coming from the European press and acceded to oversight by the colonial

authorities. Soon however, the growing American press and its local elite letter-writers became central to anti-colonial nationalism and resistance to British rule. Merchants and shippers used a letter-writing campaign to criticise the effects of stamp duty on trade (Hart, 1970, p. 140) and in 1768, 'Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania' were published in several different newspapers to garner resistance to British tax laws (Leonard, 1986). Through publishing private individuals' letters, using an egalitarian mode of address and including signatures like 'A Soldier' or 'A Farmer', newspapers thus constructed a sense of the press as facilitating public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, p. 49).

The closest this ideal come to reality was in something like the 'discursive community' that emerged out of readers sharing information at times of crisis (Nord, 2001, p. 199). During a yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, readers from a cross-section of society shared experiences and passed on information via newspaper letters. In the letters they were 'passing along rumors, offering folk cures and remedies, speculating on the religious meaning of the disease, sharing their fears and their sorrows' (Nord, 2001, pp. 200-201). Nonetheless, the letter-essay media in the late colonial age remained elite, male and inclined to 'professional' opinions on political, economic and moral issues.

After independence, the struggle between the new political parties in the US translated into a model of partisanship for the main newspapers who soon became 'party newspapers' of one colour or another (Leonard, 1986). Here too letter-essays were the dominant form of proselytising but somewhat paradoxically there was also a strong public discourse during this period regarding media objectivity and impartiality. It was during this time that editors began fixing letters to particular pages or sections of the newspapers because opinion was increasingly considered problematic and thus needed to be distinguished or separated from 'news'. The trend thus involved the professionalisation of journalism and the separation of the concerned-citizen-letter-writer from the skilled and 'impartial' journalist (Hart, 1970).

One of the most important factors in the development of the 'letters to the editor' was in the sudden advancements in printing technology that allowed publishers to slash the cost of their newspapers which were still limited to a relatively wealthy readership, and sell them for a penny a copy (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). Combined with increased literacy rates and the need for

new businesses to reach as many consumers as possible, the nineteenth century saw newspapers orientate suddenly to the middle ground politically and to grabbing the attention of the largest number of consumers as possible for their advertising pages.

In this context, letters to the editor begin to look much more like those we are familiar with today and were deliberately constructed at the time as true and authentic voices of the common people; implicitly therefore *not* those of the professional journalists or the editors. Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune* stated, 'any offbeat social philosopher could express him-or herself in the paper, if he or she wrote forcefully' (Emery and Emery in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005, p.53). While some of the 'quality' newspapers persisted with an explicitly elite-letters tradition, the penny press marked a new era of letters as an ordinary-readers' forum for debate.

In the twentieth century, the idea of 'letters to the editor' begins to stabilise as a particular type of media text with a number of different explicit and implicit purposes. On the one hand, letters had to be presented as respectable discussion rather than as damaging, irrelevant and biased gossip. On the other hand, 'letters to the editors' allowed the newspapers to put forward an impression of the press as facilitating democratic public debate and giving voice to often marginalised citizens on the social issues of their time. Thus, Habermas (1989) calls the media the key institution of the democratic 'rational-critical' public sphere in the modern era. Letters also provided an opportunity for readers to air concerns about the press itself especially regarding partiality and bias in the content and journalistic practices of the paper (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). For example, Thornton (Thornton, 1995, p. 29) found that letter writers were:

> passionate about the public service role of the press. They praised truth telling and demanded more. They expressed fury at political partisanship and hailed a free press as essential to a vital democracy. And they reached heights of eloquence as they demanded the press act as an advocate for the common man and consider its effect on morality.

But the newspapers, by now tightly bound to the market through the selling of advertising space, understand their readers primarily as consumers, not citizens (Thornton, 1995). To the newspaper industry, readers are both consumers of a product (the newspaper) but also as products themselves; audiences to be sold to advertisers. On this view, letters to the editors

provide a means for the newspaper to directly engage their audiences in attempts to appeal to and expand that audience.

In whatever guise the audience appears to the editors however, readers themselves came to identify the letters as a means to voice not only personal opinions and complaints, but as an opportunity for strategic intervention. The abolitionist movement produced its own publications but also had letters published in the mainstream newspapers while the Suffragettes and later feminist movements wrote letters to editors as well as pamphleteering to forward their cause. More contemporary feminist publications take the letters section on board as a more integral means of engagement and debate; many publications consist mainly of letters (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

Interestingly, research has shown that that the practice of women writing anonymously or using pen names has persisted throughout the history of letters to the editor, especially when the topic is more political than practical, and mainly because of fear of retribution or verbal assault, something which speaks to the vehement trolling of women commentators and journalists online today (Pedersen, 2004). Meanwhile, the topics that dominate in the letters to editors and in the USA in particular have persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continue to dominate in the online debates today: abortion, gun control and race (McCullough in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

In this short genealogy of the online newspaper comment, from scholia to letters to the editor, we can see that the activity of intra-text commentary as public interpretation and debate has long been with us. Indeed, the very inception of the modern printed press was based on 'reader' commentary in the form of letters between members of the public on issues of public concern. With the professionalisation of the press, the reader and the journalist came to represent two different modes of experiencing the world. On the one hand there was the personally, socially and historically situated reader with her 'views' and 'opinions', while journalists positioned themselves as 'objective' and 'neutral'. This segregation by expertise is challenged in contemporary journalism by the explosion of phenomena like citizen journalism, social media and 'fake news', a world in which, according to Soffer (2009), mainstream news has to become more sensationalist and emotive to compete. *The Irish Times* and *El País* are also responding

to these changes in their move to subscription models but present these changes as a means to invest in more professional and expensive journalism. Meanwhile, however, while most contemporary broadsheet newspapers still publish letters to the editors in their print editions, the comment has noisily taken over the mantle as the voice of the readers online. In the next chapter I look at what online newspaper commentary means for the mainstream press, for public debate, and for the future of democracy itself as these issues have been taken up with energy in the scholarly literature. In the next section here, however, and with very broad brushstrokes, I try to communicate the underlying concerns of scholarly research into comment studies since their inception only two decades ago, highlighting the gaps and oversights that my own work seeks to address.

Comment Studies and a 'new paradigm' for Media Studies

I have divided the literature review in this thesis into two broad sections. The first section, 'Four themes in newspaper comment research', reviews the relatively new field of 'comment studies.' The second broad section in the literature review contends with the different assumptions underlying the relationship between the reader and the media text as manifested in the traditions of media and communication studies. These two sections then serve as a basis for my own critique of the literature. However, here I provide a brief, introductory overview of the main assumptions and oversights in the contemporary comment research to which the design and focus of my own work responds. Each point here is expanded and examined in further detail in the next chapter.

1. Most comment research has meant examining the semantic, discursive and linguistic meanings of the *content* of the comment and carries this out through various modes of textual analysis (see for example Coe et al., 2014; Jayachandran, 2015; Meyer and Carey, 2015; Santana, 2015). Implicit in this research are questions like 'What do the words and phrases in the comments mean?' and 'What do they mean for issues like public debate?'

- On this view, the comment is an object in which meaning inheres and rigorous content analysis is all that is needed to extract it. The *form* of the comment as a short, informal, fragment of text appearing on a small bright screen, often in the hand of the reader as he dashes about in his daily life, is completely neglected as a possible source of meaning. Thus, the embodied, situational and other more directly experienced aspects of encountering an online text are cut off from view by the blinker-effect of a focus on semantics.

2. In these 'objectivist' textual approaches, comment posters are regarded simply as newspaper readers and therefore the comments are taken to represent the voices, opinions or interpretations of at least a slice of that readership.

   - There are a number of problems with this approach but the one most relevant to the researchers themselves is that this 'slice' is so small. The US-based online magazine *Slate* published a study of its own readers' posting habits which showed that only one percent of its readers were commenting (Friedrich, 2014). This reflects the 'One Percent Rule' I discussed in the Preface, but the problem becomes more acute when research uses newspaper comments to make claims not just about readership, but about public opinion more broadly (see Koteyko et al., 2013; Brossoie et al., 2012).

3. In more recent studies, where the elusive non-commenting readers are more actively sought out and questioned, the approach tackles sampling problems with the quantitative methods largely developed in the North American positivist tradition of communication studies (Beaudoin, 2002; Nonnecke et al., 2006; Preece et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2014).

   - Besides the interpretivist critique of positivism and the attendant problems with questionnaires and surveys, the more specific issue here is that non-posting readers are defined as passive and inactive and as such, problematic. Non-posting members of an online discussion community are 'lurkers' exerting a drag on the creative propulsion of 'active' commentary. This research has an administrative bent and uses participants' responses to figure out how to stimulate them into action. Thus,

by privileging action, this approach nullifies other practices like reading and listening.

4. In the very small number of qualitative studies of non-posting members of online discussion forums, the subjective view is privileged over the objective (Arnold and Paulus, 2010; Beaudoin, 2002; Dennen, 2008). This means that an individual reader's verbal responses to 'scholarly' research questions *about* the comment, are assumed to provide us with the 'real' meaning of the comment.

- This approach reflects the tradition of interpretation-as-decoding in media reception studies and poses important challenges to the 'objective' perspective. However, in its own way it neglects the everyday meaning-making that happens to fall outside of signifying systems like language and social categories.

Therefore, I offer my own research as a response to the void opened up by the accumulative effect of these approaches to the newspaper comment. This present study makes a very deliberate attempt to overcome the ontological dualism in much comment and media studies that ends up privileging either the object (text) or the subject (reader) by looking instead at the *encounter* between the reader and the text. By encounter I mean a 'third space' often called the phenomenon or experience (Iser, 1993). In this third space, we see practices, tacit knowledge, movement, emotions, settings, situations, embodied know-how and technologies themselves come to life as the pervasive 'background' which gives meaning to the 'surface' or spoken world (Harman in Markham and Rodgers, 2017). My main source of inspiration for this approach is the tradition of phenomenology established at the beginning of the 20th century by German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl (2012), but more especially, its hermeneutic strand developed by Martin Heidegger (1962a), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975). With the work of these authors as a central guiding thread, I also draw inspiration from the contemporary thinkers who have developed their work in fields from media studies to anthropology and literary criticism. Thus, the influence of Nick Couldry (2012), Shaun Moores (2005), Tim Ingold (2000), and Wolfgang Iser (1993) features in this study. Overall then, this present research sits least awkwardly within the tradition of media studies.

The contemporary media-studies landscape has been shaped by at least five major currents of work (Couldry in Bräuchler and Postill, 2010, p. 35): Mass communications research; Critical Theory; the semiotic text-focussed approach inspired by structuralism; critical audience research; and more recently, media anthropology. The approach I take in this present study fits loosely into what Nick Couldry (2010, p. 36) calls a 'reformulation' in the treatment of media in media studies. This reformulation aims to upend the theoretical impasse caused by the different gravitational centres pulling on research from these different strands of work. In brief, the central dispute in media studies centres on the determining *effect* of the media. An 'effect' would be the change (or reinforcement) of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in the person who watches a particular news programme, for example. Text-focussed approaches assume by their very interest in the media text that it has an effect. More ethnographically minded researchers respond simply: 'Where is the evidence of such effects?' and instead seek out resistance and creativity around media use in studies with actual audiences. The new paradigm Couldry (2010) is advocating disrupts this effects/resistance dichotomy by looking instead at media practices like reading, gaming, socialising and sharing and might be termed something like a Media Practice Paradigm. Elsewhere Shaun Moores (2017) calls for an 'Everyday Life Studies' or a 'Lineology of Quotidian Cultures' (2020, In press), in which media would be considered only in so far as they are woven into the practices of everyday life. The focus on practices - very much influenced by Bourdieu (1977) - would have the effect of decentring both media texts as well as the audience concept as competing foci in media studies, effectively side-stepping the debate altogether. I will consider Practice Theory and its connections to phenomenology more specifically in Chapters Two and Three, but the way that both perspectives view the text-reader relation as a something of a synchronous unity is the main point here. My own research fits loosely into this 'new paradigm' in so far as it focuses on media-related practices and experiences rather than on texts or audience interpretation and takes up the concomitant critiques of representation, individualism and wholism. However, as I have pointed out, methodologically this research takes its cue much more directly form phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Philosophical commitments

The word phenomenology describes one of the major philosophical movements of the 20th century and is closely bound up with the history of German and Continental Philosophy. The philosophers most closely associated with the movement are Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In terms of methodology and the social sciences, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) describe it as an overarching perspective influencing *all* qualitative research, but phenomenology is also often listed as one strategy among the many used for guiding qualitative inquiry (Cresswell, 1998). The defining feature of phenomenology is the way it considers *how* reality manifests itself to human understanding as a theme for investigation 'in its own right' (Langdridge, 2007, p.4). 'Phenomenology does not attempt to speak about things but only about the way they manifest themselves, and hence tries to describe the nature of appearance as such', (Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p.1).

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) the aim of phenomenology is to describe lived experience in rich detail paying close attention to the meanings that those experiences hold. Thus, phenomenology stands in contrast to the social scientific aims of testing hypothesis and theories. Holmes (2015) contrasts phenomenology to the 'naturalism' of positive sciences which reduce explanations of human knowledge to 'purely natural processes.' As van Manen (1984, p.1) argues, instead of constructing abstract explanations of the world, phenomenology offers us a method that brings 'us into more direct contact with the world.' Phenomenology informs this research by providing a methodological foundation for exploring 'the logic of the world as it is experienced' by the participates as they encounter the news media, the internet, technology and fragmented texts like newspaper reader comments in their everyday lives (Brown and Heggs, 2005, p.294).

Hermeneutics is best known as the philosophical study of how humans interpret written texts, especially in biblical and legal studies. Bauman (1978, p.7) calls the task of hermeneutics one of 'clarifying' the meaning of a text, of 'rendering the obscure plain.' Philosophical concern for interpretation stretches back to the ancient Greeks and is as concerned to understand understanding itself as much as texts themselves. The name of the Greek messenger god

Hermes is usually linked to the etymology of the word *hermēneutikós,* meaning interpretation. Hermes' role was to convey messages from the gods to humans, but Hermes was known to 'mislead as well as lead' and thus represented the 'untrustworthy yet necessary link between worlds' (Moran, 2000, p. 271). Hermeneutics influences this present research through two channels. When Martin Heidegger (1962) challenged the idealism of his teacher Husserl, he brought hermeneutics into the heart of the phenomenology and opened it up for an interpretative conception for the method. Therefore, while my research seeks to describe fundamental or structural aspects of the readers' experiences, these meanings can be thought of as linguistic constructions that offer insights that the (thesis) reader might well be able to share in through their own experiences; in other words they are not supposed to be *essential* meanings.

Importantly hermeneutics also informs the methodological commitments of this study through the work of Heidegger's own student, Gadamer. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is often called *moderate* hermeneutics because of its relation to the three other prominent strands known as *objectivist* (associated with Dilthy, Simmel and Weber), *critical* (with Apel and Habermas) and *radical* (with Foucault and Derrida) (Gallagher 1992; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a theoretical perspective for understanding the participant-readers' interpretations of the news media texts through his notion of text interpretation as an open conversation and understanding as a fusion of different perspectives. Crucially, it also provides a lens for understanding my own role in the production of new meaning as a culturally and historically situated researcher. I return to phenomenology and hermeneutics in detail in Chapters Three and Four where I outline their histories and internal debates as well as and their implications for qualitative research like this present study.

In the next section, I give an overview of the housing crises that were unfolding in Ireland and Spain when I first embarked on this research in 2015. I believe it is important to communicate these crises in some detail because it was the primary socio-cultural and emotional background to my meetings with the participants, as well as the main topic that we discussed through our reading of the newspaper articles and comments. Furthermore, while this 'what' of the media content, and even the 'what' of the research interviews are in many ways secondary to '*how*' readers make meaning, I have included this detailed section on housing because the patterns of

sense-making I outline in the later chapters would be difficult to understand without this background knowledge. I have built these pictures of the crises on the current research into housing in Ireland and Spain by housing researches in the two countries. In this section I also look at how the media in both countries deals with housing as a topic. The individual newspaper articles that I read with the participants can be found in Appendices 3 and 4, while I also offer a summary of their contents in Chapter Five.

The housing crises in Ireland and Spain

During the post-crisis years while still living in Spain, I spent all of my free time working on the documentary film *Eat Your Children* (2015) about protest and austerity in Ireland. During this time the image of the 'ghost estate' still loomed large in the Irish imagination. Indeed, the very cover image for the film was of a small child pedalling her bike through a mostly empty, half-built housing estate in rural Ireland. In both Ireland and Spain, thousands of building developments had been abandoned mid-construction as the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 unfolded across the globe and the construction companies carrying out the building went bankrupt. Both countries were left with thousands of empty housing estates in various stages of completeness. In Ireland in 2010, there were 2,846 unfinished estates in Ireland and only 429 had some construction work still being carried out (The Housing Agency, 2010), a phenomenon Kitchin, Gleeson and O'Callaghan (2014) called 'The New Ruins of Ireland.' Photographer Markel Redondo captured the extent of the phenomenon in Spain in a series of drone shots in 2018 (Redondo, 2018).

Figure 4 Abandoned Construction in Spain, Redondo (2018)

However, as I was making plans for my field work in 2017, it was becoming clear that Spain, and Ireland were entering a new phase of crisis marked by a chronic housing shortage and an upsurge in housing activism. The reasons for this swing from surplus to scarcity are many and complex (see Byrne, 2016) and are linked in both countries to the reliance on construction-led growth in the economic boom leading up to 2008. In Ireland the effects of austerity policies and decades of dis-investment in social housing began making a serious impact after 2014. A new trend of global equity firms buying up distressed housing in Irish cities led to particularly sharp hikes in rents (Hearne et al., 2018). The problem of evictions had already been the source of much anti-austerity protest in Spain and since much earlier into the post-crisis period. In 2018, when I sat down with Lola to read *El País* together, 60,000 evictions had been passed through the Spanish courts that year (Domínguez, 2019).

Emergency Accommodation in Ireland

In February 2019, the homeless charity *Focus Ireland* published a report on the rise in homelessness in Ireland with a particular reference to family homelessness in Dublin (Long et al., 2019). The details illustrate the sudden rise in homelessness in and around 2015 when the charity first began investigating. They also noted the changing demographic of homelessness in which families with children were increasingly registering with local authorities in need of emergency accommodation. A government report that same year had shown that there were 10,264 individuals living in emergency accommodation in Ireland in February 2019 (Minogue, 2016). The *Focus* report pointed out that this number represented a 163% increase compared to the same month in 2015 (Long et al., 2019, p. 11). The number of families experiencing homelessness in that period had increased from 429 to 1,707 (Long et al., 2019, p. 11) which represented a 298% increase (Long et al., 2019, p. 11). The number of children living in emergency accommodation had quadrupled (Long et al., 2019, p. 11). In their *Country Report on Ireland 2019*, the European Commission (2019) called for 'urgent action' on homelessness.

In 2017, just as I was embarking on my field work, news stories about homeless people dying on the streets of Ireland were emerging. The death of homeless people on the street was becoming an issue of heated public debate (especially on day time talk radio for example) because this had been an extremely rare occurrence in Ireland in recent decades and the events carried emotive undertones of the evictions of Irish families from their homes during the colonial period. Notably, references to historic experiences of eviction were appearing in the form of 'user-generated content' or alternative media sources rather than from the mainstream press. Moreover, in contrast to the recent media imagery of ghost estates, the tragedy of homelessness was all the more forceful. In 2017, reports showed that 13% of the housing stock in Ireland lay empty (Hearne, 2017). To put this in context, housing researcher Rory Hearne (2017) points out that in Cork in 2017 there were 269 people homeless and 21,287 vacant units, meanwhile in Dublin there were 3,247 people homeless while 35,293 homes sat vacant.

As if to underscore the personal hardship of the housing crisis in Ireland and its relationship to my research, my own close friend was told by her local Citizen Advice Bureau in the west of Ireland that she and her four-month old baby were on the pathway to homelessness, just as I

was planning to avail of her hospitality on one of my first field trips to Ireland.[3] For several months she had been moving between different short-term sublets but as these were coming to an end she sought help from the local government where she was told she would only be considered for emergency accommodation if she was sleeping on the streets with her baby. During a stressful registration and means testing process she finally found a private rental that she could just about afford while waiting for rent assistance, unfortunately, this in a different city to the one where she had been living and working for several years. When she left there, she left a tight network of friends that had supported her in child minding while she worked. While she never had to sleep on the streets, the stress and the vulnerability she felt for her and her child were an immense strain, now with the added pressure of a major if not impossible commute. Our many hours of conversation about her experience played in the background of my four-years of research and remain the touchstone for my emphasis on the first-person perspective and experience.

The causes of the sudden rise of homelessness in Ireland in the period since the global financial crisis in 2008 are many. Ireland had suffered acutely in the crash with most of the damage caused by a vastly over-inflated property bubble (For more on this see Monastiriotis et al., 2013). In the immediate aftermath of the crash, as the extent of the losses were only first coming to light, the Irish government took responsibility for the debt of its biggest banks, which it then struggled to pay. In 2010, the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund offered a €85 billion 'bailout' loan to Ireland in exchange for a comprehensive programme of fiscal austerity based primarily on cuts to public spending and the privatisation of public assets and services. Unemployment jumped from four percent in 2004 to 15 percent in 2011 (Hearne et al., 2018, p. 155). Between 2008 and 2014, government funding for social housing provision, which had historically acted as a buffer against homelessness and unemployment in periods of economic crisis, fell by 88.4% (Byrne and Norris, 2018). This led to a 91.5% reduction in the output of social housing units in the same

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[3] Seventy percent of families in emergency accommodation are lone-parent families (Hearne et al., 2018, p. 158), meaning women are disproportionally affected: 'This follows a long Irish history of gendered forms of social violence inflicted on poor mothers and their children who were made invisible, incarcerated and excluded from society.' (Hearne and Murphy, 2017, no pagination). Notably women have also spearhead much of the organised protest in post-crisis Ireland (see Hearne, 2015)

period (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in Byrne and Norris, 2018, p. 3). There was therefore an extended period in Ireland where neither private developers nor the state were building or refurbishing housing in any considerable numbers.

Arguments from the left of Irish political discourse charged the post-crisis governments of systematically reducing the housing stock in Ireland for the purposes of re-inflating house prices in the interest of their landlord constituents (Sinn Féin, 2020; Solidarity-People Before Profit, 2020). House prices in Ireland had fallen by 50% from their peak in 2006 to a trough in 2012 (Byrne and Norris, 2018, p. 3). Fine Gael, the governing party from 2011 to 2020 and that which calls itself the 'party of home ownership' has not argued explicitly against increasing housing provision, but has been accused of delay, inaction and 'insufficient political will' (Hearne and Murphy, 2017, no pagination; People Before Profit Housing Policy, 2019). Moreover, a report sent to the Irish parliament in 2018 pointed out that the annual payments the government makes to private landlords for providing emergency accommodation far outweigh the long-term costs of providing quality cost-rental housing nationally (McEnroe, 2019).

Social policy researchers, Byrne and Norris (2018, p. 3) argued that the sudden and vast reduction in social housing provision in post crisis Ireland coupled with the collapse of the private housing market and a more recent population growth in the cities, were the immediate causes of the chronic housing shortage and hence the unprecedented rates of homelessness. However, they point to the accumulated effect of changes to social housing policy in Ireland in the 1970s as a key factor in the contemporary crisis (Byrne and Norris, 2018, p. 9). Compounding matters, growing mortgage arrears and the contraction in available credit for new mortgages forced more and more younger people onto the private rental market; with increased demand, landlords increased rents (increasing by 13.5 percent annually from 2010 to 2016 (Hearne et al., 2018, p. 157)), often subverting legal restrictions by evicting existing tenants on dubious grounds in order to increase prices for new ones. Lima (2019) highlighted the impact of home-sharing platform Airbnb on short-term rental prices in Dublin and called it a 'vivid element' of Ireland's housing crisis. In short, Ireland's homelessness is understood in both academic and popular discourse as the result of a neoliberal, pro-landlord political agenda pursued even in the post-crisis context by consecutive liberal-conservative governments.

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By the time news of the deaths of homeless people were reaching the public in Ireland, the daily evictions of working-class families from their homes were already well under way in Spain. Greece, Spain and Ireland were the eurozone economies worst affected by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Heavy reliance on construction-led growth and the ballooning of property debt at their biggest banks had left Spain and Ireland both keenly exposed to mortgage-based financial crash. The socialist PSOE government who were in power in Spain when the crisis hit, had opted for a Keynesian policy response to counterbalance the contraction in market-led economic growth (De Weerdt and Garcia, 2016, p. 2). However, following demands from the European Central Bank in 2010 to restore confidence to the international financial markets, the government installed emergency fiscal measures (mainly in the form of cuts to public spending) that abruptly overturned its emblematic social cohesion pledges (Dellepiane and Hardiman, 2014). Despite the efforts however, or because of them, confidence was not restored to the markets regarding Spain's ability to pay its debts, and Spain's economic slump dragged on (Dellepiane and Hardiman, 2014). Eventually Spain sought a bailout from the EU and a change of government persevered with deepening austerity measures (Dellepiane and Hardiman, 2014).

Expanded homeownership in the decades before the crisis was a key factor in the way that the Spanish population experienced the housing crisis after 2008. During the pre-2008 boom more than 6.5 million housing units were built in Spain and growing owner-occupier housing was facilitated by low interest rates and access to mortgages (De Weerdt and Garcia, 2016, p. 2). By 2012, Spain was one of the biggest homeownership countries in Europe: 85 percent of total housing stock was privately owned (De Weerdt and Garcia, 2016, p. 2). The other key factor was how employment in Spain pre-2008 was tightly bound to labour-intensive industries like construction (Monastiriotis et al., 2013). The sudden collapse of the housing market was responsible for the rapid loss of more than 50 percent of the total jobs lost in the crisis (Monastiriotis et al., 2013, p. 21). Overall, from 2008 to 2011 almost 2.5 million jobs disappeared in Spain, 1.4 million were in the construction industry (De Weerdt and Garcia, 2016, p. 3). Youth employment was hit especially hard. In 2013, 57 percent of young people were unemployed in Spain, compared to 24 percent in the rest of the eurozone (Monastiriotis

et al., 2013, p. 21). Many of them had given up full-time education to work in the booming construction industry.

Because unemployment unfolded so rapidly after the financial crash, thousands of families found themselves suddenly unable to make their monthly mortgage repayments. Between 2008 and 2012 more than 400,000 mortgage foreclosures were initiated in Spain (De Weerdt and Garcia, 2016, p. 3). By 2016, Spanish banks were the biggest landlords in the country because the comprehensive collapse of the real estate industry itself had left millions of properties on the banks' accounts. The specific features of the legal landscape also meant that homeowners were not only expropriated and evicted upon non-payment, but were also bound to the remaining mortgage debt for the rest of their lives (De Weerdt and Garcia, 2016, p. 4). This could happen after only one month of non-payment. Moreover, interest rates on arrears were hitting 30% before being brought under legislative control in 2013.

The housing crisis in the Irish and Spanish media

The way that the media represents homelessness and the problematic aspects of this portrayal is the subject of much academic interest (Campbell and Reeves 1989; Iyengar 1991; Devereux 1998; Hodgetts et al., 2005; Mao et al., 2012; Feantsa, 2014; Caeiro and Gonçalves 2015). And while this present study does not examine patterns in mainstream media reporting or reader commentary on the homelessness crises, political economy and discourse analytic approaches are telling. Devereux (2015, p. 261) criticises the mainstream media's persistent 'human interest' approach to homelessness as perpetuating 'sentimental' and 'hackneyed' understandings of homelessness. As the media 'occupy a privileged and powerful position in influencing public knowledge', he charges that the media's failure to tackle structural causes of homelessness in favour of human-interest stories results in 'short-term public responses' such as charity donations and volunteering.

Henry Silke (2015) carried out a discourse analysis of *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* newspapers' treatment of the topic of housing in Ireland in the period just before and just after property prices began to fall in 2007. Like Devereux (2015), one of his main arguments is that the media has the power to frame an issue of concern to all members of the

population but do so with a clear bias towards sectoral interests. Taking the role of the media in a democratic society to be one of 'watchdog', where 'objective reporters' critique information, question sources and unearth hidden detail, Silke found the Irish media severely lacking (Silke, 2015, p. 9). '[H]ousing was primarily looked at from the point of view of the market rather than society' (Silke, 2015, p. 8). The following points summarise his findings (Silke, 2015, pp. 6–8):

- Editors placed housing stories more frequently in the business and advertising sections of the papers than the societal sections
- In sourcing information for articles, journalists used sources connected to property and finance industries were more common than homebuyers or renters – out of 800 articles only one ventured to offer the (critical) view of a tenant
- The greatest source across the sections is made up of estate agents, mainly as advertorial, however, generally unaccompanied by perspectives from consumer, public interest or societal sources
- Representatives of political parties that call for non-market solutions to housing make up 9% of sources
- Users, or people who buy properties to live in rather than to earn wealth from, make up only 2% of sources and appear in only 2% of articles
- In accordance with 'exchange value' (the value of a property for landlords and investors), the property and finance industry sources make up 43% of all sources and appears in 44% of all articles

Silke observes that 'statements from sources in private industry are generally reported as fact with little or no critique', there is 'a lack of independent or investigative journalism' and a generally 'captured press' (Silke, 2015, pp. 7–8). The tone is 'aspirational and advertorial', the 'key issue is market stability', not 'affordability' (Silke, 2015, pp. 7–8). There is some acknowledgement in the news sections that many people cannot afford to buy a home on the open market, but tenants' perspectives are completely missing. The prospect of state supported housing is condemned in neoliberal terms as 'interference' in the market (Silke, 2015, p. 8). Exceptions notwithstanding, he concludes that 'newspapers did not act in accordance with the

overall public interest in mind but rather narrow sectional and economistic interests', or 'class-based interest' (Silke, 2015, p. 10). The effect of such one-sided treatment is that housing in the Irish media is treated unquestioningly as a commodity whose main purpose is to generate wealth, not to provide shelter, security and protection to all members of society.

Alonso Belmonte (2019) carried out a Critical Discourse Analysis of the way that *El País* represented '*desahucios*' or forced evictions in a selection of extracts drawn from its 2014 online coverage of the housing crisis. She was specifically interested in the different ways that emotion was being used in 'broadsheet' newspaper reporting and how journalists rely on the emotions of external sources (victims of evictions for example) for the 'purpose of building public belief about specific social groups' (Alonso Belmonte, 2019, p. 338). One aspect of her findings is that when news stories construe 'villains' of the housing crisis these are recurrently presented as 'non-human' organisations or institutions like a Town Hall or a bank; these are often represented as behaving negatively and thus question marks are inferred about the propriety of this behaviour from the reporter or the newspapers' perspective (Alonso Belmonte, 2019, p. 345). Meanwhile the victims of the eviction crisis are consistently portrayed as powerless and motionless. This is achieved by the extensive use of the passive voice or discussion of material processes in the past participle. One headline in September 2014 captured her point succinctly: *Disabled, abandoned and evicted*. Often the victims of evictions are described as silent but when they are quoted, emotional quotes predominate (Alonso Belmonte, 2019, p. 347). Thus, critical analysis reveals that the housing crises in Ireland and Spain are often represented in the mainstream media through a particular lens, one which the authors suggest side-lines both the complex issues causing the crises and the difficult and multi-layered personal experiences of those facing the most hardship.

By sketching such a detailed picture of the housing crises in Ireland and Spain, as well as some analysis of the media discourses surrounding them, I hope to have conveyed the mounting sense of urgency, struggle and political debate that configured the socio-political backdrop of this research. Through this context and through the newspaper articles themselves, the themes of housing and homelessness were central to my discussions with the research participants; housing was very much part of *what* we talked about, as much as it was a central theme in each of their own lives. However, to stress the point, the main questions guiding this research

concern the *how* of reading online newspaper comments, not the experience of housing or even reading *about* housing in the press *per se*. For this research, housing is a contextual rather than a thematic concern and takes a secondary role as a point of discussion in the empirical chapters. Nonetheless, the picture I have sketched here, should provide a foundation for understanding the brief but important references that are made to the crises in the later chapters.

One way through this thesis

This thesis is divided into nine chapters. In this introductory chapter I have offered an overview of how the newspaper comment is generally understood, a review of its definition in internet studies and a short genealogy of in-text commentary extending from Homeric scholarship. I have indicated briefly how the comment is approached in media studies pointing out some of the gaps and theoretical problems that my own work targets by way of its phenomenological and hermeneutic commitments. I have also offered a detailed overview of the housing crises in Ireland and Spain as the social, cultural and historical context of this study.

The next chapter presents a detailed review of the media and communications studies literature wherein the newspaper comment is investigated and analysed, but also of how the reader-text relationship has been assumed, critiqued and repositioned within these two traditions. I present a descriptive review of current and historical studies so as to provide a sense of the interpretative richness of the archive before I turn to interrogate a problematic dualism between object and subject that goes un-reflected in the ontological foundations of much of this work.

Chapter Three slows the pace slightly as I return to look in detail at the history of phenomenology and hermeneutics with a short detour through existentialism. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the foundations for the conceptual framework I develop for my own approach in the following chapters. Thus, I review the work of Husserl (2012), Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Gadamer (1975). I also unpack a number of issues in what became known as the Gadamer-Habermas debate and the Gadamer-Derrida non-debate so as to discuss and position my own work in relation to power, language and knowledge production.

Chapter Four maps out the implications of an interpretative phenomenology for the purposes of a qualitative inquiry focussed on the digital every day. In this chapter I build a conceptual framework out of *meaning, practices, emotions, the lived body* and *simple reading,* unpacking and adapting them as I go. The second half of this chapter deals with the methodological dilemmas this framework generates.

Chapter Five is a review of the research as I conducted it in practice and on the ground in Ireland, Spain, England and Australia with the four participants Maggie, Alice, Jedser and Lola. I call this work an existential investigation following a number of Max van Manen's (2016) guidelines for a well-structured yet sensitive and open qualitative method. This chapter moves through the formulation of the research question, the development of an auto-hermeneutic, issues of sampling, interviewing, observing, transcribing and finally hermeneutic analysis and questions of validity.

Chapter Six, Seven and Eight comprise the hermeneutic interpretations I developed from my analysis of the Research Dialogues. Each chapter represents one of the essential 'cluster themes' that emerged from this analysis and is organised by an exploration of the meaning of the 'subthemes' from which it was constituted (van Manen, 2016; Smith, 2003). Chapter Six presents an interpretation of each participants' everyday media practices, from checking the headlines at the office, to scrolling through the news on their phone to working slowly from the back to the front of a newspaper. I develop a phenomenological understanding of the patterns visible across these practices through Merleau-Ponty's figure-ground thesis (1962). Chapter Seven is structured around the discovery of a striking contrast in the Research Dialogues between the nature of the participants' responses to the newspaper articles and their responses to the reader comments (Iser, 1993; Rosenblatt, 2016). Here, I draw on research in comic book studies to develop an understanding of the role of white space and para-textual structure for interpreting fragmented texts. Chapter Eight looks at the phenomenologically important theme of intersubjectivity. I call this chapter 'Encountering the Other' and within it I develop an interpretation of how each participant encountered the presence or absence of the authors of the media texts that we read together. Again, a contrast emerges where the professional journalist is experienced as absent while the comment-poster is experienced as

present to the reader. This presence/absence structure conditions the experience as one of availability and dialogue or of unavailability and exclusion.

In the concluding chapter I bring my findings into discussion with a range of literature where similar themes, interpretations and theories have been broached and analysed. This chapter looks at Marshal McLuhan's 'macro' Medium Theory (1967) and at the 'micro' perspective of Digital Literacy Studies as well as issues of ethics and intersubjectivity online. Finally, in order to bring the themes of the three chapters together and consider their interrelatedness, I return to one of the key theoretical underpinnings in this research. For this task I consider what reading the online comment can tell us about the discourses of dialogue that hover persistently around the scholarship on the internet since the early days of cyber-euphoria. Using Gadamer's fusion of horizons as a theoretical lens, I show that while my participants' experiences demonstrate a much more personal involvement in a 'dialogic' encounter with reader comments, and a much less meaningful experience in the 'monologic' encounter with the article, none of Gadamer's central principles for dialogue such as risking one's own meanings, self-questioning and using the Other's horizon for new understandings are present. In concluding the chapter, I consider the further questions that derive from the interpretations in this thesis, the methodological implications for media studies more broadly, and reflect on the limitations of my research method.

The primary contribution of this study stems from the paucity of research into the situated experience of reading online newspaper comments. There is simply no existing research on this aspect of the comment and my work gladly breaks this new ground. In developing a *phenomenological* understanding of the experience, I aim specifically to contribute to a thoroughly detailed ontology of the comment for others wishing to turn to it in the future. The empirical data and interpretations herein also contribute to the emerging qualitative literature on the broader phenomenon of 'being online' where non-verbal practices of listening and learning are gradually being identified and re-evaluated. The particular synthesis of phenomenology, hermeneutics and practice theory in this research has allowed me to devise a conceptual framework that anchors the more experimental research methods required for a comprehensively digital age, especially for the purposes of a contemporary media studies where textual interpretation and the experience of digital objects are intimately intertwined.

This framework contributes specifically to the practice literature in media studies by foregrounding the experiential logic in everyday media practices. In the literature chapter, my 'Four Themes in Comment Studies' offers a novel organisation of the current research on the comment by bringing trends and patterns together in a way that highlights important oversights in the literature. Overall however, the findings in my empirical chapters on the nature of the encounter with the Other in reading newspaper comments, as well as the image of the white space in the fragmented structure of comment threads as a conversational 'trigger', constitute the most important contributions of this study. The interpretations I offer of these phenomena contribute to the literature on the deliberative nature of peer-to-peer engagement online by challenging normative evaluations of the democratic quality of alternative media and by bringing attention to the non-representational aspects of the news reading experiences for newspaper studies.

In the next chapter I present a detailed review of the extant literature on the newspaper comment and an examination of how the reader-text relationship has been treated in the two related fields of media and communication studies.

CHAPTER 2 The Comment and the Reader in Media and Communication Studies

This chapter offers an overview of the different ways that the reader-text relation has been approached in media and communication studies, both historically and in the contemporary scholarship. I begin by looking at current investigations into the newspaper comment and at the different themes and concepts that are emerging in this relatively new arena. I offer a tentative critique of these comment studies and contextualise them within the broader Participation Paradigm that has come to define much of the scholarly interest in user-generated content and the internet. The second half of the chapter examines the tradition of Audience Reception wherein the reader-text relation has been afforded the most direct attention in media and communication studies. Following this examination, I critique the philosophical underpinnings of reception studies which, in their rush to counter media studies' inordinate focus on the text, end up over-emphasising the rational, interpretative actions of a reader-subject. Before concluding, I introduce my own critique of the object-subject dualism underpinning media and communication studies and point to the various ways this dualism negates the lived reading experience and its imbrication with everyday settings and readers' embodied, practical ways of knowing. Finally, I signpost how other researchers are beginning to challenge the subject-object paradigm (Oliver, 1981) in both Practice Theory and media anthropology and position my own work in relation to these new streams of study.

Four themes in newspaper comment research

The recent advent of the online newspaper comment means that the scholarly examination of the phenomenon is barely out of its infancy. For this reason, I decided to carry out a thematic analysis of the extant research to help to identify the key concerns and approaches that are beginning to coalesce. Four major strands of work stand out. I have labelled the first two strands 'Uncivil Deliberation' and 'Managing the Mayhem'. In both cases, democratic deliberation and the quality of public debate online are key concerns, but these are approached from either a 'theory of democracy' or a 'newspaper studies' point of view. Uncivil Deliberation studies arose after the first decade of the 21st century when the practice of readers commenting on online newspaper articles was gaining momentum. We have already seen the results of the English newspaper *The Guardian's* analysis of their own reader comments (see the Preface). In the academic context, researchers were also responding to the mounting anecdotal evidence that much online commentary was characterised by 'vulgarity' and 'vitriol'.

Uncivil Deliberation

Coe, Kenski and Rains (2014, p. 660) tracked digital 'incivility' across 6,400 comments on the US newspaper *Arizona Daily Star* over three weeks in 2011. They defined incivility as 'features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics' (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). In a content analysis of the comments, they coded each of their units into categories such as 'name-calling', 'lying' or 'vulgarity', (Coe et al., 2014, p. 673). Name-calling was the most common form of incivility in the newspaper comments and more than one in five out of every comment was uncivil. They also found that the occasional poster, rather than the regular one was more likely to be uncivil (Coe et al., 2014).

Responding to the same concerns about incivility, Santana (2011) turned more directly to the media topics that elicit the most vitriol. He analysed the comments posted under news articles regarding immigration laws in three southern state newspapers in the US and found words like 'cockroaches,' 'locusts,' 'scumbags' and 'vermin' were commonly used to describe Latin American immigrants, together with some comment posters calling for violence against them

(Santana, 2015, p. 103). He concludes that where there are few restrictions on what can be said or who can join the conversation, the social equality and democracy that the internet promised, is in fact, for some ethnic minorities, the first casualty (Santana, 2015).

Together, Coe, Kenski and Rains (2014) and Santana (2011; 2015), offer a glimpse of the kind of findings that researchers concerned about the opportunities for online debate and the effects of incivility are generally encountering. Jayachandran (2015) considered online commentary on the topic of rape in India; Steinfeldt, Foldtz and Kaladow (2010) looked at racial attitudes towards American Indians in online newspaper forums; Musolff (2015) examined the metaphors used in mainstream and alternative media around the topic of immigration in the UK: each study found that on the internet, incivility grows and intensifies at unprecedented rates (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011). In democracy theory, Papacharissi (2004) and Shapiro (1999) identified the sharing of ideas in a respectful or civil manner as one of the central ideals of democracy stretching from Ancient Greece to modern times. On this view, incivility affects trust in, and legitimacy of politics, negatively impacting open-mindedness (Hwang et al., 2008).

Most of these investigations into the online newspaper comment also therefore form part of broader theoretical debates around the internet and the extended modes of democratic deliberation it offers, especially to groups of people historically excluded from power structures. Crouch (2012, p. 2) states: 'Democracy thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people to actively participate through discussion and autonomous organisations, in shaping the agenda of public life, and when they are actively using these opportunities.' Fraser (1994, p. 84) describes 'subaltern counterpublics' as discursive arenas 'where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'. Jenkins and Thorburn (2004, p. 2) argue that the internet 'is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority'. The Participation Paradigm is the body of work in internet and media studies that explores the potentials and actualities of 'subaltern' democratic deliberation online. The approach of authors like Noci, Domingo, Masip, Micó and Ruiz (2011) exemplifies this work. The authors carried out a discourse analysis of 36,000 comments drawn from six

Catalan online newspapers in a two-month period in 2009. Their aim was to establish whether newspaper commentary was indeed extending democracy. Like much of the theoretical scholarship on participative media, their work was premised on the normative principles outlined by Jürgen Habermas (1974) in his elaboration of the concept of the public sphere.

The public sphere is the realm in social life where private individuals come together to deliberate about 'matters of interest' in relation to the activity of the state (Habermas et al., 1974, p. 49). A true public sphere must be free from corporate and state domination, access must be guaranteed to all and the opinions it forms must be translatable into policy via democratic legislative structures such as elections (Habermas et al., 1974, p. 49). Together with the public sphere, Habermas' theory of communicative action argues that a human capacity for rationality is inbuilt in language and that this capacity creates a real potential for free, critical reflection on public matters. Furthermore, rational-critical communication tends towards a mutual search for understanding and consensus in the public sphere (Habermas, 2015). Using Habermas' requisites for rational dialogue, Noci, Domingo, Masip, Micó and Ruiz (2012, p. 48) used guidelines like the following to evaluate the democratic quality of the debate happening in the comments:

1. Participants should not contradict themselves
2. An argument applied to a subject should be also applied to other similar subjects
3. Different participants should not use the same expression to define different things
4. Participants should only say what they believe
5. If new ideas are proposed, their relationship with the issue at hand should be explained

The authors then conclude emphatically: 'The discourse analysis demonstrates that comments in news are not fostering democratic dialogue. They hardly meet any of the Habermasian principles' (Noci et al., 2012, p. 62). They cite a lack of respect for other users, a lack of diversity and a lack of 'mature' arguments as the main reasons that newspaper comments do not qualify as a healthy, deliberative public sphere. The authors also argued that the newspapers themselves do not demonstrate commitment to their own criteria for respectful debate in the comments. The authors call for a pre-publication model of moderation whereby each comment would be assessed to make sure it complied with the ideals set out by the newspaper for its

online commentary platform. Nonetheless, they also recognise the business impracticality of such a model and hence express a deep concern for the future of newspaper comments. Taken altogether, the findings of the 'incivility' and 'deliberation' research are indeed stark. Taken at face value, the findings of 'incivility' and 'deliberation' research are indeed stark.

Managing the Mayhem

'Managing the Mayhem' is the label that I use to identify the stream of work in media and newspaper studies that has emerged in the wake of these incivility studies. Research revolving around this theme is currently being published in newspaper journals and amounts to a quasi-concerted effort by journalism scholars to prescribe editorial guidelines for dealing with the incivility outlined in the previous work. They look in detail at the demographics of online comment posters (Meyer and Carey, 2015); they try to find a digital balance between opening up public debate and curtailing verbal 'free for alls' (Nielsen, 2012); they offer methodological advice for summarising the vast data caches that comments provide (Llewellyn et al., 2014) and suggest digital solutions for curbing hate speech such as in restricting poster anonymity (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). For the purposes of understanding where abusive comments come from and how to tackle them, this is important work. However, there is also a serious risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water. I hope to show in my own research that there is many a lesson to be learned from reader comments that editorial and business boards can use to develop more meaningful engagement with their readership, especially in a global atmosphere where online news media are struggling, both quantitively and qualitatively.

Comment as Public Opinion

The theme that characterises most of the remaining research on the newspaper comment considers the *comment as public opinion* and does so with a much more pragmatic eye. In these studies, the comment is operationalised as a new and rich source of data for exploring public opinion on a huge variety of issues from climate change (Koteyko et al., 2013) to domestic violence (Brossoie et al., 2012). In each case the comments are positioned as a naturally occurring source of public opinion on particular issues and the comment posters are presented as a sample of the public. These studies differ from the incivility and management studies in

so far as the practice of commenting online, democracy and the role of the press are not usually problematised in the research questions. Instead the findings are offered as a sample of public opinion on a subject matter of concern to the researcher and often point to recommendations for those working in, for example, environmental activism or in promoting public healthcare policies. In all three strands of work, from Uncivil Deliberation to Managing the Mayhem and Comment as Public Opinion there is one glaring absence, however. Although each makes their own explicit claims about readers, participants or even the public, the research itself begins and ends with the text - the comment itself. None of the above studies acknowledge that, not only do the numbers of people posting represent a miniscule fraction of those actually online - surfing, reading, listening, viewing and *not* posting - but that even just trying to understanding posters themselves is vastly underserved by examining the short, de-contextualised snippets of their online commentary.

Lurking

One area in which there is a concerted effort to understand non-posting internet users specifically, is in the academic literature on the management of online communities (Beaudoin, 2002; Nonnecke et al., 2006; Preece et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2014). In these studies, an online community is most commonly understood as comprising the internet users who register to join an online group that discusses a specific issue. Typical examples of these groups are illness support groups; education, technical or professional knowledge sharing groups; UGC platforms like *Wikipedia* and social networking services like *Twitter* and *Instagram*. However, a number of these studies also consider an online community in much broader terms and include anyone who reads or consumes any form of user-generated content. Throughout this literature there is implicit reference to the phenomenon known in cyber-folklore as the 'One Percent Rule' or the 90-9-1 principle (van Mierlo, 2014). As I previously mentioned, this rule states that 90% of internet users surf the internet but do not contribute any new content or share existing content actively, 9% contribute in a minor or intermittent way, and only 1% of all internet users constitute the population of 'active' participants who create the overwhelming bulk of the (non-professional) material on the internet. Posting questions, answering questions, commenting, sharing information, links and references are all considered part of the practice of posting. This means that 90% of internet users are 'lurking'. 'Lurkers' is the unhappy term

used in these studies to describe the members of an online community who read, browse or surf through UGC online, but do not themselves post, comment or otherwise 'actively' contribute to the discussions. In the case of newspaper comments, lurkers are the readers of online newspaper comments who do not themselves post any comments.

One of the most cited studies on lurking was carried out by, Andrews, Nonnecke, Preece and Voutour (2004). The top five reasons that their participants gave for not posting to the group of which they were members were the following (Preece et al., 2004, pp. 210–215):

1. I do not feel the need to post because I get what I want from reading
2. I want to get to know the group before I start posting
3. It is helpful to listen as well as to post
4. I encountered a software problem
5. I do not feel like I fit into the dynamics of the group

Many early studies on the lurker phenomenon focused on trying to improve experiences for online communities and stated increased participation as a goal. In this work, lurkers were labelled 'free riders.' Van Mierlo (2014, p. no pagination) makes the following conclusion in a study on digital health social networks:

> Lurkers generated limited or no network value. Although Lurkers may benefit from observing interactions between Superusers and Contributors [those contribute most of the content and those who contribute sparingly], they do not generate network effects, nor do they contribute to the network growth.

Thus, lurkers were of little value. However, through qualitative research on the benefits of the internet for education, researchers (Arnold and Paulus, 2010; Beaudoin, 2002; Dennen, 2008) found that students learn from visiting, reading and reflecting on the material that is posted by their peers and teachers in an online forum. Thus, non-posting students learn 'vicariously' (Arnold and Paulus, 2010). Likewise, Edelmann (2013) argues for lurking to be understood as an active and valuable form of internet behaviour.

A critique of comment studies

In summary then, the ongoing research into the online newspaper comment can be divided into four primary themes concerning 1) the problems incivility pose for democracy online; 2) the search for a means to manage this incivility for online newspapers; 3) the comment as data on public opinion and 4) the vacuous/vicarious practice of lurking. The first part of this chapter has presented an overview of the key questions and concerns that characterise this research. However, in reviewing the theoretical and methodological frameworks that support these themes, several interrelated problems stand out. The first problem is an old problem. In the research on lurkers the positivist assumptions and quantitative survey methods involved are open to the standard critique from the interpretivist perspective. Sonia Livingstone (2015, p. 1) expresses frustration at how communication research persists with a methodology that masks the 'audience's 'agency, diversity, life contexts and interests'. She argues that avoiding in-depth engagement with the actual people who read and use the internet amounts to a 'symbolic annihilation' of the audience and its members (Tuchman in Livingstone, 2015, p. 2). My own criticism mirrors this reproach and I offer a more comprehensive evaluation of mass communication studies once I have sketched an overview of their contribution to our understanding of the media-reader encounter in the second half of this chapter.

The next problem with the current research, however, rests on what Crawford (2009, p. 526) calls the 'glorification of voice'. Both Fraser (1990) and Habermas (1974) describe the opportunity for speaking, deliberating, reasoning and debating as the key feature of healthy democracies. But since the cyber-euphoria around the inception of the internet, Crawford (2009) argues that a more one-dimensional conception of voice has taken hold. In the early days of the internet, so-called techno-libertarians saw the ability for individuals to express themselves freely as society's ultimate achievement (Barlow, 2019). To voice yourself online is to express yourself, to participate, to speak truth to power. Crawford (2009, p. 526) claims that this rapture with voice has occasioned a crude correlation between speaking-up and *being* online and she takes lurker studies to task for their inability to discern the more potent and dynamic activity of 'listening'. Crawford (2009) argues that in reframing 'being' online as 'listening' a much more richly contoured set of reciprocal and dynamical practices begin to

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appear. Elsewhere, Couldry (2006, p. 6) calls listening online 'reciprocal, embodied' and 'always in an intersubjective space of perception'.

As my own research evolved, I began to appreciate this reconceptualization of online participation and discovered that different modes of *listening* and *being* offered rich and nuanced metaphors for what my own participant-listeners were up to. Crawford (2009) goes on to describe the different modes of listening that she has discerned in practices around the internet and highlights how users shift attention between 'background' and 'foreground' listening in what might be described as distinctly '(post)modern' competencies and subjectivities. In my own work, the notion of listening threw light on the intersubjectivity of the encounter between the participants and the newspaper comment.[4]

In the use of surveys, lurker studies foreground information gathering, needs and motivations and in doing so fail to recognise the much more subtle but arguably more powerful experiences happening in the background. While Crawford (2009) targets the lurker research with her critique, I argue that it could be equally applied to all of the other text-focussed comment studies. These studies analyse the comment and then make or imply claims about the posters *as* the readership, and sometimes even about the public at large. Not only is this a considerable leap when we bear in mind the 90-9-1 figure, but the comments themselves can tell us relatively little even about those who do post.

This final gripe with the current research on the newspaper comment is thus an ontological one and reckons mainly with the Uncivil Deliberation and the Comment as Public Opinion studies. When I outline the theoretical framework of my own study in Chapter 4, this problem will become more obvious. For now, I want to highlight how a reliance on textual analysis of the

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[4] Despite my agreement with Couldry and Crawford here, I continue to use the terms 'reader' and 'reading' throughout this thesis (where I don't use the word participant) because it always felt the most intuitive term to use when interacting with the research participants and asking them to focus on the 'practice of reading' the comments. Furthermore, to differentiate between the non-posting readers and the posting readers of online newspapers, I use the term 'comment-posters' or just posters when referring specifically to those readers who also post. Any time I use the word comment, it is always to be understood as referring to the online newspaper reader-comments posted in response to an article. I try to avoid using the word comment in this thesis unless having this specific meaning.

comment as a means of understanding either the reader or the public, or even the reading experience itself, rests on the fallacy that discourse is extra-corporeal (Bourdieu, 1993). The comment research that makes claims about public opinion and reader *experience* after analysis only of comment *texts* has missed the fundamental meaning of meaning. Bourdieu (1993, p. 73) wrote: '… the body is […] constantly mingled with all the knowledge it reproduces and this knowledge never has the objectivity it derives from objectification in writing and the consequent freedom with respect to the body.' Therefore, an exclusive focus on a digital text like a newspaper comment without spending time observing, participating and talking with the writer of that text, stymies the possibility of developing a deep, nuanced understanding of the meaning of those comments, let alone someone else's experience of reading it.

One of the aims of my research will therefore be to understand the experience of reading the online newspaper comment and of 'listening' online by observing, being with and talking to the participants in their everyday situations on and around the internet. With an ethnographic concern for thick descriptions of the everyday, the 'data' in this case is produced through a firm decentring of the media text and its concomitant focus on semantic content. I will elaborate on the difference between my own approach and other textual and qualitative approaches in my critique of reception studies later in this chapter. At this point, I think it is useful to situate these newspaper comment studies in the wider Participation Paradigm in media and internet studies and the theoretical debates that characterise its development. In the following section, the comment is considered as just one manifestation of the many billions of user-generated content flickering daily across the internet.

The Internet and the Participation Paradigm

The Participation Paradigm in media and internet studies is premised on the recognition that the internet and its related technologies have provided a multitude of ways for individuals to communicate, deliberate, share knowledge and collaborate across space, time and devices, and on a scale never before seen in human history (Livingstone, 2013; Gurevitch et al., 2009; Castells, 2007). Part and parcel of this recognition is a belief much like Habermas' that peer-to-peer communication, coupled with new and proliferating platforms for cheap DIY media-

production, brings democratic participation to sectors of the global population whose views have rarely been given a voice in history (Gurevitch et al., 2009). Moreover, the paradigm posits that these voices are now posing a serious challenge to established political hierarchies and media gate-keepers (Livingstone, 2013; Gurevitch et al., 2009). The 'audience' in mass media studies of the radio, television and film was a passive and easily influenced audience, vulnerable to ideological manipulation and more or less incapable of critically appraising what it consumed. In the 1980s, empirical research {Citation} shone a new light on the furtive techniques that individuals were employing to subvert the media in the home. With the internet and its opportunities for participation, the Participation Paradigm asks if grassroots political subversion might move from living room politics onto a new and vast public sphere, and if so, what the consequences might be.

Reasons for optimism around online commentary

The presupposition underpinning the most optimistic perspectives in the Participation Paradigm is that social and economic progress is generated by extending participation in the public sphere to the discourses that are normally marginalised (Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1989; Gramsci, 1971). Even in commonsense terms we tend to regard more participation as a good thing, as more in line with maximal ideals of democracy and egalitarianism (Carpentier et al., 2013). With the ideal of the public sphere in mind, authors began to ask if the internet was providing a new space for free, egalitarian and rational-critical deliberation between individuals outside of state and corporate domination and beyond the bourgeois elite, if in effect, the internet was enhancing democracy.

Besides Noci et al ((2012)Benkler (2006), Burns (2008), Jenkins (2006) Papacharissi (2010) and Shirky (2009) represent some of the most celebratory voices regarding the democratic affordances of the internet. They have highlighted how people can now produce as well as consume media content and in so doing exponentially increase the amount of 'freedom in the world' (Shirky, 2009, p. 172). Through blogs, social networking sites, microblogs, wikis, content sharing sites and other discussion platforms like newspaper comments, non-professionals can bypass the institutional media, market and culture gatekeepers, get direct access to decision-making dynamics, extend freedom of speech and bring about 'epochal

change' (Shirky, 2009, p. 304). In 2006, Jay Rosen famously pronounced the death of the audience and the birth of the citizen activist and since then microblogs like *Twitter* have been widely acclaimed for their role in political transformation (Rosen, 2006), (see for example the positive assessment of the role of *Twitter* in the Arab Spring by Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney and Pearce (2011)).

Social movements and protest groups can build solidarity - for example #MeToo - while off-line protest can benefit from online organisational tools like Google Maps and encrypted messaging. From personal experience, the website *¡Democracia Real Ya!* (Real Democracy Now) was an indispensable source of information during the *Ocupa* - the Occupy movement's street protests in Spain. I visited the website daily from my desk at a call centre on the outskirts of Barcelona between calls selling Apple computers to British customers. The feed the website offered allowed me to see what was happening more or less live at the main protest site just three miles from me in Plaza Catalonia where I would head as soon as my shift finished. On the day that the local riot police removed the last protesters I watched the feed as it was updated every few minutes with video clips of the violent scenes that unfolded. Without a doubt, the online presence and collaborated feel of the *¡Democracia Real Ya!* allowed me to gain information on the daily happenings and planned tactics, to feel a sense of solidarity with other protesters and to develop a strong critique of the state's response. The Spanish sociologist and theorist of communication and social change, Manuel Castells was a regular speaker at the talks and assemblies in Plaza Catalonia that summer. His book *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Castells, 2015) captured the sense of hope that those present felt as we worked to build a critical mass against austerity and capitalism on the streets of Spain at the time. Castells has repeatedly stressed the new and supercharged effects on social change that the internet and 'rhizomatic' online networks can have (Castells, 2015). There are, however, a number of cautionary voices in the participation choir who would seek to temper such glowing reports.

Reasons for caution about the internet's relation to democracy

These more critical voices are not so much challenging the positive evaluation of users' own experiences like my own, or even the presuppositions of public sphere theory. Instead they are asking: Is this really what the internet is doing? For some time this small cohort of media

theorists have treated claims of cyber-euphoria with caution, bringing traditional concerns for the 'management of meaning' into conversation with the sociological and political problematics of participation, democracy and the public sphere (Dean, 2005; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009). In political science, researchers have been looking at the empirical evidence of the 'effects' of the internet on political participation in the USA and found that rather than heralding a new age of political activity, the internet is reproducing and reinforcing existing social biases - those already politically active stay active or become more active, and vice versa. This reinforcing aspect of the internet has become commonly known as the echo-chamber or polarizing effect (Gibson et al., 2005). Like *The Guardian* study (Gardiner et al., 2016), a number of quantitative studies carried out in the UK found that barriers that women faced in the real world were mirrored in the virtual world, (although this did not seem to be the case for people with lower education and socio-economic status, who were more active online (Gibson et al., 2005)). More rhetorically Keen (2011, p. 504) laments the demise of professional journalism in 'the telling of common stories, the formation of communal myths, the shared sense of participating in the same daily narrative of life.'

With a more explicitly critical lens, writers like Fuchs (2014), Andrejevic (2012), Morozov (2009) and Smythe (2006) have engaged theories of power and ideology to uncover an even darker side of online media participation. Andrejevic (2012) for example looks at how media corporations use detailed surveillance techniques to monitor individuals' online activities for the purposes of selling advertising or for providing personal data to police and military sources. Political economists highlight how algorithms are designed to 'herd' online discussions in ways that are not linked to their political significance but more aligned to the capitalist logic of profit. If online debates are funnelled around the internet according to a logic that targets as many potential consumers as possible, then a user's perception that she is involved in some sort of organic development of a critical mass around a subject matter – saving the polar bear for example – is not what it seems (Andrejevic, 2012). Moreover, Morozov (2009, p. xiii) argues that online petitions and protest groups primarily function to allow us to evade the bigger sacrifices and commitments of real-world participation like door-to-door campaigning or protesting. Smythe (2006) reminds us that immensely powerful corporations like *Google* and *Facebook* send their advertising around the internet by piggybacking on the 'fun' labour of the 'produsers' who generate the content that gets shared and disseminated, without paying them.

With a political economy lens we also unearth the unequal distribution of access to the internet between people within western societies and between those societies and other parts of the world (Ragnedda and Muschert, 2013). Worse still, we discover the slave-like conditions of the workers who mine for the raw materials needed for digital technology and of those workers who assemble the devices upon which claims for the internet and expanded democracy depend (Fuchs, 2014). In sum, the internet and its related technologies can be seen as either the engine of a global democratic juggernaut or as the glittering flotsam bobbing about atop deeper social and economic currents of violence and injustice.

So, where does the newspaper comment come in all of this? For researchers concerned with expanding democracy, the online newspaper comment is but one manifestation of the internet's myriad opportunities for the global 'subaltern' to challenge dominant discourses. And this optimistic assumption was a major factor in my own decision to focus on the newspaper comment. However, problems like incivility and inequality of access imply that in practice, there is a mirroring of offline domination and exploitation, problems which the comment can only but reproduce. My own work recognises the broader issues of political economy and social domination in terms of the internet but given the direct-experience focus of my approach, they fall largely outside of the scope of this research. Likewise, this work side-steps incivility because, while it represents a particularly noisy corner of the internet, it is only one small enclave in terms of participant numbers. Finally, my own philosophical commitment to the everyday involves an explicit rejection of the normative implications of public sphere studies. By beginning with principles for democracy and judging online activity in accordance with them, public sphere theorists are impeded from ever discerning the ontological promise of peer-to-peer connection online. Consequently, the starting point for this present research is with quotidian media experiences and the everyday, but often 'subterranean', significances in the encounter between readers and online newspaper comments (Harman, 2011, p. 24). In the next chapter I unpack the theoretical and methodological implications of this approach in more detail, but in what follows I give an overview of the body of work in media studies that has done most of the heavy lifting in drawing our attention to the everyday experiences of media 'audiences'. In this account of Reception Studies, I highlight how my own work both draws on this rich tradition but equally diverges from some its principal presuppositions.

A brief history of audience reception studies

Audience reception studies refers to a collection of approaches in media and cultural studies that bring the active interpretation of the reader, viewer or listener to centre stage in understanding the media. In centring the reader, it finds her situated within her local setting, her community and wider sociocultural milieu. Here, interpretation refers to the way in which people make sense of their daily lives, the events, the texts and the other people around them (Livingstone and Das, 2013). A fundamental principle for reception studies is that the meaning of a text is not fixed or objective, something to be identified through formal, impersonal literary techniques, but rather is actualised in an interpretative process by a reader and while this always happens in a given context, likewise it is never 'innocent' (Freund, 2013, p. 10). Reception theory was first developed in Germany at the University of Konstanz. Its main aim was to challenge the text and author-centred approaches that dominated literary theory. Thinkers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Barthes, Fish and Eco all challenged the various modes of objectivity in their own fields. Heidegger and later Gadamer challenged the assumption in the tradition of hermeneutics that a decipherable objective meaning inhered within a text, stressing instead the role of a reader's own preunderstandings and traditions for the very possibility of interpretation. When French theorist Roland Barthes talked about the death of the author in 1967, he was marking the trend in literary theory where establishing the author's intentions could reveal the meaning of a text.

> '[…] a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination' (Barthes, 1989, p. 6).

Italian literary theorist Umberto Eco also gave much energy to the movement against text and author-centred interpretation. With terms like 'semiological guerrilla warfare' (Eco, 1986) he breathed much more revolutionary tones into the interpretative activities of readers. In the US, Stanley Fish (1980) gave the written sentence the status of an event; something which could

only happen with the participation of the reader and her experience as part of an interpretative community. Reader Response theory developed in the United States and drew on Fish's 'interpretative communities' to help to bring the shared norms and strategies people use for interpretation into relief (Livingstone and Das, 2013). But Wolfgang Iser (1993), working at the University of Konstanz stressed that Reception Theory differed from its American cousin because it focussed on the *process* of reception rather than on the 'response' of the reader or the 'effect' of the text. This is a point of detail that resonates with the approach in this present study, but I will return to it and to Iser later. Firstly, to the dominant paradigm in communication studies and the positivist ether that these hermeneutical heterodoxies were beginning to infiltrate.

Limited effects – The dominant paradigm in mass communications studies

During the post-war period mass communications studies were flourishing among social sciences departments in North American universities. In this theoretical context, the reader-text encounter was subsumed into a simple unidirectional transmission model. In this model a message was passed from the mass media – a newspaper or radio programme – to the reader or listener who received the meaning in the message unproblematically. In their own way, the social and political scientists developing this new path were responding to what they saw as the pessimistic outlook of another school of thought lurking on the periphery of American Dream sociology (Gurevitch et al., 1982). The exiled theorists Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer had painted a bleak picture of the society that greeted them on fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1940s. In trying to understand fascism in Europe and the failure of the workers' revolution predicted by Marx, they saw in the American 'culture industry', large-scale manipulation of the masses for the purposes of capitalism (Horkheimer et al., 2002).

Their description went something like this: The mass dissemination of capitalist ideology through films, books, radio and newspapers has succeeded in permeating people's everyday lives but presents them with only one possible version of the world; the constant reproduction of this version by the culture industry (mainly the media) ensnares them within 'the total power of capital' (Horkheimer et al., 2002, p. 94). While glossy representations of 'reality' enthral the movie-goer, the real conditions of existence are studiously repressed. Any sign of rebellion

on the fringes – they use Orson Wells as an example - is quickly subsumed by the whole; all value is reduced to profit and consumer needs are manufactured for them (Horkheimer et al., 2002). Other similarly pessimistic views were promulgated in the behavioural effects tradition, also in the US, but this time echoing more conservative concerns for the ill effects of TV violence on the viewing public (Bandura, 1978). In contrast, mainstream mass communications research was now asserting that the media had, in fact, quite limited effects on its audience, and this quickly became the dominant paradigm in US-based communication studies.

The 'limited effects' thesis emerged out of the quantitative investigations that were carried out on American audiences' voting decisions in the 1940s and 1950s. The two major studies that introduced and elaborated the thesis were *The People's Choice* by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) and *Personal Influence* by Katz and Lazarsfeld (Katz et al., 2017). Following detailed experiments carried out on samples of the voting electorate during the Roosevelt presidential campaign, the authors more or less ruled out the possibility that the media could directly affect people's decisions. Instead, the results pointed to an extra layer of influence between the voter and the media. The 'two-step flow' model that they introduced illustrated how a person's close social networks and communities mediated between them and the campaign messages of presidential candidates in US elections. In the rare event that a voter might change her mind, this decision was more than likely affected by a person close to her or an opinion leader in her community, rather than by exposure to media (Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995). These studies pointed more to a recalcitrant than to an actively interpreting audience, but the way it dismissed media influence as an object for study in the social sciences, and the faith it placed in positivist methodology to do so, came in for some criticism.

Gitlin (1978) denounced limited effects research for evading the complex and long-term effects of media exposure by focussing only on easy-to-measure short-term effects. In this way, he said, it ignored more fundamental problems of how the media construct reality to promote the *status quo*; something that was much more difficult to measure but which the findings of limited effects research could not contradict (Gitlin 1978). Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995, p. 5) summed up Gitlin's arguments simply: "'no change' is not at all the same thing as 'no effects'." Moreover, the behaviourist and psychological assumptions that underpinned much of the quantitative work in this area led later effects theorists like David Miller and Greg Philo

(1998) to criticise mass communications research for viewing human behaviour as measurable, as if it were a chemical or biological process and for entirely neglecting the meaning systems and sense-making that happens within cultural contexts and relationships. As part of the wider criticism of positivism, laboratory techniques, questionnaires and surveys as well as the presumed neutrality of the researchers themselves were also brought into question (Philo and Miller, 1998)

Uses and Gratifications

Another strand of work that began its life in the US and which is often linked to reception studies is Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974). U&G researchers responded to what they saw as a semantic bias in mass communications and shifted the focus from the media text to the audience's choice of media technology, choices which were in turn filtered through personality and context. Who chose to turn on the radio or read a newspaper and for what purposes (Ruggiero, 2000)? Participants in Herta Herzog's *On Borrowed Experience* (1941) described an array of 'gratifications' that using different media technologies and genres provided. For example, women listening to radio soaps said escapism or a sense of companionship motivated their choice of media and content (Herzog, 1941). For Herzog, the work highlighted how an individual's own active evaluations and expectations determined how useful a medium was to them and, like limited effects theorists, she offered this discerning, discriminating audience as a direct challenge to the passive audience thesis of the Frankfurt School. However, while U&G shares in a wider concern for technology, context and personal meanings, Livingstone and Das (2013) caution against linking the theory too closely to reception studies. Unlike the behaviourist underpinnings of limited effects theory, U&G is underpinned by a rationalist-cognitive psychology that asserts an active, engaged agent controlling their media choices and making decisions based on needs or goals (Livingstone and Das, 2013). Like the empiricist model in behaviourism, reception theorists view goal-directed cognitive activity as too abstract a theory for grasping the complex web of everyday life, society and culture in which media practices and interpretations are embedded.

Cultural studies and Encoding/Decoding

As hermeneutics and German reception aesthetics were being received by media and culture theorists in the rest of Europe, in England Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall were articulating what came to be known as British cultural studies. In terms of the mass media, cultural studies expressed a desire to move beyond the major theoretical blind spots in communications research and recognise instead the relationship between culture and society as one of the most important questions for the social sciences. British Cultural Studies,

> situated culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms served either to further social domination or to enable people to resist and struggle against domination. It analysed society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterised by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, and race, ethnic and national strata (Fenton, 2007, p. 16).

The term 'culture' set the work apart from mass communication studies by implying the study of an 'entire way of life' as opposed to one 'isolated segment of existence' (Carey 1995, p. 366). Newbold summarises 'critical' cultural studies in terms of this opposition to the 'liberal-pluralist' mass communications approach (1995, p. 328):

> [Cultural studies] assumed that the media as part of the culture industries did have important effects; but those were not short term and immediate, or at least they were not merely so, but were the contribution of media to popular consciousness through the language, symbolic and cultural codes in which the media framed the world, not as neutral organisations working to serve the public good in some kind of independent 'fourth estate' or 'watchdog' role, but as institutions embedded in existing patterns of social relations and, in common with all powerful institutions within a given social system, serving to reproduce the social relations in which their own are invested. Media work in this model is essentially ideological work, but to understand the media it is necessary to understand their place with reference to more extensive social and cultural codes from which they draw and to which they contribute.

Media and cultural studies became firmly established at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies where reception aesthetics come into contact with feminist, Marxist, postcolonial and post-structural theories. At the heart of the centre in the 1970s, Stuart Hall spearheaded a total reconfiguration of the text-audience relationship (Kitzinger, 2004). Hall drew directly on the work of Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971) and his concept of hegemony – a dominant but more contestable form of Marx's ideology. This approach constituted a less-totalising account of capitalist society than the Frankfurt School's 'culture industry' and allowed space for reader activity in contesting ruling ideologies. The admission of the reader into text interpretation also formed part of Hall's criticism of the influence of structuralism and screen theory in British film studies at the time. Screen theory offered complex theoretical accounts of subject positioning and fragmentation when talking about Hollywood film in the 1960s but had entirely neglected the empirical work of talking to the film-goer in favour of a privileged reading by the academic critic. Nonetheless, Hall retained a focus on social reproduction in his own models and linked reader meanings to positions within relations of social class.

The seminal theoretical text in the early days of cultural studies (often called media studies because of the centrality of media to modern culture) was Hall's essay written originally in 1973, 'Encoding/Decoding' (2006). In it he describes how media texts (he was mainly referring to television) go through a cycle from the point of production or 'encoding', to consumption, or 'decoding' by the audience (Hall, 2006). He argued that no moment in this iterative cycle is independent of context, constraint or convention but that the construction of the meaning of a text is carried out at different moments which do not necessarily reflect each other's content (Hall, 2006). In other words, while an intended message is built into a text at the point of production, this is open to various interpretations at the decoding stage. The text is thus polysemic, meaning it is open to many often-unanticipated de-codings. Hall (2006, p. 170) states: 'There is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to 'pre-fer' but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence.'

Hall employed three possible positions for audience members in receiving a text: 1) accepting the preferred or dominant message; 2) negotiating or partially accepting some of it, and; 3)

wholly rejecting it and actively questioning the framing of the message (Hall, 2006). To illustrate the negotiated position, Hall uses the example of a trade unionist who accepts political rhetoric that calls for all citizens to 'tighten our belts' in the name of the national economy but does not apply this to his or her decision to strike at their immediate shop floor level (Hall, 2006).

David Morely and Charlotte Brunsdon (2005) carried out a series of studies in the 1970s and 1980s in England based on the BBC current affairs programme, *Nationwide*. It was one of many that implemented Hall's encoding/decoding model and sought specifically to compare audience decoding to their own semiotic analyses of media texts. They questioned to what extent the 'preferred' reading of *Nationwide* was taken on board by audience members and asked after the connection between interpretation and social categories such as class, gender or race.

Their own textual analysis of the programme highlighted that a 'celebration of eccentric regional and individual difference stands in for the recognition of structural inequalities of class, nationality, ethnicity *and* region' (Morley and Brunsdon, 2005, p. 14). Their audience decoding studies, which involved interviewing 29 groups of participants following viewings of the programme, also demonstrated an important connection between a group's socio-economic background and interpretations of certain aspects of the programme. For example, a group of trade union members responded positively to the programme's 'populist' style while a group of managers viewed this format negatively. Likewise, the trade unionist participants questioned the programme's favouring of management perspectives while the manager respondents did not. The research also found that many respondents readily identified the 'preferred' reading but that this recognition was not automatically followed by a rejection.

However, the insight that had most impact on future studies and for the encoding/decoding model itself was the clear lack of any *necessary* link between class, interpretation and resistance. Very often the study showed that audience members with very similar socio-economic backgrounds produced very different readings. Significantly, the studies found that Hall's three positions; dominant, negotiated and oppositional, did not leave space for the actual responses of groups of people such as black students who did not find any aspect of the

programme with which they could engage (Taylor and Willis, 1999). In these findings, some researchers picked out the signs that readers were in fact often resisting dominant ideologies, contesting media messages and re-interpreting popular culture for more radical ends.

Resisting audiences

Audience activity quickly became the dominant theme in much British empirical work in the decades after 'Encoding/Decoding'. In most cases it followed the emphasis by post-structuralism on localised power relations, marginalised groups and diffuse points of resistance. The active, resisting audience was thus sought out, interviewed and championed. Katz and Liebes (1984) looked at how the popular US soap *Dallas* was received and interpreted by audiences in different national contexts; Bobo (2006) inspired studies of how minorities such as black women in the US re-shaped meanings from mainstream texts to empower themselves; Gillespie (1995) found that young British Asians were able to read their own complex interpretations into the Australian soap *Neighbours*. Nonetheless, Hall insisted on the constraining factors of social relations, maintaining that the messages produced in one moment of his cycle, were closely linked to the conditions and the power relations prevalent in which they were made[5]. Since Hall's 'Encoding/Decoding' essay there were other important developments in reception studies and we can see that not long after Morley and Brunsdon's (2005) work, fewer and fewer empirical researchers used social categories like class and race as theoretical frameworks for testing and understanding audience interpretations.

Reception contexts and gender relations at home

Morley and Brunsdon's work had inadvertently highlighted something that was to become increasingly central to media studies. In the criticisms of the *Nationwide* studies the importance of micro-contexts for reader reception and interpretation became clear. In asking television viewers about their viewing experience in a focus-group environment that was far removed

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[5] In a review of the active audience research in 2013, Livingstone and Das lament that despite the energy behind the project, only 'modest pockets of resistant readings' were ever found (Livingstone and Das, 2013, p. 14).

from the spatial and temporal contexts in which they would normally watch the television, the *Nationwide* studies had erased the situatedness that would have allowed for meaning to emerge.

At the same time that media devices were multiplying and becoming more and more ingrained in everyday life, there was a growing recognition that the concrete locations, the daily routines and the social relationships in which audiences are embedded, are also deeply imbricated in the reception, use and understanding of media content. As part of this turn to context, the materiality or technology of media devices was also brought under the microscope. I use the term micro-context here to differentiate this close focus on the everyday 'situatedness' of our media encounters – usually found in the home, but increasingly in the street, commuting, at work etc, - from the decoding studies influenced by a concern primarily for macro-contexts or social categories of gender, class and race (Sullivan, 2013, p. 161). However, as we will see, these micro-context studies of media practices in the everyday revealed much about the gendered social relations in modern home life in the west.

Researchers began to employ in-depth interviewing, observation and ethnography, and generally began spending as much time as possible with people in their homes as they watched the television during their normal daily routines. In this new ethnography they aimed to get to grips with the ways in which the array of contexts like space, place, social relationships and temporality were interconnected with understanding media texts. Spigel (2013) found that as televisions were introduced into suburban homes across North America, living rooms were rearranged not only to make space for the new technology but also to make it the physical centrepiece of family living. In terms of time, television programming began to transform daily habits with members of the family structuring their routines around their favourite shows (Sullivan, 2013, p. 165). More generally, researchers found that by the end of the 20th century, Americans were spending more and more of their time at home watching television, something which Putnam (2000) correlated with a shift in American cultural practices away from time spent in wider social communities.

Dorothy Hobson (2005) had by this time already carried out in-depth interviews with stay-at-home mothers in working class neighbourhoods in the UK and found the home to be a place of isolation and subordination for these women. In this context she pointed to the media

practices of these women as means of making connections to a world outside their home. Morley himself took the criticisms about focus groups and contrived contexts to heart. In *Family Television* (2006) he gave an account of a new project in which he spent time in the living rooms of 18 homes in London. There, Morley also found that in the domestic context the meaning of television was profoundly different for the men and women in his studies. Many women felt watching the television was an indulgence and felt guilty for doing so rather than tending to housework. Men, who took control of both the family viewing and physically of the remote control felt relaxed when watching the television (Morley, 2006).

Gray (1992) looked at how women experienced the introduction of VCRs as a new piece of technology into their home and family life. Following some personal frustration that her participants were exhibiting a certain ignorance and lack of confidence around the VCR, Gray came to the conclusion that much of this was a strategy of resistance. Her women participants were trying to limit the heavy load of domestic labour by avoiding learning how to use the VCR. As one of her respondents declared: 'No, I'm not going to try [to learn how to use the timer on the VCR]. No. Once I learned how to put a plug on, now there's nobody else in this house puts a plug on but me…so [laugh] there's a method in my madness, oh yes' (Gray, 1992, p. 168). Likewise, Hobson (2005) and Seiter *et al.* (1989) found that women's so-called addiction to soap operas was a form of resistance to the relentless pressure of having to be emotionally and physically available to others in the home. As we can see, the findings of many of the micro-context studies around the television revealed the interconnectedness of domestic life with the wider social forces of gender relations. At the same time however, they also challenged the assumptions in Critical Theory and in much of Hall's decoding thesis that the viewer's interpretation was constrained by ideological media and wider social processes. The women participants in the studies were clearly using media in ways that had not been considered in the scholarship up until now and especially in ways that if not radically resistant, then were at the least not wholly absorbed by the messages and meanings that media were disseminating.

Around this time David Morley and Roger Silverstone tried to bring the two levels of context – macro and micro - together in a more radically contextualised approach to media studies. Their argument was that the concrete physical context of the household must be re-inserted

into the 'system of economic and social relations within the formal or more objective economy and society of the public sphere' (Hirsch and Silverstone, 2003, p. 16). Moreover, they proposed reintegrating a focus on the media text with a focus on the meaning of media technology. In their research project *Household Uses of Information and Communication Technologies* based out of Brunel University in the UK they oversaw an immense project of data collection based on durational observation and qualitative interviews. Details were collected about contexts from the bedroom to the national and international environment. This project was most noted for the overwhelming amount of data amassed and the often-insurmountable management and analytic challenges that came with it (Morely and Moores, 2014). Part of the rationale for this present study is that the concrete social, spatial and temporal contexts for internet reception have not as yet been subjected to the same fine-grained empirical analysis that media researchers brought to bear on television in everyday life in preceding decades. However, some studies are already heading in this direction.

Sonia Livingstone (Ito et al., 2013; Livingstone, 2002, 2009) led a project that explored changes in young people's lives which included new media and found that by the end of the last century children were spending less time outdoors and more time in the home. Secondly, her findings suggested that a proliferation of media devices in the family home was correlated with a shift away from the family watching television together, to more individualised styles of media use (Livingstone, 2009). The upshot of these changes finds children spending more time with screens in isolation in their own bedroom or other separated spaces in the home, although this was more pronounced with young teenagers than with children (Livingstone, 2009). These studies are illuminating, however in the use of surveys and interviews much of the contextual detail that would have been captured in participation and observation was missing. Nonetheless, in a more ethnographic study by Mackay and Ivey (2004), who spent time in ten households in Wales in 2001 and 2002, a similar picture was revealed: family members secluded themselves from others while using media. Likewise, some of the findings on television studies about gendered relations in the home were mirrored in these recent examples. Mothers and older women tended to leave activities around digital television and the internet to the children and the fathers (Mackay and Ivey, 2004).

A critique of reception studies

In this detailed history of reception studies, I hope to have outlined some of the most important challenges media and cultural studies posed to the dominant paradigm of communication studies from the 1960s onwards. In this history the audience member is brought from the periphery of scholarly concern for textual meaning right to centre stage in understanding the media and interpretation. Likewise, there is an effort – successful or not – to bring context and technology into the frame when asking about how we understand and interact with media. Together media, cultural and audience studies posed a serious challenge to both quantitative communication studies and text-focussed media criticism. However, the criticisms of reception studies itself are many.

Within the field itself, advocates on the sharper end of the critical paradigm, lamented the move away from the critique of power that active audience and context studies entailed. From these latter perspectives, imposing theoretical 'structural' constraints on interpretative activity in advance of empirical work, as in Hall and Morely's early work, precluded any possibility of genuine audience creativity, and hence of social change. From outside the tradition, mass communications scholars say little about reception studies, but the broader critique of positivism has triggered a certain convergence of orthodoxies. The Glasgow Media Group for example (Kitzinger, 2004; Philo and Miller, 1998) a primarily positivist and critical project, has made extensive use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to build up a more comprehensive approach to media analysis. On the other side, in user-generated content studies we see internet 'audience' researchers starting with the texts rather than interviewing or spending time with the users themselves. Meanwhile, as communication scholars set off with their surveys in pursuit of the elusive online lurker, they are finding that at some point they may have to go and find where she is in the real world and talk to her.

Personally, I recognise the huge value that the rich archive of reception studies adds to our understanding of our relationships with the media and media texts. The qualitative bent of my own study also chimes with media and cultural studies' critiques of positivism; I offer a fuller account of my position in the next chapter. However, one fundamental difference between my own work and some central strands in receptions studies needs to be highlighted. This

difference centres on the use of the term *interpretation* in studies inspired by Hall's Encoding/Decoding essay, but also in the way the activity of interpretation is assumed and un-reflected upon in so much of contemporary media studies. This model of interpretation, which here I will call *cognitive* interpretation, is premised upon the notion that our conscious understandings of the world are shaped to a large extent by the symbolic representations produced and disseminated by the media (Moores, 2017, p. 18). For the media to shape our view of the world we have to assume that we, as agents, go around taking in 'bits' of information from our surroundings (Moores, 2017, p. 18; Taylor, 1992). We then stick these bits together in our minds and subsequently make decisions about how to act according to these pictures or re-presentations (Moores, 2017; Ryle, 2002). This crude description of the rationalist theory of the mind is part of the mind-body dualism bequeathed to Western philosophy by Descartes. It openly underpins mass communication studies but also lingers in much of contemporary cultural and media studies. Phenomenologists are among those who argue that without a thoroughgoing critique of this object-subject dualism, the far more significant non-representational modes of knowing the world such as the 'engaged, embodied agency of moving around and handling things' go unappreciated (Moores, 2017, p. 8).

Despite his own critique of structuralism and its focus on the discursive nature of meaning, Hall's model itself privileges cognitive interpretation. In an interview with the Media Education Foundation Hall states: 'to become a cultured subject rather than just a blob of genetic material is…to internalise…the grid of one's culture…a system of representation…[which then becomes] …the conceptual maps in our heads which allow us to come to a sense of what is going on in the world' and that 'nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse' (Hall in Moores, 2017, p. 20). Phenomenologists argue that cognitive-interpretative-representational thinking takes up very little of how we actually think (Thrift, 2008). Most of our daily lives involve an embodied, practical and generally pre-linguistic know-how (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Heidegger, 1962). Therefore, to privilege linguistic or symbolic meaning as a research object, as so many qualitative and discursive media studies do, eclipses these corporeal, affective and practical ways of knowing. Together with Moores (2017) I recognise the absurdity in calling for a complete elimination of any focus whatsoever on linguistic and symbolic representations in the study of media. However, my own study aims

to contribute to a body of work that redresses this prolonged drift in media studies away from situated ways of knowing the media.

I will turn to the theoretical and methodological questions this generates in the following chapters where I specify how phenomenology and hermeneutics influence this study. It should be clear by now however, that the 'radical contextualisation' perused by media researchers in the wake of Morely and Brunsdon's *Nationwide* study signalled the early signs of a movement in the direction of non-representational theory.

To summarize, the current research on newspaper comments gives us important insight into the patterns of incivility that emerge in the content in relation to topics such as gender and immigration. Newspaper and journalism studies are currently seeking ways to develop more responsive moderation systems to allow the debate to continue while excluding the most offensive material. Researchers in lurker studies are working to identify and understand the wider non-posting 'user' population, but their survey techniques do not allow for much nuance or depth in understanding these individuals, although education researchers are beginning to use more qualitative methods to expand this area. These studies can be viewed in the context of the participation paradigm and democracy theory where the internet is viewed as an extension of the public sphere, a paradigm to which they provide useful counterpoints. In terms of the reader-text relationship, the archive of media reception studies shows a development in the way that this relationship has been understood and repositioned over the last number of decades, entering a phase since the 1980s where contextual factors like time, space, technology and the body have begun to undo the object-subject dualism that constrained much of this work. Before I conclude, I look briefly at emergent 'media' studies that focus on practices and tentatively place my own work within this school.

A new paradigm for media studies

The stream of work in which this present study sits least awkwardly is made up of several different threads bound loosely together and evolving out of several different traditions from sociology and anthropology to philosophy and geography. The first major publication that

offers a flavour of this 'new paradigm' (Couldry, 2010) in media studies is Bräuchler and Postill's (2010) *Theorising Media and Practice*. In 2017, another publication taking up some of the same concerns from a more philosophical perspective was published titled *Conditions of Mediation: Phenomenological Perspectives on Media* (Markham and Rodgers, 2017). Recent publications by Nick Couldry (2012), David Morley (Morely and Moores, 2014) and Shaun Moores (2017) also point to these interesting developments. This 'new paradigm' involves a side-stepping of the old debates in media studies by taking practices – the rich variety of things that people do with the media – as its starting point. Beginning with practices means that media are decentred and deprivileged as the primary analytical focal point of research. Research is thus transformed into something more akin to what Moores (2014, no pagination) calls 'Studies of the Everyday.' However, while my own work is allied to the philosophical commitments in this new paradigm, it draws more directly on writings and themes in the traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics, both of which fed into earlier moves towards practice. Therefore, the next chapter presents a brief history of these two traditions and considers how they are brought together by Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1975) to offer a framework for an in-depth and multi-layered qualitative media research design.

Chapter 3 A Brief History of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

This chapter presents a history of the key thinkers in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. In this account I show how these two different strands fold into each other to offer an interpretative-existential perspective for qualitative research. The main areas I discuss are: 'Husserl, Consciousness and Pure Phenomenology', 'Existentialism', 'Heidegger, Dasein and Hermeneutic Phenomenology,' 'Merleau-Ponty, the body-subject and the Phenomenology of Perception' and 'Gadamer and Philosophical Hermeneutics', ending with a discussion of 'The Problem of Power'. The point of phenomenology for this project was to facilitate the development of a rich understanding of 'in-the-think-of it' experiences around the media, and especially around reading fragmented online texts. Hermeneutics is important to this study for a number of other reasons. Firstly, Heidegger's hermeneutic intervention in western philosophy recast Husserl's phenomenology along lines that was to mark the anti-essentialist thinking of the second half of the twentieth century. This allows for a *non-essentialist* or hermeneutic phenomenology.[6] Secondly, my core question asks after the *reading* experience which inevitably brings up questions of text interpretation and understanding more broadly. Phenomenology privileges mantic over semantic meaning and is more attuned to experience, practice and things than it is to the content or structure of texts (van Manen, 2016). However, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics takes Heidegger's hermeneutical

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[6] Throughout this thesis I refer to the terms phenomenology, interpretative phenomenology and hermeneutics interchangeably. This chapter should explain why these terms can be used in this way.

'understanding' and re-orientates it for thinking about meaning in the work of textual interpretation. Therefore, hermeneutics enabled me to deal with my participants' interpretations of media texts without falling back on representational 'decoding' assumptions. At the same time it provided solid methodological grounding for my own analysis of the vast collection of textual data that this research generated.

In the next chapter I try to resolve some of the methodological challenges these different influences generate, but this chapter offers an overview of their history. And once I have outlined phenomenology and hermeneutics, I take on the thorny question of power. None of the authors I cover in this history deals with power head on, however, in a world of vast media corporations and the mere bite-size power-tools that something like newspaper comments can offer us, it is worth reviewing phenomenology's determined focus on lived experience from perspectives that argue that much of constraint and manipulation goes misrecognised in this experience (Bourdieu, 1990; McNall and Johnson, 1975). I have done this by considering Gadamer's 'moderate' hermeneutics in relation to the philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida and their alternative concerns for *exploitation* and *domination*.

Husserl, Consciousness and Pure Phenomenology

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl (1970, 2012) worked to establish phenomenology as a foundational 'science of the essential structures of pure consciousness' (2008, p. 60). Husserl was responding to what he called the crisis of the European sciences and especially to developments in philosophy which meant it had come to almost completely eliminate the rich complexity of life as it is actually experienced by human subjects. Husserl rejected the prevailing confidence that scientific models about chemicals, energy or forces could provide the keys to understanding life, viewing scientific naturalism as rife with hidden assumptions and distorting concepts (Harman, 2007, p. 24; Lewis and Staehler, 2010). Husserl worked to systematise a new method in his 'pure' phenomenology as a means of exploring, scrutinising and describing the minute detail of every form of phenomena as given directly in human experience, without interpretation (Husserl, 2012). He argued that philosophy did not need to make metaphysical statements about 'things in themselves' beyond our experience of

them but should instead focus on what we could be certain of: how those 'things' *appeared* in human consciousness. Instead of paying attention to the objects we see and touch in everyday life, Husserl proposed we focus on *seeing* and *touching* as activities of consciousness (Brockelman, 1980, p. 36).

Allowing these phenomena to speak for themselves was the only way to establish 'rock bottom' ontological descriptions that would provide the sturdy foundation that science and philosophy needed (Brockelman, 1980, p. 35). In one example, Husserl argued that philosophy's abstract theoretical explanation of time as a series of consecutive 'nows' failed to engage with how time is actually experienced and lived by the human subject. Husserl stressed that time was present to human understanding as having much more complex intrinsic meaning. Time is experienced as *anticipation* and *retained past experiences* as well as a sense of consecutive 'now' moments (Bowie, 2010, p. 92). Here, anticipation and retained past experiences are part of the *essential* structure of the experience of time. Husserl posited that there is a deep reality made up of essences that can be intuited by the human mind and which constitute 'the meaning [...] or being [...] of things, i.e. their very nature' (Brockelman, 1980, p. 33).

In developing phenomenology as a method Husserl proposed the *phenomenological reduction*. The reduction means that the phenomenologist must suspend or bracket his or her natural attitude towards the world in favour of a 'reflective bending-back' of attention towards consciousness itself (Brockelman, 1980, p. 35). In the reduction, the philosopher becomes a detached onlooker, illuminating and thematising the latent aspects of human experience. Husserl's reduction therefore allows for 'intuition', a direct contact with the 'things in themselves' without any theoretical constructs, subjective experiences or cultural contexts getting in the way (Dowling, 2007). In this way we move from a 'natural attitude' in which we are directed unquestioningly to 'objects' in the world, to a phenomenological attitude in which the way those 'objects' appear should come into focus and speak for themselves. Later on, Merleau-Ponty called this a slackening of the threads that bind us to world and saw the reduction as a means of making these threads more visible - a way of refusing to take for granted anything which we believe we know (1962, p. xiii). Husserl's reduction is multi-faceted but one important aspect, called *epoché*, is a method whereby a researcher consciously sets aside any prejudices, biases, hypothesis or theories he or she may have about 'the being of

a perceptual object' in order to 'clear the way from the particulars to the "pure" essences' (Eberle, 2013, p. 186).

Aided by the phenomenological reduction Husserl then developed the notion that *all consciousness is consciousness of something*. Eberle (2013) describes this as the missing element in Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum'. Husserl argued that 'ego cogito' does not happen in a vacuum but is always tied to the 'thing' that is (re)cognised (Eberle, 2013, p. 185). Husserl's term for this - *intentionality* - is a *field* of conscious experience and it is the fundamental feature or structure of consciousness. It suggests that consciousness (the mind or subject) is always consciousness *of* something (matter or object). Husserl expanded the meaning of intentionality, which traditionally in philosophy meant theoretical awareness - the active, self-conscious, transparent representation of something before the mind - to include other forms of awareness or intention such as desires, confusion and anger (Harman, 2007, p. 18). If I perceive, think, feel, imagine – I always perceive something, think of something, feel something, imagine something.

Thus, the ensemble of 'ego cogito *cogitatum* is the phenomenon' (Eberle, 2013, p. 185) and in the end, the attention a 'subject' gives to something – more or less consciously - is combined with the properties of the 'object' in a unity. This awareness is thus an objectifying act which constitutes the phenomenon (Eberle, 2013). Merleau-Ponty is careful to point out that phenomenological constitution is not a form of constructivism (1962, p. xiii). Canadian phenomenologist Max van Manen (Manen, 2016, p. 4) explains that the nature of this constitution is that it 'signifies, gives meaning or sense […] it does not create objects which lie outside our consciousness […] but lets the world meaningfully appear for us.' Both world and subject are constituted together. Therefore, phenomenology is a science of the basic relationship between object and subject, neither of which can be found independently of the other. In this way, phenomenology offers an escape from the dualism between subjectivism and objectivism as opposing ontologies in post-Cartesian philosophy (Brockelman, 1980).

In his later writings Husserl began to explore the idea of the *Lebenswelt* or *lifeworld*. Husserl had pointed out that the world of objects that science, especially positivism, had taken as its starting point is in fact an already constituted world. He argued that Kant had made an

important but 'unexpressed presupposition' which was simply the 'surrounding world of life taken for granted as valid' (Husserl, 1970, p. 103). For Husserl, the immediate context out of which the world of objects is constituted is a lifeworld; the horizon of meaning filled with culture, religion, language and practices that make up our everyday experience. The lifeworld is 'unquestioned, unformulated, preconceptual and naively-accepted behind and before any and all discursive or symbolic interpretation of it' (Brockelman, 1980, p. 47). The point of the lifeworld for Husserl is that it is presupposed by scientific endeavour as much as it is in any other human activity. Natural science presented a world that was eternal, subject-independent and universal (Lewis and Staehler, 2010) and in this way had forgotten that it was in the lifeworld that its own concepts and abstractions were first conceived and constructed. Phenomenology focuses on the 'primeval form' or on what appears as immediate to us before we try to explain or interpret it (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). Thus, in undertaking a 'concretely general doctrine of essences' of everything in the lifeworld, phenomenology embarked on a massive project of an 'ontology of the lifeworld' (Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p. 44; Husserl, 1970, p. 142) (Husserl, 1970, p. 142).

Edmund Husserl was working at time, when, in the midst of devastation after World War I, philosophy was pulled between two poles (Eagleton, 2008). On the one hand, as Eagleton (2008, p. 47) points out was a 'sterile positivism' obsessed with categorising facts and lacking any regard for the meaning of human existence, and on the other was an 'indefensible subjectivism' with 'rampant' relativism and irrationalism. Through phenomenological reduction Husserl tried to present phenomena as the only certain, pure data with which we could work, and a transcendental or presuppositionless phenomenology as a rigorous science of 'pure' phenomena that would provide a more fundamental basis for science and philosophy (Eagleton, 2008, p. 48). Phenomenology in this form continues to inspire research in disciplines such as healthcare, education, psychology and sociology and a number of specific authors have been useful in mediating the jump from philosophy to qualitative research. Some of the most prominent include Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), Moutzakas (1994) and Polkinghorne (1989). Together they emphasise the careful description of phenomena through focusing on the lived experience or meaning that phenomena have for individuals who have experienced them. As in mainstream interpretative approaches, they also stress the centrality of reduction through activities that 'surface' the researcher's own everyday knowledge of the phenomenon

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 87). In phenomenology inspired by Husserl, these preunderstandings are 'set aside' or 'suspended' to focus on the phenomena in a 'neutral' way and hence researchers argue that it provides validity to the findings. In this short summary of the origins of phenomenology I want to emphasise how I have taken the lifeworld, the importance of the first-person perspective, lived experience and the task of describing those experiences in rich detail to the very heart of this study. I have also tried to take the notion of intentionality on board in the research design by not separating the individual from their settings or context, especially by focusing on practices and embodied knowledge. In this I have drawn on Husserl's followers Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) and their respective notions of *Dasein* and *body-subject*. In the following sections I will show how the adaptations and criticisms of Husserl by his students and later followers have helped to shape his pure phenomenology into a more interpretative one. However, I take a circuitous route through existentialism to help to contextualise and highlight the main concerns in my own work.

Existentialism

Existentialism is an alternative intellectual strand running through the history of European philosophy which pits itself firmly against what it sees as the suffocating embrace of reason and rationalism inherited from the Greek tradition. A founding assumption in the Greek-inspired tradition was the idea that humans in all their aspects should be studied in the same way as nature, that there was nothing special about humans that meant they could not be approached according to the same logic and methods as any other 'object' to be found in nature. On this view, the role of philosopher-scientists was to discover the general or essential properties of all of the (human and non-human) 'objects' in nature. In response to this approach, thinkers from Pascal, to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche launched swingeing critiques and set the scene for the more self-conscious existentialists of the twentieth century. But as Brockelman (1980, p. 9) puts it:

> [W]herever in our intellectual and cultural tradition men and women have insisted on the limits of reason; wherever they have insisted that logic alone cannot help us to

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overcome our alienation and (alone) cannot set and solve the dilemma of human purpose and meaning; wherever they have insisted that other and deeper dimensions and faculties of human life are called for -- call them "faith", or "will", or "heart" – there we find the roots and source of existentialism.

One of the main assertions of these early critiques was that human nature or subjective experience could never be fully or transparently present to itself; that in trying to look at humans objectively from the outside the tradition had in fact completely overlooked the very 'being' of human being. Existentialists make concrete, individual existence primary, this means that they look at the practices and activities of everyday life in their minute detail from the unique perspective of the subjects. They do this because to abstract out from these practices in an effort to get at a general or essential human nature distorts rather than clarifies the meaning of human experience. By examining reality in such detail existentialists aim to illuminate what is really going on in the nitty gritty and avoid reducing experience to fit pre-made models of it. Therefore, they comprehensively reject the theoretical perspective as a useful position to study human being.

In their examinations of direct or lived experience, the kinds of things they found going on were for example, that human life is lived in 'radical openness.' For Kierkegaard (1844) and Sartre (1957) humans are constantly 'becoming' because they are free to live and to choose a life. This is a sharp contrast to the scientistic view of humans as having an essential, detectible nature. All existentialist thinkers espouse some form of the notion that the meaning of one's life is given in the living of it and an authentically lived life is one that rejects the safe, easy options offered by the crowd. All of this means that efforts by the primary tradition of western philosophy to abstract the 'being' of human being into an objective, transparent once-and-for-all system, was in fact only another form of self-denial and bad faith, an inauthentic flight from the deeper questions of the meaning of existence.

Heidegger, Dasein and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In the writings of Martin Heidegger, existentialism, hermeneutics and phenomenology come into direct contact and the encounter becomes the source of remarkable innovation and insight. *Being and Time* (1962) was Heidegger's challenge to the western philosophical tradition running from Descartes to Kant, but more than anyone perhaps, to his teacher Husserl. For Heidegger (1962) the real concern of philosophy should be existence or being itself. He accused his forebears of failing to heed this question in its deepest ontological sense. Philosophy had taken what it means 'to exist' for granted. Heidegger (1962) rejected Cartesian object-subject dualism and the idealism embodied in Husserl's emphasis on consciousness that stemmed from it. For Heidegger, Husserl's intentionality and 'pure' presuppositionless phenomenology retained too much of the Cartesian mind-world distinction and thus could never disclose lived human existence. Phenomenology would have to discard the notions of the transcendental if it wanted to pursue the immanent, 'historical, lived, practical nature of human experience' (Moran, 2000, p. 277).

In exploring the question of being, Heidegger proposed the word *Dasein* to label the specific kind of entity that a human being is (Heidegger, 1962). This being is much more than a biological creature or even a person or subject. Dasein is usually translated as 'being-there' or 'open-being' and is supposed to highlight two core ideas: 1) that humans are always already enmeshed with a meaningful world and 2) that humans are the only beings for whom being itself is an issue. 'Human beings, it will turn out, are special kinds of beings in that their way of being embodies an understanding of what it is to be' (Dreyfus, 1991, pp. 14–15). Being for Heidegger (1962, p. 346) is hidden in this cloudy world-individual entanglement and when we try to reach for it, especially in the over simplified theoretical way that science does, it 'withdraws' into the background. All the same, in our everyday lives we implicitly deal with this being, we have the unique if opaque capacity to reflect on it and our knowledge about it is deeply embedded in our everyday practices. Therefore, presuppositionless phenomenology is impossible - we cannot bracket the world we are enmeshed with. Nonetheless, phenomenology for Heidegger remained the only means of attending to the question of being at all.

Traditional philosophy posits the world as made up of pure objects or raw data waiting to be encountered by human senses or subjects and actively given meaning. But this is the world 'with its skin off' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 132).

> What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking waggon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling… It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise'. The fact that motor-cycles and waggons [s*ic*] are what we proximally hear is the phenomenal evidence that in every case Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, already dwells alongside what is ready-to-hand within-the-world; it certainly does not dwell proximally alongside 'sensations'; nor would it first have to give shape to the swirl of sensations to provide a springboard from which the subject leaps off and finally arrives at a 'world'. Dasein, as essentially understanding, is proximally alongside what is understood. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 207).

Here Heidegger tells is how the world is always experienced as already meaningful, we experience the *North Wind*, not a pure sensation.

The things or other beings that the world is full of, Heidegger calls 'equipment', not objects. Heidegger's equipment is 'ready-to-hand' for humans, i.e. the things in the world around us are always encountered as part of our life projects and are thus already 'laden with context dependent significance' (Wheeler, 2018). Heidegger's famous example involves a hammer and a carpenter in the midst of a building project.

> We are aware of the situation we find ourselves in, not as an arrangement of discrete physical objects…, but globally, as a whole network if interrelated projects, possible tasks, thwarted potentialities, and so forth. This network is not laid out explicitly but it is present as a 'background' to the project we are concerned with …There is no deliberate means-end planning in this mode; indeed any tools we may be using (and our own bodies) are not experienced as distinct entities that could be set into a means-ends framework…Our experience is not of the hammer, nor of the wood and mails as

independent entities, but of the hammering, the raising of the wall, the constructing of the home (Packer, 1985, p. 1083).

We rarely if ever encounter a hammer as a long wooden shaft, with a heavy metal shape on top, although this is how philosophy assumes we encounter the world around us, as objects with properties located in a space. Heidegger (1962) calls this 'theoretical' hammer present-at-hand and considers it a rare and threadbare form of being.

To fully understand the being of something, philosophy must give in to the ineradicable meaningfulness of life, contextualised by the practical interests, language, history and cultural traditions into which we are involuntarily born and inculcated. This is 'being-in-the-world' and it is a characteristic of Dasein (Heidegger, 1962). Furthermore, for Heidegger, the 'world' is a correlational totality of meaning where Dasein can be found *among other beings*. Dasein is therefore 'always already' in the 'world' and any object, event, person or text we try to understand is always already shaped by our practical concerns and interrelations (Heidegger, 1962).

This account of Dasein and 'world' is Heidegger's description of the pre-reflective, un-thematised understanding that conditions philosophy's theories and conceptualisations, but which philosophy fails to recognise as its own starting point. Philosophers and scientists - at least as much as everyone else - judge and make statements about things from deep within the context of unspoken background pre-judgments (Heidegger, 1962, p. 199): 'When an assertion is made, some fore-conception is always implied; but it remains for the most part inconspicuous, because language already hides in itself a developed way of conceiving.' In other words, all experience is itself an interpretative encounter within an already interpreted context and this characterises the very mode in which we relate to the world (Moran, 2000, p. 235). Heidegger therefore turns phenomenology away from Husserl's twin emphases on consciousness and the reduction and back towards the world. Rather than providing fundamental, disengaged and exhaustive descriptions of appearances, Heidegger insists that philosophy can only suggest, indicate, hint and allude to the withdrawn being of things, but that in doing so, phenomenology becomes a fundamental ontology (Harman, 2007, p. 28). Thus, Heidegger's being-in-the-world transforms phenomenology from a scientific endeavour

into an interpretative one. The interpretative and existential phenomenology of philosophers like Sartre, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty try to grapple with this discovery in all its complexity and difficulty while retaining the spirit of phenomenology and its concern for the lifeworld and its structures of experience (Manen, 2016). Next I will look at how French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed Husserl and Heidegger to bring the body into view as the locus of meaning and knowing.

Merleau-Ponty, the body-subject and the Phenomenology of Perception

> I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the facade of the cathedral, where it roams over the mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 40).

This account of a walk in the city by architect Juhani Pallasmaa offers an example of the way of thinking that French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty inspired by placing the body at the very centre of the experiential world. Merleau-Ponty was deeply influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger and developed a phenomenology of being-in-the-world that argued for the body over consciousness as the central locus of knowing. He directed his major work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) against empiricism and 'intellectualist' or rationalist philosophies and especially against any notion of Cartesian dualism between an outer world and an inner consciousness. He drew on the theories of form and structure being developed in Gestalt psychology in Germany at the time to argue that we can only perceive or experience the world against a 'landscape' or background understanding of that world. To try to break down experience into component stimuli misses its very nature as inherently *intertwined* and in a dialectic relationship with a 'rich and complex environment' (Moran, 2000, p. 393). '[M]atter is 'pregnant' with form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the 'world'' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.

12). Likewise, he refuted the rationalist assumption that a transcendent subject voluntarily constructs concepts and in doing so gives meaning to the world, because for him, the subject and world are inseparable from the beginning:

> As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it . . . I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 214, emphasis in original).

In this we can see that Merleau-Ponty sees himself in a kind of unity or synchronicity with the sky. The anthropologist Tim Ingold puts it like this: 'the world of the person who is perceiving and the world that is being perceived, invade one another, begin to merge. So when I have my eyes open, it seems that where my head is, there is light, there is a world, the two things have come together' (Ingold, 2018). Thus, we see how the Cartesian subject-object duality is broken down into this unity. Trigg (2013, p. 413) states that 'the body, other, and world are each intertwined in a single unity and cannot be considered apart.'

Thus Merleau-Ponty's major contribution was the idea of the *body-subject* as an alternative to the 'cogito'. The body-subject stresses the situatedness of the subject as a corporeality intertwined with a world that is perceived as already 'constituted for us before we conceptually encounter it in cognition' (Moran, 2000, p. 402). In this way the body and the world turn into one continuous experience. The role of phenomenology is to try to find a way of describing this hazy, pre-reflective 'pre-established harmony' of perception, especially by bracketing as much as possible the theoretical and scientific distortions that have abstracted away from lived experience.

One way in which Merleau-Ponty attempted to illuminate this pre-discursive awareness was by studying the cases where it broke down. The *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) gives detailed notes on 'phantom limb' syndrome suffered by a person who had lost an arm to injury but who continued to experience it as somehow present. Merleau-Ponty (1962) concluded that the injured person's learned movements like twisting a doorknob had become so habitual that they could not be fairly described as cognitive thoughts about actions; they are

known instead pre-cognitively by the body. Merleau-Ponty also considered the work of artists like Paul Cézanne as acutely phenomenologically sensitive and called for philosophy to bring 'truth into being' in a similarly creative way.

> His [Cezanne's] painting was paradoxical: he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement. This is what Bernard called Cezanne's suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it. This is the reason for his difficulties and for the distortions one finds in his pictures between 1870 and 1890. Cups and saucers on a table seen from the side should be elliptical, but Cezanne paints the two ends of the ellipse swollen and expanded. The work table in his portrait of Gustave Geffroy stretches, contrary to the laws of perspective, into the lower part of picture. In giving up the outline Cezanne was abandoning himself to chaos of sensation, which would upset the objects and constantly suggest illusions, as, for example, the illusion we have when we move our heads that objects themselves are moving—if our judgment did not constantly set these appearances straight (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 63).

French theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) drew in Merleau-Ponty to elaborate his concept of body *hexis* which provides a good example of how meaning is embodied directly in experience, movement, conduct, emotion, speech and practice. Body *hexis* is the set of different habitual patterns of movement and posture – talking, walking etc. - that we learn from our family members and other people in our lives, usually the people in the same social class as our own. It is these learned patterns that guide us in our perceptions and understandings of the world and of others, and through which we make meaning ourselves. In this way there is meaning to be had in movement and which is communicated by the movement itself, not in the subsequent reflection upon it after we ask someone 'why did you do such and such?' We do not learn these patterns through being told *about* them or by consciously applying a set of rules for movement. Nonetheless, the schemes are passed from practice to practice and these schemes ground all of our intuitions, feelings and 'common sense' (Krais in Throop and Murphy, 2002, p. 188). In

analysing these body schemes, we can begin to see how the body is thus a 'socially informed body'. Again, Ingold (2018, p. 84) articulates these ideas in simple examples:

> I don't want the idea that *what we do* is an expression of what we feel inside. I want to say that *what we do* is *what we are*. So if I am angry, and you can see that I am angry – because of the way I am throwing my arms around and shouting – then it's not that I've got something inside and using a loud voice or waving arms to express it. Rather, my anger is the loud voice. It exists in the action itself. And therefore, you can perceive it quite directly. You don't infer from my behaviour that I might be feeling angry inside. You actually perceive my anger *in* my loud voice and gestures, which means that other people are often better witnesses of our affective condition than we are ourselves.

Thus both Merleau-Ponty's *body-subject* and Heidegger's *Dasein* are developed as a profound rejection of the social scientific notion that 'human beings can exist in any neutral sense' apart from their enmeshed involvement with the world (Allen, 2007, p. 60). My own work seeks to draw on these perspectives in the way it is designed to allow for immersion within, as well as sensitively elicit the detail of lived moments of experience. I confront the challenges in designing a piece of research that responds to these demands in the following chapter. Next, I turn to hermeneutics and to the writing of Gadamer to show how his theory of interpretation can contribute to deeper understandings in qualitative research.

Hermeneutics

Essentially, what Heidegger and his followers had posited was that human beings are, in a most fundamental way, interpreting animals, inescapably embedded in and 'merged with' concrete life situations (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2012, p. 117). In this way they considered interpretation or hermeneutics as the distinguishing mark of the human condition, the fundamental ontological feature of being human. Hermeneutics is the 'science and art of interpretation and thus also of meaning' (Henriksson and Friesen, 2012, p. 1) and like phenomenology, it has a long and complicated history.

Hermeneutic inquiry has as its goal to educe understanding, to bring forth the presuppositions in which we already live. Its task, therefore, is not to methodically achieve a relationship to some matter and to secure understanding in such a method. Rather, its task is to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living, a life that is not secured by the methods we can wield to render such a life our object (Jardine, 1992, p. 116).

Bauman (2010, p. 7) calls the task of hermeneutics one of 'clarifying' the meaning of a text, of 'rendering the obscure plain', but hermeneutics also involves the philosophical study of *how* humans interpret written texts, thus it involves a concern for understanding interpretation itself. Philosophical concern for interpretation stretches back to the ancient Greeks and the name of the Greek messenger god Hermes is linked to the etymology of the word *hermēneutikós,* meaning interpretation. Hermes' role was to convey messages from the gods to humans, but Hermes was known to 'mislead as well as lead' and thus represented the 'untrustworthy yet necessary link between worlds' (Moran, 2000, p. 217).

In the Christian world, St Augustine's writings established some of the basic principles for exegesis of the Bible, many of which continue to influence hermeneutics today (Moran, 2000, p.272):

i)   The autonomy of the text: the interpreter must look for the meaning in the text itself, not impose his or her own meaning on to it

ii)   An interpreter must have a certain background knowledge or expertise in the topic of the text to be able to understand it, but must also be open to the spiritual meaning and not deliberately read against the intended meaning of the text

iii) In reading parts in light of the whole, an interpreter must interpret the parts in accordance with the overall consistency of the whole, even if this means that literal meanings of parts are turned on their heads to accord with a contradictory meaning implied in the whole

During the Enlightenment, when scientific knowledge was elevated to the position of ideal for all human inquiry, German hermeneutician Friedrich Schleiermacher attempted to systematise hermeneutics into a general theory of understanding that would underpin all of human

interpretation, making hermeneutics a universal discipline (Forster, 2017). His theory involved both systematic grammatical work as well as a more intuitive activity called 'divination'. In Schleiermacher's work 'both the linguistic understanding of meaning and a psychological understanding of the author's intention could be established (Outhwaite, 2015, p. 785). The question the interpreter asks herself is 'what is it the author is trying to tell us?' Schleiermacher was therefore one of the early proponents of the German word *Verstehen*, associated today with Max Weber and the systematic approach to interpretation in the social sciences. Schleiermacher is also associated with a key idea in hermeneutics, the notion of the hermeneutic circle. This involves a staged or circular approach to understanding wherein parts of a text are understood or questioned terms of the whole. I will elaborate more fully on the hermeneutic circle in the next chapter because it formed the basis of my own process of 'analysis' in this study.

Augmenting Schleiermacher's work, Wilhelm Dilthey developed a 'reenactment' or 'reproductive' hermeneutics in which empathic understanding of another mind is achieved by suspending preconceptions and by 'imaginatively reliving the actual and possible experiences of others' (Russell in Patterson and Williams, 2002, p. 11). Contemporary inheritors of Dilthey in the hermeneutic traditions are E. D Hirsh and Skinner. Although they allow for a more nuanced approach to excavating authorial intent through reading texts, there remains the assumption of a basic division between an 'empathising subject and a (human) object for empathy' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2012, p. 117). Thus, the label 'objectivist hermeneutics' is often attached to this project.

Contemporary hermeneutics have also been influenced by Structuralist and Post-structuralist approaches to text interpretation, the crux of which Nicholson (Nicholson, 1989, p. 29) calls 'decipherment'. Through this much-less empathetic lens, straightforward narratives are decoded or deconstructed to reveal meanings which were unknown even to the original author. Jürgen Habermas (2015) applies a *hermeneutics of suspicion* to reveal the way economic and power structures can distort meaning in text and communication, something which he criticises empathetic and divinatory hermeneutics for overlooking. Another influential hermeneutician, Paul Ricoeur aims at a 'dialectical' approach between structuralism and hermeneutics.

However, it is Heidegger's influence on hermeneutics that established a new approach in which 'projection' is the structure of understanding (Heidegger, 1962). This means that it is the reader who plays the active role in interpreting a text by 'projecting a meaning out of his own resources' (Nicholson, 1989, p. 29). As we have seen, Dasein is irrevocably immersed in its practical, concernful being-in-the-world. In *Being and Time* Heidegger rejects the very notion of an innocent reading that assumes meaning lies in a text and the reader merely takes it in. The claim completely upends the assumptions even behind the most technical philological or linguistic interpretations and brings the role of the reader to centre stage. But it was Heidegger's student Hans-Georg Gadamer who developed his teacher's work to establish *philosophical hermeneutics*.

Gadamer and philosophical hermeneutics

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher whose life spanned the entire twentieth century. Gadamer is often credited with developing the theory of interpretation that became central to postmodernism and for bringing hermeneutics into the very heart of the social sciences. He was trained in Greek philosophy and became a student and keen follower of Heidegger, much of whose thinking can be traced in his work. In his 1975 [1960] *Truth and Method* he expanded on the argument that truth was not only to be found in the understanding produced through rigorous method applied in modern science. *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975) is a phenomenological description of the event of human understanding, something which he sees, following Heidegger, as basic to our mode of being and not just an art or technique. Hermeneutics is for Gadamer the search for human self-understanding and describes all human activity from history and art to science and philosophy, but also our everyday orientation to our practical survival in the world (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2012; Moran, 2000). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is therefore universal and its paradigmatic understanding is that of encountering a work of art, an experience which brings us into the 'realm of truth', but which cannot be arrived at by technique (Moran, 2000, p. 281). This experience of truth is described as an un-concealment or disclosure by Heidegger of the very roots or structures of existence (Heidegger, 1962, p. 446). In this way understanding as *Verstehen* cannot be thought of as a counterpart to explanation as a mode of reaching

understanding in the social sciences, but as a perquisite for any understanding at all. In the end, interpretation and understanding are the same thing. In the tradition of hermeneutics, Gadamer sets his task of philosophical examination of the conditions of all understanding apart from the 'objective' hermeneutics that seeks to establish general principles for interpretation (Hekman, 1986, p. 92).

Gadamer followed Heidegger in taking our condition as historical beings as central to understanding. Like a stream or river in which we are immersed, we are already participating in history when we look back and try to understand or explain an historical event. If we try to understand the French Revolution for example, we cannot lift ourselves free of the way that event has affected contemporary European culture, the context from which we are trying to gain understanding (Zimmerman, 2016). The very reason we can understand the French Revolution is the fact that we stand in the same 'stream' of history (Zimmerman, 2016). Therefore, through studying past events we do not obtain a consciousness of history but are working with a *historically effected consciousness* (Gadamer, 1975, p. 6). Tradition provides the 'web of conceptions' (Zimmermann, 2015) passed down from the 'long, communal past' (Vasterling, 2003, p. 153) that constitutes the very possibility of understanding in the first place.

> History does not belong to us, but we belong to it . . . The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being (Gadamer, 1975, p. 237).

Here Gadamer reflects on the idea of the 'withdrawn' in Heidegger in that we can never be clear about how history influences our thinking and judging. The challenge then is not to strive for a neutral standpoint but to make our own presuppositions as transparent as is possible by putting them to work in an open dialogue with tradition (Moran, 2000). Although Gadamer is notoriously vague on the 'how' of this proposition, he sees tradition functioning through our prejudgments or 'prejudices', in German Gadamer uses the word *voruteil.* But these are not negative or stubborn, quasi-deliberate blind spots. Prejudices are the footholds or forestructures of understanding, legitimate or not, that we use to begin any process of understanding and

which enable questions to be asked in the first place. All understanding emanates from underlying preunderstandings carried along by the culture we are situated within. Tradition was seen as an obstacle to understanding in the Enlightenment and Gadamer was targeting his predecessors in the hermeneutic tradition like Dilthey and Husserl for proposing guidelines and techniques as the only means for arriving at 'correct' or 'true once and for all' interpretations. Tradition as preunderstanding is fundamental to our sense of ourselves and is thus ineradicable.

> It is not so much our judgments as our prejudices that constitute our being... Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something. (Gadamer, 1990, p. 9).

Gadamer awards authority in European tradition to the canonical texts of philosophy that have stood the test of time. Plato and Aristotle form part of the tradition we grow up in and become assimilated into. Their position as legitimate or authoritative, and thus central to tradition, is established by our awarding authority to them through a recognition of the expertise of their arguments (Zimmermann, 2015).

Drawing from Greek tradition and from his teacher Heidegger, Gadamer sees language as essential to understanding and his view is that "being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 474). In this sense, language does not simply mirror or reflect human experience, but 'makes humans be' and shapes reality in a way that is communal (Moran, 2000, p. 270). Language is thus 'the universal medium in which understanding occurs' (Gadamer in Kinsella, 2006, p. 27).

How explains (How, 2017, p. 122):

> To have a language, Gadamer argues, is to have a 'world'. Language goes ahead of us giving shape to the world. There is no 'pure' world lying behind language, though we can of course speculate what the world might be like if there were no languages.

However, such speculation would entail thinking of a 'wordless' world *through* language.

Eagleton (2008, pp. 55, 61) highlights what both Heidegger and Gadamer had recognised this and posited as a challenge to Husserl:

> Language for Heidegger is not a mere instrument of communication, a secondary device for expressing 'ideas': it is the very dimension in which human life moves, that which brings the world to be in the first place. Only where there is language is there 'world', in the distinctively human sense…The meaning of language is a social matter: there is a real sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me.

Therefore, because language 'is a social matter', for Gadamer (Gadamer, 2008, p. 25) all interpretation or understanding is conditioned by cultural values that language carries:

> The phenomenon of understanding, then, shows the universality of human linguisticality as a limitless medium which carries *everything* within it – not only the 'culture' which has been handed down to us through language, but absolutely everything – because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of 'understandings' and understandability in which we move.

But this does not ensnare understanding in a vicious circle. In any dialogue with another we risk our own assumptions as well as pursue a desire to be understood (Gadamer, 1975). Understanding occurs because of the 'question, answer and revision' or game-like quality of language. We know the rules but not the outcome and are carried along by 'to and fro' of conversation, when understanding occurs it constitutes something new 'over and above our wanting and doing' (Gadamer in Moran, 2000, p. 249). Dialogue is a recurring theme in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975) and is understood as the conversational or dialectic characteristic of interpretation wherein preunderstandings or prejudices are iteratively brought into relief, explored and their legitimacy tested. Dialogue for Gadamer is the genuine and committed attempt to relate the meaning of the other's words to my own perspective which goes beyond simply recognising another point of view. He is thought to have lived by this maxim in his

active engagement with other philosophers. Thus, mutual understanding is a reasonable goal for research, as it is for conversation, text interpretation or the experience of art. This stands in contrast to a more strictly post-structuralist viewpoint wherein mutual understanding is unattainable due to continually deferred meaning in language or a hidden will to dominate the other.

Gadamer calls mutual understanding a 'fusion of horizons.' A horizon, following Husserl, is both the range and limit of knowledge that a person brings to a situation. It is made up of what Mendelson (1979, p. 54) calls the 'preoccupations of a particular age' as well as the personal, biographical experiences and situatedness of the individual in this age and it is therefore an enabler as well as a limitation to understanding. Understanding is reached when the horizon of the interpreter and the 'object of study' are fused through open dialogue and acceptance. It is specifically a fusion rather than an abandonment or domination of one horizon over another. In this way 'as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 307).

> One intends to understand the text itself. But this means that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the texts' meaning. In this the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says (Gadamer, 1975, p. 388).

This 'understanding' as a fusion of horizons involves an attentiveness to the prejudices that we bring to an event of understanding. While these prejudices may never be fully transparent to us, they do allow for understanding to take place. The fusion of horizons empowers the historian to find meaning, often unanticipated meanings, from the object of study. In different epochs and cultures, with different horizons or perspectives, different meanings of the same text can emerge. However, this fusion is a continual process, the meaning of an object of study can never be defined or categorised once and for all. We can make an argument for a particular meaning as more convincing or 'true' in particular situations but meaning can never be closed or complete. Heidegger especially had emphasised the radically finite nature of being (Moran, 2000). Even though it generally goes unspoken, an understanding that our life projects, our

culture and tradition are overshadowed always by death is taken by Gadamer to highlight the finite and radically contingent nature of human understanding.

> It part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after will understand in different And yet it equally indubitable that remains the same work whose fullness of meaning realized in the changing process of understanding, just it the same history whose meaning constantly in the process of being defined (Gadamer, 1975, p. 373).

Taking on board notions like 'historically affected consciousness', 'the fusion of horizons' and the dialogic nature of understanding, Gadamer reminds the qualitative researcher that our understanding can never be a complete, a-historical, once-and-for-all understanding of a subject matter, but instead comprises only a moment, or provisional and partial understanding, a position which this research fully recognises and attempts to honour in its design, practice and textual interpretations. In the next section, I look at the problem of power.

The problem of power

Before I conclude this chapter, I will turn to one of the main criticisms directed at interpretative phenomenology; that it fails to deal with the problem of power (Habermas, 2015). As a means of giving order to a complex issue, I discuss how Gadamer engaged specifically with Jürgen Habermas and the understanding of power as *exploitation,* on the one other hand, with Jacques Derrida's power as *domination*. I present this debate and my own interpretation of it in as much detail as possible for personal reasons. I had initially approached my postgraduate studies from the perspective of Critical Theory, however, I recognised early on that phenomenology and hermeneutics seemed to offer a more open approach to research that involves participant interpretations and lived experiences, especially by avoiding the presumption that the subject's own view is inevitably a misinterpretation produced by ideology. However, I was only able to fully commit to this approach once I was able to understand and adapt what initially looked like a conservative hermeneutic position on tradition and power. In the next few paragraphs I recount this journey for the reader.

Gadamer and Habermas

One of the primary objectives of Critical Theory has been to shed light on the areas of western tradition where ideology and economic exploitation have distorted human self-understanding and therefore precluded emancipation from oppressive social relations. In the 1970s, Habermas began to rework the methods of Critical Theory by incorporating certain aspects of hermeneutics, especially from Gadamer's work (How, 2017). I have already outlined Habermas account of the public sphere, but central to this are notions of the 'Modernist Master Subject,' and rational-critical deliberation. Coole (2005, p. 124) describes conceptions of the subject like Habermas' as involving an ontology of 'individuality…responsibility, autonomy, rationality and freedom' (Coole, 2005, p. 124). Here again we see the ahistorical Cartesian subject as an interiority separated from the world outside and carrying out decision-making in an internal, detached and self-reflexive processes of reasoned evaluation (Coole, 2005, p. 124, Rethinking agency). Habermas' project therefore was to seek out the conditions for *ideal* communication, and thus for a democracy free from power relations and ideological distortion based on this rational-critical Subject. Meanwhile, we can now see that Gadamer's 'understanding' incorporates Heidegger's being-in-the-world critique of the Modernist subject and also therefore challenges this notion of a rational and transparent speech situation.

Nonetheless, Habermas criticised Gadamer's use of an all-pervasive notion of tradition. Following Gadamer too closely meant terms like 'prejudice' and 'preunderstanding' were impossible to break out of because of their innate and universal quality as prerequisites for understanding. While Gadamer urges us to accept the authority of tradition, Critical Theory views it suspiciously as the 'systematically distorted expression of communication under unacknowledged conditions of violence', (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 63–64). For Habermas, the impossibility of escaping tradition means that the objective or neutral reference point that is essential for being able to look back on and see ideological distortions from the outside, becomes an impossibility. As such, the persistence of distorted understandings that accumulate from histories of 'force and coercion' cannot be exposed or critiqued because there cannot be, for example, an objective (or undistorted) theory of society with which to *judge* various aspects of tradition (Nuyen, 1994, p. 420).

If hermeneutics is placing oneself in tradition then hermeneutical understanding will fail to detect any pathology that besets the tradition, and hence will fail to grasp the truth. It will fail because tradition is that with which we understand, or interpret anything, including tradition itself, and a defective tradition will not see itself as defective (Nuyen, 1994, p. 420, emphasis in original).

In response to these criticisms, Gadamer pointed out that in positing an objective point of view, Habermas was assuming we could somehow gain a 'God's-eye point of view' (Nuyen, 1994, p. 423) to look down on and see ideology for what it really is. The problem with this, Gadamer maintained, is in the misguided way it imagines (like other objectivist positions) that reflections and critiques can be completely free of a theoretician's own historical positioning and of all the preconceptions or prejudices that come with that (Gadamer, 1975). Thus, a critical theorist will unavoidably read her own tradition in her interpretation, and even more so if she believes she has superseded it. The epistemological stance of this present study chimes with this rebuttal of Habermas. There can be no form of communication, academic or otherwise, undistorted by power and tradition. Therefore, it reflects arguments from other quarters such as post-structuralism which caution against forcing 'empirical data' through the narrow lens of a theoretical framework bewitched by the fallacy of methodological objectivity.

Gadamer against Gadamer

However, I do want to highlight what I see as the inherent critical and creative capacities of philosophical hermeneutics that do not rely on the need for a neutral standpoint for the possibility to recognise and critique tradition; in a way, to use Gadamer against Gadamer. This opportunity comes from the way that language and tradition are bound together. Language limits, but also enables reflection. In his article 'Critique of Ideology: Hermeneutics or Critical Theory', A. T. Nuyen (1994) laments that Gadamer himself did not recognise the critical potential of his hermeneutics, a capacity deriving from this central linguistic trait. Hermeneutics is a '*dynamic dialogical* process the aim of which is to reach agreement on meaning and truth' (Nuyen, 1994, p. 427) [my emphasis], and as part of this dialogical process tradition is both applied and affected in one way or another. Therefore, Gadamer does not mean

that while tradition contains superior 'knowledge and insight' it is not 'beyond questioning'. (Nuyen, 1994, p. 427).

Moreover:

> The task of hermeneutics of tradition is to remind critique of ideology that man can project his emancipation and anticipate an unlimited and unconstrained communication only on the basis of the creative reinterpretation of cultural heritage. If we had no experience of communication, however restricted and mutilated it was, how could we wish to prevail for all men and at all institutional levels of the social nexus? (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 59)

In brief then I use the lens of 'fusing horizons' to evaluate not only the participant-readers' interpretations of the media texts but my own socially and historically situated position as researcher engaging with both the participants and the texts which the research produces. Next I consider the infamous non-event of the Gadamer-Derrida debate. By discussing this 'debate' and its questions about domination of the Other I position my own work in relation to a specific view on power and ethics in terms of intersubjectivity.

Gadamer and Derrida

Counter to Habermas' critique of Gadamer and his lack of 'objectivity', philosophical hermeneutics was also challenged by accounts of truth and meaning that see in it an *overly naïve realism*. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction has been described as *a hermeneutics of suspicion* because of its insistence that absence and *différance* continually destabilise language to the extent that they preclude the possibility for truth to emerge. Its aim has instead been to unmask, decode and decentre the 'truth' of meanings that we take for granted. The main difference between deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics is in the way that the latter makes a concerted effort to understand the Other and believes some form of meaning can be co-constituted in so far as a 'language without meaningful content […] would be a contradiction in terms; for language is our way of being in the world, and it is the power of written utterance to evoke a world when read that makes it language' (Palmer, 1983, p. 61).

For Derrida, this project imposes meaning on another from the outside in an unrecognised will to dominate the Other (Derrida, 2001; Zimmermann, 2015). Derrida advocates what is called a 'radical hospitality' of the otherness of the Other by withholding the will to understand and impose meaning on the Other (Zimmermann, 2015). However, in its own way I see this otherwise profoundly generous position as a failure to put one's own understanding at risk and critique tradition more generally, equal but opposite to Gadamer's position on tradition that appeared to grant it a free ride. Again, it is in Gadamer's account of language that we can see the creative and projective capacity of philosophical hermeneutics.

In contrast to the instability of language in deconstruction and *différance*, Gadamer's hermeneutics places faith in the creative, 'boundary-overstepping' (How, 2017, p. 123), capacity of language to produce shared meanings. Gadamer argues that the dialogic or reciprocal character of language, like a game with two or more players, means no one knows in advance what will emerge, but that language, by its very nature can transcend itself - it is playful and projective, it tends towards a creativity which supersedes its own rule-governed thresholds (How, 2017, p. 123). Something can emerge from language; *something* comes into existence through the back and forth of conversation.

Habermas (in Adams and Adams, 2006, p.56) describes this capacity:

> the language-games of the young do not simply reproduce the practice of the old. With the first basic linguistic rules the child learns not only the conditions of possible consensus but also the conditions of possible interpretation of the rules, which enable him to overcome and thereby also to express a distance.

In this process language produces something, an understanding that is its own truth, but at the same time it relies upon the willing participation of interlocutors, not the domination of one by the other:

> For Gadamer, language is living language - the medium of dialogue. When in *Truth and Method* Gadamer holds up the Platonic dialogue as the model for philosophical conversation, he makes it clear that the success of dialogue depends on the continuing

willingness of its participants – right from the point where one of them asks a question that can no longer be repressed – to "give in" to language, to be carried along by the conversation for the purpose of letting meaning emerge in an "event" of mutual understanding (Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989, p. 2).

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to outline the philosophical foundations that ground the interpretative phenomenology that guides this research. I have reviewed Husserl's pure phenomenology and stressed the importance of its commitment to direct experience and the lifeworld as key ideas for my own methodology. Next I turned to the tradition of existentialism and its concern to disclose everyday experience as it ran through the history of western philosophy. In discussing Heidegger, I illustrated his notion of Dasein as being-in-the-world and thus the influence of hermeneutics and existentialism in his work. Dasein forms the basis of the ontological commitments for this present research, however, I also showed how Merleau-Ponty's *lived body* supplements Dasein with its focus on how the world is experienced by the body-subject as a kind of unity or harmony. Next I considered how Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, in being influenced by Heidegger, offers a conception of understanding, language and dialogue that is useful as a framework for reflexive research into text interpretation and reading practices. I also discussed the questions of power, critical distance and domination through the Habermas–Gadamer and Gadamer/Derrida debates, hopefully showing how the creativity of language and the usefulness of prejudices can offer opportunities to reach truth, agreement and new meanings by way of openness and dialogue. The next chapter, 'Interpretative Phenomenology and Qualitative Research' is a bridging chapter that attempts to close the gap between the philosophical and theoretical concerns outlined here and the more practical and logistical concerns of qualitative research on the ground. I do this by developing a conceptual framework out of the notions of meaning, practice, context, lifeworld, the lived-body, and mood and emotion. All the while, the central guiding ideas of Dasein and the fusion of horizons remain somewhat as background references.

CHAPTER 4 Interpretative Phenomenology and Qualitative Research

When I am debating with a friend about the pros and cons of the UK leaving the EU, I am deeply immersed in the details of the conversation and in the emotions and arguments that develop between us. However, if someone was to turn to us with a mobile phone to video record the debate, I would become more self-aware, more conscious of the arguments I make, of how I sound or look. In this sudden self-conscious reflective-ness, myself, my debating partner and the conversation all become objectified in thought. But the prior, immersed, possibly heated, debate unfolding between us and in which we were both involved immediately and naturally is the 'lived experience' that is central to phenomenology. Evidently, however lived experience is impossible to grasp in the living of it and as soon as we turn to reflect on it, we have missed the moment. Likewise, when the participants in this research sit down in their regular spot to scroll through the headlines on their phone or computer, dip in and out of news stories and flick through the reader comments they are immersed in the world, they are being there, however, as soon as we turn to look at this moment in detail, to reflect upon it, we have lost something. Phenomenology as a reflective philosophy turns very deliberately to explore this taken-for-granted but ever-elusive 'felt world' and works as far as possible to translate its underlying logics into textual expression (van Manen, 2016; Paterson and Hughes, 1999). Unsurprisingly, the methodological challenges generated by this task are many.

This chapter gathers together the key tenets of an interpretative phenomenology that result from the theoretical implications of phenomenology and hermeneutics as laid out in the previous chapter and which best interrogate situations like that I have described here. The first thing to

note is that none of the phenomenologists in the previous chapter specified a unique method or approach. Theirs' was a first-person, reflective philosophy and as we have seen, one of their favourite targets for criticism was the unquestioning reliance of the natural sciences on method. Nonetheless, there is a growing interest in phenomenology as an inspiration for qualitative inquiry, especially in nursing studies, psychology and education. And as Johnson (2000) and Zahavi (2018) argue, drawing methodological implications from Heidegger and others is both possible and productive.

The first half of this chapter develops a conceptual framework out of the writings of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, but also out of the more recent considerations of their philosophy by authors like Seamon (1993), Thrift (2008), Moran (2000), Moores (2017) and Ingold (2011). In each section I consider the methodological implications of the different concepts and phenomenological insights involved. From here on I use the word 'phenomenology' on its own to describe the theoretical perspective that these principles signify and that supports this thesis, but it is an existential, interpretative-descriptive phenomenology that is implied throughout (van Manen, 2014). In the second half of the chapter I tun to the specific dilemmas that this approach generates and try to resolve them in a way that provides the research with coherent ontological and epistemological foundations. In what follows I look at the notions of *meaning, practice, context, the lived body* and *the lifeworld as* separate key concepts for elaboration and discussion. I bring these together with a specific discussion of Nicholson's (1989) notion of 'simple reading' and at how he conceives of the practice of reading newspapers. However, it should be noted that the terms and concepts that I highlight are all deeply implicated in each other. The lifeworld and the lived body for example both combine all of the other ideas as well as each other and their artificial separation here is for purposes of convenience and clarity. Likewise, I leave out other important phenomenological terms such as intentionality and Dasein because, besides being already discussed in the previous chapter, they are already implied as the underpinning assumptions of the concepts I draw out here.

The key tenets of interpretative phenomenology

Meaning

This research aims to disclose the lived meaning of participants' everyday encounters with the media and especially with the fragmented online newspaper comment. Of fundamental importance to this task is the particular conception of 'meaning' that is implied in the approach that I take. As I outlined partially in the previous chapter, the history of philosophy involves two opposite but connected positions on the origin of meaning. Metaphysics was the philosophical project of discovering facts and properties about objects in the world and thus worked to build up an ever-more detailed picture of what the world really is like (Fetveit, 2001). Articulating the meaning of something was simply a process of explicating its essential properties. In media studies, this approach involves an explication of the meaning to be found in a text. The opposite position emerged as a challenge to metaphysical thinking in the wake of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1953). This subject-centred position involved a shift away from 'thinking about how the world is, to thinking about how we perceive it' (Fetveit, 2001, p.175). This position 'places meaning within the perceiving subject and assumes that meaning is projected upon the entity from the perceiving subject' (Johnson, 2000, p. 135). Subject-centred descriptions seek to displace essentialism with a pluralisation of values and conceptions of truth (Fetveit, 2001). In media studies, this approach turns to the reader and views his or her interpretation as the actualisation of the meaning of a text and thus stresses polysemic meaning.

However, both object-centred and subject-centred positions presuppose a distinction between an 'inner' and an 'outer' world, between object and subject, and only from there can they then make commitments about whether meaning is objective or subjective (Johnson, 2000). This generally nonreflected commitment to dualism means that claims for objectivity are always vulnerable to counter-claims about the impossibility of attaining impartial access to the world. Meanwhile, interpretations of the world from the subject-centred side must learn to be comfortable with relativism and the obstacles it places on the path to making any argument about any meaning at all (Johnson, 2000). In this case Piketty (2013) points out the sense of bewilderment and paralysis we feel when everything and its opposite can be found to be true.

In developing intentionality, Husserl went some way to breaking up this dualism, however his insistence that some fixed structures of consciousness (the transcendental ego) must explain how experience is structured meant that meaning for him was ultimately to be found in the absolute subject. In the end Husserl's pure phenomenology can be seen to reproduce the Cartesian privileging of the 'knower'.

In contrast, meaning for Heidegger comes from Dasein's immersed and practical dealing with the world. For Heidegger (1962) there is no possibility of, or indeed need for a neutral standpoint for grounding knowledge because being human means being involved in a dense grid of meaning wherein things show up as meaningful only because they are part of practical life projects. Meaning comes from a primordial understanding that flows 'naturally from our everyday ways of coping with the world' (Hoy, 1993, p. 173). The world here is the 'matrix of relationships' within which something, anything, shows up as meaningful (Richardson in Johnson, 2000, p. 137).

In Heidegger's example outlined in the previous chapter, Dasein uses a hammer as part of a practical activity which itself is part of a life project like hanging a shelf, which in turn is part of moving into a new house etc. Meaning originates in practices situated within the context of the goals and purposes developed out of Dasein's past experience, immersion in culture and orientation towards future life possibilities. While this 'know how' and its context are not explicit or usually reflected up on by Dasein, they are nonetheless present as a primary understanding in the 'background' of everyday practices. Without this background understanding nothing at all would get done, at least not without the time-consuming labour of first representing to oneself cognitively every single aspect of every single action we take in moving around the world every day.

Unready-to-hand is the meaning a hammer has when it breaks (Heidegger, 1962). When something that we take for granted suddenly stops working human experience shifts to a mode of obtrusiveness because the tool suddenly stands out of its usual practical contexture before us. Present-at-hand is then the much less common mode of engagement that involves a form of reflection or stepping back from both our projects and the things we encounter in the world to objectify them (Heidegger, 1962). This is how Heidegger describes the stance of the scientist

or metaphysician, but one from which the scientist then supposes two things: a) that present-at-hand meaning presents her with the full and true being of something, and b) that this is how humans primarily experience the world in their everyday activity. Both of which are mistaken because the very basis of meaning, the practical 'know how' and the dense grid of contextual, practical and relational meaning have been removed from the analysis. Consequently, the meaning aimed at in this research is the ready-to-hand meaning that emerges in the participants' immersed and everyday media practices. From this view, obtrusive and present-at-hand meanings also show up and allow us to consider how and why elements of the everyday like media technologies are taken for granted in some situations and not in others.

Practice

Practice Theory is the term given to the family of theories that have developed out of the philosophical work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein and which strive to bring practices as ordinary, everyday, bodily actions into focus (Bourdieu, 1977; Knorr Cetina et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002). When 'practice' is more deliberately the unit of analysis a whole range of human activity - 'routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 255) come into view. In 1977, Pierre Bourdieu published *Outline of Theory of Practice* in which he attacked the assumption in normative accounts of human action that actors are consciously aware of the rules by which they are governed. Bourdieu's practices (1990, p. 12) 'have as their principle not a set of conscious and constant rules, but practical schemes, opaque to their possessors, varying according to the logic of the situation, the almost invariably partial viewpoint which it imposes, etc.' For this reason, practice studies generally focus on activities that are publicly observable (cooking, recycling, buying and selling shares on trading floors for example). Meaning is thought to be grounded in practices themselves – practices having meaning in and of themselves, to those that carry them out, and those that observe them. On this view, meaning is not to be found by seeking out 'inner' beliefs *about* the activities. Thus, practice theory generally eschews talking to people about their practices in written narrative or interview approaches. Instead, the most apt method for enabling a 'rich and detailed understanding' of practices is long-term, micro-ethnographic observation (Spaargaren et al., 2016).

Practice theory is currently making an impact on media studies especially through the collection of essays edited by Bräuchler and Postill (2010) and through the work of Nick Couldry (2012). Practice theory means media studies must turn away from focusing on the media text and the symbolic meaning of its content. But likewise, it means shifting the emphasis away from the reader's own interpretations and responses to a text. A focus on practice decentres the media – as text or technology - as the starting point for research as well as undoing social categories like gender, class and race through which reader responses were filtered in early reception studies. When everyday practices are in focus, practices around the media are only considered as part of the wider array of activities that people are engaged in. This present research takes the call of Practice Theory to de-privilege both the objective and subjective points of view and to focus instead on activities, very much to heart. To do this I spent time with each participant as they moved around a familiar setting and went about their daily practices - which included reading their favourite newspaper and its comments online. Where I didn't adhere strictly to the practice perspective is in the time I dedicated to in-depth interviews with each participant. I justify this blended approach later in the chapter, but essentially, I argue that in many ways people can tell us much about their practices by talking about them, as long as this approach is complemented by some form of participant observation.

Lifeworld and Context

Husserl's notion of the *lifeworld* goes some way to bringing meaning, practice and context together. The term lifeworld challenges the scientists 'true world' because it recognises that the world is unavoidably experienced or intuited by each individual subjectively, and that these individual lifeworlds comprise wider collective lifeworlds – the class room, a friendship group, the family home, a political movement - all of which shape and constrain each other (Seamon, 2013; Lewis and Staehler, 2010). The lifeworld therefore is not equivalent to an introspective world of the individual but to a lived and social environment. Lifeworld thus emphasises the entwinement of person and world. The people-world immersion that lifeworld implies again undercuts the object-subject dualism assumed by the sciences (Seamon, 2013). Instead of these two concepts existing side by side, person and world are understood in the lifeworld as *one* (Seamon, 2013).

[T]he lifeworld ... is always already there, existing in advance for us, the —ground of all praxis whether theoretical or extratheoretical. The world is pregiven to us... not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world (Husserl, 1970, p. 142).

Thus, one of the most important aspects of the lifeworld is that it goes on without us having to reflect on how or why this happens; we drive home from work in the evening thinking about the day's events and without thinking through a mental map of the route we are taking. But even more deliberate actions that require concentration and intention or focusing of the mind also happen within the lifeworld (Seamon, 2013).

The methodological implications of the lifeworld, practical know-how and context as phenomenological insights are taken on board in qualitative research in a variety of ways. Here Johnson (2000, pp. 139–140) articulates their importance for nursing studies:

Being-in-the-world … reminds us that our lives are unified and connected within the whole of our significances and involvements. Because human involvement is the clearing that makes all meaning possible, the participants' experiences and the meaning of these experiences cannot be separated from the whole of that person's world. Therefore, a single experience is inseparable from its context of involvements. Moreover, the meaning of any experience is not presented to the researcher as a decontexualized entity that can be investigated and understood as an isolated object. Rather, both the experience and the meaning of that experience are embedded within a contextual whole. In that sense, hermeneutical phenomenology as a research methodology is interpretive. It is a way of uncovering and bringing out into the open an understanding which has been presented to the researcher, not as a kind of cognitive or theoretical understanding but rather in the structure of something *as* something.

Nursing research influenced by Heidegger's meaning as know-how-in-context focuses on the fine detail of everyday situated nursing practices as well as their spatial and temporal contexts. This means spending time with participants in their everyday settings, observing them and participating with them where possible in their activities. Most phenomenological approaches

in nursing studies were influenced initially by Husserl and therefore often follow the phenomenological interview method – unstructured, in-depth and longer than the usual one-hour qualitative interviews - where participants are encouraged to talk about their practices in detail, especially eliciting narrative stories with a concern for the whole of the person's life experience. The analytical emphasis is then on uncovering the implicit practical knowledge and the context-dependent nature of meaning in this interview and narrative data (Johnson, 2000, p. 140)

> eliciting stories or narratives of an experience is one way to preserve the context and to enable the significance and meaning of that experience to be… In the actual *living* of our own stories individual events acquire significance within the whole to which they belong. Thus, the stories that are *told* to others reveal meaning, as well as a sense of organization and coherence, i.e. how an experience fits within the context of one's life. Moreover, this coherence and sense of significance entails that the meanings of experiences are context dependent. [Emphasis in original]

My own work aims at the lifeworld of each participant. For this reason, I travelled to visit each one in their home, work or other familiar setting to carry out an in-depth 'interview' and to observe and take notes on their individual media-encounter settings. I also asked each participant to tell me their personal biography in their own words, and rather than focusing on demographic specifics I communicate these stories in some detail in order to give a sense of the web of significances that count for each one. The interviews were planned and carried out as unstructured and usually lasted more than two hours. Therefore, they are best referred to as conversations or dialogues. These interviews aimed at eliciting the detailed self-narratives that Johnson (2000) refers to but also at attaining rich descriptions of the participants' media practices, in their own words. However, to help to develop a deeper phenomenological sensitivity to meaning beyond illocution, I have incorporated the notion of the *lived body*.

The lived body

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty (1962) the lifeworld, practice, meaning and context are all imbricated within the *lived body*. Embodied knowledge becomes manifested through movement and practical action in a way that is closely integrated with the physical setting

surrounding that action (Seamon, 2014). A good example of this is how a person walks up a set of stairs, the exact height and depth of each step is not known to the person as exact 'information', but the body makes a kinaesthetic judgment about distance and the appropriate action or movement to make; this is exactly the kind of habitual and skilful embodied knowing that Merleau-Ponty is talking about (Ratcliffe, 2009). The lived body helps to constitute the meaning or perception of the stairs as 'steep but climbable' (Ratcliffe, 2009, no pagination).

Merleau-Ponty's lived body has influenced this study through the writings of media theorist Shaun Moores (2017; 2014; in press), through phenomenological anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011), more generally through the writings of behaviourist geographer David Seamon (1993, 2013) and other non-representational theorists like Nigel Thrift (2008). Moores' article (2014) about knowledge in the hands in media use was of particular inspiration in my own research. The excerpt below highlights the level of detail that turning to one's own embodied practices can reveal, and which in turn tells us so much about ways of knowing that do not rely on presumptions of rational knowledge transparent to consciousness.

> Gently applying pressure to the base of the machine with the thumb of my right hand, my left-hand thumb lifts the lid while the other fingers of that hand lie on top. My right-hand index finger then slides from right to left across the touch-pad, moving the cursor until it is located over an area in the middle of the screen marked "Locked." Here I tap the left side of the touch-pad to reveal my desktop display or the document that I was last working on (it is rare for me to have shut down the computer the previous day, as I am in the habit of just closing the lid). (Moores, 2014, p. 197 Ways of the hand).

This close empirical study of his own practices inspired me to carry out my own self-study and auto-hermeneutic. For this I took a video recording of myself reading the online newspapers and scrolling through the comments, however, it was some time before I honed a 'hermeneutic' practice sensitive enough to be able to see and develop new meanings and interpretations out of this recording. Moores uses Merleau-Ponty to analyse his 'ways of the hand' and stresses that '"it is the body which 'catches' and 'comprehends' movement"' (Merleau-Ponty in Moores, 2014, p. 198). Thus, he argues for an anti-rationalist and anti-structuralist theory for contemporary everyday (media) studies (Moores, n.d.)

Mood and emotion

Phenomenology also stresses the importance of 'moods, passions, emotions, intensities and feelings' (Anderson in Vannini, 2015, p. 5). Mood was a central theme in the work of Heidegger (1962). Dasein is dependent on pre-intentional moods as a context for participating in a meaningful world. To understand moods phenomenologically we can look at the distinction between moods and emotions. For Heidegger, moods can be considered as 'deeper' than the moods we use in everyday language and Ratcliffe (2009) recommends we think about them more as 'existential feeling'. Emotion is the more clearly intentional state - we can be bored, disappointed, or excited *by* the news. In contrast, Heidegger highlights mood as the background against which we observe the world, by this he means that we cannot view the world as an outsider or as an object might be able to survey the vessel in which it is contained (1962, p. 173). In the above discussion of Dasein we have seen how tools show up or stand out for us as significant only within the 'web of practical purposive relations' between things and our projects in which they are involved (Ratcliffe, 2009, no pagination). In this way specific things, people, happenings etc. have significance for us. If this everyday significance or sense of purpose was to be taken away from us, we can imagine something very like Sartre's *nausea* as the mood that best describes the alienation and contingency that would pervade our sense of being in this scenario (Ratcliffe, 2009). Therefore, mood is an important background state which, even though often barely visible to us, is the ground against which intentional world-directed emotions show up.

Moods as background is taken up in the current stream of work known as non-representational theory by Thrift (2008), McCormack (2014), Anderson(2014), Lorimer (2008) and others who bring moods, emotions, passions and feelings together to think about the supra-individual notion of 'affect'. Drawing on Heidegger via Deleuze they think about affects as 'attunements' that bodies enact, transmit and are themselves produced through (Vannini, 2015, p. 5), with a special consideration of the role of affects in political regeneration. This strand of work makes a point of transcending the human or subject level considerations to work instead with relations between humans, objects, networks and energies. In being sensitive to mood, emotions and affect in this present study, I was careful to consider each individual's emotional response to both the semantic meaning of the media texts as well as their feelings around the media

technology. The general moods in which they carried out their media and other everyday practices were also of concern, although more difficult to establish or interpret. These 'moods' or simply background feelings did not become apparent for me until much later into the analytic stage of the research. As an example, the up-beat and energetic personality of Alice Holmes meant that it took several listenings of the interview recordings to identify an underlying anxiety around the issue of education. Alice complained that her teenage students simply 'copy-paste' their work directly from the internet, which on its own I did not see as communicating anything new or surprising. However, after listening to the recordings several times, I understood that this indicated a background mood of grave worry and anxiety around the media and young people's future and this anxiety had made the newspaper Alice read every day at the local café stand out for her in its very materiality. The fact that something was printed on paper where she could hold it and even smell it, signified something more trustworthy and secure. This stood in contrast to the other participants for whom media materiality was woven invisibly into the background of their awareness.

Simple reading

Bringing these phenomenological principles together, we can begin to see that the practice of reading, despite its apparent position as the paradigmatic 'internal', 'subjective' and 'cognitive' act, is as much an embodied, situated 'course of sense making within daily life' as any other practice (Heap, 1977). Nicholson (1989, p. 131) considers the act of reading in terms of Heidegger's phenomenology of being and through it describes reading the newspaper an act of 'simple reading'. By 'simple reading' he means a direct, non-reflective reading in which there is little suspicion about hidden meanings or misgivings about sources and bias. On this view, we read simply every day in reading the news, emails and ads. Self-consciously interrogating the truth or meaning of the text is of course possible, but Nicholson contends it is not the primary mode in which we read the newspaper. Thus 'simple reading' is contrasted with more critical and reflective (or foreground) reading and interpreting of texts, as a hermeneutician might do with an ancient biblical manuscript, or how a lost hiker might read a crumpled map.

Most of us, however, simply do not have time for that reflective, critical kind of reading in our everyday activities. This 'simple reading' he calls a form of background interpretation – the

interpretations that we make but that we are not usually conscious of doing. Neither are we aware of the practical interests and language that they involve or of the 'unheeded totality of the environment' that count in our understandings of what we read simply (Nicholson, 1989, p. 132). In this way he explains that simple reading can have a 'direct impact' on the behaviour of the reader, prompting him or her to 'behave in a certain way' (Nicholson, 1989, p. 133). There is a recognition in this claim that 'direct effects' are real; you read the news of an explosion in the capital city and you are prompted to turn on the television to find out more about what has happened, similarly you are prompted to text friends and family who might have been in the city to establish their whereabouts.

> In saying that these are direct effects, I mean that the behaviour is prompted by the information just as directly as any behaviour is prompted by desires and wishes that spring up within the self or that stem from any stimulus. Conscious deliberation does not occur […] Reflections and doubts do occur [Was this an accident or an attack?] but they do so subsequent to the initial behaviour…Whether the material is sensational or not, we the of words to reach out and ensnare our attention (Nicholson, 1989, p. 132).

To speak of 'direct effect' in a piece of work that looks so much like audience research poses a problem. The whole raison d'être of new audience research was to question the presumptions in communication studies and Critical Theory approaches that held the audience was an impressionable mass. As primarily non-reflective enactors, it could be suggested that 'readers' are ripe for manipulation by a determining subliminal message in the text that they are unaware of consciously. But understanding in the phenomenological sense is not a 'pure passivity' because reading is a *projective* understanding. The reader necessarily brings a 'fair amount of interpretationally relevant baggage' to any reading activity (Heap, 1977, p. 106). 'When one reads, one binds the message received intimately together with the other material in one's consciousness, with one's imagination and memories' (Nicholson, 1989, p. 133). This is a 'merger' of what is inside consciousness with what is outside it; we put 'constructions' on the messages without directly perceiving this act, we notice some aspects and exclude others, but we do not actively discriminate between what is inside or outside, what we notice or omit (Nicholson, 1989). The text we read is outside us, but in our understanding of it there is no boundary between what comes from outside and what comes from within (Nicholson, 1989).

In this way, simple reading is understanding as background interpretation. In this understanding the reader projects their interests (being a caring parent or a committed socialist for example) to their reading of the text and through which the meaning of the texts becomes intimately bound up with these projections in such a way as there is no distinction between 'two' meanings possible. The activity of simple reading was thus the target of this research. However, in the data analysis this 'simple' turned out to be much more complex than Nicholson tries to convey here. Two of the four participants enacted what could only be described as very suspicious readings of the newspaper and comments, while the other two, albeit much more immersed in the content of the news, were reading suspiciously in terms of the technology they were using to access the news. While their own background interpretations were involved in each reading, (and much of my analysis aims at highlighting these) the participants' visible efforts to understand the background of the news narratives or the hidden meaning of the media technology complicated the scene. I develop this interpretation in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight and bring my findings into conversation with Media Theory and Digital Literacy in the Discussion Chapter.

In summary, this research was designed and carried out with commitment to the theoretical centrality of *context, practice, situated meaning, mood, the lived body* and *the lifeworld*. This involved travelling between four countries so that I could spend time with each participant in their own home or other familiar setting. I carried out unstructured, long-form interview-conversations using a simple interview schedule to remind myself of key ideas to mention, therefore allowing the participant's contributions as much freedom as possible. During these and other meetings I also observed, participated in and took detailed notes on each participant as they scrolled through and read newspaper comments. During this time, I also took field notes on the immediate contexts, the participants' body movements, practices, emotional responses and mood atmospheres. But I also talked to them in detail about their comment-reading experience, their everyday media practices, their biography, past experiences and their future plans. Occasionally, to facilitate in-depth conversation, I did this in settings outside of the participants' everyday. For example, I returned several times to the home of Lola who lives in my own hometown to collect notes on her daily practices, but we read the comments together and talked in detail about them in the quiet vicinity of my own kitchen while her parents cared

for her two young children. After the initial interviews, I kept up email and video conversations with each participant for several months. And instead of having the recorded interviews transcribed by someone else, I chose to listen to each and transcribe them myself so that I could become immersed in them and their subtle feelings and references. This required listening to each interview several times, and through the notion of the hermeneutic circle, proved key sources of insight in the analysis, especially for developing on the role of mood and emotion. The next chapter outlines these methods in more detail. In what follows here, I turn to the methodological dilemmas that this particular form of interpretative phenomenology generates and present resolutions that secure this framework's coherence and consistency.

Methodological implications

Talking about practices

As I have already pointed out in my discussion on nursing studies and practice theory, qualitative approaches influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics involve methodological implications that pull in seemingly opposite directions. Approaches that draw more directly on Husserl advocate in-depth, unstructured interviews, lasting as long as possible and with as little direction from the researcher as feasible (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). These interviews, it is hoped, provide the researcher with rich, content-full descriptions of the meaning of experience from the first-person point of view. In 'analysis', the researcher uncovers the phenomenological meaning in these personal narratives by bringing them into contact with themes like self-consciousness and temporality. One particularly insightful example of this approach was carried out by Johnson (2000) who talked to patients about their personal experiences of being restrained in leather restraints as inpatients at a psychiatric facility. The interview approach makes sense here. Asking for personal narratives during a long-form interview and avoiding a list of set questions honours the holistic concern for meaning by allow time and comfort for an interviewee to sketch these out as broadly as possible. This allowed the participants to bring up experiences from their lives that did not appear immediately connected to the experience of being restrained. A participant-observer or other ethnographic approach that involved the researcher actually observing the restraining

procedure, while valuable in theory, would be deeply problematic in terms of ethics. To exclude experiences like being restrained in favour of more mundane, easily accessed and less 'dramatic' daily routines and practices would be equally problematic, however.

The phenomenological interview relies on the somatic and mantic as well as semantic quality of language because it rests on a faith in the subject's at-least partial capacity to step back and reflect on their practices and experiences (van Manen, 2016). Likewise, it relies on the subject reflecting on these experiences after the fact and to communicate the significance of them in some faithful, consistent and coherent way through language. However, the reflexive subject is the very problem highlighted by Heidegger's Dasein and Merleau-Ponty's body-subject. Practice theorists influenced by both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, (but also Foucault, Bourdieu as well as Wittgenstein and Giddens), deny the possibility that meaning can be derived from what people *say* about their lives (Knorr Cetina et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002). For one, they argue that interviews and their transcripts cannot accommodate features of experience like emotions, context and practices that are difficult if not impossible to bring into self-consciousness and discourse. Moreover, because interviews happen after the fact, they can only provide a secondary or second-order account of experience and events (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). Bennett (2013, no pagination) draws on Bourdieu to argue that: 'In questioning an act, such as in an interview, the seemingly seamless interaction between person and environment dissipates and the nature of the practice as an embodied practice is lost'. Therefore, many practice and non-representational theorists eschew interviews altogether and pursue more 'experimental' ethnographic and performative approaches such as recording live video footage or keeping photo diaries as ways to access events, practices and body movements as they happen (Knorr Cetina et al., 2001; Latham, 2008; Schatzki and Schatzki, 1996). Likewise, they argue for presenting research in much less discursive modes than written thesis and journal articles. Some call for dance, performance art and other experimental and non-representational modes of communicating research 'findings', although they accept the various challenges that such a position poses. Others simply suggest supplementing interviews with other methods like observation of practices or recording conversations in live scenarios rather than in a sterile, contrived 'interview room' (Macpherson, 2010; Spinney, 2009).

However, some media practice theorists like Couldry (2012) imply a notion that sees much of intention and deliberation in people's everyday practices around media, therefore legitimising the use of interviews. For example, in the research project *The Public Studies*, Couldry and his colleagues ask participants to enter their daily practices into a journal (Couldry et al., 2016). A strict practice theory view would see these entries as distorted versions of real practices because the subject is not considered to be able to give any 'true' account of what they do. Personally however, I agree with Couldry (2012). Some practice theorists like Hitchings (2012) and Merriman (2013) also argue that people *can* talk about their practices. The first reason for my agreement with their position is an instinctive reaction against the implication in practice theory that research participants cannot bring their own practical meanings into conscious thought, but that the researcher by observing and reflecting on them, can. Merriman (2013, pp. 182–183) criticises this implication in practice theory as:

> the problematic belief that experimental and improvisational 'mobile methods' [non-representational ethnographic methods] provide the means to enable the research to get 'close-to', 'grasp' or witness the here-ness, now-ness and live-ness of particular practices and events – providing some 'God-like' position from which the researcher can gain a more accurate or authentic knowledge of a situation.

Secondly, I agree that in speaking about practices we can and do bring at least some of the normally non-illocutionary aspects of that practice into language more or less reflexively. Hitchings (2012) highlights how practice theorists such as Bourdieu and Giddens allow for moments and techniques of improvisation, reflexivity and individual will in their own social practice perspectives. Besides his concern for symbolic power, Bourdieu (in Hitchings, 2012, p. 62) talked about 'disposition analysis' and urged the researcher to reflect on her own academic habitus. When Giddens talked about the personal reflexivity that characterises modern societies it became possible to imagine how routine practices themselves might be 'dragged into discursive consciousness' (Hitchings, 2012, p. 62). What these views highlight is that, while the 'hyperrational' subject must be thoroughly critiqued, practice theorists would be going too far in the opposite direction if the subject became 'entirely subordinate to our practices' (Hitchings, 2012, p. 63). Finally, and importantly for this research, if Heidegger calls Dasein the shepherd of being, then human language and conversation in both 'natural' and

'contrived' interview settings, must always inevitably hint at the pre-discursive understandings that subtend it. I am in agreement with Hitchings (2012) then that talking to people about their practices is more tricky than it is impossible. In designing this research then, I took advice from both practice theory and Husserlian phenomenology which involved both the observation of practices and the in-depth long-form interview. Again, these will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

Discerning and developing phenomenological meaning out of the large body of recordings, transcripts, field notes, emails and conversations then required an analytic approach that stayed true to interpretative phenomenological tenets and took into consideration the self-narratives of the participants, their practices, and what could be read in between the lines of both. One important source of inspiration for my own analytic orientation, especially in listening to the recordings of the interviews, was Allen's (2007) and Charlesworth's (2000) considerations of Merleau-Ponty's first and second-order language (1962).

Second-order language

In *Crime, Drugs and Social Theory*, Allen (2007, p. 65) points out that social science interviews that require participants to *explain* their behaviour and personal reasoning for taking drugs forces a wedge between the actor and the primacy of their world involvement. In seeking 'I did it because…' answers and corralling participants in this direction, most quantitative and much qualitative research techniques suppress the 'awkward' first order language that emerges from the tight grip of primary experience (Allen, 2007, p. 64). In looking for 'reasoned reasons' in interviews we will only find 'second order' language or the 'speech about speech' which 'makes up the general run of empirical language' (Allen, 2007, p. 64; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 178). What we must look for is first-order or 'authentic' speech: 'There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, *a thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 179, emphasis in original). For Merleau-Ponty (1962) the thought is *in* the naturally occurring speech itself, we do not need to ask about what was really there inside the mind that justifies the speech after the fact.

One obvious place to look for this first order speech would be in everyday, naturally occurring conversations, as is the focus for ethnomethodology. There are extra challenges then to seeking 'first order' speech when, sitting for a research interview, we are not strictly in the thick of our participants' everyday news-reading practices. However, as Allen (2007) points out, there are still some opportunities to hear the acoustics of this more primary mode of being in the first-order descriptions that participants offer of their practices during an interview. For example, in his interviews about crime and drug use in Greater Manchester, Allen's participants said things 'just happened' or 'came naturally'. Because he was part of a traditional qualitative, policy-oriented research project at the time, Allen reflects that these answers were not deemed adequate by the research organisers because they did not explicitly or reflectively explain *why* the participants had 'chosen' to become involved in certain activities. However, when pressed to give reasons and rationalisations for their involvements, participants would repeat these phrases or retrospectively call their behaviour 'stupid'. In a critique of his own involvement in the research, Allen (2007) identified this as a forced imposition of the social scientist's framework of understanding (taking drugs is deviant or abnormal behaviour requiring rational explanation) onto the perfectly valid practical point of view the participant had already offered.

In forcing primary experience through the tightly bound mesh of second-order language, the researcher effectively eviscerates the more practical, immersed, holistic view that interview subjects have of their world. Yet with more phenomenological sensitivity, comments like 'I don't know' or 'It just happened', or even moments of extended silence, can be heard to communicate deeper, more complex, existential meanings. Allen (2007) for example hears the 'utter horror and pain of exclusion' in the uncompromising language of his working-class participants as well as an agonising misrecognition of their experience of domination in a class-based society. Likewise, in his study of life in post-industrial Rotherham, Charlesworth (2000) points out that the experience of closeness to material necessity meant his working-class participants did not possess the concepts through which to view their own lives in the same way as himself, the more materially comfortable and distant researcher. The following excerpt from Charlesworth (2000, pp. 114, 119) demonstrates how he tried instead to stay with the 'crude' language of his participants and do justice to the often-painful existential insights that it embodied.

When asked for an opinion on Rotherham this woman felt one word, 'crap', uttered with a blank face, as though the question were of an imbecile, in the tones of tolerant self-evidence and complete seriousness, was a satisfactory description of the place…She reaches spontaneously for crap, the immediacy of the response shows that it is not one that issues from a careful weighing of possible responses; she is not contemplating different aspects of her perception or experience, but feels 'crap' captures the experience of stultifying banality the town engenders…It crystallises in a condensed meaning, a relation to the world, attitude to existence and being, and instantiates this in a sense that relates to the referential-whole of their lives… Rotherham-crap is a direct expression of their experience… [This] description takes the form of direct expression of experience that is primordially encountered. Instead of reports of a reflective, deliberative, aesthetic kind, one finds expressions that are closer to pain behaviour in form.

Both Allen (2007) and Charlesworth (2000) take a phenomenological approach to their research that listens to what is said in the silence as well as in the first-order or 'awkward' language of their participants. Both then draw on Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) to critique the bourgeois parlance and cultural domination that is carried out in traditional social science approaches. Therefore, in the interviews I carried out and in the subsequent correspondences with my participants, I tried to allow for opportunities for the participants to describe the lived immediacy of their reading practices in their own words, to avoid demanding explanations for their responses, to avoid simplifying or decontextualizing their own interpretations, and to listen with a phenomenological ear to what was in the silence as well as in the words. In lots of ways this happened almost accidentally because of my own 'failure' to take on the role of formal, academic researcher. As soon as the conversations were up and running, I was drawn irresistibly into living the moment. And while initially I had seen this as a personal failure to embody the professionalism required of my new role, something that I needed to 'work on', I now see this unguarded personal immersion in the conversations as a source of much of the 'authentic' debate and exchanges that occurred within them. Furthermore, I took on the transcription myself so that I could listen closely for the momentary silences, sighs or tone of voice that would direct me to first-order experiences being conveyed in the emotion and embodied responses to my questions. The interpretations offered in this thesis, it is hoped, thus

provide a phenomenological insight to the meaning in the silent as well as moved, lived and spoken encounters between the readers and the media, technology and the newspaper comments.

Reflexivity

So far in this thesis I have little mentioned one of the concepts most important to contemporary qualitative research. Perhaps this is because the 'anxieties and ambivalences' that Rose (1997, p. 306) has found embodied in the general understanding of reflexivity are compounded in an interpretative phenomenological project, not least because as central an author as Gadamer (1975) describes prejudices as both critical for asking questions and impossible to make transparent, demanding all the same that they be surfaced and thoroughly interrogated. Thus, the notion of reflexive research is a complicated one in terms of phenomenology and hermeneutics. In the following points I have tried to combine, prioritise and allow for co-habitation between some of the key tenets of phenomenology for the purposes of carrying out a reflexive research practice, again these are mainly drawn from my reading of Gadamer (1975). I discuss the challenges my application of these points generates in the following section.

Hermeneutical phenomenological research must:

1) Allow that preunderstandings are fundamental to understanding and therefore must therefore be relied upon for developing insight;

2) Allow for the researcher's first-person experience of a phenomenon as a legitimate starting point for gaining understanding;

3) Accommodate the bracketing of the researchers' natural acceptance of personal, commonsense and theoretical preunderstanding in order to gain direct access to the phenomenon as lived;

4) And concurrently accept that full transparency (and therefore complete bracketing) of preunderstanding is ultimately impossible.

Researchers influenced by interpretative phenomenology have devised various means of interrogating their own preunderstandings. Some researchers set up interviews with colleagues with the explicit aim of revealing and interrogating as much as possible of their own positionality. Gaidys and Fleming (2005) recorded these interviews and then transcribed and analysed them along the same lines as they did their participants' contributions. Howes (2013) mirrored the reflective practice of phenomenological philosophers in a solitary reflection on her research question and the contribution of her own positionality and academic training in the way she constructed that question. She then carried out a thematic analysis of her reflections and considered them in a critical dialogue with colleagues. Like all qualitative researchers, phenomenologists keep journals and sketch mind maps of emergent understandings as new 'information' provokes prejudices that were not previously visible to them (Gaidys and Fleming, 2005). The Canadian phenomenologist Max Van Manen (2016) places more emphasis on the productive aspect of preunderstandings then on the interrogation of them and urges the researcher to draw creatively from one's own experience of a phenomenon as a starting point for understanding and to turn back iteratively to reconsider this experience in the new light of the developing research. I believe van Manen's approach is more in tune with Gadamer's simultaneous concern for preunderstandings and his emphatic eschewal of method.

In this research, I carried out three separate levels of personal reflection and explication. Firstly, the preface of this research consists in my own short autobiography leading up to the beginning of this research. I had attempted to write this several times during the research, however, I was inspired by the rich and candid autobiographies that the participants' had offered me so willingly and decided to write one that I might have offered had I been asked the question about motivations by a researcher. It is hoped that this autobiography offers the reader a flavour of the concerns that led to me writing the proposal for this research as they stand out in relation to my own past experiences and future life projects. Having written them also forced me to face them myself. I position this reflection in the preface of the thesis to emphasise its nature as the ground against which the research concerns were first formulated. Secondly, in preparing the literature review, I developed a systematic understanding of the different theoretical perspectives on the reader-text relationship that played the central role in this research. Through this exercise I developed a clearer understanding of the notions that had influenced my own initial concerns about the media, especially from my past readings of the Critical Theorists.

The phenomenological approach in this research is an attempt to overcome the theoretical restrictions that these preunderstandings would have imposed in the form of a more critical or social constructivist approach. Through my critique of these perspectives in the Gadamer debates, I was able to more fully understand their presuppositions and, it is hoped, avoid imposing them on my participants perspectives and to try to 'bracket them' out of the analysis to gain direct access to meaning.

The third level of reflection complimented these first two levels. While level one and two constitute a typical reflective approach in qualitative methodology I felt a more interrogative approach to my own experiences and media practices was required. For this I carried out 'self-study'. To carry this out I video recorded myself reading the newspaper and the newspaper comment online. I took notes about my surroundings and my familial and social context. As part of this exercise, I copied and pasted two newspaper articles and the comments from the pre-selected texts into a word document, free-writing my first-order responses to both texts in the spaces provided between the outlines of the texts. The results of this reflective exercise was used primarily to inform my approach to the interviews and to the analysis stage by stimulating considerations like 'Who is the participant talking to in their response, me, the comment-poster or the text?', because in my own responses to the comments I noted that I felt like I was responding to a person rather than to a text. I offer more details on this auto-hermeneutic approach in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a bridge between the history of phenomenology in the previous chapter and the practical description of the research as it proceeded, in the next chapter. I discussed the concepts of meaning, practice, context the lived-body, mood, the lifeworld and simple reading as central tenets in phenomenology and pointed to how I aimed to incorporate these as methodological commitments in this research. The second half of the chapter turned to the methodological dilemmas these various commitments entail. Firstly, I discussed how I have incorporated recommendations from both Husserlian phenomenology and practice theory to allow my researchers to talk about their practices and experiences, as well as noting my own

set of observations of them. I then elaborated a distinction between first and second-order language based on Allen's and Charlesworth's readings of Merleau-Ponty so that I could allow for these different orders of experience to be accounted for in my own research. Finally, I turned to the question of researcher reflexivity and described the three-level reflection exercises that I have included in this research and which involve a self-observation and auto-hermeneutic approach. The next chapter describes the practical realities of carrying out this research, from the formulation of the central research question to the writing up my interpretations. I deal with the traditional qualitative concerns of sampling, coding and validity and demonstrate how these issues were translated to honour the philosophical commitments and conceptual framework of this study.

CHAPTER 5 An existential investigation

A key principle of interpretative phenomenology is to avoid imposing strict methods on phenomena. Likewise reducing their contextual, embodied, experiential character to suit the demands of theoretical models is considered anathema. However, while a completely free, open, exploratory engagement with phenomena is desirable, the lack of guidelines for carrying out such an approach proves an enormous hindrance to the qualitative researcher in attempting to disclose useful and perceptive insights. In response to what they saw as Husserl's overly scientistic approach, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer assiduously avoided translating their philosophy for the purposes of carrying out actual human inquiry. However, writers such as phenomenologist and educationalist Max van Manen (1984, 2016) now recognise the need to fill this gap. Van Manen offers a way to organise a phenomenology-inspired qualitative research project and to manage the different questions of method that inevitably arise in its practice. In an introduction to 'doing' phenomenology he offers four phases for carrying out interpretative phenomenological research, each phase stressing the iterative nature of the movement between different 'procedural activities' (van Manen, 1984, p. 5). My own investigation has been designed principally around van Manen's framework. However, despite the anti-method spirit of interpretative phenomenology, the more traditional qualitative research framework provided by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) also goes some way to indicating the different phases and activities that comprised this research project. I have reproduced this cycle here so that the reader can see that ultimately there was an organised and

comprehensive approach to this research rather than a random, overly reactive or improvisational approach.
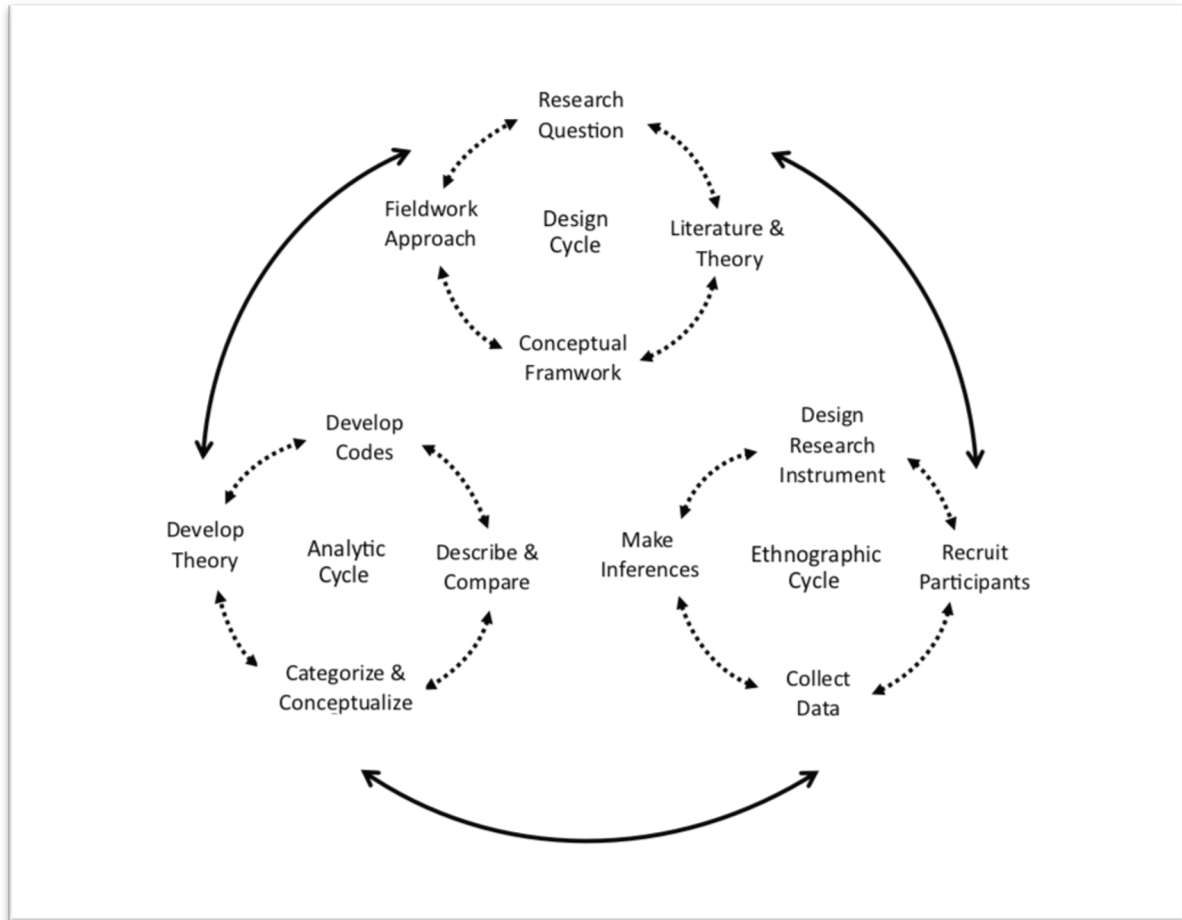
Figure 5 Hennink, Hutter and Bailey's 'Research Cycle' (2011)

The cyclical character of this model also stresses the iterative nature of the research and provides the researcher with a clear structure and reference point for designing and planning that reflects coherence and soundness at all stages. Some adaptations and changes of emphasis were required as my own study unfolded. Influenced by interpretative phenomenology, the different 'steps' involved in each phase were characterised by a much stronger dialogical, descriptive and interpretative attitude rather than a more 'validity' orientated qualitative, ethnographic or analytic stance. Interpretation/analysis began as soon as the first interview was completed and communication with my participants continued into the late stages of 'analysis'

and writing up the thesis. Likewise, the term ethnography or digital ethnography could be loosely applied to my field work, but I refrain from using these words because they tend to imply less concern for the embodied and situational aspects of media encounters and more emphasis on the broader cultural and relational contexts around the participants. Nonetheless, the Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) diagram gives a general sense of the way in which this research project proceeded between 2015 and 2020, especially in illustrating how movement within and between the different cycles was ongoing, allowing for the development of hermeneutic understanding over time. [7]

As can be inferred from the overview of existential philosophy in Chapter Three, using vocabulary like 'data', 'codes', 'sample' and 'analysis' is deeply problematic in a phenomenological study because it gives the impression that human experience can be captured, reduced, neatly dismantled and coded into straightforward 'results'. For this reason, van Manen (1984, p. 12) suggests instead that we think about how to carry out a 'thorough exploration of the scope of lived experience' rather than 'method' and Alvesson (2010, p. 69) uses the term 'insight gathering' as a way to think about interviews and data collection more generally. I have done my best in this chapter to avoid more scientific qualitative vocabularies but occasionally slip back into this language when other options are too cumbersome. For example, I use the word 'interviews' a lot, although I believe what I carried out can be more aptly described as hermeneutical dialogues with the participants. Likewise, where I use the word analysis, I mean analytic in a probatory mode rather than in an explicit disassembling and cause-effect mode of analysis.

The rest of this chapter describes how the research was carried out under the subheadings 'Turning to the nature of the lived experience', 'The existential investigation,' 'Phenomenological interpretation' and 'Writing phenomenologically'. I also summarise the media texts that were utilised, introduce the participants that were involved and give a brief precis of the Research Dialogues that compiled all of the research data on each participant. The next section illustrates how the articles appeared online on the day I read them with the participants, I have also included a small extract from the comments that were attached to the

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[7] This period involved a four-month hiatus for maternity leave at the end of year one.

news story, 'Moratorium on evictions would stop growth of homelessness'. All of these texts are available to read in full, including translations and comments in Appendices 3, 4 and 5.

As a reminder however: I carried out this research by recruiting four participants from my own extended personal networks, I travelled to visit and sat with each one as they read the news and the corresponding comments on their favourite newspaper. I had pre-selected news stories on the housing crises unfolding in Ireland in Spain at the time. I noted the participants' immediate environments, their embodied practices of reading but also beyond reading. I noted mood atmospheres, emotions, objects, technologies and my own responses and reflections. I recorded our unstructured, in-depth interviews on my mobile phone. I corresponded with each participant via email or video calls in the following months and spent several afternoons at home with Lola. I transcribed each dialogue myself and began interpretation as soon as each transcription was completed. This 'analysis' was based on the general idea of a hermeneutic circle working from parts to whole. I dedicated several months in the final two years of the research just to analysis, which I did primarily by listening to the interviews several times, making notes directly on the transcripts (printed paper versions and other copies on Microsoft Word on my desktop computer). During this period, I developed my own systematic approach to interpretative analysis later working with emerging themes (sub-themes and cluster themes) on flip-chart paper using postit notes. Eventually all of the analysis was either photographed or transcribed into Word documents where modes of retrieval could be better organised. However, much of the final interpretations that are presented in the empirical chapters became much more fully developed in the writing of the thesis.

On the next page, I have inserted small image of each of the four newspaper articles as they would have appeared to the readers on their various devices on the day we read them. These images are supposed to give a sense of how the articles appear on first entering the webpage. However, the full text of each article has been included in Appendices 6 and 7 in Word format for more comfortable reading.

The media texts

The four newspaper articles from El País and The Irish Times
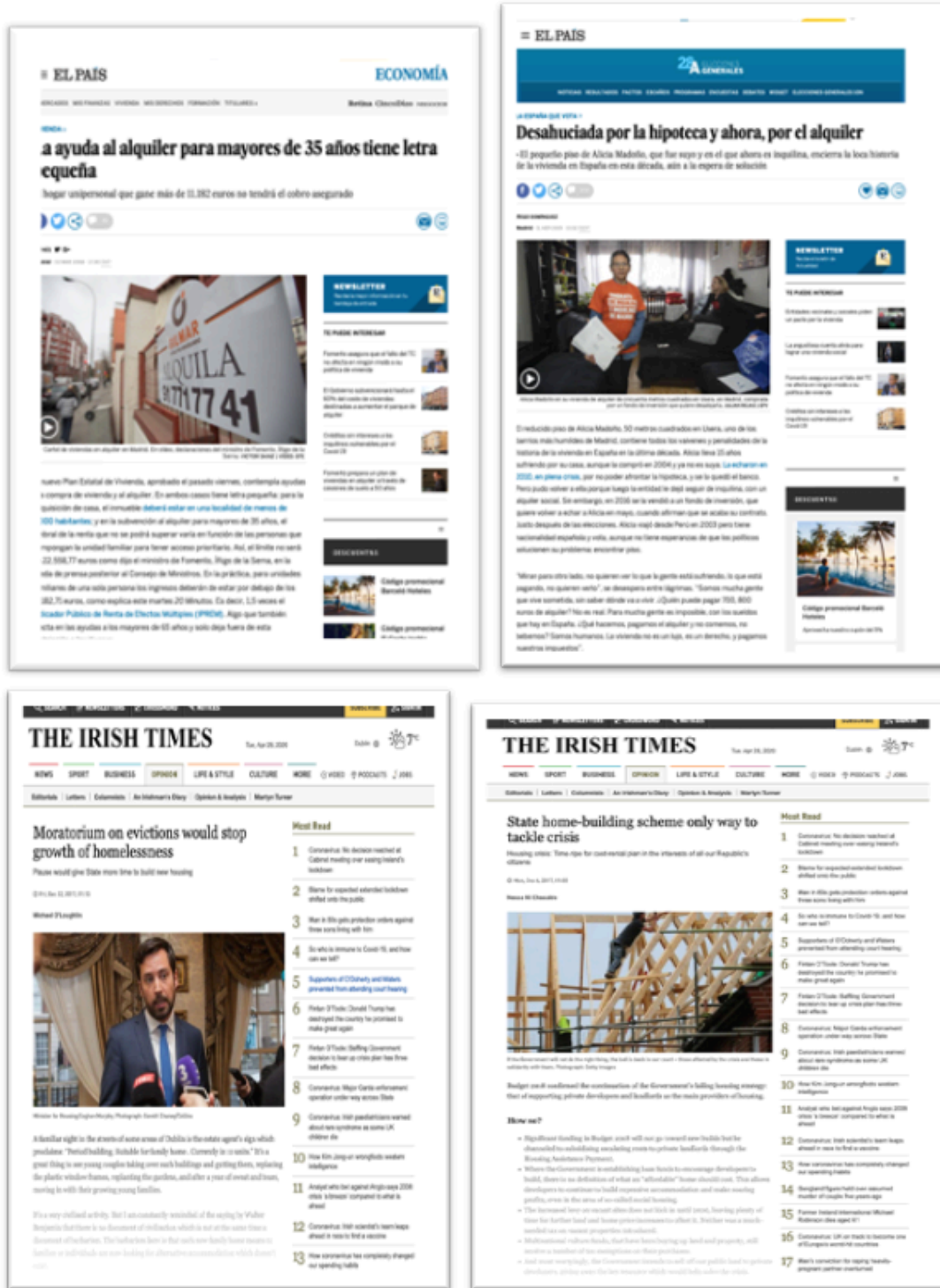

Figure 6 The 4 news articles used in the research from the Irish Times and El País (the articles can be read in full, including translations, in Word format in Appendices 5, 6 and 7).

Sample of the comments from The Irish Times article

<u>'A Moratorium on evictions would stop growth of homelessness'</u>

Govinfos

@Splitshift; ''We are to be a nation of tenants, fodder for the rich''

Correct, and this is actual state policy since 2000, whether under FF-PG governments or FG/Labour/Independent governments. We are today reaping the harvest that these governments have sown for us. And on it goes.

11 days ago   3 Likes   Like   Share

longtermfan

The Social Welfare payment to the owners should only be paid if the property, on inspection, is considered suitable for human habitation, including what would be regarded as normal necessities in a home. I know this would take many dwellings out of the available stock for renting but we have to decide what we want for the country. There should also be a scale of rental, depending on facilities, size & condition of property, just like in 'normal' private renting.

11 days ago   0 Likes   Like   Share

Govinfos

@longtermfan; ''The Social Welfare payment to the owners should only be paid if the property, on inspection, is considered suitable for human habitation, including what would be regarded as normal necessities in a home.''

In fairness it has to be said that under HAP (Housing Assistance Payment) schemes - now applying to all private accommodation being used by local authorities - there is a fairly rigorous inspection procedure and regulatory standards are strict. It doesn't come anywhere near...   » more

11 days ago   0 Likes   Like   Share

Aodh

So I'm a foreign national intending to live in Ireland for the next 12 months. Is there any reason I should pay my rent?

10 days ago   2 Likes   Like   Share

Figure 7 Sample of comments from Irish Times article

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So far, I have only talked briefly about *The Irish Times* and *El País,* the two newspapers from which the news articles were selected for the joint reading exercise with the participants. These two papers are both daily broadsheets and reputable 'newspapers of record' in their respective countries. *The Irish Times* was founded in 1859 and is the second most-widely read newspaper in the country. In the colonial period the newspaper was the voice of British unionism in Ireland, but today presents itself as a liberal and progressive Irish newspaper. Irishtimes.com is the online edition of the paper and offers up to 20 articles for free every week. To access further articles readers are encouraged to purchase a subscription between €12 and €50 per month. Since April 2016, anyone who wants to comment on an irishtimes.com story must subscribe to the newspaper. This reflects how many of the major 'global' newspapers are moving to a part-free/part-subscription format.

El País was founded much more recently, just as Spain was transitioning to democracy after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1976. Its ideology is social-liberal, but in its short history it has variously supported the socialist party, (the PSOE), as well as the King, Juan Carlos I. *El País* is the second most-widely read newspaper in Spain, however, it has recently shifted its online strategy making it the most-widely read Spanish language newspaper online globally. It too is moving towards a digital subscription model and potentially ending its print version. From April 2020, readers will be able to access 10 free articles per month before they are asked to subscribe; the subscription fee will be €10 per month. Before 2020, and during the research, readers had to set up a profile on the *El País* website with a full name, personal data and profile picture in order to post comments. An image of their own face was not compulsory, and few profile pictures included images of a person. I have already outlined in Chapter One how research has interpreted the discourse and framing of the housing crises in *The Irish Times* and *El País* which shows that whatever the specifics of their political ideologies, they tend towards one-off and 'heroic' human interest stories over complex investigations of people experiences of homelessness. Next, I give a brief summary of each of the articles that I read with the participants.

<u>'Moratorium on evictions would stop growth of homelessness', irishtimes.com, (O'Loughlin, 2017)</u>

In this article, author, Michael O'Loughlin, is a well-known filmmaker, commentator and poet in Ireland. This article appeared in the 'Opinion' section of the newspaper's website; however, I call all pieces I used from these newspapers, 'news' in the broad sense. O'Loughlin argues for a one-year ban on all evictions in Ireland in order to prevent any more families entering emergency accommodation or ending up living on the streets. He makes the point from a first-person perspective and talks about his own experiences in renovating a period building and his local knowledge of a 'countryman' landlord. The landlord had divided and rented out several units in an old, rundown period building and was receiving payments for the units via the social welfare scheme. O'Loughlin criticises this as not cost effective or just, and he is sympathetic to the plight of people facing the risk of homelessness, however, I would argue that there is no real depth of feeling or critique in this piece. Read this article and the below comments in full in Appendix 4.

<u>A sample of the comments in response to this article:</u>

❖ G: Michael's proposal of a moratorium on evictions is a bit like a man saying 'I need to design a whole new way of doing things but I really don't think I want to.' The reality as Michael himself knows all too well, is that ideologically speaking, FG and Murphy himself have absolutely no intentions – or powers – to stop the real reasons that have caused and are continuing to perpetuate the homelessness crisis. You could actually wave a magic wand and start the construction of social housing and…

❖ P: I love the idea of a moratorium on evictions. The rate of homeless tenants far exceeds that of the homeless who are able to find affordable accommodation (and that accommodation is usually rental, and, by its very nature precarious). Some breathing space is indeed welcome. But far be it from the state to consider homelessness worthy of serious consideration when property speculation is once again in rampant ascendency and the financial bubble of 2008 a distant and impossible memory.

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ii.   'State home-building scheme only way to tackle crisis', irishtimes.com, (Chasaide, 2017)

The author is Nessa Ní Chasaide, an activist with the campaign group Housing Action Now. Ní Chasaide argues forcefully for a large-scale house building project led by the Irish government as the only long *and* short-term solution to the housing crisis. The article begins by criticising the latest budget plans for tackling housing demand through tax incentives for private developers. She lays out a 'sustainable' scheme that would involve building and re-taking existing empty properties back into the social housing stock. These houses would be rented out at affordable prices to families who need them with security of tenure over the long term. The new houses would be paid for by a cost-rental model, where the rent earned form the tenant families would repay the mortgages the government had taken to pay for construction. The piece is articulate and well-organised, and I was surprised to come across it given my own assumptions about the neoliberal agenda of *The Irish Times*. However, Ní Chasaide, while probably a passionate campaigner, maintains a rational, objective voice for the piece. Read this article in full and its corresponding comments in Appendix 4.

A sample of the comments in response to this article:

❖ S to G: Here's a link to a story which says that €2.5m is being spent on ten new social housing units in ………Connemara [a sparsely populated region in the west of Ireland, link provided].

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- ❖ Even if housing units could be delivered for €150k each in Dublin they would still not be self-financing on the average Dublin social rent of €3K per year.

- ❖ People need to accept the fact that housing is expensive and the planning system difficult to navigate. And have a debate based on the facts.

- ❖ G to S: Firstly, it doesn't cost 250,000 to build 2 and 3 bedroom units in Connemara, this story you've linked us to provides absolutely no details around the project and I suspect the cost also includes the purchase of the land – and we were talking about building costs on state land, land already in state ownership. Housing units in Dublin are going to cost more to be sure – I accept that. However if a house lasts say 80 years, then the building and maintenance costs may be well covered over time.

iii.   'The new rent assistance for over 35s has some small print,' elpais.com, (El País, 2018)

There is no by-line for this article. It sets out the detail of a new government rent, and house-purchase assistance scheme introduced in Spain but is focused on the complicated criteria that are involved in accessing the grant. The article goes to some effort to explain the different levels of access, the different income criteria and living arrangements that the new subsidy takes into account when assessing applications. For example, in order to qualify for the grant in buying a home, the property must be located in a town with less than 5,000 inhabitants. Qualifying for the rent assistance aimed at over 35s varies according to the character of the household or family unit. It also points out that are some discrepancies between what was stated in the government publication on the scheme and the announcements made by the Ministry of Development. The article goes on to define the different income thresholds for accessing the grant and dedicates a section to unpacking the assistance criteria for retired people. Read the full English translation for this article in Appendix 5.

❖ AA: The question is, Why discriminate by the number of the inhabitants in the city where you live? Those in big cities have no right to be helped? I don't understand those standards...there must be someone who is dedicated to inventing these things so that in the end the aid does not reach anyone, after the EU gives out to the government, which is the government that gives the least aid to its citizens [in the EU], but if one that they choose to help has to be blonde, blue eyed, friendly, over 180cm tall...in the end…

❖ FM: I'll apply for a 'non-contributory' grant although 'I have contributed for 37 years' or...neither?

❖ JV: The matter of ostentatious advertising of "improvements" is not the small print, but the deeply rooted habit of telling 'half-truths' (lies).

iv.   'Evicted: Once as mortgage holder, now as tenant,' elpais.com, (Domínguez, 2019)

This article tells the story of Alicia Madoño. Mrs Madoño bought a 50 square meter flat in a poor neighbourhood in Madrid in 2004 for €260,000. At that time, she and her son were both working two jobs and between them they paid the €1,600 monthly mortgage payments. However, during the crisis finding work was difficult and when they were unable to make the payments, they were evicted by the bank that held the mortgage. The bank then allowed them to return to the flat as tenants receiving rent support from the state. Mrs Madoño is a carer for the elderly and her son and daughter and three grandchildren were living with her in the two-bedroom flat. However, the building in which the apartment was located had been recently bought by an investment fund who wanted to remove the family. Mrs Madoño's rental contract expired in the coming weeks and the investment fund were refusing to renew it, which means she would face a second eviction from the same flat. She was receiving support from a

housing activist group and intended to fight the eviction. The article quoted a member of the group who pointed to the renewed property bubble caused by rising rents. A representative of property investors stated that the market needed these investors to finance long-term building plans and should not scare them away with populist stories of evictions. Read the full English translation for this article and corresponding comments in Appendix 5.

A sample of the comments in response to this article:

- Well, the situation is hard for her but in an important part it is due to her bad head [bad decision]. A lawyer friend told me in the most complicated times of the crisis and evictions for non-payment of mortgage: people spend 200 or 300 thousand euros on a house without batting an eye lid but are unable to spend 200 or 300 on someone to advise them. And the truth is that she really needed it.

- Buy a house of 260,000 euros a year after arriving in Spain... eh, great idea. Alicia is a fierce investor, the next thing she did was buy stocks in Bankia, and now she is looking to invest in Bitcoin, what will she be into next year... Come on Alicia, then you go to the newspaper crying for us to help you pay for it. XD

Turning to the nature of the lived experience

With Hennink, Hutter and Bailey's 'Research Cycle' (2011) as a background framework for visualising the different phases and activities in this research, I turned to van Manen's outline (2016) of an 'Existential Investigation' to more fully incorporate phenomenological thinking into this process. Phenomenology attempts to disclose the essential nature of a lived, meaningful experience (the phenomenon) and looks to both the everyday ontic characteristics of that experience as well as its more fundamental and tacit (ontological) hidden depths of the encounter (van Manen, 1984). Here essence means a linguistic construction and as such, an

interpretation (van Manen, 1984, p. 41). That means looking in a certain way at a phenomenon and in the beginning, this requires formulating a research question that facilitates this kind of 'looking'.

Formulating the phenomenological question

The underlying question of a phenomenological study is simple: What is the phenomenon really like as it is lived through? As an example, van Manen (2016) asks: What is it like to be a parent? Another from Ilharco and Introna (2006) asks: What are the fundamental meanings of our engagement with screens? The question is supposed to illicit wonder and thoughtfulness rather than lead to a clear answer reducible to results. I have also seen how some phenomenological researchers incorporate a traditional 'research question' structure into their own theses and list three to four follow-on questions that they then use to guide the discussion chapters. However, I decided to ask the one guiding phenomenological question and allow the 'core' meanings that emerged in the 'analysis' to structure the later discussion. I believe this approach stays closer to phenomenology's appeal to remain open and flexible in exploring a phenomenon in its own uniqueness. My guiding research question then, is the following:

What is the lived experience of reading the online newspaper comment?

Explicating preunderstandings

Van Manen (2016) discusses several means of surfacing and interrogating researcher bias, however as I mentioned in the previous chapter, reflexivity in hermeneutic phenomenology is complicated. As I have already discussed my position within this complication, here I review my approach briefly.

1. I wrote a short autobiography for the preface of this thesis as a means to surface my personal and commonsense preunderstandings, my concerns, past experiences and future life projects as the background against which this research question arose.

2. I carried out a systematic literature review of the theoretical perspectives on the reader-text relationship in media studies which allowed me to outline and critique these different perspectives as well as recognise their part in my own outlook. As I have mentioned before my initial approach was informed by my (non-academic) reading of Critical Theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno, but with an equal interest in ethnographic approaches to the media as well as sociological ones. In deepening my knowledge and interest in phenomenology, my own theoretical preunderstandings came in for vigorous critique, which is the basic structure of the debates in Chapter Two.

3. I carried out a self-study (which is described below).

4. I also kept memos throughout the research, initially using notebooks for field notes and *Google Keep* for memos, later moving to the notebook software called *Evernote* to manage these notes and reflections.

5. The 'data analysis' stage of this research thus constitutes a fusion of horizons in which my own preunderstandings are brought into relief and changed by their coming into contact with the data from the other participants producing the 'findings' or new understandings.

The existential investigation

An auto-hermeneutic of encountering the media and reading the comment

In a phenomenological study of citizen journalism, Markham (2011, p. 8,9) describes the 'hunched' corporeality of the maverick reporter wielding portable devices about the place as embodying an epistemological orientation to the world 'in which information is conceived as precious, elusive, urgent and potentially subversive.' I took an auto-hermeneutic approach to my own media practices as a starting point for this research to see what it would tell me about

my own orientation to the media and to the newspaper comment and how this could help to start to understand the participants.

Self-study is growing in popularity as a methodological approach and has been adopted energetically in fields such anthropology and education. In anthropology, autoethnography has facilitated the inclusion of researchers' own experiences and understandings into their inquiries of cultural contexts of which they are already a part (see Ellis and Bochner, 2000). In education self-study aims to help facilitate more reflective practices of teaching and learning (Lassonde et al., 2009). For my purposes here, studying myself, my own practices and responses was an attempt in the early stages of this research to examine the phenomenological aspects of regular readers' daily engagements with the online media and specifically of reading of newspaper comments. I drew inspiration from other automethodologies such as Systematic Self Observation (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002), autoethnography (Chang, 2010) and auto-hermeneutics (Gorichanaz, 2017). In the end however, I developed an approach that best suited the phenomenon in question as well as my plan to bring questions I developed out of this study to other participants. In order then to externalise my own experiences and view my own practices 'from the outside' I carried out the following:

1. I recorded a video of myself reading the newspapers and comments where I would normally do so, on my computer at my study desk in the living room of our rented terrace house. I have included a screen shot of that video in Figure 9. A short hermeneutic of this scene suggests that my orientation to reading the news online is one of time constraint; I side saddle the seat because reading the news is only something I can do between cooking, cleaning, changing nappies, organising field work logistics, teaching classes, marking essays, catching trains, and therefore I expect to have to jump up again within minutes of sitting down. My hair looks uneven because I cut it myself by lobbing off a ponytail, again time constraints. My hoodie and track suit suggest comfort and ease of movement; however, they are more reflective again of time constraints because I am so tired when I finally get to bed that I often sleep in my clothes. However, I am very much at home at my Mac – I type without looking at the keyboard, although I never learned to type properly. Reading just the first three paragraphs of a news article as I am doing here, as well as a small number of comments

matches this rapid-fire rhythm of my everyday and satisfies the quick gratification and connection I need in reading both the news and what I see as the 'we' the public's debate about it.
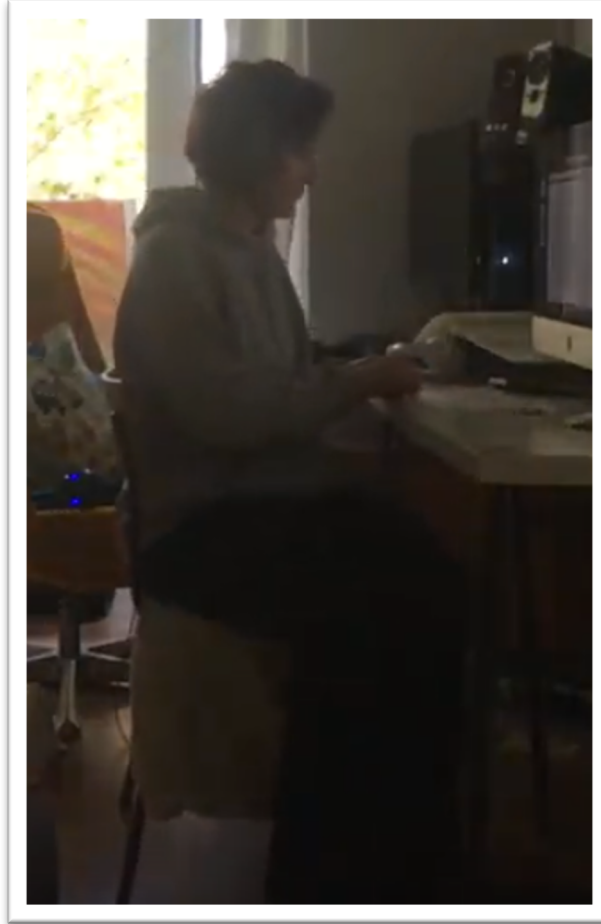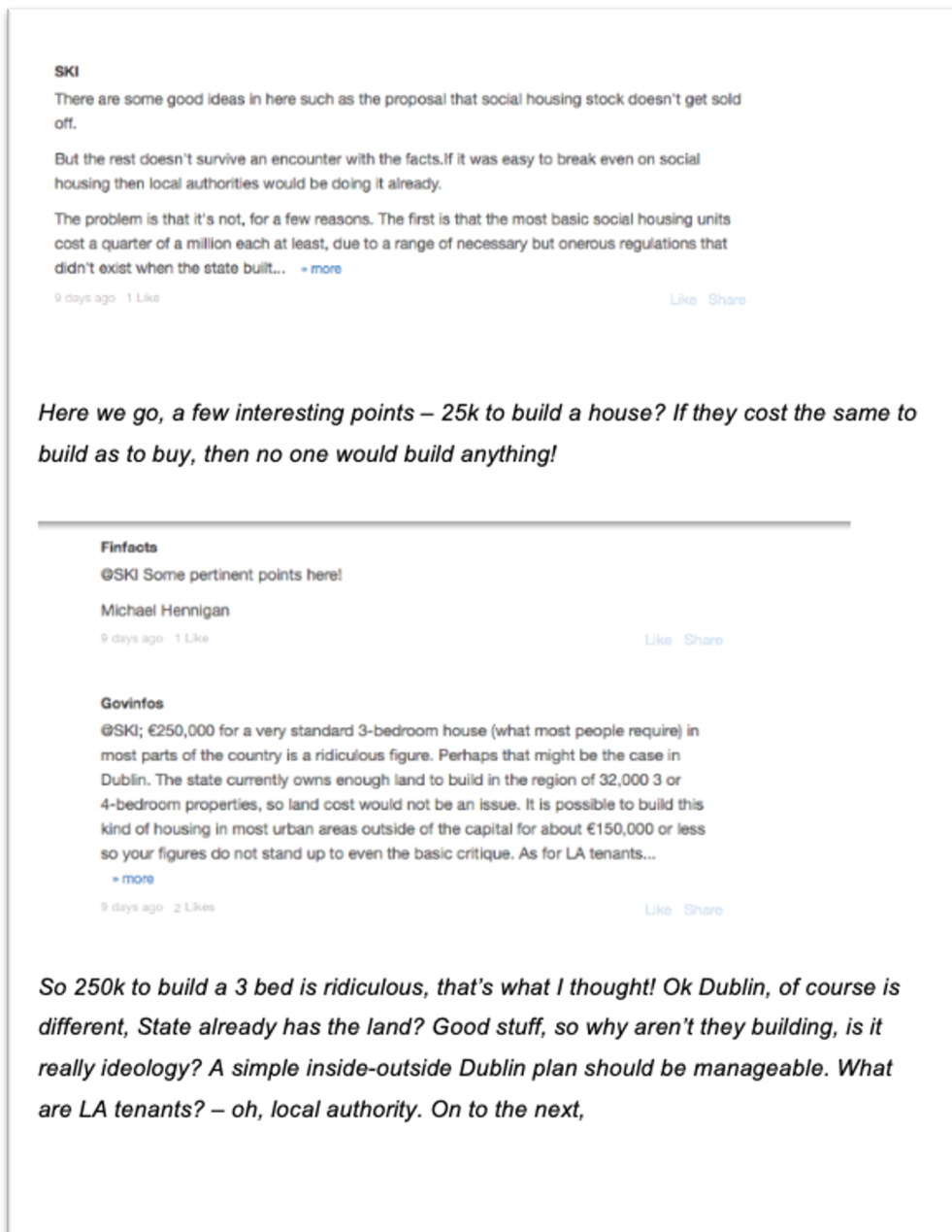
Figure 8 Screenshot from Self Study video of my own media practices

2. As part of this self-study, I copied and pasted one *Irish Times* article and one *El País* article into a Word document, including their corresponding comments, and while reading them through I noted my own responses and reactions by typing thoughts, observations and critiques in the spaces between the texts. This is based on the 'interval recording' and 'free-format narrative' methods of Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) who stress how these methods can bring the tacit understanding of in-the-thick-of-it

activities to light. An excerpt of my free-writing response to the comments is in Figure 10 below.

SKI
There are some good ideas in here such as the proposal that social housing stock doesn't get sold off.

But the rest doesn't survive an encounter with the facts.If it was easy to break even on social housing then local authorities would be doing it already.

The problem is that it's not, for a few reasons. The first is that the most basic social housing units cost a quarter of a million each at least, due to a range of necessary but onerous regulations that didn't exist when the state built...   » more

9 days ago   1 Like   Like   Share

Here we go, a few interesting points – 25k to build a house? If they cost the same to build as to buy, then no one would build anything!

Finfacts
@SKI Some pertinent points here!

Michael Hennigan

9 days ago   1 Like   Like   Share

Govinfos
@SKI; €250,000 for a very standard 3-bedroom house (what most people require) in most parts of the country is a ridiculous figure. Perhaps that might be the case in Dublin. The state currently owns enough land to build in the region of 32,000 3 or 4-bedroom properties, so land cost would not be an issue. It is possible to build this kind of housing in most urban areas outside of the capital for about €150,000 or less so your figures do not stand up to even the basic critique. As for LA tenants...
    » more

9 days ago   2 Likes   Like   Share

So 250k to build a 3 bed is ridiculous, that's what I thought! Ok Dublin, of course is different, State already has the land? Good stuff, so why aren't they building, is it really ideology? A simple inside-outside Dublin plan should be manageable. What are LA tenants? – oh, local authority. On to the next,

Figure 9 Excerpt from 'free writing' exercise: my response to the comments

3. To compile and consider these studies, I completed an Encounter-Context Table (ECT) on my own biographical, socio-demographic, situational and practical details (see

Lola's Encounter and Context Tables as a sample). This ECT approach is based on a similar method developed by Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares, Tomicic (2017) which involves a set list of questions that prompt the researcher to take notes on phenomenologically important themes such as spatial, temporal and intersubjective observations. Thus, I took notes on themes such as 'the emotional climate' and 'the setting' of the encounter with the comments as well as 'the people, organisations and institutions' which my responses were about.

4. I then compiled these above notes, observations and reactions into a single Word document and labelled this 'MJOL Research Dialogues'. I created and maintained a Research Dialogue Document for each participant.

5. I then applied a hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation to this document looking for themes, core meanings, subthemes and interrelatedness among them that could begin to point to the essential meanings of encountering the comment.

The themes and questions that emerged from my analysis of these texts became the basis for the interview schedule that I put together for my planned interviews with other participants. Some of the early themes from my self-study that became central to my later analysis of the participant interview transcripts were; 'fitting the media in when there is little time', 'responding to the author,' 'energised when reading the comments,' 'emotionally detached when reading the article', as well as 'at one with Mac'. Hermeneutic phenomenology recognises that these are part of my personal 'standpoint' and experience as a researcher with a past present and a future of her own, and that they cannot be eradicated by bracketing, journaling or suspension techniques. However, in order to also 'let things speak for themselves', I did not return directly to my own experiences while working on the analysis stage with the other participants' research dialogues until it became clear that there were aspects of commonality between the five different Research Dialogues.

Obtaining experiential descriptions from others

Although most phenomenological philosophers worked from their own experiences, obtaining descriptions of lived experience from others is not unusual. In one of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) most famous phenomenological studies he asked people who had undergone the amputation of

a limb about their lived experience. However, a study carried out under the rubric of qualitative research must consider more technical issues.

Sampling

In many ways, the sampling method in this study can be described as purposive and convenience sampling. However, sampling is the point at which phenomenology's devotion to the details of first-person experience differentiates it more sharply from other mainstream qualitative approaches, and thus from concepts like sampling. Due to its quest for in-depth, detailed descriptions of lived experience, and especially to hermeneutics' 'painstaking, case-by-case approach to analysis' (Smith, 2003, p. 54), the sample size of a project must remain small. At the same time, at least as many participants should be included to allow for real similarities and differences to be detected (Smith, 2003, p. 54). Taking the timeframe of this research into account and balancing these two directives, I decided that four participants was apt. This decision is supported by recommendations by Smith (2003) and van Manen (2016), both of whom suggest that four to five participants is appropriate for research seeking idiographic as well as nomothetic understanding. Both also agree that the data amassed through mainstream qualitative interviews, usually ranging in number from twelve to 24 are unlikely to provide the opportunity for the depth of consideration that is required given the usual PhD research timeframe.

Another point to emphasise here is that because phenomenology argues for the importance of a researcher's own perspective as valid, many contemporary phenomenologists have taken this to the core of their practice. Dylan Trigg (2013) for example, carried out an auto-hermeneutic of his own experiences of agoraphobia by providing a thick phenomenological description of an anxiety attack he had once had on a bus trip. This detailed, one-person self-study allowed him to develop his thesis that agoraphobia demonstrates an essential intercorporeality of open space. Thus, in response to potential questions about the validity of such a small sample I find myself thinking about Beverley Skeggs (2012) who tells us that her eleven-year, 83-person ethnography of class and gender, was in fact 'all about my mother', as she quotes Pedro Almodóvar. A committed phenomenologist would argue that a study of her mother would have been just as valid an enterprise. Thus, to pre-emptive arguments about the problems of such a

small sample, I argue that finding and spending time with my four participants, travelling to their settings, gathering contextual details, sustaining follow-up correspondences and carrying out in-depth, cyclical interpretations of the 'data', all with a phenomenological interest in the subtle, often wordless and subterranean meanings bound up in all of these different methods, provides an immensely rich and equally 'valid' cache of data for a thorough and comprehensive qualitative research project.

In relation to researching *media audiences,* Kitzinger (2004, p. 127) likens sampling to an attempt to 'frame the sky'. In audience studies, sampling has principally been driven by the assumption that social categories like class and gender constituted groups of people with relatively similar life experiences. Although many audience studies aimed to gather the fine-grained detail of everyday life in all their uniqueness, the use of social categories as a guide to sampling links the 'findings' to claims about a broader group of people than those studied. Hermeneutic phenomenology reminds us that any individual experience has the real potential to be completely unique. Therefore, to be guided by a social category in sampling involves the imposition by an academic's theoretical perspective into a person's own lived experience. As the research progresses it may turn out that gender for example is central to that experience, or indeed not relevant at all to the person's own sense making; this is what phenomenology tries to honour in being open to lived meaning and avoiding the imposition of social categories as a sampling guide.

At the same time, phenomenology agrees that the 'sample' should be relatively homogenous, and the participants should at least read the newspaper and comments regularly to be able to provide detailed accounts of the phenomenon in question (Smith, 2003). Then, in order to add to the possibility of finding commonalities it makes sense to find participants who are not completely different from the researcher in terms of recognisable lifeworlds, suggesting a purposive sampling procedure that stretches outward from the researcher's own experience (convenience sampling) (van Manen, 2016). I personally found this particular principle difficult to accept, firstly in terms of sampling but equally with regards to self-study. My thinking as I first approached my research was that postmodern 'naval gazing' in contemporary academia had inevitably privileged a white, middle-class perspective, and I worried that in doing an auto-hermeneutic and a study of my peers I would fall into this trap. However, in the

first few months of my studies, I was reminded by a young trans researcher at a conference in Manchester that as an Irish working-class woman, not to mention pregnant and unmarried, that I was not 'exactly at the apex of the food chain.' Thus, began a growing appreciation for my own perspective and for those with whom I shared many of its angles.[8]

To find participants then, I simply emailed people in my own social and professional network to ask after colleagues, friends and family who might be regular news and comment readers. I had been living in England for only two years at that stage and had been in Barcelona for the previous seven, working all that time on a film about Ireland where I spent several weeks every year. The four participants thus include two people connected to my Spanish network and two to my Irish network. I introduced myself and my research initially by email, making follow up phone calls with people who were interested in the project. Jedser is the colleague of a professional acquaintance of mine based in Ireland. Alice is a friend of a friend, both based in Barcelona. I met Lola, who is from Madrid, at the local library in my adopted hometown in England. Maggie is my cousin and was not originally supposed to be part of the research. However, on visiting her and her sister in Australia during this research she told me how she read *The Irish Times* including the comments every morning at her work desk, despite not having lived in Ireland for several years. I believed this was a worthwhile perspective to represent in my research.

The ethics of including people who are from my own personal network, even family, is not questionable specifically in terms of phenomenology. In fact, it is a clear advantage to already have rapport with your participants rather than having to build it from scratch because depth and live-ness are so essential. Awkwardness and discomfort on the part of the participant hinders 'in-the-thick-of-it' activity. Concern for professional distance or contrived familiarity are equally obstructing on the part of the researcher. I had recruited people with whom communication and rapport came easily out of our shared lifeworld. Thus, while

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[8] Both of my parents left full time education in their early teens to work. However, as a child myself of free third level education in 1990s Ireland, I simply forgot that my own was not part of the traditional perspective in academic discourse, perhaps more especially so in the British education system where I carried out this research.

phenomenology could be 'all about my mother,' it could just as reasonably be a lot about my cousin.

However, in terms of research more broadly, questions around exploitation and the commodification of others' experiences from which they benefit little, is of course as relevant here as in any research. Brewis (2014) suggests that researching her friends was advantageous in many ways, but she had to be careful not to unthinkingly exploit the relationship because of how readily her friends answered her questions about their sexuality. While I remain confident that the topic of my research did not in itself invite many personally sensitive contributions from the participants, there were nonetheless aspects, especially autobiographical, that were emotionally delicate. In response to this I have questioned where I included certain details whether in fact, they were necessary to deepen the insight I was trying to convey and excluded them if the point could be made without them. Otherwise, however, I am reasonably confident that the ethical question of researching people from my extended personal network does not pose added disadvantage for my participants. In the next four sections I introduce each participant individually and in some detail, yet, while my connection and friendship with each one deepened and extended over time, I resisted the temptation to provide full and richly detailed biographical accounts here. I have done this in an attempt to honour the practical demands of leaning on a concept like *Dasien* wherein the pre-individual, embodied and trans-biographical aspects of being are stressed. Thus the 'story' of the participant is to be found in the hermeneutic interpretations in the following chapters, more than in their individual tales.

Alice Holmes

Alice (each participant chose their own pseudonym) is the friend of a friend of mine, both are based in Spain. She lives in a town outside Barcelona and is a teacher in a secondary school. She has two primary-school age daughters but when we met, she had recently divorced and left the family home. She reads *El País* in print every day at the café near her work and clearly relishes the ritual. She also checks the headlines and reads the comments on her smart phone intermittently during the week. Together we read the newspaper article on the Spanish governments rent assistance scheme, something which appeared to be relevant to Alice's own circumstances but which she found difficult to engage with. Nonetheless, she was open and

energetic in our meeting and forthcoming in our further email correspondences. The main themes to emerge in the 'Alice Dialogues' were trust in the mainstream press, anxiety about technology and her students' and children's education. She was wary of reader comments as non-professional, however there were subtleties about her embodied responses in the midst of the reading experience that told a deeper story.

Lola

Lola and I met at a toddlers' story morning at the local library in my adopted hometown in the North of England. I mentioned my research and she told me she read newspaper comments every day and would love to be involved. Lola was born and brought up in Madrid, has a PhD and several post-docs in chemistry and was a full-time mother during the period of my research. Halfway through the project, she and her family had to leave England due to a change of business plans at the factory where her husband had been working. Lola was the most avid user of media technology and read the news and comments several times a day. I visited Loa in her three-bed semi-detached home many times over the research, taking notes on her busy parenting and media practices, however, we sat and read the newspaper together on her mobile in my kitchen one day when she was able to leave her daughters with her parents. The interview was carried out in Spanish and English. Lola and I read the newspaper article about a Peruvian woman in Madrid facing a second eviction. Lola was frank and matter of fact, but often monosyllabic, in discussing the article. She expressed frustration that the woman in the story had not organised her personal finances to avoid debt. However, she became disconcerted by some of the anti-immigrant comments and worked to differentiate her own responses. Lola's use of media technology alerted me to a continuum between technology and the body that I had not considered asking about, but which emerged as central to each participant's experience as I used it as a lens to review the other Dialogues.

Jedser

Jedser contacted me asking about the project after he had been forwarded my initial email. He is a builder, property speculator, widower and father of grown-up daughters. He is also an

active campaigner for the Irish Socialist Party. He is self-employed and has decades of experience as a builder and project manager in the construction industries in both Ireland and England. He earned several million euro as a property speculator and landlord during the so-called Celtic Tiger period in Ireland up to the 2008 economic crash. He subsequently filed for bankruptcy, twice. He said he was keen to discuss the Irish media and the housing crisis although he 'boycotted' the mainstream press, reading the *Irish Times* only very rarely. I decided to include him to explore this matter more because his rejection of the media seemed to be *about* the media, and given his expertise and interest in housing, he was thus an interesting participant. I visited Jedser at his home in a town in the south of Ireland and we carried out our meeting sitting at his work desk in a cabin office in his garden. Jedser read the *Irish Times* article by housing activist Nessa Ní Chasaide but despite his own political views did not seem to engage with it on any noticeable level. He was more open to the comment posters, although again, the interaction was nuanced and ambivalent. A key insight from the Jedser Dialogues was the absence of a certain solidarity between reader and poster that was prevalent in the other Dialogues, despite the fact that Jedser could be said to have *agreed* with the content of the comments more than any other participant.

Maggie

Maggie is my own first cousin, born and brought up in our hometown in the South of Ireland. We are both members of a large working-class Irish family where only the younger members of 34 cousins were able to access free third level education in the 1990s and early 2000s. Both Maggie and I then also pursued post-graduate studies. Maggie now lives and works in Melbourne, Australia, where she has been for the last eight years. She works for a government funded public health organisation which she likened to the NHS clinical Commissioning Group with a specific focus on community health care. She was recently promoted to the board of directors of the company. However, we were not granted permission to visit her office together and instead she sent me her own descriptions of her morning practices and office surroundings. To carry out the interview, we sat together in her sisters' house in Melbourne where she visited regularly and where I was staying at the time. We read the news together on her laptop. Maggie and I read the article about the moratorium on evictions by Michael O'Loughlin, but we carried out a second in-depth interview via Skype several months later where we read the article on

the house-building scheme. Maggie was cautious and thoughtful about her answers throughout. She talked about her efforts to remain sceptical about the news and about reading the comments. Together the Jedser and Maggie Dialogues revealed that a broad and compassionate concern for communal well-being was the background landscape against which certain aspects of the news and the comments showed up as relevant to them.

Now that I have introduced the participants, each of whom contributed their time generously and openly, I will detail the methods I employed to generate my mostly textual data.

Observing practices

Nicolini (2012, p. 217) suggests a number of questions that the researcher can employ to sensitise her observations to the 'unsung background' that practice and embodied knowledge makeup. His aim is to focus the observer on 'the social and material doing of something […] the real-time doing and saying something in a specific place and time' (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 219, 221). When in situ, the researcher should look to see what people are saying and doing, what they are trying to do when they speak, what is said and done, how the patters of saying and doing flow in time (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 219, 221). In terms of the body she should ask: How is practice accomplished through the body? How are bodies configured by the practice? How do the artefacts involved in the practice contribute to giving sense to the practice? (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 219, 221). Nicolini also incorporates Heidegger's emphasis on care or practical concern by asking of practices: What practical concerns ostensibly orientate the work of practitioners? Rather than beliefs or values, this concern is a 'pre-verbally experienced' sense of what ought to be done and can be educed from questions like: What matters to the practitioners? What do they care about? What do they worry about in their practice? (Nicolini, 2012, p. 224). I kept observations in field notebooks and usually filled these in manually straight after the interview or after a visit with the participant. To think about practices more clearly, I combined my field note observations with references from the interview transcripts that hinted at or talked about practices and compiled them in a list in each participant's Research Dialogue. I have included an extract of this list from Lola's Portfolio below:

WHAT LOLA DOES WITH THE MEDIA

- Lola reads surreptitiously when her small children are asleep, she reads in the morning, very quickly, after the babies awake and have their first feed and go back to sleep, then she reads in bed.

- But it is a treasured ritual, she finds a seat, has a coffee, she scrolls through headlines deftly, finding articles that are interesting to her, if she doesn't have time to read them then, she opens the page as a tab and saves it for reading later that night in bed.

- She goes directly to the newspaper home page via an icon saved on her home screen, she doesn't use social media for news. (Therefore, at the same time, reading the news on her phone - when her laptop is not convenient - is it part of her being an adult, professional, connected, informed, managing her knowledge of the world?)

- She always reads *El País*, her and her family vote for the PSOE, the Spanish centre left party, but her 'reasons' for reading *El País*, stops here. It's a habit, it's the right thing to do in the context of her life, but she doesn't interrogate that at all.

- Lola struggles to find how to open/enter the comments page, it takes her a good few seconds, we both expected it to be more obvious, it's not a serendipitous thing now reading the comments, you have to go and look for them. Things have changed since I started this research.

- She returns again at night time when they are asleep – this is when she might have windows open form earlier in the day and gets a chance to read the articles in full in peace.

- She used to check in with the newspaper website much more frequently when working, just to take a break from work, at her desk, but only lasting a few minutes.

Figure 10 Field notes on what Lola does with the media

Unstructured interviews

Phenomenological interviews aim at producing thick, descriptive and content-full conversations with individuals about the meanings they have of their first-person experiences and everyday practices (van Manen, 2016). These interviews are not geared towards extracting the answers to 'why' questions, as is the case with much qualitative interviewing techniques, but aim more towards the 'how' of everyday taken-for-granted routines. As with most qualitative approaches, phenomenology stresses the inevitability of the researcher's part in constituting the reality they study. The researcher is very much part of the conversation and between them, the researcher and participant co-construct knowledge and meaning (Dhoest Zeller et al., 2014, p. 30). So-called digression from what the researcher has set out to talk about is not considered a problem and is often found to be the source of new and deeper

understanding of a phenomenon. I have already talked about the conflict among practice theorists around talking about practices, and the possibility that a participant might be able to reflect and bring to language the 'background' meaning of their practices. However, this study is more influenced by the tradition of phenomenology and along with Gadamer and Husserl-inspired researchers, I had faith that tacit meaning could, with some effort, be brought into language.

I arranged to carry out at least one in-depth interview with each participant in one of their own everyday locations. Each interview lasted between one and three hours. I used an 'interview schedule' with a short list of 'themes' or topics that I wanted to cover and audio recorded each interview on two separate smart phones for back up purposes (Patterson and Williams, 2002). I added to or adapted this schedule after each interview. This basic document helped me to stay open to possible themes and topics that I had not envisaged in advance of the meeting and allowed me to adapt to changes of direction in the conversation. It also allowed for a more conversational tone in the interview while reminding me of topics that I was interested in discussing. For example, I wanted to make sure I asked about everyday media practices because each interview veered automatically towards the meaning of the content in the media texts. I therefore had to note words like 'scrolling?', 'sitting down?' 'moving around?' in my schedule. While I took notes on what I could observe of these practices and movements I also asked the participants to reflect as far as they could on what and how they usually encountered the online newspapers and comments. I noted body movements as far as I could remember in my field notes after the interview.

I later transcribed the recordings verbatim using the Jefferson Transcription System (2004), noting silences and other audible non-linguistic gestures such as sighs and excited responses. Listening to recordings several times and transcribing them personally rather than delegating the task is important to gaining a hermeneutic understanding (Fleming et al., 2003). In this mode, transcribing is viewed as a type of 'conversation analysis' and very much part of the 'analytical' process itself. However, I did eventually incorporate a speech-to-text software called Transcribe.wreally.com. This software allowed me to speak the words of my participants into a microphone as I was listening to them on headphones and the programme produced the text. I was able to slow down the recordings to allow me to edit the document manually as I

went and to apply the Jefferson transcription symbols over the text. I believe this process allowed for an even deeper understanding of the participants' contributions as I had to speak their own words myself for the software. This was a perspective on meaning that was more directly visceral and emotional than I had experienced in simply listening and typing.

Continued correspondence

I kept in touch with Jedser in Ireland and Alice in Spain via email after the initial interviews. I sent emails to each of them with various open-ended questions that I had developed in the ongoing interpretation of the interview transcripts and field notes. Each participant replied in email. Some emails were richer in detail than others, and I developed questions that seemed to elicit more detail in further emails. Maggie who lives in Australia, preferred voice calls. I carried out two voice calls via Skype with her in the summer of 2019 and transcribed the details. I was able to spend more time with Lola who lived in my own hometown in England during the research period. As noted above, I visited her at home several afternoons during 2019 where I took field notes about her practices around engaging with media and technology and about her immediate and wider settings.

The Encounter-Context Tables

In seeking a formula for managing and organising the 'data' that I had collected in the form of field notes and memos, I discovered the 'encounter-context-themes' ECT methodological devices developed by Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares, Tomicic (2017). In acknowledging that the 'rich description' of contextual detail to be gathered for phenomenological research can lose its value when the researcher is overwhelmed by the volume of that detail, these authors offer a way to organise and prioritise the material. I took their ECT device and adapted it for my own purposes. I created a 'Reflecting on the Encounter' table and 'Reflecting on the Context' table for each participant. I have included an extract from the two tables for Lola below as an example. Using a number of the author's original subheadings such as - Who is in front of me? How does she present herself? What happened to me during this interview? - I was able to order my notes and reflections into a much more manageable scheme of contextual source 'data'.

Lola's Encounter Table

QUESTION	PURPOSE	SUMMARY OF REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVIEW/ENCOUNTER (FROM MY FIELDNOTES)
Who is in front of me? Record socio-demographic description, specific biographical events, life circumstances.	To empathetically capture others based on their being in the world	Lola is a mother of two small children (her toddler is two and her baby is 4 months old). She is in her mid-thirties and has a PhD in chemistry. She completed several post-docs and fellowships while living in Spain and Germany, before moving to England three years prior to our meeting. She is now a full-time mother, but actively seeking work. She is from Madrid originally and completed her PhD research there. She came to England with her husband (also Spanish) who works for a German car maker as an engineer. This company sent him to England as part of an open-ended contract with a German car manufacturer that has a plant in the North of England. Close to completing this research, Lola and her family had to move back to Germany because there was no longer work for her husband with the company at the British plant. This was unexpected and the family were disappointed and very distressed by this news. Within two months of hearing this news they had returned to Germany. Lola's father is a lorry driver, and her mother cleans offices.
How does she present herself? Record emotional climate of the encounter, verbal and non-verbal, type of collaboration and reflective thinking.	To identify the attitude of the other person in the encounter	Lola is confident in her own professional capabilities, but she seems to be concerned that others don't take her seriously (family, friends, new acquaintances, in-laws, funding bodies). She is helpful to me in my research in such an empathetic way that I feel relaxed and we share personal thoughts easily. She is clearly a busy woman, but she is focused, thoughtful and serious during the interview.

Lola's 'Context Table'

CONTEXTUAL DIMENSION	SUMMARY OF NOTES ON CONTEXT AND SETTING FROM MY FIELD NOTES
Interactional Dimension Identify the party about whom the participant is talking when discussing different topics (persons, evens, institutions, roles).	She talks about her parents a lot, more so than her husband and children, she was not forthcoming on the details of their lives when I asked about her personal biography. She was sympathetic to the Peruvian lady in the news article who lost her home but was clearly annoyed at the state of the woman's personal finances and how she had not made the correct decisions in managing them. When talking about the commenters, she does not show any scepticism towards their identity; other readers, ordinary people is the assumption. She did not question that the news article was also a particular perspective, rather than a factual concrete story. Her orientation to media is instrumental, she wants to know the news from Spain, it is a kind of duty to read it, but also she is interested in unusual people stories e.g. 'Albinos in Africa', but her social media use is orientated around gaining information on parenting etc. She talks about the other parents on the groups as sources of information.
Temporal Dimension Record the unfolding aspect of what is expressed, highlighting potential transformations and dynamics of the phenomenon, and identifying its possible directionality. Underline the key events and temporary breaks in the story	When we first met at the library in our adopted hometown in the North of England, Lola said she was a voracious newspaper reader and a that she always read the comments. When I finally decided to contact her about an interview, she had a 3-month-old baby – her second child, her first was still a young toddler, she said in the interview she reads the comments much less frequently now, unless they are particularly relevant to her and her life projects. However, she still reads the newspaper on her phone, mostly the headlines but also full articles, 2-3 times a day. The 2008 economic crash does not loom large for Lola, despite Madrid being one of the European centres of anti-austerity protest. She is acutely aware of the housing bubble cycle, but this comes from discussions with friends and family in Madrid rather than the papers, perhaps because her age group will be looking to buy homes. It seems as if she intends to engage with the issue once she is ready to buy a home in the future.
Spatial Dimension Define the immediate context where people interact daily.	Lola's main context of reading the newspaper is in her home, she reads after the babies have their morning feed and are asleep, she finds a chair and has a coffee. They are moments without the babies, with herself and a window to look out onto the world. She is a stay-at-home

Depending on the topic, it may be important to record, for example, the participant's neighbourhood, the square they visit, their workplace, and their living conditions (in terms of significance rather than material aspects).	mother, but she is proactive in organising daily activities and trips to the library, seeing friends and visiting the surrounding country-side. Reading the news online seems to be the only time in the day that she stops physically moving about. She opens web pages with interesting news articles that she spots in the morning and takes time to read them in full at night when the children are in bed. The absence of a laboratory as a space in Lola's life is clear, she is very keen to get back to work and clearly connects a sense of herself to a physical connection to a laboratory – her home before the children were born. Most times I call to her house she is on her laptop filling in applications with a small baby in a sling and another on the potty. Her house is a small three bed semi-detached, and it is full of the paraphernalia of child rearing, something that she doesn't seem to engage with thematically, ever, unless I ask. I have friends who only talk about the practices of child rearing.

Inevitably, because the whole research process was iterative, I added to and edited the content of these tables throughout the research. In general, the tables combined edited selections from my field notes and memos, memories I had from the meetings as well as thoughts and reflections on the interview transcripts. Using the 'ECT' subheadings also prompted new questions that I could then put to my own research material to form new perspectives and insights.

Phenomenological interpretation

The 'analysis phase' of my research was by far the trickiest. Firstly, the term analysis does not chime with a phenomenological outlook because analysis is premised on breaking meaning into elemental parts and producing knowledge of phenomena based on an inspection of their discrete properties (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). Description of lived meaning is the stated aim of phenomenology, however, even the term description implies notions of a simple correspondence between reality and language. In practice this 'phase' involves the researcher turning to the research material in a reflective phenomenological mode and 'describing' what they 'see', the product is of course, one interpretation among the many possible. Equally, the application of a step-wise or staged analytical procedure is antithetical to an immersive

hermeneutic endeavour. So 'analysis' in terms of my research refers to the 'process of insightful invention, [re]discovery or disclosure' (Manen, 2016).

Despite these claims, the 'data' that confronts the novice researcher needs to be managed properly to allow for transparent and well-organised research, and the analysis needs to be equally rigorous, methodical and thoroughgoing for anything insightful to surface. However, strict adherence to method *per se*, as we have seen, is anathema to philosophical hermeneutics. Tried and tested coding procedures and content analysis recommended in qualitative textbooks seemed to offer nothing but censure and closure to a phenomenologically orientated study, particularly in the way that small units of text are cut from their context and assigned to codes, nodes and categories. Moreover, there is ultimately no 'analysis phase' for interpretative phenomenology, the whole research process is the interpretation, and it is open, reflective, unstructured and creative. In the end, and with much difficulty, I developed my own approach centred on the principles of the hermeneutic circle.

The hermeneutic circle

The hermeneutic circle is a central idea in the history of hermeneutics and refers to a broad philosophical perspective on human understanding as well as to the hermeneutic task of deciphering texts. In philosophical terms, the hermeneutic circle alludes to the situational and interpretative nature of all understanding (Gadamer 1975, Thompson et al., 1994). Gadamer further emphasises the provisional character of an interpretation which should always remain open to future modification, which essentially changes the circle to a spiral. Nonetheless, idea of the circle originates in the methodological work of interpreting ancient texts in which the interpreter was urged to consider the meaning of parts of the text in relation to the meaning of the whole, and vice versa. For example, in the study of ancient biblical texts, individual sentences were considered in relation to paragraphs, paragraphs in relation to chapters and so on. The wider context of the bible was the 'whole' of Christian doctrine, but this doctrine is also held up for interpretation in terms of the parts. The process is iterative and aims to produce an overall coherent interpretation that has ironed out internal contradictions. In this way the hermeneutic circle looks like a conservative device or vicious circle, pressuring parts to fit into an overarching official doctrine. However, in practice the meaning of the 'whole' also becomes

modified over time. Arnold and Fischer (1994, p. 63) call the hermeneutic circle a 'dialectical tacking' that should infuse the spirit of the interpreter's approach to text analysis rather than correspond to a step by step process.

One of the main challenges in this research was to develop a well-organised approach to the source material – the field notes, memos and interview transcripts –that allowed for insightful interpretations to develop while tacking between the 'parts' and the 'whole' of the material. The approach I developed is based on this part-whole dialectic of the hermeneutic circle and was careful therefore not to break the material into units or codes. I give a detailed account of how this process proceeded in practice in the section below called, 'The Interpretative Process' firstly, however, I consider the emphasis in my own work on both first-person perspective and on commonalities between perspectives.

Idiographic and nomothetic analysis

This study presents an idiographic *and* nomothetic analysis of the phenomenon. Following qualitative tenets means paying close attention to the individual's first-person perspective, trying to see the phenomenon from their point of view. With a Husserlian phenomenological influence, the aim is to gather enough detail from different people's perspectives to be able to construct a sense of what is common to each perspective. This commonality points towards what could be general and fundamental about the phenomenon.

Placing a hermeneutic lens on this approach emphasises the potential uniqueness of each perspective to the extent that ultimately, it may not be possible to find commonalities enough to point at anything general about a phenomenon. Therefore, in practice this study firstly paid close attention to each participant's contributions and contexts by carrying out thematic analyses of their individual experiences in the Research Dialogues. This in itself was an iterative process and required several line-by-line readings of each interview transcript and encounter and context tables. Only after this procedure for each participant, I looked for commonalities across the Portfolios, now including my own interpretative notes on the initial readings.

Thematic analysis

Phenomenology's traditional focus on essences or the structures of experience makes thematic analysis the most apposite approach for the interpretation of research texts. Themes in this phenomenological sense are the motifs that are felt by a reader to recur in a text, but rather than fixed nodes, concepts or categories, they are more like loose knots around which meaning is woven (Manen, 2016). Identifying themes in reading a research text is initially a free act of 'seeing meaning' but these themes do not work in list form, cut apart from the other details of the experience and slotted into different thematic bins; themes can only be developed and communicated in narrative form and in constant contact with each other, with the context and with the wider meanings related to the experience. As a research strategy, thematic analysis develops so as to give shape to the experience in question. Van Manen (2016) equates the themes that can be interpretatively educed from the transcript of a phenomenological interview with the very structures of experience that phenomenology is addressing. The diagram on the next page (Figure 12) shows the cluster themes and the sub-themes that emerged in my analysis. Each blue circle represents a cluster theme, which eventually became one of the three 'empirical' chapters. Each of the six ovals represent a sub-theme in relation to a cluster theme and each one corresponds to patterns in the Research Dialogues which give us insight into the structures of the experience of encountering the mainstream news, media technology, and newspaper comments. The empirical chapters follow the structure of this diagram, elaborating and analysing each of the subthemes. The Discussion Chapter attempts to bring the themes together and into dialogue with other areas of research and media theory that either extend the understanding or challenge it. After the diagram I outline the detail of the interpretation process as I experimented, developed and refined it over the last 18 months of the research.
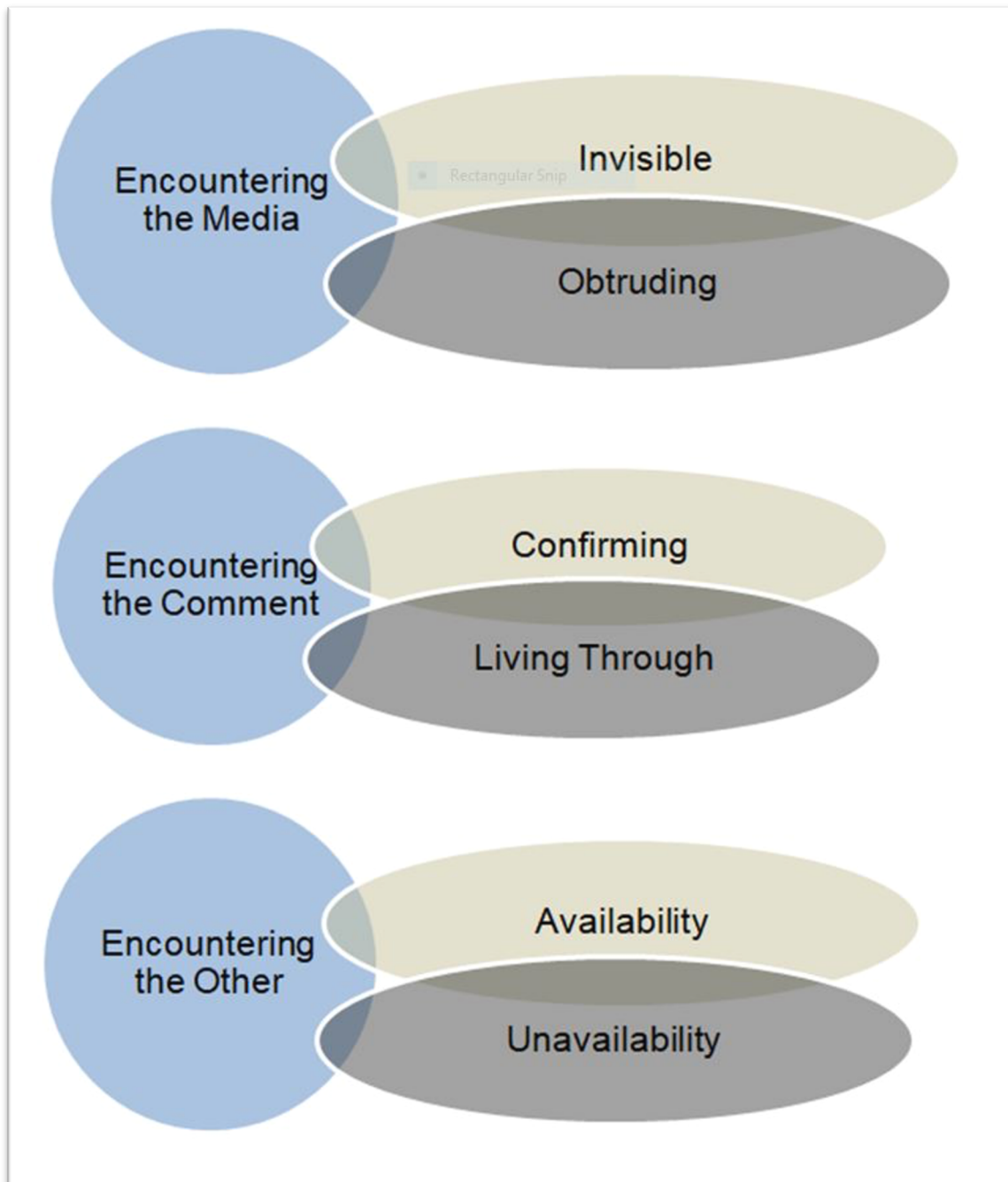
Figure 11 Cluster theme and subtheme diagram

The interpretative process

This process combined the thematic analysis recommended by van Manen (2016) with an orientation to the iterative movement of the hermeneutic circle between whole and parts of a text. Although I had been reading the transcripts regularly since they were completed and reviewing different parts of the collected material over the years of the research, I began the 'interpretation phase' in earnest in the 18 months when I set myself a list of 'tasks' to keep my approach organised and oriented to gaining a hermeneutic understanding. I carried out these 'tasks' while keeping the four Research Dialogues open side by side on two wide-screen computer monitors, this enabled easy and constant access to the 'whole' of the research as well as the 'parts' in such a way that I did not have to cut parts out of their context in order to work with them, at least until the working cluster themes were more fully emerging. The following 'Tasks' is the check list I set myself to apply to all research texts to that I treated them all as intensively as each other.

Figure 12 Image of Research Dialogues open on desktop over the space of two wide screens

Task 1: Review field notes

The first task was to apply my own field notes to an interpretative and selective process by reviewing them and entering my them into the encounter and context tables following the subheadings provided (see above).

Task 2: Think about the whole

I began by spending time with all of the material I had gathered on each participant, immersing myself in the totality of each Research Dialogue. This also involved listening to the interview recordings and reviewing my field notes. This task was to get a sense of the 'whole'. I had noted a number of key questions that hermeneutician's put to a text at this stage of the process and used these as cues for sense-making. I took note of my interpretations in a free typing essay format within the Research Dialogues.

- o What is going on here? As a whole, what does this text mean?
- o What questions is the text an answer to?
- o What are the questions that cannot be answered by the text alone?

Task 3: Think about the parts

This next task involved returning to the texts again but this time by thinking about the individual parts - phrases, words or sentences, even sighs or silences – and asking about their individual meaning. Firstly, I reviewed the interview transcripts line-by-line asking what each and every one meant on its own terms. I had entered the transcripts into the first column of a three-column table within the Research Dialogues. I now entered my exploratory comments on the individual units into the second column. A second 'part reading' requires that in reading the document again you pick out meaning units that stand out. I highlighted units that jumped out at me (in blue below) as being particularly revealing about the encounter. Then in answering the question 'What does this say about the phenomenon?' I entered these interpretations in the third column. Below is an extract from Alice's Research Dialogue.

Interview Transcript	Exploratory notes on line-by-line reading	What stands out and what does this say about the phenomenon?
A: [56-64]Si no estás dentro de unos ingresos mínimos o máximos y qué tal funciona en el número de personas que hay en la casa viviendo, eso sí, te entero, lo dice lo repite bastante con lo cual está haciendo además…habla de las familias y después dedica un pequeño apartado a la gente mayor [raised voice] y eso sí eso lo arregla (sort out), pero tampoco especifica si es en todo el país, yo entiendo que será en todo el país porque habla del BOE pero [sighs] no sé, me da la sensación de que faltan cosas que se podría explicar todavia mucho mas.	She can recall there are upper and lower limits for earning, how many people in the house, because its repeated a lot. It talks a bit about families, older people, 'they will sort this out,' but they are not specific about place, I have to infer this form the use of the BOE, 'it gives me the sensation that there is something'; things missing, things could be explained much better. Raised voice? She is panicking, stressed, anxious about being expected to decipher this, and not feeling she is getting it. But is left disappointed anyway.	Is she a member of the wider audience, is she meant to understand this? Who does she feel is the audience, does she feel like a member of the targeted audience?

There are things they could explain much more or better, again this absence, this gap, this disappointment. They should do this, but they don't, her expectations are lowered. She doesn't read with expectations, then for what? Why are these not creative gaps or interesting indeterminacies, because of expectations |

Task 4: Return to the whole, and again to the parts

In this movement I returned to look at my notes from Task 1 on the meaning of the text as a whole and asked if the interpretations of the parts have changed the meaning of the whole. Similarly asking if the new meaning of the whole, case a new light on the parts. Again, these notes were entered as free writing into the Research Dialogues. While this process appears perhaps overly pedantic or repetitive, it was not until this stage that those nuggets of meaning, which I could later claim to be real insights, began to develop – and principally as products of the clashes between thinking about the part and whole.

Task 5: Begin to note emergent themes

In this step I reviewed all of the interpretative notes in each Research Dialogue and looked for ways to describe relationships between the different parts – or emerging themes. I noted these themes in a two-column table. In the first column I listed the initial themes. In the second column I noted themes that acted like cluster themes for groups of themes that shared certain similarities or commonalities – van Manen's 'knots of meaning' and their subthemes (2016). I then subjected these cluster themes to a set of questions also taken from van Manen (2016) and which encourage the researcher to start to write phenomenologically around these themes. These questions were as follows:

- ❖ What are the different aspects of the cluster theme?
- ❖ How does this cluster theme manifest itself?
- ❖ What does it do?
- ❖ How does it do this?
- ❖ What is the significance of this theme for media studies?

CLUSTER THEMES & SUBTHEMES

No expectations
Something's missing
Repetition
Feels it tells her nothing new
Low expectations (interpretation is closed down)

Does not engage with author
Trusts the newspaper brand
Talks about the article
No reference to an author

Not invited to engage with the article
Blocked by numbers
Annoyed then in her reln to the article
Being excluded

Task 6: Determining essential themes

Once I had applied task 1 to 5 to each of the participants' Research Dialogues, I was ready to begin the nomothetic analysis. For this stage I printed out the theme table from each participants' portfolio and planned to work with these in paper, spreading them out to view them altogether. For this task I spent summer 2019 in Ireland where my brother had kindly offered a spare room for the purpose. Each printed theme table measured A2 poster size, I spread them out on the floor, and I worked with flip chart paper, markers and Postit notes to begin to cross reference the different themes. I also applied the above questions for the cluster themes to these new themes. I believe this process, although somewhat *pain*staking, was a useful one for a first-time researcher, wherein the mechanics of link-making are more visible and material.

In summary, I carried out this research through in-depth interviews with four participants in one of their own familiar settings where I also took notes on their everyday media practices and embodied engagements with media technologies. We read a newspaper article and the corresponding comments together on one of their own everyday devices and discussed the reading experience and the content of the texts in detail. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and formed the basis, together with field notes and memos, for the Research Dialogues. I carried out an iterative whole-part hermeneutic analysis of these documents developing a set of cluster and subordinate themes for each document. Next, working with A2 printouts of the themes from each Research Dialogue I carried out a nomothetic analysis across the four documents. The themes that emerged from this analysis form the basis of the following three empirical chapters: 'Encountering the media', 'Encountering the Comment' and 'Encountering the Other'. In conclusion to this chapter, I offer a means by which to evaluate a hermeneutic study like this one.

The soundness of a hermeneutic study

A hermeneutic study recognises the inherently social and political act of sorting 'good' from 'bad' interpretations, however, this does not imply that hermeneutic research can take an a-scientific, 'anything-goes approach'. Patterson and Williams (2002) offer a set of evaluative criteria from the writings from Polkinghorne (1989), Giorgi (2003), Mishler (1990) and Thompson (1990) that are consistent with the philosophical commitments of a hermeneutic inquiry like this one. These 'criteria' do of course propose some sense of grounding knowledge or providing an over-arching framework for evaluating it, however, they do not propose to guarantee the 'insightfulness' of the research conclusions. I offer these three criteria for the purpose of evaluating this present study: *persuasiveness, insightfulness* and *practical utility* (Patterson and Williams, 2002).

Persuasiveness

In this way, an external rater would evaluate a research product by judging the interpretation (or final report) against the empirical 'data' used to make that interpretation. An interpretation

is deemed warranted or justified against the examples used from the data, which should be made available to the reader. Giorgi (1975, p. 96) suggests that this occurs when a reader who adopts the same position as the researcher's stated perspective, can 'see what the researcher saw' without necessarily agreeing with her interpretation. In this way the project is open to external critique while also allowing for different interpretations between evaluators.

Insightfulness

Insighfulness is the second principle by way of which this research should be judged. As a criterion for evaluation, an 'insightful' interpretation should 'increase our understanding of a phenomenon' (Patterson and Williams, 2002, p. 35). The researcher should provide a pathway for the reader through the empirical material in such a way that the vantage point offered on the 'data' provides a new, deeper, coherent and justifiable insight on the phenomenon. In this way patterns will have emerged that were not previously visible where connections and relationships among discrete parts are brought into greater relief against a background landscape or gestalt. Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjälä and Pesonen (2012, p. 10) talk about evocativeness in similar terms, in which 'good research awakens and provokes thought about things in a new and different way'. For Gadamer (1975) this is a 'hermeneutic experience' and for Heidegger it is a 'happening of the truth' (1962). This proposition recognises the ambivalence inherent in whatever collection or configuration of data that is presented and the guiding principle of the researcher's interpretation.

Practical utility

Finally, I offer the criterion of *practical utility*. Practical utility can be compared to Mishler's (1990) criterion of 'trustworthiness' in the way it asks about the functional aspect of empirical research and the usefulness of the knowledge generated in 'enhancing understanding, promoting communication, or resolving conflict' (Patterson and Williams, 2002, p. 35). When an interpretation is persuasive or 'sufficiently justified' its 'utility' also becomes pronounced. Thus, the concepts, methods and inferences of a study can be relied upon by other researchers in their own work. Practical utility follows from the shift away from notions of absolute truth towards an assertoric and usefulness view of knowledge (Patterson and Williams, 2002, p. 35).

In brief, for research in both the foundational and anti-foundational mode, 'the plausibility of the conclusion is what counts' (Cronbach in Patterson and Williams, 2002, p. 35).

Conclusion – Writing Phenomenologically

A reasonable conclusion to draw from the non-linguistic and practice-theory influences in this research would be to announce 'enough of words' and turn instead to dance, film, painting or music to communicate my research discoveries. After all, even philosophical hermeneutics goes to some lengths to stress the importance of pre-linguistic, non-representational meaning. On this view, academic writing is a reflective, 'report-ive' and discursive practice and thus can only express primal meaning by a secondary thematising. By its representational, predicative nature writing can never really get at the primacy of lived experience. Hegel (in van Manen, 2016) claimed that by naming the things around him in his world, Adam effectively annihilated them because in the act of naming, their existential richness was summarised, conceptualised and abstracted. This is not to say that, words themselves cannot constitute embodied meaning. For example, in the 'first-order' language of a 'natural' conversation, words are not often carefully considered, edited and crafted the way a research report, or even a diary entry might be. This primitive realm is the target of the unstructured phenomenological interview. But with academic report-writing we are 'relentlessly bombarded by the formulaic concoctions of academic prose, weighed down with arcane vocabulary, honorific name-calling and ever extending lists of citations' (Ingold, 2015, p. ix).

Thus, Ingold claims: 'It is in the realm of the explicit and not the tacit that silence reigns,' reminding us that the domain of the poets, singers, actors, calligraphers and craftspeople is not wordless, but rather 'raucously verbal' (Ingold, 2015, p. ix). However, along with many phenomenology and hermeneutic-inspired researchers I believe that words are still useful and even precious and instead we must look for another way of writing than the 'formulaic concoctions' of academic language (Ingold, 2015, p. ix). Moreover, for Sartre (Sartre, 2004 [1940]) writing phenomenology was the very practice of phenomenology; *writing reflectively is the method*. In the practice of writing and re-writing, phenomenological meaning is crafted. The following chapters are the product of this craftwork.

CHAPTER 6 Encountering the media

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' encounter with the online newspaper comment, I first looked at their everyday media practices, their embodied use of media technologies and the settings and wider contexts in which these encounters were embedded. In my hermeneutic analysis of the Research Dialogues two dominant but obverse themes emerged. For Alice and Lola, the media as the mainstream news was encountered as a *ready-to-hand tool*, something useful but largely transparent to them as the news media *per se* (Heidegger, 1962). However, they experienced their media devices as *obtruding* from this background thematically and demanding conscious consideration and reflection (Heidegger, 1962). Meanwhile, Maggie and Jedser experienced the technology that they used to access the mainstream media - their desk top computers – as invisible ready-to-hand tools in something like a body-machine continuum (Ihde, 1990). However, Maggie and Jedser experienced the Irish press (mainstream media) not only as thematic, but as deeply problematic. This chapter offers an interpretative description of the 'ready-to-hand' and 'obtrusive' media/medium as indicating the fundamental experiential structures that make up the participants' everyday encounters with the news media. In conclusion, I use Merleau-Ponty's figure-ground thesis (1962) to show that the participants' background web of significances (the hermeneutic 'whole') accounts for the different ways that the media appeared to them.

Alice and Lola

The ready-to-hand news media

For Alice and Lola, the media (as the mainstream press) was encountered very much as a ready-to-hand tool (Heidegger, 1962). As we have seen, ready-to-hand is the being of a tool like the hammer encountered amidst an equipmental structure, part of which is the carpenter's building project. In its ready-to-hand being the hammer has meaning in so far as it is part of Dasein's wider web of significances and in its functioning is therefore encountered as 'something in order to'. When it functions normally then it is largely transparent as an object in itself. Alice and Lola read the news media daily and in the midst of busy work, domestic and child-rearing duties. They encountered the media as 'equipment' in these life projects and therefore as a useful but largely unnoticed tool in their getting on with things.

Lola is the participant who visits the newspaper online most often. She reads *El País* every day, two to three times a day, on her phone, lap-top or tablet. *El País* is the same newspaper her parents read and identify with politically as supporting the Spanish socialist party, the *PSOE*. Her mother cleans offices and her father is a truck driver, however, she tells me about their regular reading of *El País* without feeling the need to explain in any detail why this paper.

MJ	Which newspaper [do you normally read]?
Lola	*El País*
MJ	Always *El País?*
Lola	Yes, always *El País*, depending on what has happened, sometimes I open other newspapers, but *El País* is the one for me.

Here, Lola indicates that *El País* is nothing more than a family habit, deciding to read it did not require prior deliberation on the wide choice and meaning of online newspapers or of the legitimacy, power or significance of the mainstream media *per se*. Reading it simply makes sense in the practical context of her life.

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Lola visits the *El País* home page at least once every morning, usually after her two baby daughters have had their first feed and are sleeping. This she would do in bed on her phone or on a tablet, but sometimes at the kitchen table on her laptop with a mid-morning coffee. Lola moves deftly around a small house packed full of child rearing paraphernalia and where chores await her at every turn. However, in the midst of this disorder, she fits in quiet times and places to read the news online. She scans the headlines quickly either on her phone, tablet or on her laptop but often reads several paragraphs down into particular stories.

This habit of regularly checking the headlines indicates that reading the news is as important a task to her as her domestic and parenting duties. She does not feel guilty about the 'time out' this takes, nor is this about escaping domesticity or entertainment, or even filling in the silence. Lola reads the news regularly because she senses that doing so is part of being a responsible and informed mother and adult and the news media constitute a tool in this project. It provides her with up-to-date news from Spain, it connects her to the world outside her family home and keeps her informed. The media, and *El País* specifically, is a tool in pursuing these purposes and activities and because they function smoothly in this role, she does not reflect on the meaning of the mainstream media *per se*.

We can also see this ready-to-hand meaning in the way that Lola first 'entered' the *El País* website. Lola entered the newspaper's homepage via an icon she had saved to the home screen on her phone. I asked her if she had not downloaded the newspapers' app but she looked at me in surprise as if to say she had not thought of that.

MJ	It's an app, is it? That you use on your mobile?
Lola	No
MJ	No? You use the webpage directly? Ah, ok, why don't you use an app?
Lola	[Looks at MJ for a moment] Because it never occurred to me.

[Both laughing heartily here]

The newspaper's homepage icon saved to her mobile 'home' screen appeared to her the most efficient way to access the news (it does only require one tap) and for her it sufficed as such. This again illustrates the utilitarian mode of her engagement– a swift, purposeful engagement that required little in the way of reflection on the how or the why, especially if it was working according to her immediate needs.

Likewise, for Alice, encountering the media was an activity woven tightly into a busy day-time schedule and the media as the mainstream press was encountered again as a transparent 'something-in-order-to'. Every day at 11am Alice sat at a table at the café close to the school where she worked and read the newspapers, in paper, if they were not already being read by the elderly women who also frequented the café. She read *El País* in full and occasionally also *La Vanguardia*. These two papers are widely regarded as representing the centre left and centre right of Spanish politics, respectively. Alice said that she and her parents identify politically with the left-wing politics of *El País*. Her parents are economic migrants from the south of Spain who moved to Catalonia for work and to bring up their family. Alice sees herself as Catalan but also as the daughter of Spanish-speaking parents.

> Alice   I am… I read *El País*, but I also look at *La Vanguardia,* if they are both there, I read them both.

While *La Vanguardia* is originally a Catalan paper they are both now two of the most widely read and 'reputable' broadsheet newspapers in the country. Reading the two papers enacts these different aspects of her sense of self, Spanish and Catalan, but also being responsible in her choice of the most 'respected' brands.

Of all four of the participants' Alice can be described as the one most immersed in the content. She can recall several of the day-in-the-life stories she has read and tells me about them with feeling and pleasure, assuming that I would recognise the value in these simple, everyday human narratives.

> Alice   I begin at the back of the newspaper. At the back, for example *of El País* or *La Vanguardia* there is always an interview with a person,

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normally anonymous, someone who is not well known, not famous. And they do an interview with them about their way of life or about something in particular about that person. I read that first. It's always super-interesting that they are anonymous, and they do lots of different things, things that you would never come across on the TV. You would never know about them, and they are mostly scientists or writers. There was one childminder, and another was a female missionary…

Thus, Alice makes her first daily connection with the news media through a deep immersion into a story about the everyday experience of an ordinary Spanish person. Once 'in' she moves to the culture pages – the section she says she is most drawn to (*qué es me llame me interesa*/ that which most draws my interest). Here she reads through the day's film and theatre listings and book reviews. Finally, she moves to the hard news at the front of the newspaper, where she says she has to make more effort. While Lola scanned the headlines regularly and quickly, using the news media as a tool to facilitate connection to the outside world, Alice is much more immersed in the moment of reading. She reads a human-interest story in full before even opening the newspaper, then moves slowly and methodically through her favourite sections, examining and savouring details as she goes. Her reading time is also an official break time and does not need to be squeezed randomly in between other tasks. But this immersion is as much an indication of the tool-ness of the media as is Lola's scanning. Alice does not question the newspapers in any critical way, she says that she trusts the paper version more than the online versions because they are not so easily manipulated.

> Alice   [T]he fact that they are written [printed] gives me the feeling that they are more trustworthy.

She explains that as the 'reputable' brands, she does not need to worry about trustworthiness or concern herself with questions about the 'interests' that might lie behind the stories. Alice leans on this assumption and gets on with reading the paper because she relies on the media as an important tool in her life. She uses this tool for gaining access to the rich detail that she clearly enjoys so much. In this immersion the media is ready-to-hand; it is invisible in itself to her awareness.

The obtruding medium

Despite their habitual and ready-to-hand encounters with the news media, Alice and Lola were both acutely aware of the technological devices through which they carried out this engagement. The contrast between their tacit understanding of the media and their sharp awareness of the medium was striking, although it took different forms for each woman. Heidegger talks about the breakdown of a ready-to-hand tool like his hammer (1962). A smoothly functioning and therefore invisible hammer suddenly 'appears' to the carpenter and becomes present or obtrusive when the top flies off and he is forced to halt his construction and examine the hammer as a shaft of wood and a lump of metal. Much ethnographic research on new media devices has shown how technologies such as mobile phones and laptops have become tool-extensions of the human body. These technologies are ready-to-hand tools that we use to get on with our work, communication or entertainment, but they are now also contoured to the body ergonomically so that they are experienced in such a way that the distinction between body and machine becomes indiscernible.

In 1990, Don Idhe already called this relationship between body and technology an 'embodied relation'. In an embodied relation, a device only becomes present to conscious awareness when it breaks down. A mobile phone running out of battery mid-call draws attention to itself as an electronic device that runs out of power. Up until that point the speaker was immersed in the conversation and the mobile phone was invisible. Lola and Alice are both immersed in the content of the news media; however, they are both acutely aware of the medium that 'carries' it (Groys, 2012). For Lola, the medium is a problem. Below is an extract from my interview with her where I am trying to get a sense of how often she uses her devices during the day to check the news. However, as she tries to explain this, she cannot but qualify her usage in terms of her young daughters. Since her daughters were born, she has a new sense of her own corporeality around the devices, especially the mobile phone.

Lola	I read [the news] in the morning
MJ	Ya.
Lola	But, very quickly.
MJ	Yes, in bed?

Lola	Yes.
MJ	Before the children…?
Lola	Normally after eating, when the girls are sleeping. And again, at night when they are sleeping.
MJ	Ah ok, so about three times a day?
Lola	Mmm…
MJ	Oh Lola…
Lola	But, that's just because of the girls, before the girls…
MJ	Yes?
Lola	I read, for example, when I was working - in order to disconnect – the news, the newspapers, two minutes and that was it, back to work.
MJ	On the computer when you used to work…? But nowadays on the phone?
Lola	[Yes] Because it's more comfortable, I prefer the computer [laptop], if I have the computer open, I look at the computer.
MJ	Ok, ok
Lola	And, for example, the tablet is very useful for the news, but sometimes, if I'm not on the computer, I will use the mobile.
MJ	In that case you read [the news] when the children are not there […]?
Lola	You see, I don't want them to see me with the mobile.

It is clear Lola likes using her laptop and tablet and I have already noted how she sees it as a responsible thing to do to read the news regularly. She used to do so un-self-consciously when she worked full time. However, in the above quote we can see that she is very concerned to only read the news online when her daughters are not in the room. This suggests that Lola is aware of how she looks from their point of view: head down, no eye contact, distracted. She can sense herself holding, staring at and constantly touching a small glowing lump of plastic and metal, and she adapts her practices because of the meanings this activity would communicate to her daughters. In and around her two small children Lola senses that it is the medium which is the message (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). It might tell them that there is something more important than them in the room or that if their mother turns her body and attention towards this little device on such a regular basis, then this is an acceptable and normal thing to do. Here we see Lola has her own awareness of what Bourdieu (1977) called body

hexis; she worries that her daughters would learn to reproduce this bodily comportment and these significances around the media through mimicking her own practices and movements. Hence, she manages her behaviour, she scans the headlines quickly on her phone out of view of the children and returns at night in bed to read articles in full. The medium obtrudes in Alice's experiences because it fails to function in a way that allows her to engage with something that is important to her – the news media - in a way that would not send troubling signals to those around her.

The medium obtrudes for Alice as well, but not so much because it is broken or ill-fitting. It was obvious that in her descriptions of reading the newspaper at the café, there was something more than just habit in Alice's experience. She had given the impression that her reading the newspaper was as sensuous in its physical experience as it was appealing to her imagination. Lola's description of her café reading had evoked the sounds of thin newspaper pages falling lightly on the table-top. This was particularly evocative for me because I had spent my first few weeks living in Spain sitting in different cafés trying to learn Spanish by reading the newspaper, which, by the way, doesn't work. When I asked about this, Alice responded with the following:

> Alice [in an email]   I am a lover of the printed press. I adore the shape, the colour, turning the pages, feeling my way about the different sections of a newspaper. I believe in the idea of taking a moment of peace and quiet to yourself at the start of the day, usually at break time, and always at a moment when you don't have to work.

Here the newspaper seems to be present to Alice's awareness while at the same time she is absorbed in the content. Alice also sees her media practices as contrasting sharply with the practices of her students who only read on-screen and rarely with any analytical depth.

> Alice   My students click on the first or second return from a Google search on the internet […] then they copy-paste and don't process any information, they copy it and paste it as it is, into their own work.

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With this reference to 'copy-paste' Alice obviously feels a sharp contrast between her young students' superficial media encounters and her own immersive reading and pleasurable awareness of the paper in her hands. This indicates that there is a certain element of purpose in her absorption in the symbolic meaning of the newspaper; she does not want to enact anything like her students' mode of reading, she makes a point of losing herself in the stories. But likewise, she remains aware of her sensations responding to the materiality of the newspaper. As we have seen, a hammer becomes obtrusive when it breaks down, however, here the newspaper is present to Alice as a pleasurable experience, she is aware of its shape, and feel and colour and for no other reason than her enjoyment of these aspects of the newspaper. In the next section I look at how Maggie's and Jedser's experiences differ from Lola's and Alice's in relation to their experiencing the media and the medium. Following that I consider how the participants' individual background concerns and 'webs of significances' caused different modes of awarenesses to occur around the media.

Maggie and Jedser

The invisible medium

Maggie and Jedser's daily news-media encounters exhibit an almost complete reversal of awareness to Lola and Alice's experiences. Maggie and Jedser's practices around their media technologies instantiate the embodied relation described by Don Ihde (1990). However, they are both acutely aware of the mainstream news media in Ireland, that is, the media as the press, and this obtrudes for them in a suspicious thematization. Both Maggie and Jedser use desk top computers every day for work purposes. Maggie works in public health in Melbourne and reads *The Irish Times* every morning from the PC on her office desk. Jedser has built a cabin-office in his front garden in a rural part of Cork where he works on building projects, meets with clients and studies for his Masters' Degree. In contrast to Lola and Alice, who both volunteered their worries and pleasures around using media technologies, the computers in Jedser and Maggie's cases were fully withdrawn into the background equipmental contexture of their lifeworlds and remained completely un-reflected upon. For the purposes of carrying out their

jobs and reading the online news, the computers functioned as part of an 'embodied relation', mainly useful and largely unnoticed.

Jedser sits everyday surrounded by piles of paper blueprints stained with coffee-cup rings and scattered in seemingly random order about his three desks and two small rooms of his cabin-office. He has a wood fire burning when I call, and he is finishing a meeting with a client. When the client leaves, he moves from one desk to the adjacent one, both have PCs sitting on them, there are several screens, some switched on and glowing, others are black squares in the corner of my eye. He sits on a tall, leather swivel chair and urges me to feel at home, and as I spill me coffee he says nonchalantly, 'Don't worry there's nothing...nothing of any value here.' He opens the email that I had sent him with the link to the pre-selected article in *The Irish Times.* He types with his two index fingers but does so with certainty. He moves the computer mouse with dexterity and without looking at it directly. His movements around his own office work as if the technology he uses were extensions of his at-work body.

Sarah's office is on level one of a ten story building in Melbourne. She shares her office with a colleague. Her desk is situated next to a large window which overlooks a park. To her right is a large whiteboard used to brainstorm ideas with her team. Two in-trays sit on her desk. Some personal items can also be seen on the desk placed neatly in the corner. Two large monitors and a tablet device as well as a mug are the only other items on the desk. Open on one screen is her work email system, on the other is the news site. She keeps the newspaper minimised for the first hour of being at the office and flicks between emails and news as she drinks her coffee. She usually reads the news before she starts work, scanning the news headlines before clicking on articles that interest her or that she is following. She skim-reads the articles unless it is something of significance to her or her work. Throughout the day she will open the news when she needs a break. She reports that some days, depending on her schedule, she will open the news site and go through the same ritual as the morning time before her afternoon begins - news article, emails, coffee.

In their places of work both Jedser and Maggie encounter their media technologies as ready-to-hand tools. Their hands move with certainty around the keyboard and the mouse moves as if it has grown directly out of the palm and index finger. Favela and Chemero (n.d., p. 70)

describe the hand-mouse relation in someone who uses it regularly as an 'extended system' in which the mouse becomes a 'constituent in the cognitive system'. Maggie and Jedser are in this embodied relation to their PCs in which the screen, the keyboard and the mouse are all extensions of their embodied practices. In this way they are invisible to them as they get on with the day's tasks. In sharp contrast however, the mainstream Irish press is encountered as profoundly obtrusive. I consider this embodied relation to technology and how it contrasts with Lola's and Alice's' obtruding devices in the conclusion to this chapter. Next I look at the 'suspicious media'.

The suspicious media

In using the medium transparently, Jedser and Maggie instead focus sharply on the Irish media as an object of suspicion. They consider the media broadly to be Irish journalism, the mainstream press and in our readings, *The Irish Times* specifically. This news media is thematic throughout their Dialogues. In our meetings Maggie and Jedser question it directly, point to it, distance themselves from it and express suspicions as to the interests acting behind the stories they read. The media is not a ready-to-hand tool in Jedser and Maggie's lifeworld, it has broken down and stands out as problematic in their experience. Jedser had signalled his personal rejection and boycott of the mainstream press early in our correspondences:

Jedser [in an email]	I find "Irish" media [mainstream press] repetitive and almost boring
	I feel our media is biased and almost reminds me of
	the BBC World Service referring to 'State controlled Radio Moscow'

Jedser is practising a boycott of the mainstream Irish press and so he read *The Irish Times* with me as one if his rare visits to the website. Jedser explained the above criticism and his own boycott by way of his personal politics and activism with the Socialist Party in Ireland. He feels that the Irish media are not only uninteresting but that they represent the interests of an elite

social group of which Irish journalists are a part. Here is his first reaction to reading the article I had selected for our meeting.

> Jedser I see a kind of unconscious collusion between Irish media journalism and the state…It's almost as if - you're the journalist, you've been educated by the Jesuits, I'm the Minister, I've been educated by the Jesuits, we have this, wow - free thinking that the Jesuits instil in you, but we both think in the same way, ya know.

In this response Jedser expresses a sense of how distant he is from the content of the article. The article is a mere object which has been crafted and disseminated by a social elite and which is interchangeable with any other object emanating from any other source in this group. He experiences reading the news media as the appearance of an obtruding object and this must be so because he has a preunderstanding that the media should be functioning differently. It is hard to tell how Jedser understands a well-functioning media might look, Would it be neutral and objective, or critical and positioned politically with the working class? What is clear is that in his reading, the article is not ready-to-hand. The 'message' or the detail of the content does not take up his attention and he certainly does not become absorbed or lost in any aspect of the narrative.

> Jedser To comment on the whole tone of the article, it's blah blah blah.

Here Jedser attempts to offer an overall impression of the tone of the article, but his 'blah blah blah' shows how disconnected he is from the discursive or semantic details. He has not gained any sense of the emotional register that the author might have conveyed in her use of specific words or of value or not of any of the specific arguments she makes. The article has become an object, a one-dimensional broken hammer and is empty of any lifeworld meaning, it is in effect, present-at-hand and hence, hermeneutically dead.

But Jedser's experience of obtrusiveness in reading the article is not just communicated in what he *says* about the article. Above I described how Jedser moved about his cabin-office and how he engaged with the technology in a seamless, embodied harmony where his body, his

surroundings and the devices he used worked almost as one eco-system. This harmony was disrupted however when he leaned in in his chair to read *The Irish Times.* His disdain was evident in this lean. As he reads, he tenses slightly, shakes his head. Tuts. He scrolls and clicks deftly with the PC mouse, scanning the screen and the outer borders of the web page for signals about where to navigate to next. But his reading is an angry reading; his shoulders are taught, his gaze is sharp, scanning quickly, skipping along the tops of words looking for signs that confirm his suspicions. He is not moving about immersively and with knowing when he reads *The Irish Times,* he is experiencing a disjuncture between his embodied relation to his lifeworld and the media object obtruding offensively against this background.

Maggie's experience in reading *The Irish Times* article is not as jarring as Jedser's clearly is, however, the encounter is also defined by a disjuncture. In reading the news online Maggie is caught up in a laborious cognitive effort to uncover suspect codings within the text and prevent herself form being 'sub-consciously' deceived. As I have shown, the PC as a medium is withdrawn into the background of Maggie's awareness as it functions smoothly in pursuing her daily tasks. Meanwhile however, *The Irish Times* online obtrudes as a broken tool against this background. Even though she chooses to read it every morning she is nonetheless doing so with an acute awareness that the surface meanings she reads might be harbouring messages other than those that are directly communicated. Referring to the paragraphs in the article that talk about one particular landlord profiting from the housing crisis, she asks:

Maggie	It is interesting that the guy [the landlord] was a farmer. I wonder is there some kind of political… [over talking]?
	[…]
Maggie	'a countryman who [owned the building]…' So, I wonder is that a bit of a dig at the party?
MJ	Oh, sounds… Yes.
	[long pause]
Maggie	Because 'everybody hates the farmers', obviously.

Here Maggie is talking about how, in Ireland, the governing party at the time of our meeting, *Fine Gael,* is widely considered to be the party of the property-owning class and big farmers.

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She is thus asking whether the author of the article is making a connection between government housing policies and the enrichment of certain of their constituents like 'countryman' landlords. 'Everyone hates the farmers' is her referring to an 'anti-farmer' discourse in Irish popular debate. With this she seems to be suggesting that the article is tacitly appealing to an affective-discriminatory undercurrent in the Irish public-readership. These remarks are interesting because it shows that Maggie is the only one of the four participants who reads the article in a way that could be described as decoding. Of course, Jedser, has his own suspicions about the interests of the media in general, but he did not attempt to show how this might happen in the specific use of language in the article. This above interaction occurred within the first minute or so of our discussion of the article. I had not asked Maggie specifically about her trust in the newspapers generally or about any class or political interests that she thought might be represented in the discourse of *The Irish Times*. However, clearly Maggie is sensitive to the idea that newspapers and their writers sustain their own positionality, and that even in an overt opinion piece like this one, there are still hidden meanings.

Below here, Maggie is telling me she does not trust what she reads in the comments, even when they use facts and figures and provide links to other sources such as reports or legal articles:

Maggie	I wouldn't trust that, no.
MJ	You wouldn't trust it?
Maggie	No, and if they said it in the main article, I don't know if I'd trust it either.

But she states that she would not trust the use of reports and figures used in the professional media either. Maggie clearly regards the media as an object of suspicion, and she is engaged in an effort to prevent herself from becoming absorbed in the surface meaning of what it says. However, just because Maggie *tells* me that she reads with caution, constantly wary of deeper meanings, this does not mean that she actually enacts this suspicion every morning in situ while sipping her coffee and reading the news before she starts her day. All the same, she did sustain this caution throughout our discussion and seemed to even embody it in her approach to our meetings, she took time to think about my questions and was careful about how she answered.

Equally in our later video calls, there were signs that she does not allow herself to become absorbed in her reading the news media.

Below she is talking about how she approaches the media in general, both the professional media and the comments.

> Maggie   [B]ut you need to be careful. I'm quite careful about what I [read]… It probably does subconsciously change my view of it, but I wouldn't consciously be going, 'Oh, well, Fianna Fáil led, and they refused to sign it. That must be true.'

Here Maggie is talking about how she is careful not to simply believe what she reads in the comments, however, we can see that she is conscious of being deceived on a sub-conscious level about what she reads in the media in general. As it is for Jedser, the Irish media is a broken hammer to Maggie. It juts out from a hazy background as an obtrusive object, malfunctioning and disrupting her potentially more absorbed involvement with the news.

Analysis - The figure-ground

In summary, Lola and Alice both experience the news media as withdrawn into the background of their encounters. They use it adroitly to meet their everyday requirements of information, and connection. However, the technologies that they use to access the media stand out for them from this background. Using her media devices in front of her young daughters is problematic for Lola as she worries about the bodily habits this teaches them and she adapts her practices accordingly. On the other hand, the broadsheet newspaper, with its smell, feeling and colour, stands out to Alice as an object of pleasure. Meanwhile, Jedser and Maggie experience their media technologies as ready-to-hand tools, functioning transparently in the background of their more keenly felt encounter with the Irish media online. Their computers are invisible tools, but their engagements with the media are made up of alertness and suspicion around an obtruding online press. The main question now is, What accounts for these two sets of obverse experiences? My argument here is that the two pairs of participants experience the media as

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obtruding or as transparent depending on the background web of significances against which their experiences take place. I base this claim on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) figure-ground thesis and on Heidegger's (1962) description of Dasein as Sorge or care.

Drawing directly on *Gestalt* psychology and probably also Heidegger's being-in-the-world, Merleau-Ponty (1962) described the perception of anything as the experience of a *figure* against a *ground*. No 'thing' that we perceive is ever an isolated discrete, object itself. 'There are no figures by themselves: All figural aspects of (perceptual) experience emerge against some ground that serves to delineate its specific experiential form' (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 13). Therefore, what stands out to a person cannot be understood on its own terms, it must be considered in terms of the existential grounds against which its characteristics and outlines are formed (Thomas, 2005). Therefore, in my study, a figural media (mediums) emerge in a dynamic 'codetermining relationship to a contextual background' (Thompson, 1997, p. 446). In a qualitative study with a phenomenological concern for first-person experience, it is the participants' own embodied practices and descriptive narratives that point to this ground (Thomas, 2005, p. 69).

Firstly, however, besides being-in-the-world, Heidegger (1962) pointed out that Dasein is structured as *Sorge* or care. As Adam and Groves (2011, p. 22) put it: 'humans "are" care'. Dasein is structured by an innate tendency to be concerned with itself, the world and others and it cannot get behind this care to a pre-concerned experience of the world (Blattner, 2006, p. 37). Therefore, something can only be relevant or irrelevant to Dasein because it is structured as care in the first place; something cannot be irrelevant to Artificial Intelligence for example (Blattner, 2006, p. 37). In these terms, the ground or background tissue of significances against which the figural comes into view, *is made up of what Dasein cares about*.

It became clear from the Research Dialogues that the background concerns against which the media and the medium became figural were different for Maggie and Jedser on the one hand, and for Lola and Alice on the other. For Maggie and Jedser the referential system against which the Irish mainstream media protruded was the *social body* – Ireland as a 'knot of relations' that makes up the communal whole (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). For Alice and Lola, the media was a transparent tool and the medium was figural because the interpretative background within

which they encounter the news media was defined by concern for familial security, education and emotional well-being.

The communal whole

The Irish mainstream media were thematic for Jedser and Maggie because their background meaning contexture was made up of their concern for Irish society as a whole. This whole included not only their family, friends and neighbours, but the Irish population at large. Throughout the Dialogues, these two participants signalled at this background web of concerns by various narrative and embodied means. While talking about the media's coverage of the housing crisis in Ireland, Jedser frequently indicated that a broadly conceived familial, local and neighbourly, even national community was the fundamental source of significance for him.

> Jedser   Nobody here [not the reporter nor the comment posters in the media texts] has hit on the social fact that, kind of like, I was saying to you, you're renting off me, your kids are happy and all of a sudden you have to move, you know. […] Your kids go next door to play, that friendship is gone, whatever, you know. Now everything so far has mentioned money, all the responses there that you have shown me have mentioned money as being the factor, cost, yeah. Nobody's mentioned the social cost, nobody's mentioned the sense of community, that we all live next door to each other you know […] we grow up and our kids grow up and we are all like …People now in Ballymun [a well-known deprived estate in Dublin, eventually demolished and residents rehoused], they know their neighbours 30-40 years, and that has a value as you get older. When you're younger you don't need it or appreciate it so much. As you get older it's nice to meet an old school buddy, to meet someone you know, I meet guys I've known from 30, 40 years ago. I stop and chat with them and it's nice yeah, it's that sense of connection not so much important when you're young, and your kind of - he's got kids and you're driving on with your career – [you're not] so much aware of that then, not certainly like the sense of community. You can debate about people in Ballymun, […] there was a great sense of community

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there, and they managed to patch it back together and whatever, that's lost in this fragmented rental market.

Here I sensed that Jedser was warning me that, even if I don't feel it now, eventually it is a sense of community and old friendships that sustain your sense of meaning and security. He talks about his own lifelong friendships, worries about a hypothetical mother being evicted then jumps to the famous story of rekindled community among old neighbours after the demolition of a 1960s block of flats in Dublin. This narrative spiral from family to local to national context runs right through Jedser's Dialogues and weaves a tightly bound lattice of significances. It is because of the social and relational nature of this web that the Irish media appear to him as deeply problematic. Heidegger notes how something stands out more authentically the more urgently it is needed.

> The more urgently we need what is missing [or broken], and the more authentically it is encountered in its un-readiness-to-hand, all the more obtrusive does that which is ready-to-hand become – so much so, indeed, that it seems to lose its character of readiness-to-hand (Heidegger, 1962, p. 103)(Heidegger, p.103 B&T).

This is a good description of what has happened for Jedser in terms of the Irish media and explains his inability to engage with any aspect of *The Irish Times'* article in our meeting. In the context of social Ireland 'falling apart at the seams' (Jedser) and the lived experience of struggle that people experience in the housing crisis, the Irish mainstream media obtrudes in what Jedser's sees as its silence about the lived experience, its lack of promotion of practical solutions and its tacit collusion with the groups at the crux of the crisis.

> Jedser   Lack of housing was seen as a financial or a social problem [in the media and political narrative] rather than the fact that Mary and Johnny and the three kids are kind of in a B&B you know like. We have x number of Leaving Cert students going to school out of the B&B. The whole, one whole family in a room like that! […] And it's an emergency, but they've been there for a year or two years whatever and because there's nowhere for them to go!

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Here, Jedser expresses his sense of urgency and anguish that the real lived struggle of the housing crisis is ongoing and is essentially ignored in the political and media discourse. By its failure to attend to the lived and emotional effects of the crisis or to recognise wider communality as the meaning of Irish society, the media has become a mere object. It obtrudes as the media *per se* in Jedser's encounter with *The Irish Times* online because the mainstream media, as a mouthpiece for a small group of sectoral interests, has failed to heed this fundamental collectivity and relationality of Irish life. Hence, the media appears as dis-figural, broken tool against this ground.

> Jedser   That article would probably be something similar if you bought the *Business Post* or the *Times* or the *Sunday Independent* news; you'd be reading similar articles. You'd get to the point where you think, 'I've read this last week!' There is no, there's no kind of radical [thinking]: 'This is the problem, and this is the solution, this is the solution we're going to implement now.'

Maggie indicates a similar background concern for community in this broad sense.

> Maggie   So, I have friends and stuff like that who are tied to really crippling mortgages, and other friends who probably will never get a mortgage now, because it's gone the opposite way. Then the rental situation that I keep hearing about, which is that accommodation is so expensive, and it's not just in your big cities, like Dublin and Cork, it's everywhere. I don't know.

Like Jedser, Maggie spirals her understanding out from her friends' experiences to Irish society more regionally. Likewise, her sense of anguish for others' experiences and Ireland as a whole is palpable. She uttered 'I don't know' with a tone of panic and distress. But Maggie's sense of the social or communal 'whole' is based on a Lockean (1821) notion of the social contract rather than Jedser's more collective conception of community.

> Maggie   I think that in a situation that we went through, like the bust, the whole financial crisis, I think they [the Irish Government] had a responsibility to make sure, the same way they had, and did bail out banks, that they have a responsibility to provide people with secure housing, and that they could learn from other countries that have good social housing policy, and they didn't. I also think that, that's in a crisis situation, but in an ongoing way, not necessarily in housing per se, but governments have the ability and the responsibility to look after people who are at risk of becoming homeless, and they can do more to prevent homelessness.

Here Maggie sees the Irish government as having the responsibility to carry out balanced financial support for both the private and wider public sectors in the context of austerity and housing crisis. But in this statement, she is again indicating her background significances. These are based on the social 'whole' of Irish society, banks and individual members of the public included. The concern defining this 'whole' as the basis of Maggie's referential grid is also evident in how she talks about her job with the clinical commissioning group in Melbourne. When I ask her about the job she states,

> Maggie   [I work with people] more from health and the social sector, or health and human services, but we engage all the time with communities, we don't do anything without speaking to the community first.

The *ground* against which the media is outlined as obtruding in Maggie's reading of the mainstream news is made up of this private-public sector inter-relation, 'we' as the NGO sector talk to 'them' the community. Against this wider picture of social fairness and reciprocity she feels media is malfunctioning, it is suspect and dis-figural against this background.

> Maggie   [B]ut you need to be careful. I'm quite careful about what I [read]…

Here Maggie is determined to avoid being duped because she believes there is something other than what is overtly stated in the media. In both Jedser and Maggie's cases the failure of the media is in its failure to have attuned itself either explicitly or implicitly to a *social* ontology,

the implication is that had it done so or been able to do so, something like such a socially traumatic housing crisis would not be occurring. However, where Jedser is certain about why the media is malfunctioning (by being a mouthpiece for class interests) this above quote suggests that Maggie is not as certain herself as to why she feels such suspicion and caution. Media philosopher Boris Groys (2000) argues that when the medium is transparent to the user, as the computers are for Maggie and Jedser, then the reader is unsure about where to attribute the sense of agency and subjectivity (in this case manifested as suspicion towards someone or something) that they experience in reading the 'medial surface' (Groys, 2000). Jedser has little problem attributing the agency behind the housing crisis and the inactivity of the media to the powerful groups such as the state, religious and business elites. But Maggie does not apportion blame so readily, she is holding it tentatively, unsure as to where to lay it down. She is simply cautious, alert as to a potential to be misled by 'the media.'

The familial and educational ground

To understand why the *medium* comes to the fore of Alice and Lola's encounters, we again need to look at the nature of the ground against which it emerges as figural. Lola and Alice's background web of significances are made up of concern more immediate family and career concerns. Again, this background was hinted at by various means through Lola and Alice's practices and self-narratives.

The first indication of Lola's background understanding is by way of her remark about the article that we read together. In our interview, I had asked Lola to scan the headlines and find a story about the housing crisis in Spain so that it would be similar to the topics I had read with the other participants. However, Lola told me that she probably would not normally read such a story because she is not currently looking to return to live in Spain.

| MJ | Is the topic of housing in Spain an issue, is that a concern to you, are you interested in the changes in the market or…? |
| Lola | Ah, not so much, I know [about the housing crisis] because everybody is telling to me in Spain, I don't even have to read, everybody is telling to me. |

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MJ	Everybody, your family and..?
Lola	Yes but, em, in this moment for me it's not important because we are not thinking for to come back [of returning to live in Spain for the time being].

Again, here we see the tool-like quality of the media for her, if Lola had been currently concerned about returning to Spain and buying a house there, she might read newspaper articles about this issue to gain a sense of the challenges they might face in doing so. For now, however, this issue is not of concern to her because it is not a concern for the family's immediate future. Lola's media practices also point to her wider web of significances. Besides reading the news online daily, Lola also follows the social media of child development and educational experts.

Lola	E [Lola's two-year old daughter] never has a storybook that doesn't have a point to it.
Lola	For example, my parents have just brought seven books, I bought them and sent them there [to Madrid] and they brought them here [to England] and one is *The Koala that Could.*
MJ	Ya
Lola	It's about [teaching you] that you can do things, that you can leave your comfort zone. The other is *The Lion and The Rat*, that's about values.
Lola	*Elmer The Elephant* is about diversity.
Lola	I always have a list on my phone of future storybooks, and where to find ideas for that list.

Here she tells me how she uses her mobile phone and the internet, to research, save and buy story books for her children. Through this we can see that Lola is very organised and focused on a strategy for caring for and educating her children. And this is her interpretative contexture, her family and its future. As I outlined previously, the media is a sort of handy utensil in this picture and functions efficiently in the enactment of her purposes. The medium however, appears negatively against this background. Especially with her focus on books and learning,

Lola does not want to communicate overuse of media technology to her daughters and so her own media practices and the devices themselves appear as dis-figural.

In understanding why, the newspaper as a piece of technology obtruded for Alice, we need to look at the referential grid that imbricates her life experience as a teacher as the ground against which it emerges as figural. Alice feel a sense of how leaning has changed since her experiences as a student.

> Alice   When I was a student and I did my homework, I would go to the library copy the encyclopaedias, copy specialized magazines and gather the information, and I would contrast it and explain it in my way. I never did copy-paste, obviously, but now it is so easy with a click to copy whole paragraphs there is no processing of the information, it is 'ah I read it, ok this is this, okay, okay, copy it, paste it' And there's no information process.

Here Alice reports that, as a student she used to go to the local library and search through the encyclopaedias, find useful material, read it and interpret it for her own school assignments. Today, she watches her students simply copy and paste from the internet. Lola seems to be concerned that moving from books to electronic media erases the more material and embodied aspects of learning, which in effect removes the need to 'process information', and perhaps learn anything at all. This is the background web of concern that brings the newspaper as a media technology into sharp and pleasurable awareness for her.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to develop a phenomenological understanding of the participants' every day, situated and embodied encounters with the mainstream media and with their media technologies. I used Heidegger's notions of ready-to-hand being and obtrusiveness to try to show that the media was a useful and thus largely transparent apparatus for Alice and Lola while it stood out as thematic and problematic for Maggie and Jedser. I also highlighted how their embodied practices around media technologies could be understood either as a unified body-device system or a jarring of object against contexture. I then tried to account for

the differences between the media/medium as tool and media/medium as obtrusive by way of Merleau-Ponty's hermeneutic *ground* within which the media/medium was either embedded and invisible or against which it became outlined as figural. Where the participants' webs of background significances were made up of concern for social and communal relationality, the media appeared as problematic, malfunctioning or simply suspicious in its failure to attune itself to this social ontology. Where the hermeneutic whole was defined by family, education and future security, the mainstream media functioned impassively in the background of the participants' activities as nothing more than an efficient tool in pursuing their purposes. This familial and educational referential meshwork however, caused the media technology to appear as dis-figural, to stand out negatively. This happened because on the one hand, Lola worried that using media devices would send a negative sub-medial message to her children whereas Alice had a heightened awareness of the physical presence of newspapers and books because of the way that the sensuous materiality of reading been erased from her students' device-based learning experiences.

CHAPTER 7 Encountering the Comment

This chapter examines the different modes of reading that were enacted in the encounters between the participants, the newspaper articles and the comments. In my analysis of the Research Dialogues the idea of 'levels of engagement' emerged early on as a possible theme indicating different modes, activities and intensities through which the readers were 'interacting' with the different texts. With a more hermeneutic phenomenological lens, I developed this initial theme to eventually cluster several of the subordinate themes around the notions of *confirming* and *living through* (Iser, 1993; Rosenblatt, 2016). The confirmative mode of reading was enacted primarily in the participants' reading of the newspaper article and involved activities like *selecting* and *ratifying* meaning. Meanwhile, Louise Rosenblatt's *living through* describes the immersive experience that structured the readers' encounters with the comments in which emotion and personal meaning were welcomed into the interpretation (Rosenblatt, 2016). Then, in looking to account for why the readers engaged differently with the newspaper articles to how they engaged with the comments, I draw on Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of reading (Iser, 1993, 1972). Iser assigns a key role in understanding to what he calls *gaps*. For Iser, these gaps are virtual indeterminacies created by the absence of certain details in an unfolding literary narrative. The virtual is the space created by the amalgamation of the reader's imagination and the text. The more skilfully crafted the gap, the more thoroughly intertwined the reader's own interpretations become with the text, leading ultimately to a richer

reading experience. Contemporary education researchers have developed Iser's gaps to help to elucidate the role of material gaps in children's story books and comics. The white spaces dividing the different sequential images in a comic book story are called panels or gutters, but while these gaps are material rather than virtual, they nonetheless contribute to the production of a similarly nuanced and multifaceted reading experience. My argument follows this research in claiming that the richly textured personal understandings that emerged in the comment-reading encounter can be attributed to the gaps or white spaces between the individual comments as they appear on the newspapers' websites.

Confirming

In reading the newspaper article, each participant carried out several different activities that together point to their reading of the newspaper article as an activity of confirming. In using the term confirming I draw on Iser's description of expository texts as having a 'confirmative effect' (Iser, 1972) and on Rosenblatt's (2016) 'public meaning'. For Iser, an expository text could be a sociological essay or a magazine article. Like the newspaper articles in this study, an expository text is a 'document' that is specifically not fictional or literary (Iser, 1972). 'Confirming' in this context includes notions of establishing validity or truth and of acknowledging, ratifying and strengthening meaning. In this case, a confirmative effect is the experience a reader has when they feel they can refer (practically or imaginatively) to the world that the article presents and in doing so, this world or reality is confirmed, validated and strengthened, even if the *thesis* of the document is rejected. This effect is something that the reader 'demands' of the expository text as much as it is prompted by the text itself (Iser, 1972). The different modes and activities that constituted confirmative readings in this study are organised under the following subheadings, *Selecting and ratifying*, *End-oriented reading*, *Anxiety and meaninglessness*.

Selecting and ratifying

One way in which confirming was identified in the reading experience was in how the readers responded to my first question about the newspaper article once they had finished reading it. I

asked each participant a variation of the question, 'What are your first impressions of this article?' Lola, Alice and Jedser answered by summarising the article and paraphrasing parts of it. Here Lola offers her summary of the article she read.

Lola	Eh, yeah, it's about, it's about evictions, it tells the real-life story of a woman, but it's about evictions. There is a charity to help these people. They also talk about the price of renting, it has completely sky-rocketed in Madrid, and also, em, there is another property bubble forming, because the rent is so high that you just get a mortgage instead. But it also talks about things I don't understand. This woman has a mortgage, it doesn't say what she does … ah ya, it says she looks after elderly people and she has a mortgage of €1,600 a month!
MJ	Yeah?
Lola	She is also to blame here
MJ	Yeah, yeah
Lola	I couldn't pay a mortgage of €1,600 a month!
MJ	And did she lose her job?
Lola	Of course, she had the mortgage, well it's just that it's an unbelievable price to pay for a 50 square meter flat

In this quotation, the first layering of confirmation occurs in the way that Lola has *selected* out the meaning from the article that she interprets as most likely to be affirmed 'in public', in this case, by me (Rosenblatt, 2016). In this triangulation between Lola and the article and I, only certain meanings can be abstracted and shared as recognisable to all of us together. This is a landscape where evictions happen, charities are 'there', bubbles form and people have homes by means of mortgages. Lola would have had to de-select or 'subordinate' other perhaps more personal or affective meanings in order to have accomplished this recognisable summary (Rosenblatt, 2016). In continuing the conversation, we *confirm* this public meaning as accomplished and therefore as a part of our shared reality.

Noticeably, Lola offers this summary as a compilation of facts. Her paraphrasing re-builds this publicly confirmed picture out of the 'raw' material in the text and is noticeably devoid of overt

questioning or attempts at explicit re-interpretation. However, while Lola does not passively ratify what the article said by way of this summarising - after all I had asked her explicitly *about* the article - this compilation then becomes the condition for our further discussion wherein it is then validated for example, by Lola's ratification of the female immigrant carer in the only way that this picture can accommodate her; as an unlikely (implying undeserving) mortgage holder (Lola says, 'she is also to blame here'). Likewise, I orientate my own understanding towards these parameters of validity by asking Lola, 'Did she lose her job?' This question indicates that I was looking for a reason for the woman's non-payment/eviction that would have been logical in accordance with the picture I was being presented with.

End-oriented reading

Another aspect of 'confirming' evident in these reading experiences is in the way that the news article is used to fulfil an expectation the reader has about the text before they begin (Rosenblatt, 2016). Jedser's reading of the article enacts this kind of confirmative reading more than any of the others. I have already highlighted Jedser's anger towards the mainstream press in Ireland for 'colluding' with sectoral interests and against the ordinary people of Ireland. Thus, Jedser enacted an end-oriented reading by scanning the article for proof of these preunderstandings. Paraphrasing from my own field notes we can see him at his work desk:

> Jedser leaned into his computer screen, squinted his eyes and held the mouse lightly, his index finger hovering, as if ready to pounce. He read quickly and impatiently and finally sat back in his chair, energised about the issue of housing [but defeated nonetheless].

I say defeated in brackets here because it is a later interpretation of his sitting back in the chair. Through the lens of confirming we can see that he failed to find his proof. What is noteworthy here, is that article itself had called for the implementation of a large-scale housing scheme in Ireland to be led by the government and to be paid for via a cost-rental model. The article states (Ní Chasaide, 2017):

Housing Action Now – a collective dedicated to achieving housing for all – believes the primary solution to the housing crisis is the reintroduction of State-owned housing on a large scale. This is the only way to regulate runaway housing prices in the public interest.

The most effective way to achieve this is the creation of a "cost rental" housing model. As the name implies, it would be a self-financing approach involving State provision of housing which would be made available for rent to a mixture of households on medium or high incomes as well as those on the social housing waiting list.

Later in our discussion Jedser said, 'Cost rental approach - providing public housing to solve Irish housing crisis is an excellent idea, it's a no-brainer'. But this remark came in response to a comment he had read after we had moved away from our discussion of the article. At no point in our discussion of the article had he acknowledged that the whole piece was directed at making almost precisely this same argument. Jedser read the news article looking for evidence to confirm his own theory about the Irish press. He did not find it, but rather than acknowledging this and undermining his own argument, his response to the article was vague.

Jedser	Ok, all I would say from what I've read so far is ... it's a mis, a mishmash of strategies the article is discussing, ya, […]...the state making cheap mortgages available; there's the impact on, you know, on what that'll do to house prices; how it's going to push it up, ok; escalate rents. Em, there's loan funds; there's a vacant site levy…we've got the voucher funds on the market [which the government are selling to developers], we're selling because they're [developers] making less profits.

Here Jedser is listing themes in reference to the article, much like Lola had done, but it is not *about* the article in the same way Lola's response is. The main themes are not indicative of the main thrust of the article, at least in the summarising form that Lola offered (Lola, 'It's about evictions'). Jedser says, 'The state making cheap loans available;' it is not clear here whether this is something that the state is currently doing, or whether the article is promoting or

critiquing this as a strategy. Jedser's own response to his reading of the article is an ambivalent 'mishmash'.

From, 'We've got the voucher funds…' Jedser moves to his own account of the housing crisis in Ireland, and from this point on it becomes difficult to orientate him back to the article again for the rest of our meeting. Jedser's failure to find confirmation of his theory does not mean that the accumulative effect of media practices in dealing with the topic of housing does not in many ways confirm his 'suspicions.' However, in his confirmative reading he had failed to recognise that this specific article had overlapped with his own arguments. In the next chapter, I consider this misrecognition in terms of how he experiences the journalist and the comment-posters as Others and what this means for building solidarity around the issue of housing. Here, it suggests that in his end-oriented reading, his engagement with the article was one of tunnel vision. In this mode, many specifics that were relevant to his own views were overlooked while he concentrated on the end he sought, proving the complicity of the mainstream press in the housing crisis.

Anxiety and meaninglessness in reading the article

Another aspect of confirmative reading in the Research Dialogues is evident in the roles of mood and emotion. My interpretation of the participants' reading as selecting, ratifying and end-oriented could imply that reading as *confirming* is a purely cognitive act in which the readers have managed to bracket their affective responses to the texts. However, the argument from interpretative phenomenology is that all reading is an event of affective, embodied cognition (Rosenblatt 2016). Nonetheless, Iser (1972, p. 283) describes the suffocating effects of expository texts: 'More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches.' In a study of how college students employed different reading stances, Schnell (1990) noted the sense of boredom and subsequent relief that many students expressed in their reading exercises. My interpretations of the Research Dialogues found a similarly mood-like affective quality in the participants' reading experience with the newspaper article. The predominant affective structure that was 'called forth' in these readings was anxiety (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 103).

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Anxiety is one of the Dasein's 'fundamental moods', (McKenzie, 2008, p. 570) which, for some interpreters of Heidegger, signifies 'world collapse' (Blattner in McManus, 2014, p. 6). This means that in anxiety, Dasein experiences the absolute meaninglessness of its life projects and cultural horizon and the almost complete evaporation of care (Dahlstrom, 1994, p. 208). For Heidegger, anxiety provides Dasein with the opportunity to make a choice to 'resolutely' grasp an authentic, fully individuated life by recognising and facing up to its own 'thrownness' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 435). In the next chapter I draw on feminist writers to elaborate my own criticisms of the masculinist heroism bound up with this resoluteness. For my purposes here, I use anxiety to describe the pre-reflective sense of meaninglessness that becomes confirmed in reading the news. This anxiety is revealed as a background sense of unease, distrust, dissatisfaction and resignation in reading the article, especially for Maggie, Lola and Alice and especially in the way that they seek meaning without expecting to find it. All of this points to anxiety but stops some way short of total 'world collapse'.

I did not 'discover' the first signs of anxiety in any of the Research Dialogues until the third or fourth time I had returned to listen to Alice's interview recording. Alice had been upbeat and optimistic in our meeting, even in talking about her divorce, and I was interpreting her reading the newspapers as an enjoyable daily ritual. Thus, I was surprised at the sense of dissatisfaction that began to emerge after repeated listenings. Heidegger says of anxiety that it is not caused or connected to any one thing, although extreme experiences like facing death can make it more consuming of Dasein's sense of being. In this present study and especially for Alice, anxiety was an always-hovering background mood brought to the surface momentarily in reading the article. This disquiet was mostly manifest in the emotional quality of Alice's voice and in her sighs and silences, much more so than in her words, but it did surface momentarily as a kind of dialectic between the 'depth' and the 'surface' in some of her quotes (Harman in Markham and Rodgers, 2017, p. 27). Below, with unconcealed pride, Alice tells me she is a regular reader of two of Spain's more reputable broadsheets but in doing so she immediately senses how this trust is arbitrary and potentially unfounded.

Alice	I am, I am a reader of *El País*, but I also look at *La Vanguardia*, if they are both there, I read them both.
MJ	Ah ok...

Alice	[Sharp in-take of breath] Trust, they merit more trust than the television.
MJ	Ya, ya
Alice	Yes, they do, however, if I think about it a bit more, I know that are all just as easily manipulated as each other.
MJ	[Laughing] Ya, ya, ya
Alice	So, the fact that it's written down and the media writes it [prints it], it gives me the feeling that it's more trustworthy.
MJ	Ah, yes, because…
Alice	I just see them as less easy to manipulate.
MJ	Yes
Alice	In inverted commas!

I have noted previously that Alice did not make the media thematic, that she had taken them at face value and used them as a tool in her daily activities and instead had consciously noted the materiality of the paper she held in her hand. Here, while it appears as if the media comes into presence for her as suspicious, after these remarks this direct questioning submerges back into the background of our discussions again for the remainder of our meeting. It serves, however, to point momentarily to the anxiety in the background of her encounter. She 'trusts' the newspapers, she states this several times. She also states that the newspapers are less likely *to be* manipulated. This suggests that she believes any manipulation would come from outside of the newspaper, perhaps by means of hackers manipulating images on a website. But, 'if I think about it a bit more, I know that are all just as easily manipulated as each other'. She is saying in the same breath that she trusts the media, but they are simultaneously somehow the same as untrustworthy media. Her faith in the newspapers is implicitly tied to a deeper sense of unease; she states explicitly that they are more 'trustworthy', but 'in inverted commas.' Thus, the faith she enunciates is belied by a deeper anxiety underpinning her reading.

Like Jedser, each participant enacted a mode of confirmative reading in reading the article by looking for answers, details and explanations that often they did not find. Lola says of the article: 'But it also talks about things I don't understand,' and 'So, I get blocked up by the numbers.' Alice says: 'Mmm, it seems to me that some information is missing.' Maggie says; 'At least I've learned about…' and trails off. In each case, there is either something missing or

something in the way of a meaningful engagement with the article. Lola, Alice and Maggie's remarks were all uttered with a certain resignation which suggests that even in confirmative readings their expectations of finding a meaningful engagement were already quite low. This sense of being let down while also only having had low expectations from the beginning, points to the anxiety underlying the participants' reading of the newspaper article; they were seeking meaning while already sensing they would not find it. Thus, even in the interpretative activities of reading, searching, selecting and ratifying, it is this sense of anticipating meaninglessness that governs the participants' encounters with the mainstream news articles.

In these terms Jedser's case is significantly different. Jedser expresses deep anger and frustration towards the Irish media and there is a constant sense of urgency about the housing crisis running through his Research Dialogues. But this is emotion, not mood. His anger is directed *towards* the media, it is intentional. The other participants' anxiety is free floating and object-less; it was stirred up by reading the article, but not directed *towards* it. Therefore, and as I argued through a different lens in the previous chapter, in Jedser's impassioned boycott of the Irish media there is much more of significance for him in his encounter with *The Irish Times* than his explicit protestations suggest.

Living through the comments

The confirmative reading, I described in the preceding sections was primarily enacted as part of the participants' discussion of the newspaper article. When the interviews moved to a discussion of the experience of reading the comments, there was a noticeable shift in the transcripts. This shift indicated that new modes of reading and more variegated activities of interpretation had become operational. Together these activities point to a very different kind of encounter than reading the article had exhibited. In some ways the distinction follows Iser's and Rosenblatt's distinction between the experiences of reading an expository text and a literary text. Iser talks about the feeling a reader has that an expository text is lecturing them as they read. Meanwhile Rosenblatt (1985) talks about 'living through' a literary text like a poem and labels this an aesthetic reading. Living through a text is an immersive mode of reading in which the reader's attention is encompassed by the direct experience of the

emotions, senses and ideas that the text activates (Rosenblatt, 1985). In this mode, an activity like 'confirming' becomes subsumed in the way that all affective and cognitive attention is consumed in the moment of experience, suppressing more teleological movements. My discussion with the participants about the comments indicated that they had 'lived through' them in a variety of ways. I gather these different experiences together under the cluster theme 'Living through the comments' which I develop and analyse by way of the subthemes, 'Feeling through the text' and 'Introducing personal experience.'

Feeling through the text

In research on the experience of reading a literary text, the notion of *feeling* in its multiple manifestations plays a central role (Cai and Traw, 1997; Wissman and Costello, 2014). In the previous section on anxiety I noted the distinction between mood and emotion. Here I use *feeling* to indicate how emotion, sensing and sympathising came together in a complex dynamic in reading the comment. These feelings are discernible in both the audio recordings of our conversations and in the verbal expressions in the transcripts and are linked more closely to specific comments and types of comments than anxiety is to the article. Firstly, Lola makes her feelings about comments in general quite clear. Lola told me that she had been reading the comments less often than she used to because of the 'woman thing.' This is how she describes the experience of comments that are abusive towards women:

> Lola   In another case, I don't read the comments because I am very upset about the woman thing, it's like [arms raised, makes monster noise].

Lola was so 'upset' by the harassment of women in newspaper comments that she changed her media practices to read the comments less often than she used to. By way of expressing these comments as she experienced them, she threw her hands up in the air, curled her fingers into claws and quietly but intensely roared across the table at me. Later in the same meeting, she remarked again about the comments in general: 'At the end of the comments I am very angry.' Lola was the only participant who brought feelings about comments that she had read on different occasions into our discussion. The experience of 'uncivil deliberation' had obviously affected her deeply. I would not say that Lola was frightened away from the comments by this

abuse, but she was certainly deeply upset and angered by them and ultimately changed her practices because of them. Lola had not expressed any acute feelings or emotion in her reading of the newspaper article, much in accordance with her using *El País* online as a ready-to-hand tool in her life projects. However, reading the comments in connection to the story about a Peruvian woman's double eviction from a flat in Madrid, activated a complex emotional response in Lola. Lola had expressed some sympathy for the woman's plight but had argued that people are ultimately responsible for their own finances and that the woman (a carer) should never have taken on such a large mortgage in the first place, even for such a small flat in one of Madrid's poorest neighbourhoods.

In the comments she met similar arguments, but many of them focussed on the fact that the woman was an immigrant from Peru. This sentiment disconcerted Lola, so she engaged with them in a way that differentiated her own argument from the 'xenophobic' comments. She became very animated in this.

Lola	The problem is that this woman is not from Spain, she is from Peru, and they are very… there are a lot of … homophobic (?) comments.
MJ	Em, not homophobic, em, xenophobic?
Lola	Xenophobic.
Lola	Ya, ya, read the top three. [She re-reads a comment]
Lola	He is cruel, it's not because she is from Peru, it's because…
MJ	It was crazy to give her…?
Lola	It's from [because of] the salary, not because she is from Peru, it's because of the salary, you will not have more than €1,000 [salary per month].
MJ	Ya, Ya
Lola	This woman comments a lot, and she is very aggressive, [reading out one particular comment] 'You sir cannot read very well, I have been talking about what's fair, about governments… ' Ya, the thing is that in the article they say that obviously you cannot pay €800 for 50 meters [squared], it's crazy. In a good place, ya, I can understand it, but in a poor area? This is completely crazy, the price of the [flat].

In the above exchange between myself, Lola and the comments, Lola is animated and upset by the xenophobic comments she has encountered and we can see this in her insistence about the logic of her own argument: 'It's [because of] the salary, not because she is from Peru, it's because of the salary, you will not have more than €1,000 [salary per month].' Next she points out one particularly 'aggressive' comment, but she does not engage with it in detail, she returns to her own argument to emphasize again the logic of her point about not taking out a mortgage that so outweighs one's salary, she also uses the article to support her point. While Lola does not use the comments to turn and critique her own personal or social horizon of meaning, they do make her *feel* destabilized about her perspective, hence her repetition and slightly panicked responses.

I have already described how Alice evinced a sense of resignation and anxiety in her reading of the newspaper article. In reading the comments however, she became much more emotionally involved. The article she read describes the complicated criteria involved in a new government rent assistance scheme for Spain. The comments elaborate on the unnecessary complexity of the process that leaves many who need the help unable to access it. One example of how Alice becomes emotionally involved with the comments is evident in how she recounts one that she has just read. In this comment the poster describes with some irony how he would have qualified for the new government grant if, instead of being married to his wife, they had been living together unmarried in the same apartment for the last number of decades. As Alice re-tells this story in her own words her frustration mounts at the complexity of the criteria the man faces, until on finishing, she exclaims with some intensity of feeling: '[It's] totally contradictory, and this happens a lot.' Below she considers the 'reasoning' behind government criteria and further expresses her exasperation at the injustice.

Alice It's strange and I think that they try to save money in every way they can and they introduce laws that are not at all fair […] I don't know what criteria they are applying, but exactly this [man's situation] shows that they don't do things very well. How can it be that you are assessed by how long you have been married, something that has always been the norm in Spain, and suddenly you don't qualify for this grant when you really need it. And meanwhile, in the same situation [but being

unmarried, you qualify]! It's just a piece of paper! What's difference if you are married or not if we are all earning the same money?

Alice has become animated by the issue of the criteria for receiving rent assistance from the government in response to her reading of the comment. While we can also read her own housing scenario into this quotation (having left her husband and the family home only a year previous to our meeting), it is notable nonetheless that a similarly emotional response was not in evidence in her reaction to the newspaper article that had discussed the same issue. Alice was the participant who had felt 'blocked' by the use of numbers and 'percentages' in the article, yet here she recounts this poster's case and offers a detailed and emotional critique of the new scheme. Alice does not encounter anything like the emotionally charged issue of xenophobia in the comments, but nonetheless, emotions and feelings about the issue of rent assistance become activated through one man's description of his own situation.

Maggie who self-described as being 'careful' and sceptical in her reading of the newspaper as well as the comments, did nonetheless express an emotional response to the comments in a way that was absent in her response to the newspaper article. One of her first remarks on moving our discussion to the comments stated:

> Maggie   And then I love this kind of detail as well, that goes back to, for example, bits of policy or legislation. That's another thing that I like about the comments, is that people go into detail on things.

This participant would go on to make comments like 'I wouldn't trust that, no' to refer to the comment and the article. However, above she has used 'love' and 'like' in her first response to reading a comment; a comment about EU legislation no less.

Introducing personal experience

In our discussion around reading the comments, each participant introduced aspects of personal experience into the conversation. This was notable for two reasons. In our discussion around the article, Alice and Lola made little to no references to their own lives, however each woman

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began to weave the detail of several personal experiences into our conversation once we moved to a discussion around the comment. Jedser made several references to his own life during our discussion around the article but experiences in his own life appeared more frequently and were more intricately assimilated into in the discussion that revolved around the comments. Maggie meanwhile made one impassioned reference to her own friends' stressful experiences of housing in Ireland in recent years, but it is not clear what, if any aspect of the texts 'prompted' this interjection. Therefore, I have not included it in this analysis, nor have I considered any participants' remarks about their own lives where they were prompted specifically by a question of mine during the conversation.

In Alice's case there are simply no references to her own life in the segment of the transcripts that are taken up with our conversation about and around the article. After she had read the article and I ask her about it, she gave me a summary of the main points: there are 'things they could have explained much more'; she had faith/disquiet around the newspapers; she would go to a citizens advice service if she had specific questions about renting and; in response to my question, she described when, where and how she normally reads the newspaper. However, at no point did she introduce any aspect of her own life as part of the conversation about the article. When we move to discuss the comments (from the point in the transcripts where I ask her if she has 'encountered the comments much') and as we move back and forth between different points made in the comments, she begins to tentatively weave some of her own lived experiences into the conversation.

Firstly, as we discuss the comments, she begins to question the kind of 'field work' that the government had carried out in order to establish the criteria for accessing rent assistance and how it categorised a 'town', she refers to her own town, EP. Initially she is making the point that, according to the number of inhabitants, EP is a city (and therefore its inhabitants are unable to qualify for the rent assistance). But next she stresses that really, it's a 'town'. 'It's pretty much a town in the way of life there', 'It's peaceful', 'It's a peaceful city.' Here Alice differentiates between how the government measures a place and how she and others who live there experience it. Suddenly, her own lived experience of her hometown feels like an admissible contribution to the conversation.

Elsewhere, in talking about the challenges people face in finding affordable housing, Alice inserts her own situation as part of the reason why demand on housing supply rises.

> Alice [There are] lots of people like me, who have separated and who need another home, people are separating more and more, and they need another property and they do what they can so that it's in the same place, because they have children and they have to share taking care of them.

This is notable because, while she is pointing out how difficult and expensive it is to find somewhere to live in her own town, she does not blame the people who find themselves in a situation that makes up part of that demand. In this remark, Alice can be seen to assert that families separating and looking for extra accommodation is not in itself a problem, rather the practical requirements of separation, like ex-partners living close by one another, should be taken into account in thinking about housing. In this way she sees her own lived experience of separation as a legitimate part of a discussion about how to think about housing more socially.

In Lola's case again there are several references to her own life and others in her life in our discussion around the comments. Lola had made one detour into an aspect her own life while talking about the article when she pointed out 'I used to live there [in Madrid],' where it was almost a social 'obligation' for young working people to purchase an apartment in the years before the crisis. She described conversations between herself and an aunt in which the aunt would tell her, 'You should buy an apartment', 'You just have to buy an apartment!' However, when we talk about the comments these 'detours' took on a more story-like format.

> Lola Last summer we were visiting J's best friend [Lola's husband's best friend] in M [Spanish region]. We were talking about the children when she started to say [inaudible words here] her husband works, and that her husband's colleagues leave the office 'on time', 'they leave work on time!'[9]

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[9] The Spanish workday traditionally revolved around a mid-afternoon siesta, approximately 2pm to 5pm, when shops and businesses would close during the hottest hours of the day, opening again in the evening when it was

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MJ	Where is this? In M?
Lola	In M, they leave on time in the evenings, which is 5pm and at 5pm they're off. And she was complaining about this!
MJ	He was complaining?
Lola	She was!
MJ	[Expresses surprise]
Lola	Because her husband works two or three extra hours a day for free, he sees it as bad form that the others leave on time! And, of course, J [Lola's husband] and I are sitting there [surprised face]
MJ	It's because, because you are more used to working in Germany, where I imagine they leave on time?
Lola	And here [England].
MJ	And here as well, of course.
Lola	Why should anyone work for free? And this woman is getting involved in a mortgage for the house, they have a 50-year mortgage. Of course, when she complains about the system, it's like [inaudible - perhaps 'husband'] is helping the system, it's like you are helping the system!

In this 'story' Lola is making sense of different work habits as she has come to experience them in different parts of Europe. These experiences have encouraged her to question Spanish traditions in which people end up working 'for free' and think of it as normal and even criticising others for not doing so. Thematically this story can be connected to a comment that Lola had read only moments before and to which it can be seen as a 'response.'

Lola	Well, this comment is quite good, 'everybody is complaining in Spain,' and it's true. I listen to the radio every morning and there are people always asking for things, but nobody is talking about personal responsibility, about what's happening in your life.

cooler. Many businesses, especially retail business still follow this timetable, but without closing for the siesta. Other businesses have shifted in recent years to closing at 5pm, also without a siesta, but in both cases many employees are expected to stay at work until the original 8 or 9pm closing time, without extra payment. In 2019, a new law has tried to force businesses to use clocking-in systems to try to prevent them from enforcing unpaid overtime.

MJ	Mmm
Lola	Ya, it's true, I think at the end, it's a game, the fish that eats its own tail. Ok, we don't have this, and everybody is complaining about that, but nobody is thinking about how to improve.
MJ	Ya, ya, ya
Lola	I can feel, like, when I go to Spain, you can feel it.

Following this she brings in her story about visiting friends in Spain. 'Everybody is complaining' appears to activate the memory of an experience in which she listened to someone in her life 'complaining.' She then uses the friend's experience to argue a point about people sustaining the very system that they criticise by way of their own everyday practices. This interjection differs from the one about her aunt because of the winding, narrative format, where she has taken time to weave a story that helps her communicate and develop an understanding about contradictions in what we say and the way we live. Mimicking her aunt's extortions about buying an apartment had not taken up the same kind of time or space in the discussion or afforded any unfolding of narrative understanding. However, rather than a direct semantic 'activation' of a memory, I will argue below that her introduction of personal experience was facilitated by the fragmented *shape* of the comments which had opened up space for these insertions. However, before I turn to this argument, I examine Jedser's references to personal experience.

Jedser makes several references to his own life throughout the discussions both about the article and about the comments. However, something important happens in the midst of our discussion of the comments and in relation to his own personal and professional practices. In his use of personal experience throughout our conversation, Jedser was highlighting the internal irrationality of the cost-benefit perspective on housing in Irish political debate.

In one example that is illustrative of how he introduces personal experience and what it does in our conversation, Jedser refers to the experience of his daughter L who had become pregnant before she had finished university. Together the family made the decision that she and her baby daughter would continue to live at home with Jedser and his wife who would support her while she pursued her studies. In the intervening years Jedser's wife died of cancer in her early fifties.

His daughter and his granddaughter were still living with him when we carried out our interview and his daughter was coming to the end of her studies.

Jedser	My daughter L and her boyfriend, they used to get, technically a maximum €198 a week from the state for herself and F [A's daughter], who is six. [F's father would] contribute €50, so that's deducted out of that, so she gets €150 a week off the state which ends when F is 7 and L's quite happy with that.
	[…]
Jedser	L just can't wait to get away from it. She went to college and dropped out [changed degree courses]. She's just finishing social science now.
MJ	Is she?
Jedser	She wants to do a Masters in Health and Society but, like, what I'm saying is like, for example L obviously never left home. She lived here with A and myself. L could have walked into J G, the welfare man and said you know, 'I have a baby, I need a house,' they would have provided her with the house […] Everything that's available, the state would provide that, anyway, if you need it, but that's fine. People need that, […But] the house they provide you with […] the state could pay their mortgage on it rather than paying a private landlord twice as much as the mortgage would be, like the case is now. [The state] can borrow at 1%, so what stops the state, apart from the lobby group of developers, which is very powerful.

Elsewhere Jedser had already pointed out that the Irish Government's policy of 'Public Private Partnership,' based on cost-benefit perspectives, was actually costing the government more in the long run in than it was saving, for example in paying landlords rent assistance for tenants who need support. To him the costly outcomes of these policies negate their own internal logic of saving the government money. In the quote above here, he uses his daughter's experience as means of highlighting the internal contradiction of a cost-benefit argument as it plays out in practice. The use of personal experience in this way is threaded throughout the Jedser Dialogues. However, something that is un-reflected upon here is brought to light later in our discussion. In his daughter's case here Jedser is the 'landlord', effectively. I am not suggesting

that he has deliberately obfuscated this fact, simply that it is not reflected upon. This called my attention to something else. Jedser was a self-made millionaire property developer who had made and lost several million euro in the Irish economic boom and bust in the years before 2008. While Jedser critiqued elite practices like 'unconscious collusion' and irrational and socially damaging policy making, he rarely brought his own position or activities into this critique, which by most standards would qualify as part of those elite practices rather than as the everyday housing experiences of Irish people, whom he defends so passionately. It is not until we are examining the comments together that his own horizon is revealed.

Jedser   The construction industry is ... it's 'Every Man for Himself.' It's the same basically as where, you know, whereas I am protesting that people don't have housing but I'm not doing it [building social houses] because I'm too busy making money working for developers. That, so, I mean you have a lobby, amazing lobby groups here. We're probably, we're probably the most innocent people in the world, everybody is aware of lobbying in America and business needs whatever, like. You know farmers are the most powerful lobby group, publicans and builders here like, people in Dublin who don't want the State building houses because they build a block of apartments, pension funds and whatever and they know they're going to get a fortune, ok nobody wants state building…

This 'I'm too busy making money working for developers' is a short but meaningful reflection on his own life story and practices around the housing crisis in Ireland, involving some significant contradiction between his outspoken political beliefs and his professional entrepreneurial activities. Later in our meeting I ask him about his biography, and he is quite candid in outlining this period in his life, however, it only comes into our conversation unprompted on this single occasion, some time before the biography and then, only briefly in our discussion around the comments, submerging again into the background of his critique of lobbying.

Talking into space

In the preceding sections I have offered an interpretative description of how reading the article and reading the comments were structured as lived experiences. Reading the article as part of this research was an experience that can be characterised as a confirmative encounter in which the readers selected and ratified meanings that could be shared publicly, in which they sought out particular meanings, and in which depressingly, they already sensed they would not experience a broader meaningful engagement with the text. Reading the comments on the other hand can be described as being structured by more emotional involvement on the part of the reader and in which personal experience was invited into the encounter and woven into the discussion around the comments, even tentatively questioned. Reading the comments was therefore an experience of 'living through' a text, something which did not occur during the reading of the newspaper article (Rosenblatt, 1969). What I have not done so far is considered what aspects of the comments themselves can account for this difference in experience. To do this I draw on phenomenologies of textual 'gaps' and 'gutters.'

In reviewing how often each participant referred to a specific point in the article and then how many times they referred to something specific in the comments, I noted that the participants referred to specific points much more often in talking about the comments than in talking about the article. In analysing this pattern, I found that the participants *used* the texts of the comments to refer to and repeat these points, that is, they returned to re-read particular comments so as to highlight a specific point to me with more accuracy and from there offered their own interpretations and life experiences and displayed emotional involvement with the issues. There was no sign that they did this with the article. As I traced these interconnections with coloured pens between the participants' words and the words of the comments, I noted that the participants' reading of the comments took on a dialogic 'shape.' A dense 'to and fro' network of connections emerged in the Research Dialogues when the participants' words were joined up with their corresponding points in the comments. From this pattern it can be seen that in discussing the comments, the participants entered into a 'conversation' *with* the comments. In the left column of Figure 14 is an excerpt from the interview transcripts between Maggie and me. The comments that we were reading on a lap top computer sitting on Maggie's lap at the

time, are pasted into the right column. The orange arrows point to the specific points in the comments Maggie is referring to in her own interpretations.

R: That's something I agree with.
I: What's that?
R: Just that.
I: [both over talking]
R: [L.6] Homelessness is, in reality, a government policy.
R: [...] We'll go into that.
[laughter]
I: [unclear 0:17:49]
R: [long pause 0:17:55 - 0:18:05]
R: Although, it's a bit too far... It might be a bit too far left for my inclinations, but I agree that they play a key role, if not the role, in creating and reducing homelessness.
I: The government?
R: Yes...It is interesting that the guy was a farmer, I wonder is there some kind of political... [over talking]
I: Which one is the farmer, the MP or the commenter?
R: No, the man who was... What did he say? He said a country...
I: A countryman who owned the building...
R: Yes, a countryman who... So, I wonder is that a bit of a dig at the party.
I: Oh, sounds... Yes.
[long pause]
R: Because 'everybody hates the farmers, obviously.'
I: [laughing] I know, yes.
[long pause]
R: And then I love this kind of detail as well, that goes back to, for example, bits of policy or legislation. That's another thing that I like about the comments, is that people go into detail on things.
I: Yes, and refer to other...
R: And refer to... So, you can't really argue with that.
I: The Article 31 comment?
R: Yes. [long pause]
I: Do you think...?
R: Now, I don't know if they refused to sign it, but there was, obviously, some sort of [long pause] So, there were attempts back in 2000, by the European Union, to regulate some sort of building of public design [? 0:20:09]. So then, you know, if I had time, I might go, 'Oh, right, okay, I'll go back and look at it.'

JosephRyan
"Not planning is in itself a kind of planning. Not planning to house people is planning to make them homeless." Indeed it it, a plan for make people homeless. Homelessness is, in reality, government policy.
11 days ago   4 Likes

Government policy is designed on behalf of bank balance sheets, landlords of all kinds, vulture funds, their supporters, and the wider property owning sector. Homeless people, or soon to be homeless simply don't count against those powerful interests.
The worst part is the lie. The big lie...   » more
Like   Share

Spitshit
@JosephRyan
As accurate a description of the situation as I have read.
The housing crisis is not an accident.
It is policy.
The Farmers and Landlords party are looking after their own, while they can.
11 days ago   4 Likes
Like   Share

Govinfos
@JosephRyan; well said and it has been government policy to un-house people and refuse to provide social and affordable alternatives in any meaningful manner to privately rented or privately built accommodation since 2000. In that year a FF-led government refused to sign Article 31 of the European Social Charter which included a directive for each EU state to agree that would build public housing for those that were unable to afford it on the open market. As you say, the needs of the...   » more
11 days ago   4 Likes
Like   Share

Figure 13 'Dialogue' between reader transcripts and comments

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Here we can see that it was not the words or semantic content of the comments that triggered or directly prompted Maggie's remarks. It was in fact the white spaces *between* the comments that enacted the 'fro' in this dialogue. The spaces between the comments facilitated Maggie's responses. The blue arrows in Figure 14 running from the white spaces beneath each comment points to the segment of Maggie's remarks (in the blue brackets) that correspond to each gap, where each blue arrow begins. The dialogic encounter between Maggie and the comments was activated by the 'gaps' or the white spaces between each comment because these spaces paused the reading flow, temporally and spatially, and forced the reader to restart again elsewhere. These pauses function like the 'liminal spaces' in Bartow's (in Low, 2012, p. 369) comic book studies in which the reader is 'simultaneously being pushed away by the temporal and spatial divide from one opening to the next, and pulled into a more active role in the making of meaning.' Comic book researchers like Bartow (in Low, 2012) and Low (2012, p. 372) draw attention to new spaces for experiencing a text opened up by the 'gutters' or spaces between the panelling in a comic book.

Figure 14Comic book Mouse Guard, Fall 1152 (Peterson, 2007)

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Low (2012) calls the 'dialogue' between reader and these spaces the 'gutterance'. In these 'gutterances' he says the spaces speak to the reader and the reader speaks back and through a process of sensemaking readers make inferences, learn new reading competencies, construct meaning and make imaginative integrations between different panels.

McCloud (1993, p. 67) states:

> [D]espite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics...in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate forms and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experiences tells you something must be there. Every act committed to paper by the comic artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice...and equal partner in crime known as the reader.

In my own research, these 'gaps' opened up the reading experience to allow for the 'lived through' encounters in which the readers' own feelings and lived experiences were invited and welcomed as admissible features of an interpretative encounter. In Figure 14 we can see that the only explicit expressions of emotion to be found in Maggie's Research Dialogues ('I love…' and 'I like…') are spoken in direct, lived and pleasurable response *into* the space after a comment about a piece of EU legislation. In reading the newspaper articles, there was no sense that the reader could be an 'equal partner in crime'. The online newspaper article has not defied the document format and didactic style that most readers are already familiar with as the shape and rhetoric of conventional expository texts. In the enclosed space of online newspaper articles, with their conventional and carefully edited paragraph spacings, the reader's own meaning horizon is severely constricted, and she is left to read confirmatively and anxiously as the only mode on offer.

CHAPTER 8 Encountering the Other

One of the most important themes to emerge from the data analysis in this research was how the participants had experienced the *presence* of an 'Other' in their reading of the online newspaper comments. Hertzogenrath (2015, p. 1) describes media as the in-between that facilitates transmission between two communicators, but where the Other always 'evades direct access'. This chapter argues that the comment-poster is perceived as an accessible Other in the encounter with the reader: in reading the comments, the participants were experiencing something of a receptive mutuality, what French phenomenologist Marcel (2011) calls an 'attuned intersubjectivity'. During data analysis I began to cluster subordinate themes around the notion of 'presence' as it was becoming clear that the participants were somehow orientating their responses to the comments as if in some indistinct way the author of those texts was present or available to receive them. Meanwhile, in reading the newspaper article, the participants experienced the texts' authors as absent and unavailable to them. In this chapter I use Marcel's (2011) phenomenological concepts of 'availability' and 'unavailability' to interrogate how presence and absence are taken-for-granted in, and therefore structure the participants' experiences with the online media texts.

On authenticity

Before examining the data however, I want to first introduce and critique a term that formed the primary inspiration for the early stages of this chapter. In *Being and Time,* Heidegger (1962)

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describes Dasein as intertwined with the world. A fundamental aspect of being-in-the-world is that Dasein is also fundamentally *Mitsein*, 'being-with-others' (Heidegger, 1962). In unearthing this being-with as a condition of being-there Heidegger reveals that at its very core, Dasein is always already enmeshed with others in a co-relationality. Even when we are alone, we are always 'acting for the sake of some self-understanding that is interwoven with the self-understanding of others' (Blattner, 2006, p. 67). Even a hermit hiding out in the hills is enacting this inherent relationality and sociality but doing so in a privative way - insufferable others *matter* for the hermit, otherwise she would not be a hermit (Blattner, 2006, p. 67).

Therefore, in recognising *Mitsein* as an ontological condition of Dasein's lived experience, my analysis of the Research Dialogues was sensitised to the participants' tacit orientation to others, and to how this could help to disclose new phenomenological meanings in their encounters with the online news. However, I want to highlight something important about Heidegger's *Mitsein* and how I diverge from it in terms of its connection to his concept of authenticity. This quote from *Being and Time* illustrates how, besides being ontological, Heidegger's being-with also has a negative impact on Dasein.

> In utilizing public transport and in reading newspapers, every Other is like the next. The Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of the Others, in such a way, indeed, that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find shocking what *they* find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not the sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 164, original emphases)

Here Heidegger suggests that Dasein's being-with others is a type of autocratic governance of the self. Dasein's relationship with others is structured by an irresistible drag on the individual. Heidegger (1962, p. 149-168) sees *Dasein* as fallen or enthralled to *das Man* (or the 'crowd') because Dasein is inordinately preoccupied with how it is perceived by others and with how it

should orientate itself in relation to this perception. In this absorption with others, Dasein is a 'they-self' and is relieved of responsibility for its 'own-self' apart from the crowd. Dasein as fallen, is thoughtlessly compliant to trends and changes in its historical and cultural context. But occasionally, in this inauthentic existence, Dasein suddenly senses the very meaninglessness of being. Heidegger describes moments of anxiety as the sudden and inexplicable experience of 'unconcealment' in which Dasein realises there is no essential self, world or transcendent meaning. Anxiety is something which Dasein must use to appropriate an identity for itself as an individual and to thus live more *authentically*. The isolating experience of death and grief is one of the extreme authenticating experiences which can serve to individuate Dasein. Consequently, although Heidegger seems to say that being-with-others is ontological, he seems to equally argue that we cannot live authentically until we somehow disrupt our entanglement with the Other.[10] Hence, being-with must be inauthentic.

Although *Mitsein* is a key term for this research, its negative connection to authenticity resonates less vividly. For example, I have already described the participants' media practices - especially in the everyday lives of the women - as 'being responsible'. Being responsible viewed in the Heideggerian terms just described, would involve Dasein responding to the 'call of being' to take responsibility for itself, face its finitude and live more authentically in a heroic rupture with the 'they'. In contrast, I find that responsibility for others as well as for themselves is already part of the being-with structure of the participants' everyday lives. It is not a 'heroic' response to existential dread, but neither is it a mindless preoccupation with the trends and fads of the 'crowd'. To describe my participants' 'being responsible' as inauthentic because it does not self-consciously seek to break with the 'They' rings hollow to me, if not outright masculinist (Huntington, 1998, p. 6).

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[10] Heidegger and many of his interpreters insist this was not meant as a comment on the ethical (in)capacity of Dasein to live an authentic life *by way of* its relations with others; *Mitsein* is a phenomenological description of the ontological co-relationality of being, no ethics intended. But thinking about the *politics* of being, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the links *Mitsein* has with the negative connotations of the 'they' - that living an inauthentic life is intimately bound up with this being-with-others. In *Being and Time*, Dasein can only find the truth of existence by breaking its ties with the 'they' and responding individually to the 'call to care'.

On authenticity I agree with Huntington (1998) that despite Heidegger's rejection of abstraction and the knowing subject as basic fallacies in the tradition of western philosophy, his notion of authenticity nonetheless seems to demand some form of individuating, cognitive effort to affect a rupture with the social world. In Huntington's terms this rupture resonates with echoes of a 'masculinist posture of impartiality' (Huntington, 1998, p. 6). I understand that Heidegger wanted to make the point that ready-to-hand is the most common way in which Dasein encounters the world, and that present-at-hand objectification of the world is a derivative of this. However, his parallel discussion of grasping an authentically lived life from the jaws of the 'they' seems to lead back to a 'stoic resolve' to distance or abstract ourselves somehow from the world in order to see the meaninglessness of life and to embrace this absence (Sorial, 2005). In brief, I am worried that following Heidegger's terms for living responsibly or authentically would lead my analysis to view the lives of busy, stressed-out working mothers, immersed in an often-chaotic world with little time to stand back and reflect on the absurdity of life, as an inauthentic existence. This is certainly not what I encountered in my research; I found that responsibility and reflective practices are an integral part of their hectic life projects.

Moreover, in this chapter, the mode of being-with that emerges from the Research Dialogues in relation to experiencing the comment-poster points to a nourishing, tacit receptivity as much as to individuation and authenticity. Where being-with is obscured by unavailability, as in the reader-article encounter, the reading experience is an impoverished one. In the following sections I offer an account of availability through the experiences of Maggie and Lola, for whom it was particularly evident. I then show unavailability through the experiences of Jedser and Alice, both of whom encountered considerable obstacles in their experience of the Other on reading the article. Each case shows how it is through engaging with the 'comment crowd' and not by separating from it that the reader experiences authenticity and individuality.

Availability

Gabriel Marcel (2011) elaborated the concepts of 'availability' and 'unavailability' in his phenomenology of intersubjectivity. In order to be present to one another two individuals must make themselves available by putting themselves at the disposal of the other for no other reason

than to be of benefit to the other (Malbois, 2011). Availability is more 'active' than simply being-with, however, it need not be a physical, linguistic or fully reflective *act*. Instead, through availability Dasein *experiences* itself as a 'being-among-beings' in an encounter of 'attuned intersubjectivity' (Doona et al., 1999, p. 8).

The Research Dialogues show that in reading the comments the participants feel a keen mutual receptivity between themselves and the poster, despite the poster not being physically co-present. In Maggie and Lola's cases, they both engage with the comments through 'first order' responses as if in reading the comments they had entered into an embodied, ongoing conversation with a present other. In Maggie's case the sense that she experienced the availability of the poster and in turn made herself present in the reading experience can be detected in the way she responds to the comments in an un-reflected, direct and affective manner. Moments into reading the comments, Maggie exclaimed emphatically:

Maggie	That's something I agree with.
MJ	What's that?
Maggie	Just that. 'Homelessness is, in reality, a government policy.'

This response can be described as a 'first order' or embodied response by Maggie because she uttered it while in-the-stream of reading. It is also a direct response to the comment she had just read and is not an answer to a question that I asked *about* the comments. It is as if she is reacting to remarks made by an interlocutor already present to her and available to 'hear' her interpolations. In this way Maggie's response is much like the second part of an 'adjacency pair' in linguistics in which the speaking of an utterance by one speaker *provokes* the second responding utterance by her interlocutor, a question and answer sequence is a common form of adjacency pair (Alexiou, 2020). In our case here, the comment can be seen as the first 'speaker' in a conversation.

Moments later however, Maggie nuances her position slightly, as if suddenly conscious of an unguarded, mid-stream reaction.

> Maggie   Although, it's a bit too far... It might be a bit too far left for my inclinations, but I agree that they play a key role, if not the role, in creating and reducing homelessness.

But this reflective aside only serves to highlight the tacit understanding in her first answer that she had been directly invited to respond by the availability of the poster. After her aside, she confidently reasserts her own presence in this conversation.

> Maggie   […] I agree that they play a key role, if not the role, in creating and reducing homelessness

Here Maggie again agrees with the poster, but not in a way that could be described as falling in with the opinion of the *das Poster*. The poster is available to Maggie in a way that facilitates an affirmation of her own position. Markham (2011, p. 6) draws on Bourdieu to question an 'ambiguity' between self and they:

> Bourdieu is perhaps best placed to resolve this indefensible ambiguity: it makes little sense to speak of the opposition between the individual and the collective when our practices of individuation are themselves collective. Performances of individual identity permeate not only those cultures of journalism in which personal opinion is valued currency, but also in citizen journalism practiced on wiki news sites such as Indymedia.

Here Markham is stressing the collective nature of citizen journalism even though the blogger is often defined in the popular imagination as a lone maverick speaking truth to power. The citizen journalist is first and foremost a member of a citizenry, the collective ground from which 'blogging' makes any sense at all. In Maggie's case, the news article had made much the same point about the Irish government's responsibility for creating homelessness as the comment did, but Maggie did not align herself with any aspect of the article so emphatically. I argue that this is because Maggie presupposes herself as part of the mainstream media readership and it is only from this ground that an authentic assertion of herself as an individual can be enabled.

In terms of Heidegger's they-self, the posters' availability could be viewed as a mechanism by which Dasein is drawn deeper into the concerns of *das Man.* Indeed, Maggie is not asserting authenticity here by *distinguishing* her position from that of the comment crowd. On the contrary, Maggie seems to affirm her authenticity in directly responding to and in re-asserting her agreement with the comment. The sense that the posters are available in an open conversation with her offers her this opportunity to individuate herself, even if she happens to agree with the content. It is in fact the mainstream article that positions her as an undifferentiated part of the crowd, but I will return to the reader-article encounter in a moment.

Lola's Research Dialogues illustrate a similar point about availability and presence in that she seems to be involved in a pre-reflective and affective engagement with the posters, rather than a 'rational' consideration of a text. However, rather than agreeing with the comments like Maggie, Lola challenges their arguments, angrily calling one poster '*insensitivo'*, (someone who is harsh or cruel). What is interesting here is that Lola in fact agrees substantially with the comments that argue that the woman in the news story who was evicted from her family home for not being able to pay her mortgage, had been financially irresponsible. (The article itself had given the impression of having some empathy with the woman, but never explicitly). However, Lola does not want to align her response with some of the more anti-immigrant posts that also use that argument.

> Lola   He is cruel! It's not because she is from Peru, it's because of her salary,
> you will not have [earn] more than €1,000 [per month as a carer].

Here she directs the words 'He is cruel!' to me as she talks *about* this particular poster in the third person, however she seems to be responding directly *to* the poster when she says, 'It's not because she is from Peru…'. This remark would not have made sense if directed to me because, as Lola knew, I had not read the comments myself at that stage of our interview. She is clearly angered by his comment and responds directly to it as if to challenge the poster personally and correct his logic. In this engagement she must have already understood the poster as being available to her reaction because she responds with an immediate, embodied 'first-order' response. Elsewhere, Lola tells me *about* another comment she has read, but again seems to turn to respond directly *to* it with the expression 'wow', by the end of her remark:

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Lola	Well, ya, he says the same, that 'we miss Franco' – Wow!

What we see in these quotes is Lola involved in an energised, open mutuality with present others, something that very much resembles what Merleau-Ponty calls subjects 'gearing into' one another. Even though Lola is disagreeing with a poster over a specific point, the encounter is one of both availability and authenticity. She responds to the poster directly in both of these above quotes because she understands their encounter to be one of receptivity. And in a similar way to Maggie's agreeing with a comment, Lola enacts being-with as well as alterity within the crowd but this time by way of her disagreement with the comments. Thus, reading the comment enables Lola to enact both her being-with-others as well as her difference within the 'crowd'.

In the encounter between Jedser and the comment, there is no evidence that can be described as him responding 'directly' to the posters. Jedser talks *about* the comments rather than *to* the posters. However, the posters are nonetheless experienced as 'available' in the encounter, Jedser just does not orientate his remarks to them. I will explain how this is an experience of a less intense presencing in a moment. However, the reluctance to engage with the comments directly can be itself explained by Jedser's passionate, though not always successful, boycott of the mainstream media in Ireland. Jedser claimed to rarely visit *The Irish Times* website and generally avoids reading the mainstream press. Thus, in reading the online newspaper with me, he is not doing something habitual. Jedser's suspicion towards and unhabitual encounters with the mainstream media seemed to prevent him from experiencing the comments in a more direct or embodied way. Nonetheless, he encounters the posters as present because he does at least *acknowledge* their contributions, something he had not done when reading the article. Jedser's experience of the availability of the posters is best illustrated within a discussion about how the participants experienced reading the newspaper article, because it is against this background that presencing shows up.

Unavailability

Nursing scholars have considered the notion of presencing in healthcare in cases where patients died or deteriorated unexpectedly despite all of the professional protocols being met by the staff involved (Doona et al., 1999, p. 8). The researchers argued that many avoidable deaths in care involved the existential 'unavailability' of the professionals concerned. While nurses and doctors may have been present in the spatial-temporal and professional-diagnostic sense, it could be shown that they were not present in a way that would have enabled them to recognise the existential uniqueness, and hence the subtle signs of deterioration in the patient (Doona et al., 1999, p. 8). In this present study, all four encounters with the online newspaper article can be described as an experience of the unavailability of the author of the text in a way that a patient might experience the unavailability of a doctor or nurse, although of course, to a less potentially life-threatening degree.[11]

Unavailability in the reader-article encounter can be best illustrated in a comparison between Jedser's reading of the comments and his reading of the newspaper article. After having read the article and discussing it with me in our meeting, Jedser turned and leaned into his PC screen to read through the corresponding poster-comments. On reading the first comment he remarks:

> Jedser   Ok, so there's this first person, yeah, obviously clued in enough to know that we have an abundance of land in Ireland […] this person obviously has some ideas, like she's saying, you know, you can build these kind of houses for [€]150,000 and that's outside the capital.

At another point on reading the comments he says:

> Jedser   Ok obviously this guy has his figure of [€]500 plus in rent allowance, which isn't far wrong.

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[11] I make this argument in full recognition that without sufficient time and resources, existential availability is close to impossible for over-stretched hospital staff.

In these two remarks, Jedser identifies two comments which he acknowledges, at least from his perspective, are not incorrect. In talking about the posters in the third person ('this first person,' 'this guy'), his remarks are directed to me and are reflecting on and evaluating the information offered by the poster in the comment. However, this level of engagement, while it is not so much an affective, immediate mutuality, is nonetheless noteworthy in terms of availability because Jedser had sustained considerable affective and cognitive distance from the arguments in the newspaper article he had read only seconds before (Kögler, 1999).

This is surprising because the article had in effect made almost the exact same arguments as the posts he reflects on here. When sharing his first impressions about the newspaper article he had just read he says:

> Jedser   So, she's not saying, you know, say rent costs, rental housing whatever, she's not saying there's a model somewhere, you know, say Denmark or somewhere, or say Holland wherever it is, 'they did this and that that and that and these are the consequences'.

However, the journalist-author had presented a 'solution' to the housing crisis from the perspective of a pro-social housing activist and in the form of a cost rental model very much like his own proposals. The article also stated, 'The cost rental model has a good record in other European countries.' In important ways the argument in the article and Jedser's own pro-house-building argument about the housing crisis in Ireland were the same. However, Jedser's suspicion and boycott of the mainstream media resulted in a distanciated mode of reading which caused him to misrecognise this agreement (Kögler, 1999). Simply by presenting her argument in the mainstream press, the housing-activist author was immediately encountered as unavailable to Jedser for any form of engagement, regardless of the discursive meaning or political value of her contribution. The journalist was simply a 'generic case' (Marcel, 2011), interchangeable with any other journalist.

> Jedser   'Nessa Ní Chasaide, now she could be the greatest journalist in Ireland, or she could be on work experience ...'

In this quote we sense that Jedser has some sympathy for the journalist as an individual; he is the only participant who considers the author of the article by looking for and mentioning her name. This points to how reading the article is always fundamentally an instance of being-with; like the hermit, Jedser cannot but care about what a mainstream journalist says about housing in Ireland, hence his boycott. But it is a being-with defined by unavailability, and in this instance in a two-way mode.

> Jedser [S]o to me […] the article is as general as what the average politician who stands up in the Dáil will say you know, 'we are going to do this and do that,' but […] there are no specifics, […] nobody ever comes up with a fine-tuned policy, you know.

The journalist is unavailable to him as another activist concerned about homelessness because she writes in the mainstream press, therefore what she says cannot but be judged as the same as the 'average politician'. But likewise, he has also made himself unavailable to her, he cannot 'hear' that her arguments are the same as his own, which on detail and further engagement could perhaps have developed into a productive solidarity. The mutuality of Marcel's (2011) availability means that by not placing oneself or one's resources at the full disposal of the other, the self is also negatively impacted. For example, in pride the self feels self-love or self-sufficiency in which the other can be nothing but an object or an example, but in this way the self can only be an example too, rather than a unique subject. Jedser has a particularly strong sense that he is addressed as merely one part of an undifferentiated mass audience (the Irish population) by the mainstream press, hence he tries to reject this positioning through his boycott. In this way we could say that Jedser is trying to individuate himself from the they-self. Nevertheless, in his almost reluctant acknowledgment of the online comments, he is acknowledging another more fundamental understanding; the 'crowd' is also the source of authenticity, not a force pulling Dasein back into a docile adherence to unthinking complicity.

In Alice's reading of the newspaper article there is an even more obvious case of unavailability. Alice is the secondary school teacher from a town outside Barcelona who had spent the previous year setting up a new apartment for herself and her daughters after she had separated from her husband and left the family home. The article we read together discussed new

legislation introduced by the Spanish government aimed at supporting tenants through a rent grant and how the complexity of the criteria required to qualify for the assistance means that many people in need of support do not qualify. Despite the relevance to her own scenario, however, Alice is unable to engage with the article.

> Alice   If you don't fall within in some minimum income o maximum whatever…It works on the number of people living in a household - this yes, I get. It says it, it repeats it a fair bit. […] It talks about the families and after it dedicates a small aside to older people [raises voice] and this yes, he sorts out. But it's not very specific either, it's about the whole country. I understand that it's for the whole country because he talks about the BOE [the national treasury] [sighs] I don't know, it gives me the impression that things are missing that could have been explained it much better.

Here Alice is trying to sort out the information that she has just read in the article, but it is evident she is not clear herself or feeling confident about the details of what she has just read. Her statement 'whatever' sums this up. She is trying, but from the start she does not expect to get clear on what the article is talking about. She is identifying what she understands ('this yes, I get') but she is looking for specific examples that would help her. Because she feels lost in talking about the national scenario ('it's for the whole country'), it cannot, in turn, talk to her circumstances, or perhaps anyone's. There is no indication here that Alice is in a conversation with another person or that she feels addressed personally by the piece. Rather she is presented with a complex list of financial minutiae that she is supposed to figure out and apply to her own scenario. While Jedser was deliberate in his distanciated reading, it appears here as if Alice is being pushed away by the article itself.

Furthermore, Alice does not experience the journalist as unavailable because she is addressed as an undifferentiated part of one mass audience, rather, in the use of numbers and complex calculations, the writer is addressing another more 'competent' or 'professional' audience.

Alice   When it talks so much about 'percent of family income in euros per year' – I always think in terms of months, what I earn each month, [sighs] I'm not able to do annual calculation. Then, I get blocked up with the numbers and when they start to talk about percentages, incomes, euros, those financial supports, 40%, 600… my head starts to get blocked up.

Alice cannot engage with the article because it is presented in terms that do not overlap with her own lifeworld. As a teacher she is paid monthly, this article seems to be speaking instead to people who think about personal finances in terms of an annual salary. Given Alice's struggle to find a flat that she can afford while also paying bills with only one income, she is focussed on what she has to spend on herself and her daughters at the end of each month. She sees her inability to engage with the numbers as a personal failing however, not a failing of the article to speak to her as perhaps a member of the social group for whom the financial support is most relevant. Alice feels herself to be part of an unreachable they-self that is outside of the constellation of 'informed' individuals that the newspaper seems to be addressing. Alice does not orientate herself at any point directly to the article by 'speaking back' to it in embodied responses like Alice and Maggie did to the posters. She talks *about* the article or about housing in general and in a very deflated and resigned tone. Not only does Alice experience the journalist as absent or unavailable in reading the article, but she senses this unavailability is her own doing, caused by personal failing rather than by a feature of the press itself.

Conclusion

In summary, Lola and Maggie's experiences of reading the online newspaper comment shows how they encountered the poster as open and available to 'hear' their responses. Whether they agreed with the comment or not, mutuality and receptivity are enacted in their embodied responses to the text. Furthermore, through this mutuality the reader was enabled to assert her individuality from the ground of an 'attuned intersubjectivity'. Meanwhile, Jedser and Alice's experiences with the newspaper article provide no sign of an author. Alice was prohibited from engaging with the article by its over complexification of the rent assistance programme and

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thus through its exclusion of her for her as part of a non-expert 'they-self'. In Jedser's case, his own media boycott obscured the being-with that this encounter is premised upon to the extent that he misses out on an opportunity to engage with a fellow housing campaigner. His recognition of the 'presence' of the posters suggests that their status as non-elite contributors to the media uncovered being-with as the source of authenticity for him.

CHAPTER 9 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to try to gain a rich and nuanced phenomenological understanding of the lived experience of reading the newspaper comment online. In interpreting the Research Dialogues, three cluster themes emerged, each one indicating significant patterns of meaning and understanding in the participants' encounters with the media/mediums, the article and with the comment. I presented my interpretations of these cluster themes in the three empirical chapters under the titles 'Encountering the Media', 'Encountering the Comment' and 'Encountering the Other.' Taken together the interpretations in these chapters suggest that the encounter with the comment was a conversational one defined by dialogue and receptivity, whereas the encounter with the article - and for Jedser and Maggie the news media more broadly - was an experience in which a monologic voice had addressed them as objects rather than as co-subjects. In this chapter I first consider the findings of each separate cluster theme in terms of research in the fields of medium theory, digital literacy studies, and comment and newspaper studies. The inclusion of research from areas that did not appear in the earlier review of the literature, points to the commitment in phenomenology to let things 'speak for themselves'. This means that often unanticipated meanings emerge both in the field and in the analysis, which then demands an examination of new literature (Smith, 2007). Following my discussion of these areas, I turn to bring my own findings together as a whole and consider them through the lens of Gadamer's fusion of horizons. Finally, in concluding this chapter, and this thesis, I offer some personal reflections on my research journey, a consideration of the implications of my research methodology, and point to a number

of future research questions that my work generates. Firstly, however I bring my findings on the invisible/suspicious media into dialogue with the strange and wonderful world of medium theory.

Encountering the medium, Marshal McLuhan and critical digital literacy

In the chapter entitled 'Encountering the Media' I offered a phenomenological description of the participants' everyday encounters with the media. In these encounters their perceptions and understandings of the media were structured according to each person's back-ground web of concerns and significances. For Alice and Lola, the technology that they used to access the news media was figural to them as a 'broken hammer,' an object which stood out against these understandings because of its either ill-fitting or pleasurable characteristics. Meanwhile, the mainstream news media that they read every day was a transparent apparatus, functioning smoothly according to their educational purposes, family projects and future lives. For Maggie and Jedser, the online news media was an object of suspicion, something that jarred against the communal and social whole which made up the referential grid of concern for these two participants. Meanwhile, the computer-tools they used to access this media were invisible to them as they used them deftly and with purpose sitting at their desks for work. These findings bring this research into direct contact with medium theory, in both its macro and micro forms (Meyrowitz, 2010). In this section I consider my findings as they reflect and challenge aspects of the work of Marshal McLuhan (1967) and his macro medium theory. In doing so I reflect on the 'mechanism' that brings our ready-to-hand technologies in and out of awareness. Next, I place my work alongside a number of micro studies of the body and technology ongoing in the field of Digital Literacy Studies and consider my own findings in terms of the kinds of questions these studies ask.

The basic thrust of McLuhan's 1964 media theory, often condensed to 'the medium is the message,' was that while media content transmits a consciously constructed sign-message, the technical medium that carries this message is simultaneously issuing its own deeper, unconscious message, one that cannot be controlled or often even detected by either the subject who constructed the message or the 'reader' who receives it (McLuhan, 1967; Groys, 2012).

The message-effect of the medium is to silently 'alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance' so that while public debate happens at the level of 'opinions and concepts,' 'the new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute huge collective surgery carried out on the social body' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, p. 12). 'Change alters not only habits of life, but patterns of thought and valuation,' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, p. 12). One example McLuhan offers of the effects of (technical) media is of how railway extended human functions to create new kinds of cities, work and leisure, regardless of the kind of freight it carried (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). The content, in other words is 'worthless' but nonetheless functions to 'hypnotise' us, blinding us to the tectonic social changes new mediums propogate in the background (Harman, 2019, p. 28). And these effects, McLuhan argues, are more often than not, harmful to humanity. He points to the way that since the invention of the 'motorcar' we were always already reversing forward into traffic jams and pollution.

Contemporary medium theorists have taken up the questions of how new digital technologies might be already changing the meaning of being human (Introna and Ilharco, 2006; Kim, 2001; Meyrowitz, 2010). Introna and Ilharco (2006, p. 62) for example consider the phenomenology of screens in contemporary life.

> [W]e never seem to look at a screen, as a 'screen.' We rather tend to look at screens in attending to that which appears on them. What seems most evident when looking at a screen is the content being presented on that screen—the text, images, colors, graphics, and so on—not the screen itself.

These authors are concerned about how the proliferation of screens in the home and on the street are affecting '(post)modern' subjectivity. And this work reflects some of my own discoveries; that participants often focus on the content while seeing through their digital hardware. However, one important aspect of McLuhan's work that my own findings relate to is his conception of how media (as mediums) can be brought into human visibility and can thus be made to change. Media can be pulled from the murky background into human awareness by the deliberate activities of 'artists.' By artist he means anyone with 'the means of anticipating and avoiding the consequences of technological trauma' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, p. 14).

Artists, with their special sensitivities to human perception can detect the changing of sense ratios early on as they occur and can draw attention to them before we are 'numbed' by the twinkling of their surface content.

Another mechanism for change comes in the form of 'reversal.' Harman (2019) uses the example of email to illustrate this. Email started out as a labour-saving device to avoid trips to the post office, however, its convenience led to its reversal in so far as we are now 'constantly at the post office' and thus hyper aware of emails as a nuisance medium that negatively impacts both personal and social life (Harman, 2019, p. 28). Thus, according to McLuhan, only artists or the technologies themselves can instigate the bringing to light of media technologies. In my research however, my four participants' cases illustrate something distinctive about the appearance and disappearance of media technologies.

Each individual's background horizon of understanding accounted for the different modes in which both the symbolic content and the technical mediums were experienced. For Jedser and Maggie the PCs that they work on are almost completely invisible to them. According to McLuhan, this is explained by Jedser and Maggie being entranced by the media content that the PCs transmit. '[T]he "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, p. 8). And indeed, through the main themes of our conversations Maggie and Jedser both evinced an explicit concern and suspicion about media content. Like McLuhan, medium theorists of digital media warn that the machine-body synchronicity that something like the well-functioning PC affords the user, has wrought personal and social adaptations that are as yet imperceptible to the subject because she is captivated by the content (Introna and Ilharco, 2006; Kim, 2001; Meyrowitz, 2010).

Joshua Meyrowitz (2010), for example, looks at the effects that postmodern technology is having on contemporary social forms and points to a new dominance of affective experiences over knowing and thinking, the modes of social interaction that had dominated the age of print media. This 'secondary-orality', Meyrowitz claims, is on its way to bringing about 'neo-feudalism' (Meyrowitz, 2010, p.60). This prominence of affective experience has some echoes in my own work, however, Jedser and Maggie's apparent entrancement by the media content, while evincing aspects of emotion, do not seem to fit into either Meyrowitz's or McLuhan's

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dire warnings about technology. The news media is figural for Jedser and Maggie because concerns for the social whole make up their background webs of significances. Jedser and Maggie's perception of the news media as thematic is a result of them focussing on issues that negatively stand out against their background concern for the welfare of others in their national community; media content is only one possible manifestation of this focus. Because of this background and its imbrication with the past, present and future of personal experience, what becomes thematic for Maggie and Jedser is not fixed. Social, personal or even technological issues might appear as thematic in different circumstances; there is no one object of suspicion in encountering the media. Maggie is generally 'careful,' and even Jedser's anger towards the political/media class is directed at their *unconscious* collusion (Public Private Partnership like an 'opiate' to them) and general ineptitude (Ireland is '*mañana*' land) rather than solely towards the elite as *the only agent* of social suffering. These awarenesses and blind spots are provisional. Maggie and Jedser's current personal and social contexts direct their attention away from their PCs, but these contexts are open because they are always bound up with background referential systems that are evolving with ever-advancing experiences, and thus only always provisional.

Neither do Alice or Lola's cases match a media theory outlook. In many ways Lola used her mobile phone as a tool, but the nature of her family life prevented her from becoming totally entranced by the screen's offerings. Anecdotally, this experience is similar for most of the parents of small children with whom I interact in my own life. They use their phones regularly but are always conscious of the awkwardness of the device in their hands no matter how ergonomic its fit. They are equally uncomfortable about how they appear to others in using it, often apologising for answering a call or texting a message. Not only are they aware of the device as an object, but equally sensitive to the shifting embodied habits and practices that its usage brings about and potentially passes on. Should Lola's significances and concerns shift as her daughters grow up and move out of the family home, perhaps the mobile phone would slot more seamlessly into the background for her, finally released to lead her into new behaviours.

Alice too, is acutely aware of the technical carrier of the content of her daily news reading experience. Her concern for the way that electronic technology erases the materiality of

learning with books, brought the newspaper's sensory effects into relief for her to the point that she could smell and feel its presence consciously. Alice and Lola are no more or no less 'artists' than Jedser or Maggie, but all of their cases together point to the more contingent and variegated aspects of our dealing with changing technologies as they enter and embed themselves in the everyday, but especially as they are encountered against backgrounds of thickly interwoven personal and social significances.

More contemporary research into questions around the body and technology are dealt with in the field of New Media and Digital Literacy. Within this field researchers who focus on embodied aspects of education and technology point out the new dimensions of learning that tablets and smart phones 'afford' young readers (Carusi, 2006; Mangen, 2010; Rowsell, 2014; Rose, 2011). Rowsell (2014) for example, highlights how emotion, hapticity and creative play come to the fore when pupils read interactive stories on ready-to-hand screens. However, because the underlying thrust of this body of work is to 'demystify' media of encoded ideology and build-up students' critical reading skills (Cappello et al., 2011), the intensification of affectivity, play and emotion in new modes of learning with technology forces these researchers to ask a particularly narrow set of questions, not unlike those of medium theory: Does ready-to-hand digital technology ultimately re-mystify social relations by making encounters with content an ever-more seamless experience? Is the effect of invisible technology ultimately to temper critical thinking skills to the point of total captivation by content (Cappello et al., 2011)? Authors like Cappello (2009) try to confront the latent body-mind dualism in these questions by upending the emphasis on critical reasoning in education with his notion of *affective reflexivity.* By helping students to nurture an affective self-awareness and questioning ethics within their lived experiences of technology, he argues that students do not need to affect a complete critical distance from their embodied situations in order to be able to see and question 'manufactured' media discourses. However, I do not believe that he has succeeded in this task. His pupils, are in fact, required to enforce a break with immersive lived experiences of media as the only way to defend themselves against media co-option.

My own research describes the structures of perception in four people's everyday media encounters, but because the question as to whether or not they were reading critically did not

form part of the research concerns, it is difficult to map my own findings on to this dichotomy in Digital Literacy studies. However, in putting the question of critical or captivated reading more directly to my own work, the significance of personal and social background concerns and understandings becomes highlighted again. Rather than a critical-affective dichotomy emerging, Lola, Alice, Jedser and Maggie can be seen somewhere along a continuum heading towards a fusing of horizons in their encounters with the media (Gadamer 1975). Lola and Alice are able to see and question the medium *because* of their horizons of understanding, while equally Jedser and Maggie are enabled to see and question the news media because of *their* horizons. Attempting to create critical distance from these horizons would, according to Heidegger and Gadamer, end up by eradicating any meaningful experience at all. As new experiences unfold, understanding evolves and horizons expand, thus modes of experiencing the media (ready-to-hand and obtrusive) will shift along this continuum to highlight different technologies or content at different times. This fusing is ongoing; understanding is always provisional and dependent on each person's personal 'openness'. Hence the importance of the emic perspective as a starting point for media research. However, if developing a practice of critical digital literacy were the concern, then Gadamer's horizons and preunderstandings might offer a more fruitful starting point for authors like Cappello whose concern for demystification cannot but imply the mistaken possibility of a non-mystified stance.

Encountering the comment, respect and white spaces

My examination of the reader-comment encounter in this study has suggested that form rather than content instantiates the possibility for dialogue online. In the chapter entitled 'Encountering the Comment' I interpreted the participants' encounters with the newspaper article as one of confirmation, ratification, end-oriented reading and anxiety. Meanwhile, encountering the comment was an experience of feeling through a text, emotionally and immersively. In this experience details of lived experience were invited into the conversation as admissible and legitimate perspectives for a discussion on housing. I explained this difference by way of the white spaces surrounding the comments; the gutters opened up, spatially and temporally, interpretative moments of consideration and invited them into the discussion, while the conventional online article left no space for the reader.

Here I bring these findings into discussion with current research on the newspaper comment as I outlined them in Chapter Two. The first difference to note between my own study and the bulk of the work on newspaper comments in the emerging literature is that I have focused on the reading *experience*; three of the four themes I identified in my literature review as characterising the different concerns of comment studies, begin and end with the comment as text. Lurker research asks after the silent surfer online, but other than surveys, does not seek her out or spend time with her in her situated readings. The different methodological commitments in these studies make it difficult to bring their findings into conversation with my own. However, there are a number of salient points across which these different perspectives can productively engage. The most significant of these for my own research is the *affective atmosphere of respect* that obtained between comment-posters in the work by Noci et al. (2012), the *vicarious learning* that students are developing through online learning forums (Arnold and Paulus, 2010) and the potential in liminal white spaces for the development of the article for newspaper studies more generally.

The study of comments in Catalan daily newspapers by Noci et al. (2012) makes an important claim about an overriding emotional register which suggests an alternative explanation for my findings of 'feeling through the text' and 'introducing personal experience'. In describing the tone of the comments, the authors use the terms 'widespread' 'contempt' and 'disdain.' However, these emotions were primarily directed towards the protagonists in the corresponding news articles such as politicians or state institutions, often including the media itself. On the whole, the authors point out, the comments demonstrate 'respect' between the different posters 'most of the time' (Noci et al., 2012, p. 60). The difficulty in analysing my own findings in relation to these claims lies in the fact that as a quantitative study with normative prescriptions the authors did not unpack 'contempt,' 'disdain' or 'respect' as interpretations, either from their own point of view or that of the posters. Nonetheless, the 'respect' that they claim obtained among the posters can perhaps offer an alternative explanation to my own account of how and why Lola, Jedser, Alice and Maggie felt invited by the comments to bring their own lived experiences and emotional responses into the discussion on housing.

I argued in Chapter Seven that the gaps between the comments had invited emotion and lived experience into our discussions as admissible and legitimate responses to a debate on a housing crisis. In accordance with the findings of Noci et al. (2012), respect among and between the posters might better explain why these contributions were felt to be welcomed into the debate: The readers may have sensed that their personal contributions would be respected because of the civil tone and courtesy present between the posters.

However, one reason why respect might not fully explain why my participants felt invited to offer personal stories was that Lola had omitted any reference to her personal life when discussing the newspaper article. She then went on to offer a long narration of a visit with a friend when discussing the comments. This occurred despite the fact that the tone of the article in *El País* could be described as much more respectful of its readers than the tone exhibited by the posters, whom Lola had described as aggressive and disrespectful (one comment directed to another poster: 'You sir, cannot read very well'). This demonstrates that she felt welcomed into the conversation despite the aggressive tone of some of the posters towards other posters. Therefore, I argue that while respect is undoubtedly a welcome affective atmosphere when it does obtain in the comments, it was in fact the gaps or white spaces that ultimately conditioned the possibility for the readers own personal responses in the present study. Without the gaps, there would be no space for contribution, no matter the level of respect or hostility.

One area in comment research onto which my findings could be mapped with a little less difficulty is in the study of lurking. As I have already pointed out, lurker studies tries to understand why most participants using websites like newspapers or health-support groups do not actively contribute with their own comments or inputs. Initially these studies derided the lurker for free riding and holding back the participative ambitions of the group in question. However, studies of non-posting learners on educational websites, especially those that engaged qualitative methodology, found that when they went to speak to those users, they were in fact engaging vicariously. In using a variety of ethno-methods in their own immediate circumstances, sitting at their computers, tablets or mobile phones, the students were experiencing their learning encounters as both interactive and beneficial. Dennen (in Arnold and Paulus, 2010, p. 194) called vicarious learning a 'vital component' of online learning environments. Likewise, my own participants demonstrated a non-public yet nonetheless vital

form of engagement with the online comments in both feeling through the texts and in introducing their own lived experiences into a dialogue.

My research findings that describe a particular kind of engagement between the reader and the newspaper article are also of significance to the stream of journalism studies that focuses on 'managing the mayhem' in the comments. These studies are attempting develop a management approach that would equip newspapers to deal with the quantity of 'uncivil' comments that their online platforms receive. My position has always emphasised that it is in fact civil and mundane debate that characterises *most* of the comments, and thus I urge that the baby not be thrown out with the bath water. Instead, a consideration of how the comments in all their different forms and formats invite reader responses and engagements in a way that differs significantly from the reader-article encounter would be extremely worthwhile. My findings show that the participants in this study approached the newspaper article without expecting a meaningful encounter. They read the details confirmatively, either looking for confirmation of their own theories or perhaps even worse, for confirmation that their low expectations for engagement would be met. In this encounter they could only ratify the image of the world offered to them by the article and strengthen the aspects of reality that they share with it, thus precluding any meanings that did not conform. The examination of the white spaces around the comments in this study, suggests that innovative formats and para-textual scaffolding are at least as important for rich and nuanced reading experiences as the discursive and narrative aspects of the texts. As journalism researchers further examine the comments, they should also be looking for inspiration for how to rejuvenate the news reading experience. Next, I look at the experience of the Other in reading the news.

Availability, remix and Hong Kong news stalls

In my chapter 'Encountering the Other' I offered an interpretative phenomenological description of the way that Maggie, Jedser, Lola and Alice had experienced the presence or absence of the authors of the media texts that we had read together. The pattern that I described was one of availability in terms of the comment poster and unavailability in terms of the newspaper journalist. In availability, Maggie and Lola had experienced an 'attuned

intersubjectivity' with the authors of the comments in such a way that they entered into an embodied, first-order conversation with them as if they were present to hear their responses. In each case I argued that the participants were enacting a form of authenticity as individuals through their dialogical *being-with* the posters. This experience occurred regardless of these women agreeing or disagreeing with the discursive implications of the posters' comments. Jedser had not sensed an invitation to dialogue directly with the posters. Instead Jedser simply acknowledged the authors as present – perhaps even potential interlocutors - rather than engaging directly with them. Again, this exhibited a form of individuation from the ground of being-with which challenged Heidegger's notion of authenticity as a rupture between self and the 'they.' Acknowledging the posters, was in its own way also a mode of availability because it stood out in contrast to the stark absence of presencing in the encounter between Jedser and the newspaper article. In this encounter, the journalist was experienced as absent by virtue of her membership of a media elite. However, Jedser was also unavailable to hear the commonality he shared in his arguments about housing with this particular journalist.

Unavailability also captured the experience of the three women in their reading of the newspaper article. Alice for example, was excluded by the feeling that the journalist was addressing a constellation of expert others in which Alice experienced herself as a member of an unreachable 'they self.' This was then transformed into an experience of understanding when she was facilitated to engage much more personally with the complex subject matter in her subsequent reading of the 'they-self' comments.

These findings resonate with research that considers the ethical and philosophical dimensions of global digital communication (Ede and Lunsford, 1984; Hull et al., 2013; Magnifico, 2010; Silverstone, 2003). Silverstone (2013, p. 14) called for a new cosmopolitan ethics involving the obligation of hospitality towards the Other online:

> The cosmopolitan individual embodies, in his or her person, a doubling of identity and identification; the cosmopolitan, as an ethic, embodies a commitment, indeed an obligation, to recognize not just the stranger as other, but the other in oneself. Cosmopolitanism implies and requires, therefore, both reflexivity and toleration. In political terms it demands justice and liberty. In social terms, hospitality. And in media

terms it requires . . . an obligation to listen, an obligation which I will suggest is a version of hospitality.

Using this obligation as an analytical device, Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014) examined the online practices of two groups of young people located in different parts of the world through their material contributions to a shared online social space (videos, blogs, poems etc). One group was based in New York, USA the other was based in Lucknow, India. The authors were especially interested in how the young people as text creators gauged their relationships to their readers. As the students cultivated a 'literate toolkit' during their time on the programme, they developed stances in relation to their creative activities involving 'a strategic repertoire of cosmopolitan literate practices for reading, writing, and communicating with and for diverse others' (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014, p. 28). Their findings highlight a number of the possible practices and dispositions that the newspaper comment posters enact when writing their textual response for news sites and other readers, and which are then encountered by the readers. The most significant for my own work is their 'reciprocal stance'. I consider this stance here as a mode of reading as well as of writing.

The stance they describe as 'reciprocal' chimes with the experience of availability I have described here. By this stance they mean that their participants had positioned themselves as 'welcoming or open conversational partners,' as 'willing interlocutors,' and as accounting for others' potential responses. On the one hand, my own participants' engagement with the comment texts (embodied, emotional, first order and acknowledging) suggest that likewise the comments had been authored from the position of Hull and Stornaiuolo's (2014) reciprocal stance. My participants' first-order responses to the comments were directed *to* the posters as if the posters could hear their readers, or at least had considered potential responses in writing their texts. On the other hand, my participants' responses indicate equally 'willing interlocutors' on their own part. Even where there was reluctance, as with Jedser, he had at least acknowledged that the posters were informed and useful to the debate and were therefore perhaps potential interlocutors.

These findings are significant because, in his writings on the moral and ethical aspects of digitalised mediation, Silverstone (2013) warned that communication with distant others who

are made proximal online is not one of automatic reciprocity. This points to the differences I found between the experience in reading the article and in reading the comments. However, Hull and Sotrnaiuolo's work highlights the possibility that a new ethics of reciprocity is being developed among young people for whom communicating online and across space and time is providing new contexts for experiencing the Other. I am suggesting something similar by availability. Experiencing the Other via the comment mode of digital text is a development on the experience of the Other that conventional expository texts like news articles had afforded. In availability I found that the readers experienced the comment posters as open and welcoming, and in response they took up an open and willing stance themselves.

Before moving to consider the experience of the unavailability of the journalist, I want to highlight something that Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014, p. 29) have overlooked in their own work. In describing the students' pastiche-like digital productions they point to their 'quintessentially postmodern art of remix'. The students cut, spliced and edited together different text, images and footage as they translated their lived experiences into 'remixed' digital formats to send to their counterparts across the globe. In the stream of videos, poems and blogs that passed between the groups the researchers again saw the openness and willingness for dialogic interaction with the other. However, what the authors did not seem to notice, was that the very shape of the students' remixes - the slicing up of fragments of texts and images, all involving physical and imaginative breaches across traditional textual formats - may have itself called forth the conversation with the Other by providing liminal space for interjection. The question this generates would ask whether the researchers would have seen such a rich and nuanced stream of 'to and fro' between the groups had the students sent each other lengthy essays trained uniformly through the narrow lattices of traditional formatting.

In placing *unavailability* in this present study within the broader literature, a strong correlation between the newspaper tradition of objectivity and my own participants' experience of absence becomes visible. In 2005, Mindich (2005) wrote of young people in USA who had 'tuned out' of the news: they 'are as thoughtful, as passionate and as self-reflexive as they have ever been, ready to interact with news if we just provide the right conditions for them to do so.' His study of young people represents the increasing challenges to traditional journalism in contemporary

digitised society, yet in the conclusion to his study of how newspapers view their audiences since moving online, Robinson (2019, p. 4) is not hopeful:

> The conventional wisdom of the digital era is that journalists can now know their audiences in far more intimate detail than at any other time in the history of the profession. Previously, journalists based their audience knowledge primarily on their closest social circles. Now, new tools can help them solicit readers' feedback, analyse and understand readers' behaviour, and open new channels for conversation. These new capabilities promise to shine a light on the abstract audience—making one's readers present, quantified and real…[T]his paper asks whether the new tools of the digital age have indeed influenced the "audience in the mind's eye." Our evidence indicates that for the most part, they have not. In reviewing findings from the case study, we were struck by how little seems to have changed since the print era. Although they seemed more open to audience knowledge, the ways in which these reporters thought about their audiences was remarkably similar to those reported in classic ethnographies of the 1970s.

The journalists in his study had not changed their perspective of the audience since those voiced by their counterparts in the 1970s, despite the proliferation of digital feedback platforms. My account of availability in the reader-comments encounter suggests that alternative textual formats might supply a remedy for the negative experience of unavailability my participants experienced in reading the news article. And, of course, newspapers have been experimenting with styles and formats to supplement or transform the traditional article, especially since moving online. However, my argument is not simply about adding 'bit size' news or bullet-point journalism. As Soffer (2009) argues, ultimately the news can be either objective *or* dialogic, it cannot construct a reading experience that offers both. 'Modernist objectivism' and 'postmodern dialogue' are ontological and epistemological positions that cannot be pulled on and off like jumpers (Marsh and Furlong in Soffer, 2009, p. 473).

The four articles in this research study, while drawn from different sections in the newspapers online, all represented a version of objectivist professional journalism. Even when campaigner Nessa Ní Chasaide argued forcefully for a vast government housing scheme in Ireland, her

language was distinctly of the professional journalism school, but even more, her simply writing an article in the newspaper presented her in an objectivist light. Objectivism in journalism stems from the changing social and economic history of mainstream newspapers and media more broadly, but especially in the USA. As I outlined in the introduction chapter, by the 1890s 'non-professional' letters to the editor were fully segregated within the pages of newspapers. The view of journalism as 'objective' and 'neutral' was firmly established, the journalist's job was to simply describe what they saw, not to interpret or draw conclusions (Soffer, 2009, p. 478), this context set the tone of the voice readers would come to expect of the journalist:

> ['O]bjective' reports require a distanced, monologic voice because any dialogical relationship will damage the journalist's outsider and unbiased position. Because the essential ontology behind the concept of objective observer postulates a single fixed and independent reality, it assumes that a keen observation of this reality can produce a single authoritative and true voice. In order to gain information, the reporter should objectify social issues and human beings, treating them as things to be mapped and categorized with an instrumental apathy.

In my own research, the monologic, truer and authoritative voice described here by Soffer (2009) was experienced as a disembodied, unavailable Other in the reading encounter. In the encounter between the journalist and the reader, the readers have implicitly understood that they are being addressed as an audience, a non-differentiated part of a consuming mass, rather than as a unique individual in a 'constellation' of subjects. The reader is addressed as 'an animated object which works in some ways and not in others' (Marcel, 2011, no pagination) There is no sense that the journalist is making him or herself available or making any of her resources available to the readers as individuals.

In other words, the encounter was experienced by the reader as if he or she was being objectified as an 'It' rather than a unique individual or 'Thou', (Buber in Marcel, 2011, no pagination). The feeling of unavailability that I have drawn from Marcel (2011) can be linked to his contemporary's Martin Buber's (1999) conception of an *I-it* relationship where the object and the subject divide becomes utilised and pronounced. The subject, in this case the writing

journalist, always inevitably addresses an audience. In my research this audience could sense that they were being addressed as objects as much as the houses and crisis that the journalist was writing about. Sarah Ahmed (2007) writes about a background 'whiteness' pervading the self-understanding of academia: When four black women walk into a room at a conference in London, they are noticed as such *because* the background orientation at academic conferences is 'whiteness'. When the readers in my study were welcomed into a conversation by the posters, this experience stood out as an *I-Thou* relationship of availability because the background to reading a newspaper is one of unavailability or 'it-ness'.

In a detailed ethnography of how the reader becomes positioned by the 'objective' newspaper, Scollon (1996) carried out a study of the reader that is implied in the way newspapers are sold and formatted in Hong Kong. The differences he highlighted between the Chinese and the English newspapers mirrors the implied reader assumed in the articles we read in this research. Scollon (1996, p. 5) described how Chinese language newspapers in Hong Kong implied a very different reader to their English language counterparts, something which could be detected even in the way papers were arranged differently on the sellers' stalls across the city. English language newspapers were arrayed not unlike we are used to seeing on a newsagent's shelf in Europe: 'They are arrayed with the upper half of the front page upwards. This facilitates the ease of sale for the buyer. In this the newspaper is treated like a 'telephonic' channel of communication. That is to say, the display suggests a preliminary routine of selection or choice' (Scollon, 1996, p. 4). The Chinese language newspapers are laid out in 'shingled' pattern, with only the banner showing and facing the seller, not the buyer. The English newspaper therefore assumes a decision at the point of sale - you can view the different newspapers by their headline story, consider the options and choose the one offering the best information. The reader of the English paper is positioned as a 'decision maker' looking for the best information. The Chinese language papers assumes you already know which one you want to buy because you always buy it, and therefore only need to see the branding, not the various headlines. However, what my own findings suggest is that the 'decision-maker' in the former case identifies less with the position supplied to them than the newspapers might imagine.

Alice felt excluded from the information by the technical language the article had used to describe the new rent assistance programme in Spain, information that had the potential to

apply to her own scenario. She did not feel like the expert-reader implied by the text. Jedser felt the journalist was unavailable to him, less by way of the layout or specific details of the article, but rather in how he perceived that he was positioned by mainstream elitist journalism in Ireland; he felt like the object that the paper implied in its wider objectivist tradition. Thus: 'The rigidity and closure of the modern text is replaced by a search for the subtexts, which conduct a continual dialogue among themselves. And the seemingly unified meaning of a message is replaced by polysemy.' Here, Soffer (2009, p. 474) hints that the restriction on dialogue imposed by the inflexible modernist text pushed readers to seek out 'subtexts,' where they can engage in a flexible, fluctuating dialogue on the peripheries of the text. In my own study, the comments respond to this need.

The discussion I have developed here between my research findings and those in the extant literature highlights a number of interesting overlaps and incongruities on the issue of experiencing the Other online. Firstly, my findings show that the openness and dialogic willingness in the comment-reading experience resonates with findings like Hull and Stornaiuolo's (2014) for whom a new digital ethics of receptivity can be detected in the online communication between young people. Meanwhile, where studies of the implied reader in modern journalism (Robinson, 2019; Scollon, 1996) point to the 'objective' stance of the newspaper and its vision of the 'decision-maker' reader, then my research shows that this is encountered on the receiving end *by the reader* as an experience of unavailability and it-ness. In the next section, I bring all of my findings together to consider what they say about receptivity and dialogue in reading the online newspaper comments by looking at them through the lens of Gadamer's fusion of horizons.

A fusion of horizons?

Up to this point the reader may have noticed an 'article-negative/comment-positive' opposition in my findings and discussion. I have called the encounter with the comment an experience of availability, of personal lived experience and of emotion, each time implying that the experience provided a richer, more nuanced and multifaceted experience than that of reading the article. Encountering the article was an experience of a superficial confirmative, end-

oriented reading, one in which neither the reader nor the author was available to the other and in which objectivity and it-ness pervaded the background understandings. In other words, a threadbare experience in comparison to encountering the comment. However, in this section I bring this framing into question by returning to Gadamer and the fusion of horizons that I signalled at the beginning would be a touchstone for the approach in this work. At various points throughout my interpretations I have mentioned 'conversation,' 'dialogue' and 'to and fro' when considering the experience of reading the comment but I have not yet unpacked these terms or questioned them in the context of my own findings. This discourse of conversation has suggested that the encounter with the comment was dialogic in nature while the article retained a monologic voice and hence had precluded the reader from entering a conversation with it. This monologic-dialogic opposition has already come to characterise debates about the internet, the media and contemporary journalism (Soffer, 2009). Dialogue underpins the discourse of the participation paradigm I outlined in Chapter Two because the inclusion of subaltern readers, counter-discourses and marginalised voices in a global-digital public sphere implies that the internet provides a way of talking back to power. However, in considering my own findings in terms of Gadamer's dialogue and understanding, the richness of the encounter with the comment does not equate so simply with new understanding or a fusion of horizons.

Gadamer (1975) uses the notion of the hermeneutic circle to describe the movement of a dialogue between the self and another (any encounter with another person, text, work of art, thing or world) in which the horizons of each participant are used to understand the other. Then, through the back and forth of the conversation - the play of language - these horizons are brought to light and questioned. If there is genuine openness to understanding on the part of the participants, and their horizons are placed at risk, then this process can produce a new understanding, which in turn expands the original horizons of meaning and provides a new vantage point for further understanding. While many of the aspects of Gadamer's dialogue were present in the reader-comment encounter, enough aspects were absent as to bring the use of the term dialogue into serious question in this work.

Firstly, I described my participants interactions with the comments as experiences of openness and welcome. This was most evident in the way that the readers responded in an embodied and emotional way directly to the posters; this was brought into relief by the less emotive and more

distanced reading experience in encountering the article. However, central to Gadamer's own description of dialogic openness is the notion of risk. Horizons must be willingly placed at risk and therefore held up to a form of self-questioning if openness is to count. Horizons are not so much transcended as viewed from the other side. This is the most obvious difference between posting readers and non-posting readers, there is no element of risk involved in bringing personal experience into a 'conversation' with a comment that cannot question you or even nudge you to question them yourself by responding to you. In each of my participant's encounters with the comments the element of risking or interrogating personal horizons did not enter. Maggie evinced the most self-consciousness in reading the media texts, however this was a consciousness not to become absorbed in the Other's horizons rather than a questioning of her own. Likewise, Jedser hinted at the paradoxes in his own practices as a developer and his personal politics of socialism during our discussion of the comments, but this was an *allusion* to the paradox rather than a risking or interrogation of it.

None of the other participants questioned the personal experiences they contributed to the conversation as perspectives for understanding others. And while the involvement with the comment was a richly contoured affective experience, much more so than the encounter with the article, this emotional engagement did not function to disrupt the readers' own positions or perspectives. Where Lola engaged angrily with anti-immigrant comments, she was forced to make a point of differentiating her own argument about financial responsibility from theirs. However, while this anger did destabilise her certainty to a point, she did not overtly question her own perspective.

The availability that the readers felt between themselves and the posters is an important finding in this research, especially as it highlights the sense of absence pervasive in reading the article. However, without risking existing meanings or self-questioning, the emotion and personal experiences that enter the conversation do not on their own bring about new understandings or a fusion of horizons in Gadamer's terms. While Habermas' master subject restricts much of the research in the participation paradigm, Gadamer's horizons of meaning and the felt experiences of understanding offered an important development that could bring emotion, affect, sense and lived experience back into the conversation about conversation. However, as elusive is the objective viewpoint and rational dialogue for Habermas' master subject, bringing

in emotion and experience without questioning embedded horizons, appears to render the fusion of horizons as a frame for understanding digital experience just as idealistic.

Critical Review of the Research Process

With this question of a fusion of horizons in mind, I now turn to a critical review of the research process.

Preparedness of research design

The first issue for consideration involves the preparedness of my research design at the time I first approached my participants. From the beginning, my journalistic instinct to go and talk with newspaper readers wedded me to interviews as a key method and when I spent my first afternoon with Jedser in January 2018, my knowledge and understanding of phenomenology and hermeneutics was still rudimentary. I was still reading Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, but my understanding of it was to undergo several important revisions over the coming years. It was not until much later that I developed a sensitivity for the different ways that the term 'interpretation' was being used in the wider literature (what I eventually came to call the cognitive versus hermeneutic interpretations of 'interpretation'). This meant that method-wise, I had not yet fully accounted for what would eventually become central to my analysis. By giving the impression that Jedser's own semantic interpretations of the news and comments were the primary aim of my study, rather than more precisely the embodied know-how of his interpretation, I had missed out on the opportunity to gain a much richer data set. I remedied this issue somewhat through follow-up correspondences explaining the object of my study more clearly and through my formulation of second order language which I used to mine the early transcripts more deeply. However, the imbalance between the richness of details on practice, context and corporeality in the later interviews, with the more representational concerns of the earlier ones was detrimental to the analysis. My attachment to interviews was also somewhat old fashioned as it turned out, and precluded my openness to the more experimental methods championed by most non-representational researchers.

The second issue I highlight here is the challenge of analysing large volumes of data while maintaining a purist's commitment to the hermeneutic rejection of coding. Because I was a recent convert to phenomenology and hermeneutics, I took many of the key thinkers' rejection of qualitative data analysis software very much to heart. Coding in their view breaks the 'whole' of the research context into parts, eviscerating the very locus of meaning. Additionally, it separates the researcher from the texts and proscribes the immersive experience so central to the philosophy. However, in the absence of detailed guidance on an alternative approach anywhere in the literature, I was left to a rather painful trial-and-error interrogation of the huge volume of notes and transcripts that I had amassed, initially printed on coloured paper, and later in Word documents on my computer. Eventually I systematised my own approach, but this had taken approximately 18 months of experiment, failure and procrastination, and even then, I never felt very confident that I was not somehow mislaying or overlooking key insights in the unwieldy tangle of documents and tables. I do believe that the themes in my thesis provide rich, relevant and significant insights into the phenomenon of reading the online news comment, however, I don't believe that using software such as NVivo would have necessarily precluded these insights. From discussing several colleagues' experiences with coding software, it is clear to me now that both hermeneutics' concern for the whole and phenomenology's stress on immersion can be preserved through activities such as transcribing interview data oneself and repeatedly listening to the oral data while computer-based coding is ongoing. Meanwhile, my personal memoing and early-stage phenomenological writing around emerging themes would also, I believe, have sustained a focus on the contextual and pathic quality of the data. The advantage of such a process would have meant more time for reading other 'phenomenologies of …', something which I was never able to dedicate much time to while agonising over major texts like *Being and Time, Phenomenology of Perception* and *Truth and Method*. Ultimately, I cherish the experience of such an intimate, organic and immersive relationship to the research texts in this project, however, I would not recommend or pursue this process in the future.

Further Questions

The findings in this present study point to a number of potential pathways for further questions in the study of media technologies, online newspapers and reader comments as well as philosophical and ethical questions around encountering the Other online. Firstly, the phenomenological focus on the structure of the readers' perceptions of the media has highlighted that background significances structured the nature of their attentiveness towards their devices and towards the news media. I connected these awarenesses and backgrounds through Merleau-Ponty's figure-ground description of perception, but I made these connections primarily based on what the participants' own words and activities had pointed to in their backgrounds over the course of our interactions. I believe that Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus, hexis* and *field* would provide useful analytical concepts for further questioning whether these practices and background understandings might be dialectically internalising 'previously externalised structures' like class or gender; factors which the participants' themselves are likely to misrecognise in their own self-understandings (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; (Throop and Murphy, 2002, p. 190). Moores (in press, p. 29) highlights how Bourdieu's habitus could help explain experiences like Lola and Alice's for whom interacting with their mediums (the mobile and the newspaper) was an encounter of 'discordance' or for Maggie and Jedser who felt 'ill at ease' reading the Irish press. This approach would prompt questions like:

> Whose hands are not going to be at home and comfortable when faced with manipulating, say, a smartphone, a tablet computer or a gaming console (and, going back to other examples of tool or instrument use, when trying to hammer with a hammer or to play the piano)? Who feels 'out of place' and off track in particular narrative and genre settings? (Moores, in press, p. 29)

This research could also build on the rich archive of audience and context studies from past media ethnographies.

My analysis of the participants' experiences in reading the online newspaper article generated a number of important questions for newspaper and journalism studies. The experience

described in this study was one of surface-level, end-oriented reading where not only did the readers fail to find a meaningful engagement with the article, but they had not expected to find one in the first place. Newspapers themselves have already taken onboard the major existential threats that the internet presented to the traditional role of the press in western societies and indeed comment platforms themselves represent probably the most effective response to these threats (Gyllenhaal and Moses, 2006). However, even since going online and experimenting with various layouts for the newspaper's homepage, the online newspaper article itself has not evolved into any novel shape or format. Indeed, the narrow column design that afforded ease of reading in print newspapers is stretched out across wide texts on most computer screens. The most important question newspaper studies could ask is whether designs incorporating more white space might help to generate more immersive and meaningful reading experiences.

One of the most significant findings in this research was indeed related to how the white spaces in between the reader comments as they appear on the newspaper's websites had prompted and facilitated emotionally rich and personally engaged reading experiences for the participants. However, my critique of this engagement through the lens of Gadamer's conditions for open dialogue, suggested that despite the more nuanced reading experience, the 'to and fro' between the reader and the comments did not involve any risking of personal horizons of meaning on the part of the reader. Therefore, while the experience was more immersive and arguably richer than the experience of reading the article, it did not constitute an open dialogue or the fusion of horizons. This was a phenomenological study based on the sense-making of four participants with one newspaper article and one set of comments each. Further studies might involve more explicitly normative examinations of similar scenarios but with larger samples so as to question whether immersive reading and a lack of self-questioning always correlate. Wendy Martineau (2012) presents a model of multicultural understanding based on Gadamer's fusion of horizons that could offer principles for such an examination.

Finally, the question of experiencing the Other online that has emerged in my research points to future questions for the participation paradigm and the issue of solidarity. The question of how to build solidarity online is an ongoing problem for new social movements (Fenton, 2016) who are faced with the problem of having to support (and build an online campaign around) one of two problematic conceptions of the subject of solidarity: the rational-critical master

subject of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) or the subject-less discursivity of radical hermeneutics (Derrida, 1994; Foucault, 1997). In describing the reader-comments encounter in Chapter Eight, I highlighted that the readers were experiencing some form of bond between themselves and the comment posters, I called this availability. Although it appears in different modes or intensities it clearly exists in the reader-comment encounter where it is absent when the participant reads the news article. While there is no evidence that this is an explicit reflection on, or deliberate action of solidarity by the readers, there is nonetheless a tacit preunderstanding of commonality involved. I believe what we see happening is the disclosure of an 'originary' solidarity that pre-exists the subject and which is experienced by the individual even if it is not brought into direct consciousness (Gadamer, 2009).[12] For social movement theory (Porta, 2015) and for the participation paradigm, and all of us concerned that the internet should be a tool to enhance democracy, my research shows signs that there is already a form of 'inessential' solidarity being enacted in the encounter between the posters and the readers (Gadamer, 2009). Further questions in this line of inquiry might ask about the different online practices between user-generated content producers and 'receivers' that might further build on this notion of a practice-based online solidarity and what kind of ethics around the Other it might entail.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis I introduced the online newspaper reader comment as one manifestation of the many billions of fragments of user-generated content flickering daily across the internet. I explored its genealogy as intra-text reader interpretation in the form of Homeric scholia and later as a form of public discourse in 'letters to the editor'. However, I also pointed to its distinctiveness today as an expanded form of 'subaltern' access to a global public sphere. I explored the problems of online harassment that often surface in online newspaper commentary and which trouble democracy theorists, but equally I argued that so

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[12] I had been contemplating this when the Coronavirus lockdown in Europe produced an explosion of online solidarity activity; solidarity occurred simply when it was practiced, even with no underpinning notion of shared identity like nationality.

much more of online commentary happens in less sensationalist tones and merits closer examination in its own right. Next I reviewed the comment studies literature and highlighted some important oversights such as a concern for a mode of 'being' online beyond simply 'voicing' oneself.

Then I reviewed the history of media and communications studies. In this rich archive, the notion of the reader and her relationship to the text shifts incrementally over the decades to eventually become sensitised to the fine-grained detail of the settings and scenarios within which media experiences are embedded. However, I criticised the lingering assumptions of cognitive, active and self-reflective understandings of the term 'interpretation' that underpin much of this work. I therefore placed my own research with a 'new paradigm' for media studies that focuses instead on practices and embodied knowledge and which thus decentres both the text and the subject. To explain my position in more detail, I gave a history of the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics based on the writings of Husserl (1970, 2002), Heidegger, (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Gadamer (1975) and pointed to how contemporary reworkings of these perspectives offer a framework for qualitative research (Ingold, 2011; Moores, 2017; van Manen 2016). My 'methods' chapter offered a detailed overview of the painstaking data collection and analysis that this framework entailed, however, I hope also to have conveyed the companionship and mutual understanding that working so closely with just four participants engendered over the years of this study.

In the three 'empirical' chapters, 'Encountering the Media', 'Encountering the Comment' and 'Encountering the Other', I developed phenomenological interpretations of the different aspects of my participants' everyday encounters with the news media. In Encountering the Media, I demonstrated how each participant found either the news media or the technical medium present to their awareness, depending on their background concerns and significances. In Encountering the Comment, I tried to show how the white spaces between the comments engendered a 'to and fro' pattern in the interview discussions and that this was facilitated by the gaps between the comments which functioned to welcome personal and emotional responses into the conversation, whereas these had been distinctly absent in reading the news article. In Encountering the Other, I tried to show how each participant had an experience defined by the presence or availability of a conversation partner when reading the newspaper

comments; again, there was an unavailability in their reading of the article. I drew on the phenomenology of Marcel and Ahmed to show how this was a difference between an *I-Thou* and an *I-It* experience of intersubjectivity.

In my discussion of similar themes in the contemporary literature, I demonstrated how experiencing the media as invisible is not pre-given, as suggested by medium theory. Figure and ground can evolve over time and perhaps even change places as an individual's life moves on. I also considered the possibility that a respectful tone in the comments might account for my own participants' experience of dialogue, however, I argued that the 'dialogue' occurs for the reader whether or not the comment posters are being polite. Next I turned to questions of ethics to show that my own participants' experiences demonstrate something of the receptivity and openness of young people's experience with the Other online (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014). Viewed through the specific lens of Gadamer's fusion of horizons, however, I question the appropriateness of the term dialogue to describe the reader-comment encounter when risking one's own horizons is not a part of the experience. Overall, my research has demonstrated that there are emotionally and experientially rich contours to the experience of reading the comment online, however, by principles of a more critical reflexivity this richness seems to stop short of engendering self-questioning and perhaps therefore development of new horizons. I have recently encountered the work of philosopher H. H. Kögler (1999, p.viii) who is working to bring philosophical hermeneutics and critical social theory together in order to show how 'culturally situated' critique is possible. My hope is that a project like his would help in the future to uncover aspects other than emotion and personal identification in reading practices around online news and might help to more thoroughly analyse the creative and 'boundary-overstepping' aspects of encountering the comments (How, 2017, p. 123).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Consent Forms

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

Title of Project
The Configuration of Consent: Austerity and Resistance in Ireland and Spain

MJ O'Leary
Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Arts, professional and Social Studies, School of Humanities and Social Science.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.

3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential

4. I agree to take part in the above study by attending an interview

5. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and I am happy to proceed

6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymised.

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

Note: When completed 1 copy for participant and 1 copy for researcher

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project
The Configuration of Consent: Austerity and Resistance in Ireland and Spain

Name of Researcher and School/Faculty
Mary Jane O'Leary
PhD Researcher, Liverpool John Moores University,
Faculty of Arts, Professional and Social Studies, School of Humanities and Social Science
m.j.oleary@2015.ljmu.ac.uk

Dear Participant,
You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you make a final decision as to your involvement, please read the following information. It will give you an outline of the project and explain why it is being carried out. If there is anything that is not clear to you or if you would like extra information on anything specific, please feel free to ask me. Once you have read over this sheet, please take time to decide if you wish to continue taking part.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this interview is to explore the experience, understanding and interpretation you have as a reader of the Irish Times when reading articles on the theme of housing and the corresponding 'reader' comments published in response and often in direct challenge to the main arguments of the articles. The purpose of this study is to gain a rich and detailed understanding of the experience of reading 'protest' text in online mainstream newspapers, particularly in terms of housing news and different meanings of 'home'. The study forms the basis for my PhD research at Liverpool John Moores University where I am a student, and the approach involves co-creating a shared understanding between me, as a researcher and you as a participant, through the interview and possible follow-up process.

2. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. Once you have read this information sheet you will be asked to sign a consent form, however, this does not mean that at any point that you might wish to end your participation that you cannot do so. At all points during the research references to your contribution will be kept confidential and anonymised. If you wish to terminate your involvement your data will be removed from the records. If you do not want to continue now, or might later decide to end your participation, you do not need to provide any reason.

3. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to take part, you will be invited to a one-hour interview. This will take place in a public space for example at a café or a museum. The interview itself will have a set of broad themes regarding your interpretation of a sample news article from The Irish Times and a set of user-generated comments that usually appear at the end of such articles. However, the interview is described as being 'unstructured', that means that it will be informal and there are no 'required' answers, simply share your understanding and interpretation of the information in the article in your own words. I will ensure the interview time and place suits your timetable and your location. You will be one of 4 interviewees, and once all the interviews are completed and the interviews interpreted, I will make the findings

available to you. The findings will also be made available to all interview participants, presented at conferences and published in academic sociology and media studies journals. Please be assured that at all times your information will be anonymous and your personal details available only to me as the primary researcher.

4. Are there any risks / benefits involved?

There are no risks / direct benefits involved.

5. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your personal information will be kept completely anonymous. Part of the interview will invite you to recount some personal background information in relation to your past experience reading newspapers online. However, you are free to share that information or not. You can then choose a reference code or name that will be used from that point on in relation to the interview material. The initial document with your personal details will be available only to me and will be stored with a password on my personal LJMU IT account.

This study has received ethical approval from LJMU's Research Ethics Committee

Contact Details of Researcher
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If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with the researcher in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for your time in reading the participant information sheet. If you would like to confirm your participation in the research, please complete the consent form. Please note, you are still able to withdraw your consent, at any stage, without giving a reason.

Note: You should keep this copy of the participant information sheet as well as your copy of the consent form.

Appendix 3: The Spanish newspaper articles and comments

Sin embargo, aquí también hay letra pequeña en cuanto a la prioridad de acceso mencionada, ya que solo los solicitantes que estén en los intervalos más bajos tendrán asegurada la ayuda. Es decir, en los que no superen sus ingresos anuales los 11.182,71 euros y los 15.039,18. "Si las solicitudes presentadas en una convocatoria de ayudas que cumplan lo señalado son inferiores al número de ayudas que puedan ser aceptadas conforme al crédito presupuestario habilitado en la misma, podrán resultar beneficiarios aquellos solicitantes cuyas unidades de convivencia tengan ingresos que no superen tres veces el IPREM", se explica en el BOE.

Para este colectivo con dificultades económicas, como los define el Ministerio de Fomento, la subvención del alquiler será de hasta el 40% de la renta del alquiler. Además, la renta mensual debe ser como máximo de 600 euros por norma general o 900 en los casos justificados en los que los precios de mercado estén por encima. En tales circunstancias, en el tramo entre los 601 y los 900 euros la subvención será del 30%.

Antonio Aguilar, director general de Vivienda del Ministerio de Fomento, reiteró a este periódico que este criterio de ingresos anuales más bajos solo se tendrán en cuenta para la prioridad en el acceso a la ayuda. "Cuanto más dinero pongan las comunidades, podrá llegar a más personas la ayuda, incluidos el máximo de renta de la subvención", asegura. Así que la subvención pueda llegar a todos dependerá de la cuantía total destinada a estas ayudas.

Restricciones para jubilados

La letra pequeña en la ayuda al alquiler, que en la práctica reduce el mínimo de

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Restricciones para jubilados

La letra pequeña en la ayuda al alquiler, que en la práctica reduce el mínimo de los ingresos anuales, también le afecta a la subvención para mayores de 65 años. En estos casos, los beneficiarios también deberán cumplir con el máximo de ingresos anuales en función del número de personas que compongan la unidad familiar. Es decir, un máximo de 11.182,71 euros cuando solo viva una persona y 15.039,18 cuando sea una pareja.

El Estado subvencionará a este colectivo hasta un 50% del alquiler y la prioridad en el acceso a la ayuda también será para los que menos ingresos tengan. De esta forma, los que más ganen, aunque estén por debajo de los 22.558,77 euros (tres veces el IPREM), no podrán beneficiarse de esta ayuda en la práctica.

Este colectivo además ha perdido una ayuda que sí contemplaba el plan anterior. Hasta ahora, los mayores de 65 años podían beneficiarse de una ayuda mensual de 200 euros para gastos de mantenimiento, comunidad y suministros de servicio, que el Ministerio ha retirado tras la última revisión del texto. En este caso, desde Fomento lo justifican al tratarse de una ayuda que se solapaba con otras políticas sociales.

⊖ ARCHIVADO EN:

Viviendas alquiler · Mercado inmobiliario · Vivienda · Ministerio de Fomento · Ministerios · Administración Estado · España · Política · Economía · Urbanismo · Administración pública

MÁS INFORMACIÓN

El precio de la vivienda subió en

La ayuda a los jóvenes para

El precio de la vivienda subió en 2017 al mayor ritmo desde antes de la crisis

La ayuda a los jóvenes para comprar casa excluye a las ciudades de más de 5.000 habitantes

COMENTARIOS (38)   ‹ Normas

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Antonio Azaga — 15/03/2018, A LAS 14:10

La pregunta es ¿Porqué discriminar por el tamaño de habitantes de la ciudad donde vives?, ¿los de ciudades grandes no tienen derecho a que se les ayude?, no entiendo estos raseros.. hay alguien que se dedica a hacer inventitos, para que al final no llegue a nadie las ayudas, luego que la UE le tira de las orejas al gobierno que es el que menos ayudas da a sus ciudadanos, pero si uno que sacan tienen que ser rubia, de ojos azules, simpática, de más de 180 de altura......en fin...

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   👎 0   ···

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gobierno que es el que menos ayudas da a sus ciudadanos, pero si uno que sacan tienen que ser rubia, de ojos azules, simpática, de más de 180 de altura......en fin...

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   👎 0   ···

Antonio Azaga — 15/03/2018, A LAS 14:08
↳ FELIPE MARTINEZ

Aparte de lo que dices que es un incrongruencia y tienes razón, lo de haber cotizado 6 años no es correcto, puesto que para obtener el subsidio de 430 (ya no son 426), tienes que haber cotizado 15 años mínimo y de ellos 7 como mínimo al régimen general, vamos que si has cotizado 20 a autónomos no tienes derecho.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   👎 0   ···
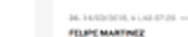
FELIPE MARTINEZ — 14/03/2018, A LAS 07:26

Yo solicito una ayuda "no contributiva" aunque "sí haya contribuido 37 años". o.... ¿tampoco?.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   👎 0   ···

José Velasco. — 14/03/2018, A LAS 07:23
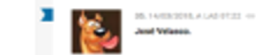
La cuestión de los rimbombantes anuncios de "**mejoras**" no es la letra pequeña, sino la muy arraigada costumbre de decir "verdades a medias" (mentiras).

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   👎 0   ···

Sr. Reinado — 14/03/2018, A LAS 07:22

Qué genialidad, de nuevo, cómo se reinventan.
Van a ser capaces de alimentar de nuevo la burbuja del alquiler interviniendo en el mercado a base de subvenciones y lo mejor de todo... los que ponen la pasta para esas subvenciones no tendrán absolutamente ningún beneficio de esta medida. Es más, sólo se verán perjudicados cuando quieran alquilar y vean que, gracias a esa subvención a la que no tienen derecho pero a la que han

🅕 🅣 🅢 ⬤ 🔽   ♥ ✉ ⊖

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34. 14/03/2018 A LAS 07:52 ···
Sr. Ilustrado

Qué genialidad, de nuevo, cómo se reinventan.
Van a ser capaces de alimentar de nuevo la burbuja del alquiler interviniendo en
el mercado a base de subvenciones y lo mejor de todo...los que ponen la pasta
para esas subvenciones no tendrán absolutamente ningún beneficio de esta
medida. Es más, sólo se verán perjudicados cuando quieran alquilar y vean que,
gracias a esa subvención a la que no tienen derecho pero a la que han
contribuido a la fuerza, los precios han subido.
Una lástima que los jóvenes y no tan jóvenes no reaccionemos como han hecho
los yayoflautas porque motivos nos sobran.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0 💬 0 ···

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33. 14/03/2018 A LAS 06:58 ···
FELIPE MARTÍNEZ

A mí, me deniegan el subsidio para mayores de 52 de 426.-€. después de haber
cotizado 37 años. porque mi ESPOSA gana algo más de 900.-€ al mes.
Si no estuviera casado legalmente, sólo conviviéramos, así ganara mi AMIGA,
3.000.-€ al mes, y yo hubiera cotizado sólo 6 años, sí tendría derecho al
subsidio.
¿Alguien me lo puede explicar?.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0 💬 0 ···

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33. 14/03/2018 A LAS 06:50 ···
Amsmar Gallo

En el ratio de 35 a 65 años de edad también existen los problemas, personas en
paro que con 50 años es muy difícil encontrar trabajo, miembros de familias
separadas que se ven forzados al alquiler etc.. Un poco más de ayuda nos
vendría bien.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0 💬 0 ···

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DESAHUCIOS ›

Desahuciada por la hipoteca y ahora, por el alquiler

El pequeño piso de Alicia Madoño, que fue suyo y en el que ahora es inquilina, encierra la loca historia
de la vivienda en España en esta década, aún a la espera de solución

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IÑIGO DOMÍNGUEZ
Madrid · 30 ABR 2009 · 09:07 CEST

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El valor de las paredes

El 80% de los desahucios fue por
impago del alquiler en 2018

El decreto del alquiler, que limita la
subida de los precios al IPC, entrará
en vigor mañana

El 'Comando Loctite' contra los
pisos turísticos

Alicia Madoño en su vivienda de alquiler de cincuenta metros cuadrados en Usera, en Madrid, comprada
por un fondo de inversión que quiere desalojarla. JULIAN ROJAS | EPV

El reducido piso de Alicia Madoño, 50 metros cuadrados en Usera, uno de los barrios más humildes de Madrid, contiene todos los vaivenes y penalidades de la historia de la vivienda en España en la última década. Alicia lleva 15 años sufriendo por su casa, aunque la compró en 2004 y ya no es suya. La echaron en 2010, en plena crisis, por no poder afrontar la hipoteca, y se la quedó el banco. Pero pudo volver a ella porque luego la entidad le dejó seguir de inquilina, con un alquiler social. Sin embargo, en 2016 se la vendió a un fondo de inversión, que quiere volver a echar a Alicia en mayo, cuando afirman que se acaba su contrato. Justo después de las elecciones. Alicia viajó desde Perú en 2003 pero tiene nacionalidad española y vota, aunque no tiene esperanzas de que los políticos solucionen su problema: encontrar piso.

"Miran para otro lado, no quieren ver lo que la gente está sufriendo, lo que está pagando, no quieren verlo", se desespera entre lágrimas. "Somos mucha gente que vive sometida, sin saber dónde va a vivir. ¿Quién puede pagar 700, 800 euros de alquiler? No es real. Para mucha gente es imposible, con los sueldos que hay en España. ¿Qué hacemos, pagamos el alquiler y no comemos, no bebemos? Somos humanos. La vivienda no es un lujo, es un derecho, y pagamos nuestros impuestos".

En 2018 hubo casi 60.000 desahucios tramitados por los juzgados en España y el 63% fueron por impago de alquiler, una cifra que crece cada año. Pero eso es lo que se ve, luego están los llamados desahucios invisibles: el contrato de alquiler se acaba y el nuevo precio se dispara. Alicia vive con su hijo, su hija y sus tres nietos, seis personas en dos habitaciones, salón, cocina y baño. En su casa falta el espacio para moverse. Paga 400 euros. Ella gana 700 cuidando ancianos.

tres nietos, seis personas en dos habitaciones, salón, cocina y baño. En su casa falta el espacio para moverse. Paga 400 euros. Ella gana 700 cuidando ancianos. Pero si la echan no podrá quedarse en su barrio. Los precios de alquiler ya son el doble. Como en todo Madrid, se están desmadrando.

La casa de sus desvelos es un tercero interior sin ascensor por el que pagó 260.000 euros, que ya era una barbaridad en Usera en 2004, pero así eran las cosas entonces. Ella tenía dos trabajos, su hijo también, y pagaban 1.600 euros de hipoteca... hasta que llegó la crisis y faltó el trabajo. Al final, Alicia logró que el banco le condonara su deuda en 2017, pero el fondo de inversión que ha comprado ahora el piso solo ha pagado por él 46.000 euros, según ha descubierto ella por su derecho de compra. Se siente atrapada en una injusticia que no termina nunca: "Lo peor es que pagando te pasa esto, no es por no pagar, yo siempre he pagado, hasta cuando no podía con la hipoteca seguí pagando la mitad. Si te van echando cada tres años de un barrio a otro, ¿vamos a tener que estar cambiando a los niños de colegio, de vida, cada tres años?", se pregunta. Alicia se ha unido al Sindicato de Inquilinos, una organización surgida hace dos años para defender estos casos, y piensa luchar hasta el final.

"Ya le puede pasar a cualquiera, la gente se cree que no le va a tocar. No es solo a gente de condición más humilde, es a cualquiera con un contrato que venza. La situación es de absoluta emergencia", dice Mercedes Revuelta, de la Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH), surgida en 2009 con el estallido de la burbuja inmobiliaria y que ahora ya gestiona más casos de desahucio por alquiler. "Los fondos de inversión están comprando edificios enteros en las capitales para especular. Lo hacen a través de socimis (sociedad cotizada inmobiliaria), que no pagan impuesto de sociedades, y no tienen ningún control

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El Congreso considera que los desahucios fueron un error estratégico de la banca

El símbolo de la resistencia antidesahucios cae en Lavapiés

alquiler. "Los fondos de inversión están comprando edificios enteros en las capitales para especular. Lo hacen a través de socimis (sociedad cotizada inmobiliaria), que no pagan impuesto de sociedades, y no tienen ningún control. Como el alquiler empieza a ser prohibitivo ya estamos otra vez con la histeria de comprar. Parece el día de la marmota, como antes de la crisis. No hemos aprendido nada".

¿Soluciones? Para la PAH lo primero es paralizar todos los desahucios de primera vivienda. Su mejor medida de emergencia sería que la Sareb, la sociedad con participación estatal que gestiona los activos de los bancos nacionalizados, y Bankia, rescatada con dinero público y con muchos pisos vacíos, los cedan al Estado para vivienda social. "Y tenemos que tener un presupuesto estatal digno para vivienda. No puede ser que el País Vasco tenga mayor presupuesto que el del Gobierno central". También piden regular la actividad de los fondos de inversión, como en Bélgica, Francia y el Reino Unido, para que tengan restricciones a la especulación.

En Provivienda, organización sin ánimo de lucro que trabaja con vivienda social desde 1989 y gestiona 67.887 inmuebles en 10 comunidades autónomas, también están alarmados: "Estamos ante una de las mayores crisis de vivienda asequible en España, no hay. Mucha gente no puede pagar los alquileres del mercado, solo pueden optar a vivienda social, y tampoco hay", explica Natalia Palomar. Según sus datos, hay 400.000 personas inscritas en los registros autonómicos de solicitud de vivienda pública y España necesitaría 1,5 millones de viviendas sociales. Provivienda cree que el presupuesto en políticas de vivienda debería llegar paulatinamente hasta el 1,5% del PIB, en la línea de otros países europeos. Para zonas especialmente problemáticas proponen crear índices de precios para delimitar los precios del alquiler.

Javier Rodríguez Heredia, presidente de la Comisión de Alquiler Residencial de

precios para delimitar los precios del alquiler.

Javier Rodríguez Heredia, presidente de la Comisión de Alquiler Residencial de ASIPA, Asociación de Inmobiliarias con Patrimonio en Alquiler, coincide en que "el problema está en que tenemos 10 veces menos parque de vivienda social y asequible que la media de la Unión Europea". Opina que se deberían enfocar los debates y las soluciones hacia cómo construirlas. "Legislar sin consultar al sector, sin un diagnóstico ajustado a la realidad y con relatos sencillos y, a veces populistas, no va a crear una sola vivienda social; lo que hace es expulsar el ahorro privado y el institucional que es el que necesitamos para financiar viviendas a precio asequible a largo plazo". En ese sentido, no cree que la situación sea culpa de los fondos de inversión: "Los ahorradores institucionales solo tienen un 2,5% de la vivienda en alquiler, difícilmente pueden ser responsables de los precios y los desahucios".

Se adhiere a los criterios de [T] The Trust Project   Más información >

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MÁS INFORMACIÓN

Los desahuciados   La ley hipotecaria

situación sea culpa de los fondos de inversión: "Los ahorradores institucionales solo tienen un 2,5% de la vivienda en alquiler, difícilmente pueden ser responsables de los precios y los desahucios".

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Los desahuciados del alquiler

La ley hipotecaria llega muy tarde

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⊙ ¿Y TÚ QUÉ PIENSAS? (182)   < Normas

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182. HACE 1 HORA
Deivid Way

Bueno, la situación es dura para ella pero en una parte importante es debido a su mala cabeza. Me lo decía un amigo abogado en los tiempos más complicados de la crisis y los desahucios por impago de hipoteca: *la gente se gasta 200 o 300 mil euros en una casa sin pestañear pero es incapaz de gastarse 200 o 300 en alguien que le asesore.* Y la verdad es que no le faltaba su parte de razón.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 2 💬 0   •••

182. HACE 1 HORA
Yenisma Say

comprar una vivienda de 260.000 euros al año de llegar a España... pero nada eh, cojonuda la idea. Alicia es una fiera de las inversiones, lo siguiente que hizo fue comprar preferentes en Bankia, y ahora estará mirando para invertir en el Bitcoin, que lo va a petar el próximo año.... Venga Alicia, dale, que luego sales en el periódico llorando para que te lo paguemos los demás XD

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 2 💬 1   •••

Bitcoin, que lo va a petar el próximo año.... Venga Alicia, dale, que luego sales en el periódico llorando para que te lo paguemos los demás XD

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 2   💬 1   ···

Simone Donaire
↳ Raton Ayala

No llame a otros figura, por lo menos en tanto Vd. no sepa exponer lo que tan frívolamente y de manera genérica declara. Aznar, señor mío, no basó el crecimiento económico en nada. El objetivo era privatizar las empresas, empezando por las deficitarias, desregularizar la economía, bajar la inflación y los intereses para cumplir con los parámetros del euro y poder entrar en el club de la moneda única en una legislatura, algo cercano a un milagro por lo que nadie apostaba. Y aparte de esto, se ocupó también de redactar otra ley del suelo, para sustituir la de los socialistas que había tumbado el Tribunal Supremo, una ley por cierto que continúa vigente. Y por cierto, la anquilosada bolsa subió como un cohete, en el mismo año saltó de 300 a 600. Fue uno de los mejores períodos de España; pleno empleo, economía vibrante, inmigrantes llegando de Sudamérica para participar en el crecimiento, y escalando puestos en la UE. Viví la historia muchacho, tenía yo 40 y pocos años, así que, no vengas con leyendas urbanas, rumorología y chorradas propias de críos.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   💬 0   ···

Yamiana Soy

Alicia llega en 2003 de Perú.... en 2004 con dos pelotas se compra una vivienda de 260.000 euros..... pero ahora tengo que aguantar que un periodista escriba mamonadas como "Pero si la echan no podrá quedarse en su barrio.".... si vamos, tengo una pena loca por Alicia. Alicia, pon a trabajar a tus hijo e hija, y dejaros de gaitas.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   💬 1   ···

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eEn ocasiones solemos sentir, en Noruega, en Finlandia en Alemania se pagan

dejaros de gaitas.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   💬 1   ···

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luis sierra
↳ Anita Dinamita

eEn ocasiones solemos sentir, en Noruega, en Finlandia en Alemania se pagan muchisimos impuestos pero tienen educación y un seguro de paro asegurado al igual que la seguridad social, asi que es evidente que hemos de pagar impuestos, mas quienes tienen mucho y entre otras cosas nos roban, pero si queremos un estado del bienestar sin tener que ir a un levantamiento porque España no es America del Norte, que tiene 30millones de sintecho, yparece que hacen bien poco,pues el, olos gobiernos que España vaya teniendo tendran que hacer algo por el estilo.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   💬 1   ···

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luis sierra
↳ El bueno de Donald

NO ENTIENDO ESO DE LA CHAPA, ME LO EXPLICAS MEJOR? GRACIAS !

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   💬 0   ···

Raton Ayala
↳ Simone Donaire

A ver figura de las finanzas...no hay que ser tan sensible en un foro. Aznar basó todo su crecimiento económico en el ladrillo...y eso es innegable. Miró a otro lado mientras esta tormenta que tu mismo describes se iba preparando porque le iba muy bien.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 1   💬 0   ···

Simone Donaire
↳ Raton Ayala

La burbuja no la creó ni Aznar, ni Zapatero ni dios. La crearon una serie de circunstancias que confluyeron: hambre secular de propiedades, fuerte demanda, dinero disponible en grandes cantidades para satisfacerla, precios en

Simone Donaire
11:55, 10-04-2019

La burbuja no la creó ni Aznar, ni Zapatero ni dios. La crearon una serie de circunstancias que confluyeron; hambre secular de propiedades, fuerte demanda, dinero disponible en grandes cantidades para satisfacerla, precios en alza, crédito fácil y bajos intereses. La tormenta estaba servida. Acusar a uno u otro de crear la burbuja, es un infantilismo propio del que carece de la mínima noción de economía.

noción de economía.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 2   👎 1   ⋯

Don Mojito
↳ nosoyrobot sarseis

Lo que quiere decir que te ves incapacitado para entrar en una espiral de endeudamiento sin fin.
Creo que el error está en pedir prestadas cantidades de dinero demasiado pequeñas. La próxima vez pide millones, entonces te funcionarán mejor las cosas. Claro, lo he dicho en tono irónico. Pero, efectivamente, es como has dicho, los bancos - los expertos financieros - incluso hubieran concedido créditos al perro de la casa en los tiempos de la burbuja inmobiliaria. Su rapacidad no conocía límites. Pero, resulta que los platos rotos los tuvieron que pagar los ciudadanos. ¿Pero, han aprendido las entidades financieras de sus errores de perspectiva y estimaciones equivocadas, han cambiado su excesiva disposición a correr riesgos irrazonables e irresponsables? El sr. Draghi, presidente del BCE, por lo menos ha decidido seguir concediendo préstamos a un interés del cero por ciento, no obstante, hay que solicitarle millones.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 1   👎 0   ⋯

Carmela Soprano
↳ Marberman Marberma

Están atrapados en la injusticia del capitalismo, la flojeza de sus hijos, compra lo que no podían y tener más hijos de los que pueden. De las injusticias del capitalismo todos somos culpables de otras cosas serán ellos.
Digo lo que otros, si se quedan sin trabajo, sin casa, con varios miembros de la familia y se empeñan en seguir viviendo en Madrid con lo caro qué significa. Tendrán que buscar otras alternativas.

RESPONDER   COMPARTIR   👍 0   👎 0   ⋯

Usuario Anónimo

La izquierda necesita desgracia para sobrevivir.

Appendix 4: The Irish newspaper articles and comments

State provision of high levels of rental accommodation would also dampen purchase- and rental prices more generally. And the inclusion of people from diverse income groups would ensure public housing is seen as a human right for everyone. The State would never envisage selling these homes. They would become a commonly owned national resource.

The cost rental model has a good record in other European countries. And it has no shortage of supporters in civil society here – including from groups actively thinking through how it could work in an Irish context.

Government policy on housing, *Rebuilding Ireland*, commits to exploring a cost-rental model through the formation of an expert group which is due to report before the year end. Yet no financing for such a future model was flagged in budget 2018. And each passing month brings with it increased prices for renters or would-be buyers, together with ongoing insecurity.

So what level of funding should the State be investing to deliver a cost rental model? The Nevin Economic Research Institute estimates that the State should build or acquire 70,000 homes over a five-year period. The institute estimates this could cost €12 billion, raised from an up-front State investment of €3 billion and cheap loans from a range of sources including the National Treasury Management Agency, European Investment Bank and other domestic and international financial institutions. These loans would be repaid through the self-financing nature of the model, that is from the rents tenants would pay.

The Government has continuously claimed that the EU fiscal rules (that seek to keep member state debt and deficit levels low) prevent us from spending on housing. That is simply untrue when it comes to a self-financing and independent semi-State body. For example, the fiscal rules don't apply to the

independent semi-State body. For example, the fiscal rules don't apply to the ESB – so why would they apply to its housing equivalent? Even Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, under public pressure, appeared to support the idea of a semi-State, but this apparent interest quickly evaporated.

Housing researchers recently noted that other areas of Government policy, such as the National Children's Strategy, at least acknowledge the international human rights commitment of the State (despite its failing to live up to them). Yet, with housing, there is a glaring absence of any mention of human rights obligations on the part of the State.

If the Government will not do the right thing, the ball is back in our court – those affected by the crisis and those in solidarity with them. This is why the recent launch of a campaign for public housing is so welcome and deserves national support. The Government should be put on notice: it must entirely reverse its approach, or be forced to go.

- *Nessa Ní Chasaide is a member of Housing Action Now, a collective dedicated to achieving housing for all*

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There are some good ideas in here such as the proposal that social housing stock doesn't get sold off.

But the rest doesn't survive an encounter with the facts. If it was easy to break even on social housing then local authorities would be doing it already.

The problem is that it's not, for a few reasons. The first is that the most basic social housing units cost a quarter of a million each at least, due to a range of necessary but onerous regulations that didn't exist when the state built.... » more

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Finfacts

@SKI Some pertinent points here!

Michael Hennigan

9 days ago   1 Like   Like   Share

Govinfos

@SKI; €250,000 for a very standard 3-bedroom house (what most people require) in
most parts of the country is a ridiculous figure. Perhaps that might be the case in
Dublin. The state currently owns enough land to build in the region of 32,000 3 or
4-bedroom properties, so land cost would not be an issue. It is possible to build this
kind of housing in most urban areas outside of the capital for about €150,000 or less
so your figures do not stand up to even the basic critique. As for LA tenants...

» more

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SKI

@Govinfos

Here's a link to a story which says that €2.5m is being spent on ten new social
housing units in............Connemara (http://galwaybayfm.ie/2-5-million-euro-
connemara-social-housing/)).

Even if housing units could be delivered for €150k each in Dublin they would still not
be self-financing on the average Dublin social rent of €3k per year.

People need to accept the fact that housing is expensive and the planning system
difficult to navigate. And have a debate based on facts rather...   » more

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Govinfos

@SKI; firstly, it doesn't cost €250,000 to build 2 and 3 bedroom units in Connemara -
this story you've linked us to provides absolutely no details around the project and I
suspect the cost also includes the purchase of the land - we were talking about
building costs on state land, land already in state ownership. Housing units in Dublin
are going to cost more to be sure - I accept that. However if a house lasts say 80
years, then the building and maintenance costs may well be covered over time...

» more

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SKI

299

SKI

@Govinfos

How much does land cost in barren Connemara? Not very much.

On my other point, assuming €150k cost of build and €3k rent you get a gross yield of 2% in Dublin. That's before any maintenance is taken into consideration.

The self-financing claim in Nessa Ní Chasaide's proposal is pure fantasy at today's building costs, social rents and interest rates.

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Govinfos

@SKI; given the amount of money the state hands out on rent assistance payments, I think that we are actually already living in a pure fantasy if we think as a nation that private sector rental is a solution to social housing!

8 days ago   2 Likes   Like   Share

JosephRyan

@SKI

"But the rest doesn't survive an encounter with the facts"

That depends on which facts you wish to consider.

The state currently pays private landlords over €500 + million pa in housing support payments. Therefore the reduction in cost to the state of that €500 million+ must be counted as part of the return on investment to the state.

Secondly, the point that there are currently arrears of 25% on rents to councils has no bearing, and is not indicative, of what arrears would be on a new...   » more

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Farrago

@JosephRyan "You are extrapolating the past tenancy mix (in terms of ability to pay) and assuming the same mix will apply to additional houses. This is incorrect and illogical." Well, Joseph, you seem to be equally assuming that the same mix will not apply with little more than wishful thinking to back it up.

"Thirdly, the real cost of house building (excluding serviced site) is not €250,000, which is largely a propaganda figure used by developers to justify prices and high profits based on...   » more

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Finfacts

There are a lot of issues that need attention including what could be called Ballymun Syndrome, Nimbies and land hoarding (there are no official data available), which sometimes results from lack of infrastructure provided by local authorities.

There is a danger as regards social housing that while the hardware can be delivered, the software would be ignored including local management, budgets for repairs etc.

NAMA's Brendan McDonagh says the requirement that urban apartment blocks have... » more

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Niklas

Yes, we have a massive housing crisis. Over two hundred thousand empty units plus further tens of thousands of rural center town and village, redundant shop units in their main streets, that will never be shops again. All needing to be upgraded to domestic / sheltered status, before all the slates fall off.

What we need is a halt to the notion that everyone, especially the entitled, have to live in the middle of our cities. Housing lists should be national, and housing benefit zoned. ... » more

9 days ago   1 Like   Like   Share

JosephRyan

Well said, Ms Ní Chasaide.

And don't listen to the people who say such a scheme cannot be self-funding. It can be.

If the people in these houses are employed, then they will be able to pay rent. The problem is that an ideological neo-liberal government and PS believe that such rents must go to the private sector landlords. Why? Neo-liberalism, that has given us a housing crisis, and the simple fact that there is money to be made. The government, its supporters, its loving vulture funds, and the... » more

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Govinfos

While a cost-rental approach to providing public housing to solve Ireland's housing crisis is an excellent idea - in fact it's a no-brainer - it's not going to be accepted by a state that does not regard the building of public housing as its business or its responsibility. The Irish state's approach to the provision of housing is to allow the private sector to do all the heavy lifting - even when it's obvious that the private-sector cannot lift anything much and when it does, it lifts the things...

» more

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Farrago

@Govinfos ....and just to reiterate again that you cannot say with certainty why the government failed to commit to this article. As I pointed out before, the relevant minister at the time indicated that it was Ireland's intention to implement the article despite not formally agreeing to it. Therefore, why isn't your post peppered with "in my opinion" or "in my view"? Since this is the umpteenth time you've referred to this, why don't you write to the department with responsibility and ask...   » more

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Splitshift

Our city (indeed our country) is becoming a low wage economy. Zero hour contracts, minimum wage jobs, bogus 'self' employment etc.

None of these people can afford to buy a home. Neither, at current rental prices, can they afford to rent (current average rent in Dublin is 1500, by 12 mths comes to 18k. The minimum wage is just short of 20K, leaving them with less then 2k to live for a year).

Yet our economy will collapse without them. And this not to mention any unemployed or disabled.

Where...   » more

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Aodh

The ridiculously misused and underused/near vacant land that the state owns at McKee and Cathal Brugha barracks, the CIE bus garages at Donnybrook, Ringsend Rd, Cunningham Rd etc, ESB depot at South Lotts rd, RTE Donnybrook and many more sites could house all third level students currently in private rental in Dublin. Why doesn't the state do this?

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Moratorium on evictions would stop growth of homelessness

Pause would give State more time to build new housing

Fri, Dec 22, 2017, 01:12

Michael O'Loughlin

Minister for Housing Eoghan Murphy. Photograph: Gareth Chaney/Collins

A familiar sight in the streets of some areas of Dublin is the estate agent's sign which proclaims: "Period building. Suitable for family home . Currently in 11 units." It's a great thing to see young couples taking over such buildings and gutting them, replacing the plastic window frames, replanting the gardens, and after a year of sweat and tears, moving in with their growing young families.

It's a very civilised activity. But I am constantly reminded of the saying by Walter Benjamin that there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. The barbarism here is that each new family home means 11 families or individuals are now looking for alternative accommodation which doesn't exist.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not against reclaiming period residences which were broken up into miserable bedsits by unscrupulous landlords, of the type highlighted in the media in recent months. In fact, I have done it myself. However, I did it in another country and there's the rub. The tenants I evicted had been provided with suitable new homes, which was a condition of the eviction. Not only that, I had to pay a hefty fee to the local council for every unit I removed from the housing stock, on the basis that if I removed a unit, it was only fair that I make a serious contribution to replacing it.

Many of these decrepit period houses, of course, do seriously need renovating. One such eyesore building in my neighbourhood was, incredibly, divided into 17 units. I would occasionally stop to chat to the landlord, who was sometimes to be found loitering outside the building. He was a country man in his 60s, always willing to share his business acumen. "People used to say I was mad for not selling, sure I could have been rich. But look at me now. Amn't I getting a €100,000 a year out of the place, regular as clockwork from the social welfare?"

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frames, replanting the gardens, and after a year of sweat and tears, moving in with their growing young families.

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Don't get me wrong, I'm not against reclaiming period residences which were broken up into miserable bedsits by unscrupulous landlords, of the type highlighted in the media in recent months. In fact, I have done it myself. However, I did it in another country and there's the rub. The tenants I evicted had been provided with suitable new homes, which was a condition of the eviction. Not only that, I had to pay a hefty fee to the local council for every unit I removed from the housing stock, on the basis that if I removed a unit, it was only fair that I make a serious contribution to replacing it.

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Conundrum

It was clear that he hadn't spent a penny on the building for years. But why would he? In a bizarre echo of the Irish tenant's conundrum of the 19th century, he had no financial interest in improvement, as the allowance paid by social protection would go neither up nor down, whatever the state of the property.

> "
> Not planning is in itself a kind of planning. Not planning to house people is planning to make them homeless

I once had occasion to enter the building, and was shocked by the squalor and neglect inside. I contacted a council housing official. He told me, off the record of course, that they had the legal powers to close down buildings like this - but if they did, in the real world, there would be no place for the tenants to go. This was some years before the current homelessness crisis so, once again, no one can say it was unexpected or unplanned. Because not planning is in itself a kind of planning. Not planning to house people is planning to make them homeless.

So here is a modest proposal. Much homelessness (including the less visible homelessness of people living with their families) comes as a result of people being evicted from their homes. As we know, there are some welcome new restrictions on landlords' ability to evict people. But do they go far enough? Minister for Housing Eoghan Murphy, mindful of the interests of property owners, obviously thinks they do. But one other possibility would be to make it illegal to evict a tenant until he had been offered or had found alternative accommodation. While this is the ideal situation, there is no point in having such a rule in Ireland at the moment, because no alternative accommodation is available. A hotel room is not accommodation. So it would be impossible to enforce.

Moratorium

But a very obvious solution presents itself, even if it is a temporary one. We are in a crisis. The homelessness problem is desperate, and requires desperate

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are in a crisis. The homelessness problem is desperate, and requires desperate remedies. So why not a moratorium on all evictions, for any reason, of any type, for the next 12 months? This would stop the growth of homelessness, and would give the State more time to build new housing, either on its own or in public/private partnership. If there hasn't been any improvement after a year, it could be extended. Not only would it halt to some extent the growth of homelessness, it could reduce the psychological stress caused by fear of homelessness in those people who are at all times no more than a month or two away from it.

Of course, the Government would oppose a proposal like this on ideological grounds, as interfering with the sacred right of property. The Minister, or perhaps some hapless Minister of State, would be sent out to do a Fr Jack around the radio and television studios, endlessly repeating, in response to every question, that "that would be a constitutional matter".

It is clear that the homeless and future homeless are not a constituency which, although they get up very early in the morning, will ever vote Fine Gael. But there are also good landlords, decent people who might have legitimate plans for their properties and need to evict people, who would start to put pressure on the Government to do something about the situation. It would be in their interests to do so, and maybe the Government would listen to them.

It doesn't seem to be listening to anyone else.

Michael O'Loughlin is a writer and poet

Topics: Homeless Crisis

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<u>Reader comments posted in response to the above article</u>

Govinfos

Michael's proposal of a moratorium on evictions is a bit like a man saying ''I need to design a whole new way of doing things but I really don't think I want to''. The reality as Michael himself knows all too well, is that ideologically speaking, FG and Murphy himself have absolutely no intentions - or powers - to stop the real reasons that have caused and are continuing to perpetuate the homelessness crisis. You could actually wave a magic wand and start the construction of social and... » more

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papasmurfnorth

I love the idea of a moratorium on evictions. The rate of homeless tenants far exceeds that of the homeless who are able to find affordable accommodation (and that accommodation is usually rental, and, by its very nature, precarious). Some breathing space is indeed welcome. But, far be it from the state to consider homelessness worthy of serious consideration when property speculation is once again in rampant ascendancy and the financial bubble of 2008 a distant and impossible memory.

11 days ago   4 Likes   Like   Share

JosephRyan

"Not planning is in itself a kind of planning. Not planning to house people is planning to make them homeless " Indeed it it, a plan for make people homeless. Homelessness is, in reality, government policy.

Government policy is designed on behalf of bank balance sheets, landlords of all kinds, vulture funds, their supporters, and the wider property owning sector. Homeless people, or soon to be homeless simply don't count against those powerful interests.

Splitshift

@JosephRyan

As accurate a description of the situation as I have read.

The housing crisis is not an accident.

It is policy.

The Farmers and Landlords party are looking after their own, while they can.

11 days ago   4 Likes   Like   Share

Govinfos

@JosephRyan; well said and it has been government policy to un-house people and refuse to provide social and affordable alternatives in any meaningful manner to privately rented or privately built accommodation since 2000. In that year a FF-led government refused to sign Article 31 of the European Social Charter which included a directive for each EU state to agree that it would build public housing for those that were unable to afford it on the open market. As you say, the needs of the...   » more

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Finfacts

Outrage has its place but while there is a strong case for more social housing it's not a solution for all problems. In the Netherlands where social housing accounts for about a third of housing and over 70% of the rental sector, thousands are evicted each year while in 2015 there were 12 Irish executed evictions in respect of public housing, despite rent arrears at levels of about 20% in the big cities.

It's easy to indulge in political labelling and the test should be commonsense - Michael...   » more

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Splitshift

@Finfacts

"in 2015 there were 12 Irish executed evictions in respect of public housing, despite rent arrears at levels of about 20% "

While there is certainly an issue in relation to the management of public housing assets, surely that should not suggest an end to such housing.

Management in our banking system totally failed, yet there was no thought of scrapping the banks.

This is just an excuse. I have also seen the 'maintenance' excuse. Apparently it costs

307

Finfacts

@Splitshift Maybe you missed my opening line: "while there is a strong case for more social housing..."

Of course, it should not be a matter of controversy to learn from experience in ensuring that there is local management that enforces community rules rather than the distant "Corpo." Presumably, you would not want a small number to make life hell for other residents as was recently raised in a court http://bit.ly/2kG4TQ9

Michael Hennigan

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tomnewnewman.org

Repeal of the "throw people out of bedsits" foolishness would cure it overnight.

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SKI

The problem in Ireland is the yawning chasm between the security of tenure of an owner-occupier and that of a private tenant. Lots of people don't want or need to own their own house but also want the peace of mind of not facing termination of tenancy at thirty days' notice. There are well over a hundred thousand households in this space I would say.

Likewise landlords take a big risk. One month's deposit does not cover an awful lot of damage and securing an eviction for non-payment or rent or...   » more

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Denito

Wait a second: if there were a legal moratorium on evictions, then why would anyone pay their rent?

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Splitshift

When house prices and rents are rising in double digit figures but earnings and welfare payments at only a fifth (or less) of that rate, then there is inevitably a rise in homelessness.

How could it be otherwise?

Well, in the past there was council housing stock. Small numbers of new houses built each year and turn over of older units as tenants died or moved on.

and turn over of older units as tenants died or moved on.

Then some genius decided to stop building and sell off the houses cheap to their tenants.

That made for a big election war chest....   » more

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Govinfos

@Splitshift; ''We are to be a nation of tenants, fodder for the rich''

Correct, and this is actual state policy since 2000, whether under FF-PG governments
or FG/Labour/Independent governments. We are today reaping the harvest that these
governments have sown for us. And on it goes.

11 days ago   3 Likes   Like   Share

longtermfan

The Social Welfare payment to the owners should only be paid if the property, on inspection, is
considered suitable for human habitation, including what would be regarded as normal necessities
in a home. I know this would take many dwellings out of the available stock for renting but we have
to decide what we want for the country. There should also be a scale of rental, depending on
facilities, size & condition of property, just like in 'normal' private renting.

11 days ago   0 Likes   Like   Share

Govinfos

@longtermfan; ''The Social Welfare payment to the owners should only be paid if the
property, on inspection, is considered suitable for human habitation, including what
would be regarded as normal necessities in a home.''

In fairness it has to be said that under HAP (Housing Assistance Payment) schemes -
now applying to all private accommodation being used by local authorities - there is a
fairly rigorous inspection procedure and regulatory standards are strict. It doesn't
come anywhere near...   » more

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Aodh

So I'm a foreign national intending to live in Ireland for the next 12 months. Is there any reason I
should pay my rent?

10 days ago   2 Likes   Like   Share

309

JohnWilliams

@Aodh

A moratorium on evictions for 12 months would entail new legislation. In new legislation it would be possible to make an exemption for tenants who do not pay their rent and the landlord would be entitled to evict. However this means that legislation would require that rents would be frozen and backdated by some months to prevent profiteering while legislation was going through parliament. A short sharp piece of legislation could be brought in with a couple of weeks.

10 days ago   0 Likes   Like   Share

Cremeegg

Does the writer seriously think that a 12 month ban on evictions would reduce homelessness. Every tenant in the country would be tempted to stop paying rent. Some would succumb to that temptation. Every landlord in the country would fear that their tenant would stop paying rent. Many would ask themselves, how can I get out of this trap. Rental properties would be sold. Favoring those seeking to buy, but the private rental market would cease to exist.

This kind of half thought through idea. I...   » more

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JohnWilliams

How many flats,apartments, houses etc which are rented and for rent are registered with the Private Residential Tenancies Board? All landlords are legally obliged to register with fines of up to €4000 and/or 6 months in prison + all legal fees. I cannot recall reading about any court proceedings regarding non-registration. The official registration figure of over 300,00 properties. This must only be a fraction of the total amount. As well as that there are stringent rules about illegal evictions...   » more

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Govinfos

@JohnWilliams: because the state needs private landlords. Daaaaw !!

9 days ago   0 Likes   Like   Share

mmichaelotmail.com

1847 - 2017. Utilitarianism drove the great famine in 1847 just as neoliberalism drives our present obsession to promote the banks. The homeless just as your starving ancestors were, are left to sort out the probems for themselves. Government today as then are all about moving the goal posts to make their friends richer.

10 days ago   1 Like   Like   Share

310

'New rent assistance for over 35s has small print'

The single-person household that earns more than 11,182 euros is not assured of accessing the grant.

(Caption: For-rent sign in Madrid. In this video, statements form the Minister for Development. Iñigo de la Serna. VICTOR SANZ /VÍDEO: EFE)

The new state housing plan, approved last Friday, considers grants for purchasing and renting homes. In both cases it has small print: for the purchase of a house, the property must be in a town with less than 5,000 inhabitants; and for the rent assistance for people over 35, the threshold of the rent that cannot be exceeded varies according to the people who make up the family unit as to who gets priority access. Therefore, the limit will not be 22,588.77 euros as stated by the Minister of Development, Íñigo de la Serna, at the press conference after the Council of Ministers. In practice, for family units of one person, the income must be below 11,182.71 euros, as explained this Tuesday on *20 minutes.* That is, 1.5 times The Multiplier for the Public Income Index (IPREM), something that also affects aid to people over 65 and leaves young people outside of the restriction.

Rent assistance for people between 35 and 65 years is aimed at citizens with financial difficulties. In this case, as published in the Official State Bulletin (BOE), the access will be tighter than initially proposed due to the differences that exist depending on the number of people that make up the family unit. Thus, for family units of a single person, the income may not exceed 11,182.71 euros in order to have priority in accessing the grant; when the family unit is made up of a couple, this limit is set at 15,039.18 euros; if there are three, 18,798.98 euros. This continues until we get to large family cases,

for which the threshold will pass the limit of 22,558.77 euros.

However, there is significant small print regarding the criteria, since only the applicants who are in the lowest intervals will have the aid guaranteed. That is, in which their annual income does not exceed 11,182.71 euros and 15,039.18. "If the amount requested in an application complying with the aforementioned criteria are less than the amount of aid that can be granted according to the budget credit enabled in it, this may benefit those applicants whose household income does not exceed three times the IPREM", explained in the BOE.

For the group with financial difficulties, as defined by the Minister for Development, the rent assistance will be up to 40% of the rental income. Besides, the monthly rent must be a maximum of 600 euros as a general rule or 900 in justified cases where market prices are above. In such circumstances between 601 and 900 euros, the grant will be 30%.

Antonio Aguilar, general director of housing at the Ministry of Development, reiterated to this newspaper, that this criterion of lower annual income will only be taken into account when considering the priority in access to aid. "The more money communities put in, the more people can get help, including the maximum grant income from the grant", he assured. Thus, the grant reaching everyone who needs it will depend on the total amount allocated to these grants.

Restrictions for retired people

The small print on the rent assistance, which in practice reduces the minimum of annual income, also affects the grant for people over 65. In these cases, beneficiaries must also meet the maximum annual income based on the number of people who make up the family unit. Meaning a maximum of 11,182.71 euros when only one person lives in the house and 15,039.18 for a couple.

The state will subsidize this group up to 50% of the rent and priority will also be granted to those with less income. Thus, those who earn the most, even if they are below 22,588.77 euros (three times the IPREM) they will not be able to benefit from this help in practice.

This group has also lost out on funding that was included in the previous plan. Until now, those over 65 could benefit from a monthly aid of 200 euros for maintenance, community and service supplies costs, that the ministry has removed after the last revision of the text. The Ministry of Development justifies this because it was a grant that overlapped with other social policies.

[End of article]

[Comments posted by readers in response to the above article]

Comments

1. Antonio Azaga: The question is, Why discriminate by the number of the inhabitants in the city where you live? Those in big cities have no right to be helped? I don't understand those standards...there must be someone who is dedicated to inventing these things so that in the end the aid does not reach anyone, after the EU gives out to the government, which is the government that gives the least aid to its citizens [in the EU], but if one that they choose to help has to be blonde, blue eyed, friendly, over 180cm tall...in the end…

2. Antonio Azaga to Felipe Martinez: Other than what you say about inconsistency, and you're right, having paid tax for 6 years is not correct, since to obtain the subsidy of 430 euros (it is no longer 426) you must have paid 15 years of tax minimum and of them, 7 at least to the pay-as-you-earn central scheme, so if you have contributed 20 years as self-employed, you have no right.

3. Felipe Martinez: I'll apply for a 'non-contributory' grant although 'I have contributed for 37 years' or...neither?

4. José Velasco: The matter of ostentatious advertising of "**improvements**" is not the small print, but the deeply rooted habit of telling 'half-truths' (lies).

5. Sr. iLetrado: What genius, again, how they reinvent themselves! They'll be able to feed the rental bubble again intervening in the market based on grants, and the best of all...the ones who put the dough up for those grants will have absolutely no benefit from this measure. What is more, they will only be harmed when they want to rent and they see that, thanks to that grant to which they are not entitled but to which they have contributed by force, prices have risen.
A pity that we, the young and the not so young, don't react like the *yayoflautas* [retiree activists during the post-crisis protests in Spain] because we have plenty of reasons.

6. Felipe Martinez: In my case, they deny me the subsidy of €426 for people over 52 after having contributed 37 years, because my wife earns just over €900 a month. If I wasn't legally married, just living together, and this FRIEND of mine earned €3000 a month, and I had only paid 6 years tax, I would be able to apply for the subsidy
Can someone explain that to me?

7. Amamar Gallo: There are also problems in the portion of 35 to 65 years of age, for unemployed

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people of 50 years of age it is very difficult to find work, members of separated families who are forced to rent, etc... A little more help could do us good.

[End of comments]

'Evicted: once as a mortgage holder, now as a tenant'

Alicia Madoño's little flat which she once owned and in which she is now a tenant, comprises the whole crazy history of housing in Spain in this decade, and which is still awaiting resolution.

*Alicia Madoño en su vivienda de alquiler de cincuenta metros cuadrados en Usera, en Madrid, comprada por un fondo de inversión que quiere desalojarla. **JULIAN ROJAS | EPV***

(Caption: Alicia Madoño in her rented flat of 50m squared in Usera, Madrid, bought by an investment fund who wants her out. JULIAN RAJOS / EPV)

Alicia Madoño's little flat, 50 square meters in Usera, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Madrid, comprises all the ups and downs of the history of housing in Spain in the last decade. Alicia has been suffering for 15 years over her house, although she bought it in 2004 and it's not hers anymore. The bank kicked her out in 2010, in the midst of a crisis for not being able to afford the mortgage, and the bank kept hold of it. But she was able to return to it because later the institution let her continue as a tenant paid by social rent. However, in 2016 it was sold to an investment fund, who now wants to remove Alice in May, when they claim her contract ends. Just after the elections. Alicia travelled from Peru in 2003 but has Spanish nationality and she votes, although she has no hope that politicians will solve her main problem now: finding a flat.

"They look the other way, they don't want to see how people are suffering, what they are paying, they don't want to see it", she despairs through tears. "There are many of us living suppressed like this, without knowing where we are going to live. Who can pay 700, 800 euros of rent? It's not real. For many people it is impossible with the salaries in Spain. What do we do? We pay the rent and we don't eat, we don't drink? We are humans. Housing is not a luxury, it is a right, and we pay our taxes.'

In 2018 there were almost 60,000 evictions processed by the courts in Spain and 63% were due to non-

payment of rent, a figure that grows every year. But that's what you can see, then there are the so-called invisible evictions: the lease ends and the new price shoots up. Alicia lives with her son, her daughter and her three grandchildren, six people in two rooms; living room, kitchen and bathroom. In her house there is no space to move. She pays 400 euro [per month]. She earns 700 euro [per month] taking care of the elderly. But if they kick her out, she won't be able to stay in her neighbourhood. Rental prices already cost double that. As in all of Madrid, rental prices are getting out of control.

The house which is the source of all her anxiety is on a third floor without a lift, and for which she paid 260,000 euro, which was itself an outrage in Usera in 2004 [Usera is a very deprived part of Madrid], but that's the way it was then. She had two jobs, her son too and they paid 1,600 euro a month on the mortgage...until the crisis came and there was no longer any work. In the end, Alicia managed to get the bank to forgive her debt in 2017, but the investment fund that has now bought the flat has only paid 46,000 euro for it, as she discovered through her right to purchase. She feels trapped in an injustice that never ends: "The worst thing is that this happens when you are still paying, it's not for not paying, I have always paid, even when I couldn't handle the mortgage, I kept paying half of it. If they kick you out every three years from one neighbourhood to another, are we going to have to move the children out of school, change their lives, every three years?" she wonders. Alicia has joined the tenant's union, an organization that emerged two years ago to defend these cases and plans to fight to the end.

"It can happen to anyone, people think it won't happen to them. It is not only to the poorest people, it's anyone with a contract that expires. The situation is one of absolute emergency", says Mercedes Revuelta of the 'Platform of Mortgage Victims' (PAH) which emerged in 2009 with the bursting of the housing bubble and that now it is handling more and more rental-eviction cases. "Investment funds are buying entire buildings in capital cities to speculate. They do it through SOCIMIS (Society Listed Real Estate), they don't pay corporation tax, and there is no oversight. As the rent begins to become prohibitive, we are ending up again amidst the hysteria of buying. It's like Groundhog Day, like before the crisis. We haven't learned anything".

Solutions? For the PAH the first thing is to paralyze all the evictions from the primary family home. The best emergency measure would be that the Sareb, the society with state participation that manages the assets of nationalized banks, and Bankia, rescued with public money and with many empty apartments on its books, would transfer those to the State for social housing. "And we have to have a decent state budget for housing. It doesn't make sense that the Basque Country has a larger budget for housing than that of the central government". They also demand that the activity of investment funds is regulated, like in Belgium, France and the United Kingdom so that there are restrictions on speculation.

At Provivienda, a non-profit organization that works with social housing since 1989 and manages 67,887 properties in 10 autonomous communities, they are also alarmed: "We are facing one of the

biggest affordable housing crises in Spain. Many people can't afford market rents, they can only opt for social housing, and there is none", explains Natalia Palomar. According her data, there are 400,000 people registered in the autonomous registers of public housing applications and Spain would need 1.5 million social housing. Provivienda believes that the budget on housing policies should gradually reach 1.5% of GDP, along the lines of other European countries. For especially problematic areas, they propose creating price indices to limit rental prices.

Javier Rodriguez Heredia, president of the Residential Rental Commission of ASIPA, Association of Estate Agents with Rental Assets, agrees that "the problem is that we have 10 times less social housing and affordable homes than the European Union average". He believes that discussions and solutions should be focused on how to build them. "Legislate without consulting the sector, without any diagnosis adjusted to reality and with simple and sometimes populist stories, will not create a single social housing unit; what it does is drive out private and institutional savings, which is what we need to finance affordable housing in the long term". In this sense, he does not believe that the situation is the fault of the investment funds. "Institutional investors only make up 2.5% of rental property ownership, they can hardly be responsible for prices and evictions."

[End of article]

[Comments posted by readers in response to the above article]

Comments

1. Well, the situation is hard for her but in an important part it is due to her bad head (bad decision). A lawyer friend told me in the most complicated times of the crisis and evictions for non-payment of mortgage: people spend 200 or 300 thousand euros on a house without batting an eye lid but are unable to spend 200 or 300 on someone to advise them. And the truth is that she really needed it.

2. Buy a house of 260,000 euros a year after arriving in Spain... eh, great idea. Alicia is a fierce investor, the next thing she did was buy stocks in Bankia, and now she is looking to invest in Bitcoin, what will she be into next year... Come on Alicia, then you go to the newspaper crying for us to help you pay for it. XD

3. Do not call the other figure, at least as long as truth does not know how to expose what so frivolously and generically declares. Aznar, my Sir, did not base economic growth on anything. The objective was to privatize the companies, starting with the deficit, deregulate the economy, lower inflation and interest to meet the parameters of the euro and be able to join the single

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currency club in a legislature, something close to a miracle that nobody was betting on. And apart from this, also took care of writing another land law, to replace that of the Socialists who had overthrown the Supreme Court, a law by the way that continues. And by the way, the stagnant bag went up like a rocket, in the same year it jumped from 300 to 600. It was one of the best periods in Spain; full employment, vibrant economy immigrants arriving from South America to participate in growth and climbing positions in the EU. I lived the story boy, I was 40 and a few years old, so do not come with urban legends, rumour mill and bullshit typical of children.

4. Alicia arrives in 2003 from Peru... in 2004 with two balls she buy a house of 260,000 euros...but now I have to put up with a journalist writing bullshit like "but if they kick her out she won't be able to stay in her neighbourhood"... come on I have a crazy sorrow for Alicia, put your son and daughter to work, and stop nonsense.

5. Sometimes we tend to feel, In Norway, in Finland, in Germany many taxes are paid but they have education and insured unemployment insurance as well as social security, so it is obvious that we have to pay taxes, more than those who have a lot, and among other things, they steal from us, but if we want a welfare state without having to go to an uprising because Spain is not North America, they have 30 million homeless and it seems that they do very little, because the government that Spain has will have to do something like that.

6. I do not understand that of the sheet, you explain it better? thank you.

7. Let's see finance figure...you don't have to be so sensitive in a forum. Aznar based all his economic growth on the brick...and that is undeniable. Look away while this storm that you describe yourself was preparing because it was doing very well.

8. The bubble was not created by Aznar or Zapatero or God. It was created by a series of circumstances that came together; hunger for property, strong demand, money available in large quantities to satisfy it, rising prices, easy credit and low interest. The storm was brewing. Accusing one or the other of creating the bubble, it is childishness that lacks the slightest notion of economy.

9. Which means you are tied into a spiral of endless indebtedness.

10. I think the mistake is in ask for borrowing too small amounts of money. Next time ask for millions, then things will work better for you. Of course, I said it in an ironic tone. But effectively, it's like you said, the banks -financial experts- they would have even given credit to the house dog in the times of the housing bubble. His rapacity knew no limits. But it turns out that the broken

dishes had to be paid by the citizens. But financial institutions have learned from their perspective errors and wrong estimates, have they changed their excessive willingness to take unreasonable and irresponsible risks? Mr. Draghi, president of the BCE, at least he have decided to continue making loans at zero percent interest, however, you have to ask millions.

11. They are caught up in the injustice of capitalism, the laziness of his children, buy what they couldn't and have more children than they can. Of the injustices of capitalism, we are all guilty of other things they will be. I say what others, if they are left without a job, without a house, with various family members and they are determined to continue living in Madrid with how expensive it means. They will have to look for other alternatives.

12. The left needs misfortune to survive.

[end of comments]

Appendix 6: The Spanish text from the two news articles copied into Word format

La ayuda al alquiler para mayores de 35 años tiene letra pequeña

El hogar unipersonal que gane más de 11.182 euros no tendrá el cobro asegurado

Cartel de viviendas en alquiler en Madrid. En vídeo, declaraciones del ministro de Fomento, Íñigo de la Serna. VICTOR SAINZ | VÍDEO: EFE

El nuevo Plan Estatal de Vivienda, aprobado el pasado viernes, contempla ayudas a la compra de vivienda y al alquiler. En ambos casos tiene letra pequeña: para la adquisición de casa, el inmueble deberá estar en una localidad de menos de 5.000 habitantes; y en la subvención al alquiler para mayores de 35 años, el umbral de la renta que no se podrá superar varía en función de las personas que compongan la unidad familiar para tener acceso prioritario. Así, el límite no será de 22.558,77 euros como dijo el ministro de Fomento, Íñigo de la Serna, en la rueda de prensa posterior al Consejo de Ministros. En la práctica, para unidades familiares de una sola persona los ingresos deberán de estar por debajo de los 11.182,71 euros, como explica este martes *20 Minutos*. Es decir, 1,5 veces el Indicador Público de Renta de Efectos Múltiples (IPREM). Algo que también afecta en las ayudas a los mayores de 65 años y solo deja fuera de esta restricción a los jóvenes.

MÁS INFORMACIÓN

La ayuda al alquiler para personas de entre 35 y 65 años está dirigida a los ciudadanos con dificultades económicas. En este caso, según lo publicado en el Boletín Oficial del Estado (BOE), el acceso será más duro de lo planteado inicialmente por las diferencias que existen en función del número de personas que compongan la unidad familiar. Así, para unidades familiares de una sola persona, los ingresos no podrán sobrepasar los 11.182,71 euros para tener acceso prioritario a la subvención; cuando la unidad familiar esté compuesta por una pareja, este límite se fija en los 15.039,18 euros; si son tres personas, 18.798,98 euros. Así hasta llegar a los casos de familia numerosa, en que el umbral pasará el límite de los 22.558,77 euros.

Sin embargo, aquí también hay letra pequeña en cuanto a la prioridad de acceso mencionada, ya que solo los solicitantes que estén en los intervalos más bajos tendrán asegurada la ayuda. Es decir, en los que no superen sus ingresos anuales los 11.182,71 euros y los 15.039,18. "Si las solicitudes presentadas en una convocatoria de ayudas que cumplan lo señalado son inferiores al número de ayudas que puedan ser aceptadas conforme al crédito presupuestario habilitado en la misma, podrán resultar beneficiarios aquellos solicitantes cuyas unidades de convivencia tengan ingresos que no superen tres veces el IPREM", se explica en el BOE.

Para este colectivo con dificultades económicas, como los define el Ministerio de Fomento, la subvención del alquiler será de hasta el 40% de la renta del alquiler. Además, la renta mensual debe ser como máximo de 600 euros por norma general o 900 en los casos justificados en los que los precios de mercado estén por encima. En tales circunstancias, en el tramo entre los 601 y los 900 euros la subvención será del 30%.

Antonio Aguilar, director general de Vivienda del Ministerio de Fomento, reiteró a este periódico que este criterio de ingresos anuales más bajos solo se tendrán en cuenta para la prioridad en el acceso a la ayuda. "Cuanto más dinero pongan las comunidades, podrá llegar a más personas la ayuda, incluidos el máximo de renta de la subvención", asegura. Así, que la subvención pueda llegar a todos dependerá de la cuantía total destinada a estas ayudas.

Restricciones para jubilados

La letra pequeña en la ayuda al alquiler, que en la práctica reduce el mínimo de los ingresos anuales, también le afecta a la subvención para mayores de 65 años. En estos casos, los beneficiarios también deberán cumplir con el máximo de ingresos anuales en función del número de personas que compongan la unidad familiar. Es decir, un máximo de 11.182,71 euros cuando solo viva una persona y 15.039,18 cuando sea una pareja.

El Estado subvencionará a este colectivo hasta un 50% del alquiler y la prioridad en el acceso a la ayuda también será para los que menos ingresos tengan. De esta forma, los que más ganen, aunque

estén por debajo de los 22.558,77 euros (tres veces el IPREM), no podrán beneficiarse de esta ayuda en la práctica.

Este colectivo además ha perdido una ayuda que sí contemplaba el plan anterior. Hasta ahora, los mayores de 65 años podían beneficiarse de una ayuda mensual de 200 euros para gastos de mantenimiento, comunidad y suministros de servicio, que el Ministerio ha retirado tras la última revisión del texto. En este caso, desde Fomento lo justifican al tratarse de una ayuda que se solapaba con otras políticas sociales.

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Desahuciada por la hipoteca y ahora, por el alquiler

El pequeño piso de Alicia Madoño, que fue suyo y en el que ahora es inquilina, encierra la loca historia de la vivienda en España en esta década, aún a la espera de solución

Iñigo Domínguez

Madrid 11 ABR 2019 - 13:02 CEST

Alicia Madoño en su vivienda de alquiler de cincuenta metros cuadrados en Usera, en Madrid, comprada por un fondo de inversión que quiere desalojarla. Julian Rojas | epv

El reducido piso de Alicia Madoño, 50 metros cuadrados en Usera, uno de los barrios más humildes de Madrid, contiene todos los vaivenes y penalidades de la historia de la vivienda en España en la última década. Alicia lleva 15 años sufriendo por su casa, aunque la compró en 2004 y ya no es suya.

La echaron en 2010, en plena crisis, por no poder afrontar la hipoteca, y se la quedó el banco. Pero pudo volver a ella porque luego la entidad le dejó seguir de inquilina, con un alquiler social. Sin embargo, en 2016 se la vendió a un fondo de inversión, que quiere volver a echar a Alicia en mayo, cuando afirman que se acaba su contrato. Justo después de las elecciones. Alicia viajó desde Perú en 2003 pero tiene nacionalidad española y vota, aunque no tiene esperanzas de que los políticos solucionen su problema: encontrar piso.

"Miran para otro lado, no quieren ver lo que la gente está sufriendo, lo que está pagando, no quieren verlo", se desespera entre lágrimas. "Somos mucha gente que vive sometida, sin saber dónde va a vivir. ¿Quién puede pagar 700, 800 euros de alquiler? No es real. Para mucha gente es imposible, con los sueldos que hay en España. ¿Qué hacemos, pagamos el alquiler y no comemos, no bebemos? Somos humanos. La vivienda no es un lujo, es un derecho, y pagamos nuestros impuestos".

En 2018 hubo casi 60.000 desahucios tramitados por los juzgados en España y el 63% fueron por impago de alquiler, una cifra que crece cada año. Pero eso es lo que se ve, luego están los llamados desahucios invisibles: el contrato de alquiler se acaba y el nuevo precio se dispara. Alicia vive con su hijo, su hija y sus tres nietos, seis personas en dos habitaciones, salón, cocina y baño. En su casa falta el espacio para moverse. Paga 400 euros. Ella gana 700 cuidando ancianos. Pero si la echan no podrá quedarse en su barrio. Los precios de alquiler ya son el doble. Como en todo Madrid, se están desmadrando.

MÁS INFORMACIÓN

- El Congreso considera que los desahucios fueron un error estratégico de la banca
- El símbolo de la resistencia antidesahucios cae en Lavapiés

La casa de sus desvelos es un tercero interior sin ascensor por el que pagó 260.000 euros, que ya era una barbaridad en Usera en 2004, pero así eran las cosas entonces. Ella tenía dos trabajos, su hijo también, y pagaban 1.600 euros de hipoteca... hasta que llegó la crisis y faltó el trabajo. Al final, Alicia logró que el banco le condonara su deuda en 2017, pero el fondo de inversión que ha comprado ahora el piso solo ha pagado por él 46.000 euros, según ha descubierto ella por su derecho de compra. Se siente atrapada en una injusticia que no termina nunca: "Lo peor es que pagando te pasa esto, no es por no pagar, yo siempre he pagado, hasta cuando no podía con la hipoteca seguí pagando la mitad. Si te van echando cada tres años de un barrio a otro, ¿vamos a tener que estar cambiando a los niños de colegio, de vida, cada tres años?", se pregunta. Alicia se ha unido al Sindicato de Inquilinos, una organización surgida hace dos años para defender estos casos, y piensa luchar hasta el final.

"Ya le puede pasar a cualquiera, la gente se cree que no le va a tocar. No es solo a gente de condición más humilde, es a cualquiera con un contrato que venza. La situación es de absoluta emergencia",

dice Mercedes Revuelta, de la Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH), surgida en 2009 con el estallido de la burbuja inmobiliaria y que ahora ya gestiona más casos de desahucio por alquiler. "Los fondos de inversión están comprando edificios enteros en las capitales para especular. Lo hacen a través de socimis (sociedad cotizada inmobiliaria), que no pagan impuesto de sociedades, y no tienen ningún control. Como el alquiler empieza a ser prohibitivo ya estamos otra vez con la histeria de comprar. Parece el día de la marmota, como antes de la crisis. No hemos aprendido nada".

¿Soluciones? Para la PAH lo primero es paralizar todos los desahucios de primera vivienda. Su mejor medida de emergencia sería que la Sareb, la sociedad con participación estatal que gestiona los activos de los bancos nacionalizados, y Bankia, rescatada con dinero público y con muchos pisos vacíos, los cedan al Estado para vivienda social. "Y tenemos que tener un presupuesto estatal digno para vivienda. No puede ser que el País Vasco tenga mayor presupuesto que el del Gobierno central". También piden regular la actividad de los fondos de inversión, como en Bélgica, Francia y el Reino Unido, para que tengan restricciones a la especulación.

En Provivienda, organización sin ánimo de lucro que trabaja con vivienda social desde 1989 y gestiona 67.887 inmuebles en 10 comunidades autónomas, también están alarmados: "Estamos ante una de las mayores crisis de vivienda asequible en España, no hay. Mucha gente no puede pagar los alquileres del mercado, solo pueden optar a vivienda social, y tampoco hay", explica Natalia Palomar. Según sus datos, hay 400.000 personas inscritas en los registros autonómicos de solicitud de vivienda pública y España necesitaría 1,5 millones de viviendas sociales. Provivienda cree que el presupuesto en políticas de vivienda debería llegar paulatinamente hasta el 1,5% del PIB, en la línea de otros países europeos. Para zonas especialmente problemáticas proponen crear índices de precios para delimitar los precios del alquiler.

Javier Rodríguez Heredia, presidente de la Comisión de Alquiler Residencial de ASIPA, Asociación de Inmobiliarias con Patrimonio en Alquiler, coincide en que "el problema está en que tenemos 10 veces menos parque de vivienda social y asequible que la media de la Unión Europea". Opina que se deberían enfocar los debates y las soluciones hacia cómo construirlas. "Legislar sin consultar al sector, sin un diagnóstico ajustado a la realidad y con relatos sencillos y, a veces populistas, no va a crear una sola vivienda social; lo que hace es expulsar el ahorro privado y el institucional que es el que necesitamos para financiar viviendas a precio asequible a largo plazo". En ese sentido, no cree que la situación sea culpa de los fondos de inversión: "Los ahorradores institucionales solo tienen un 2,5% de la vivienda en alquiler, difícilmente pueden ser responsables de los precios y los desahucios".

Moratorium on evictions would stop growth of homelessness

Pause would give State more time to build new housing

Fri, Dec 22, 2017, 01:13

Michael O'Loughlin

Minister for Housing Eoghan Murphy. Photograph: Gareth Chaney/Collins

A familiar sight in the streets of some areas of Dublin is the estate agent's sign which proclaims: "Period building. Suitable for family home . Currently in 11 units." It's a great thing to see young couples taking over such buildings and gutting them, replacing the plastic window frames, replanting the gardens, and after a year of sweat and tears, moving in with their growing young families.

It's a very civilised activity. But I am constantly reminded of the saying by Walter Benjamin that there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. The barbarism here is that each new family home means 11 families or individuals are now looking for alternative accommodation which doesn't exist.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not against reclaiming period residences which were broken up into miserable bedsits by unscrupulous landlords, of the type highlighted in the media in recent months. In fact, I have done it myself. However, I did it in another country and there's the rub. The tenants I evicted had been

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provided with suitable new homes, which was a condition of the eviction. Not only that, I had to pay a hefty fee to the local council for every unit I removed from the housing stock, on the basis that if I removed a unit, it was only fair that I make a serious contribution to replacing it.

Many of these decrepit period houses, of course, do seriously need renovating. One such eyesore building in my neighbourhood was, incredibly, divided into 17 units. I would occasionally stop to chat to the landlord, who was sometimes to be found loitering outside the building. He was a country man in his 80s, always willing to share his business acumen. "People used to say I was mad for not selling, sure I could have been rich. But look at me now. Amn't I getting a €100,000 a year out of the place, regular as clockwork from the social welfare?"

It was clear that he hadn't spent a penny on the building for years. But why would he? In a bizarre echo of the Irish tenant's conundrum of the 19th century, he had no financial interest in improvement, as the allowance paid by social protection would go neither up nor down, whatever the state of the property.

Not planning is in itself a kind of planning. Not planning to house people is planning to make them homeless

I once had occasion to enter the building, and was shocked by the squalor and neglect inside. I contacted a council housing official. He told me, off the record of course, that they had the legal powers to close down buildings like this - but if they did, in the real world, there would be no place for the tenants to go. This was some years before the current homelessness crisis so, once again, no one can say it was unexpected or unplanned. Because not planning is in itself a kind of planning. Not planning to house people is planning to make them homeless.

So here is a modest proposal. Much homelessness (including the less visible homelessness of people living with their families) comes as a result of people being evicted from their homes. As we know, there are some welcome new restrictions on landlords' ability to evict people. But do they go far enough? Minister for Housing Eoghan Murphy, mindful of the interests of property owners, obviously thinks they do. But one other possibility would be to make it illegal to evict a tenant until he had been offered or had found alternative accommodation. While this is the ideal situation, there is no point in having such a rule in Ireland at the moment, because no alternative accommodation is available. A hotel room is not accommodation. So it would be impossible to enforce.

But a very obvious solution presents itself, even if it is a temporary one. We are in a crisis. The homelessness problem is desperate, and requires desperate remedies. So why not a moratorium on all evictions, for any reason, of any type, for the next 12 months? This would stop the growth of homelessness, and would give the State more time to build new housing, either on its own or in public/private partnership. If there hasn't been any improvement after a year, it could be extended. Not

only would it halt to some extent the growth of homelessness, it could reduce the psychological stress caused by fear of homelessness in those people who are at all times no more than a month or two away from it.

Of course, the Government would oppose a proposal like this on ideological grounds, as interfering with the sacred right of property. The Minister, or perhaps some hapless Minister of State, would be sent out to do a Fr Jack around the radio and television studios, endlessly repeating, in response to every question, that "that would be a constitutional matter".

It is clear that the homeless and future homeless are not a constituency which, although they get up very early in the morning, will ever vote Fine Gael. But there are also good landlords, decent people who might have legitimate plans for their properties and need to evict people, who would start to put pressure on the Government to do something about the situation. It would be in their interests to do so, and maybe the Government would listen to them.

It doesn't seem to be listening to anyone else.

Michael O'Loughlin is a writer and poet

■ ▪ ■

State home-building scheme only way to tackle crisis

Housing crisis: Time ripe for cost-rental plan in the interests of all our Republic's citizens
Mon, Dec 4, 2017, 01:00
Nessa Ní Chasaide

If the Government will not do the right thing, the ball is back in our court – those affected by the crisis and those in solidarity with them. Photograph: Getty Images

Budget 2018 confirmed the continuation of the Government's failing housing strategy: that of supporting private developers and landlords as the main providers of housing.

How so?

- Significant funding in Budget 2018 will not go toward new builds but be channeled to subsidising escalating rents to private landlords through the Housing Assistance Payment.
- Where the Government is establishing loan funds to encourage developers to build, there is no definition of what an "affordable" home should cost. This allows developers to continue to build expensive accommodation and make soaring profits, even in the area of so-called social housing.

- The increased levy on vacant sites does not kick in until 2020, leaving plenty of time for further land and home price increases to offset it. Neither was a much-needed tax on vacant properties introduced.
- Multinational vulture funds, that have been buying up land and property, still receive a number of tax exemptions on their purchases.
- And most worryingly, the Government intends to sell off our public land to private developers, giving away the key resource which would help solve the crisis.

Housing Action Now – a collective dedicated to achieving housing for all – believes the primary solution to the housing crisis is the reintroduction of State-owned housing on a large scale. This is the only way to regulate runaway housing prices in the public interest.

The most effective way to achieve this is the creation of a "cost rental" housing model. As the name implies, it would be a self-financing approach involving State provision of housing which would be made available for rent to a mixture of households on medium or high incomes as well as those on the social housing waiting list.

The wealthier people would pay higher rents than those on lower incomes, thus providing a sustainable form of collective finance. In exchange, everyone would get security of tenure (rental contracts of at least 10 years) and all rents (even the higher levels) would be lower than the current unsustainable rates.

State provision of high levels of rental accommodation would also dampen purchase- and rental prices more generally. And the inclusion of people from diverse income groups would ensure public housing is seen as a human right for everyone. The State would never envisage selling these homes. They would become a commonly owned national resource.

The cost rental model has a good record in other European countries. And it has no shortage of supporters in civil society here – including from groups actively thinking through how it could work in an Irish context.

Government policy on housing, *Rebuilding Ireland*, commits to exploring a cost-rental model through the formation of an expert group which is due to report before the year end. Yet no financing for such a future model was flagged in budget 2018. And each passing month brings with it increased prices for renters or would-be buyers, together with ongoing insecurity.

So what level of funding should the State be investing to deliver a cost rental model? The Nevin Economic Research Institute estimates that the State should build or acquire 70,000 homes over a five-year period. The institute estimates this could cost €12 billion, raised from an up-front State investment

of €3 billion and cheap loans from a range of sources including the National Treasury Management Agency, European Investment Bank and other domestic and international financial institutions. These loans would be repaid through the self-financing nature of the model, that is from the rents tenants would pay.

The Government has continuously claimed that the EU fiscal rules (that seek to keep member state debt and deficit levels low) prevent us from spending on housing. That is simply untrue when it comes to a self-financing and independent semi-State body. For example, the fiscal rules don't apply to the ESB – so why would they apply to its housing equivalent? Even Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, under public pressure, appeared to support the idea of a semi-State, but this apparent interest quickly evaporated.

Housing researchers recently noted that other areas of Government policy, such as the National Children's Strategy, at least acknowledge the international human rights commitment of the State (despite its failing to live up to them). Yet, with housing, there is a glaring absence of any mention of human rights obligations on the part of the State.

If the Government will not do the right thing, the ball is back in our court – those affected by the crisis and those in solidarity with them. This is why the recent launch of a campaign for public housing is so welcome and deserves national support. The Government should be put on notice: it must entirely reverse its approach, or be forced to go.

- *Nessa Ní Chasaide is a member of Housing Action Now, a collective dedicated to achieving housing for all*