technologies produce subjects and societies, and to resist through knowledge and critique. We may not be masters of the code, but we are implicated in its effects and capable of reflecting on its conditions.

Network theory and new materialism complement Kittler's media theory by offering tools to map the complex interactions that constitute media systems. At the same time, they challenge us to retain a sense of political responsibility and to ask how networks are shaped, who benefits, and who is excluded. In a world increasingly governed by computation, understanding the material, historical, and social conditions of media is not just an academic project but a political imperative.

Case Study 10.1: Moral Panics and Digital Wellbeing

This case study argues that while concerns about young people's digital wellbeing are valid, policy responses must avoid moral panic and instead prioritize participatory, rights-based approaches. In particular, the possible harmful effects of continuous connection especially on children and young people has led to serious concerns and pressures on policy makers to act. The situation however is not very clear cut. While we have some evidence of harm, especially when it comes to compulsive behaviours, anxiety and victimisation through digital media, there is a sense of a moral panic about young people and new media. As newer forms of media, for example AI-powered media, become more diffused, new anxieties emerge. Stanley Cohen (2011 [1972]), who developed the concept of moral panics, argued that they unfold in stages: a threat is identified, the media amplifies concern, public anxiety grows, authorities and experts intervene, and the issue either fades or leads to social or legal changes. Similarly, the threats posed to children and young people by the internet are exposed in the media, parents and educators become anxious and policy makers are urged to intervene. As Redman (2021) points out, moral panics about media effects have a long history. In the 1950s there were concerns over television and comic books, in the 1970s over cartoons and violence, in the 1980s over the so-called 'video-nasties', in the early 2000s over video games and now about social media and more broadly about screen time. While it is understandable that parents and the society as a whole is concerned about the health and wellbeing of young people, there is little evidence to prove a direct cause and effect relationship between digital media and wellbeing. In their literature review of 148 studies, Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2014) found that most of these concentrated on the risks posed by the new media rather than actual harm caused. In the same vein, Phippen (2025) argues that much of the discourse around children's online harms is driven by moral panic and notes that while there are genuine risks and some children do experience harm online, the prevailing narrative frequently overstates the scale and severity of these harms. This is often due to selective use of data, anecdotal evidence, and a tendency to focus on worst-case scenarios (Phippen, 2025; Valkenburg, 2022). This approach can lead to disproportionate responses, such as restrictive legislation or punitive measures: for example, Australia is expected to implement a social media ban for under 16s. Such measures, however, are entirely arbitrary (for example, why 16 and not 18? Why social media and not games?), they require excessive policing of young people's lives, and may not address the underlying issues and can even undermine children's rights or digital opportunities Phippen, 2025; Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025). But doing nothing is also not an option in the face of the risks involved. Sonia

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Livingstone has developed a rights based approach, noting that children must participate in decisions about their digital future. Along with her collaborators, Livingstone has sought to find ways for involving children in thinking about and co-designing their own digital media participation (Third, Livingstone and Lansdown, 2025; Livingstone, Ólafsson, and Pothong, 2025; Livingstone and Third, 2017).

More broadly, recent research has focused on the construct of digital wellbeing which emerged as a response to the increasingly ubiquitous presence of, and potential risks associated with the new media. Digital well being refers to identifying ways of striking a balance between the benefits and risks of digital connectivity. Vanden Abeele (2021) argues that rather than seeking to define digital well being in terms of limited time spent online, we should opt for a definition that reflects its subjective, dynamic, and ambivalent nature. She defines digital wellbeing as "a subjective individual experience of optimal balance between the benefits and drawbacks" of constant connectivity, holding that this is achieved "when experiencing maximal controlled pleasure and functional support" (Vanden Abeele, 2021: 938). She then proposes a model which combines person-specific factors, such as impulsivity or fear of missing out; device-specific factors, such as notifications or algorithmic curation; and context-specific factors, which include both immediate situational demands and socio-cultural expectations around availability and responsiveness. Digital wellbeing is therefore not only a factor of how long we spend on social media but the result of how well we can balance these three factors and the demands they pose on us. Importantly, as Vanden Abeele (2021) points out, the experience of wellbeing is subjective and it can vary between people. Digital wellbeing is thus not merely about screen time or device use but about navigating a web of pathways that connect internal experiences, technological affordances, and social structures: for example, fear of missing out, combined with notifications, combined with expectations to respond to messages represents a pathway that can entrap people in a constant loop of engagement. Disruption of these pathways, whether through digital detoxes, interface changes, or institutional policies, offers potential for improving digital wellbeing, but only if these interventions are attuned to the complex system in which they operate (see also Baym et al., 2020). In a similar fashion, Ellison et al. (2022) propose a sociotechnical perspective in understanding digital wellbeing, foregrounding the mutual constitution of users and technological systems. Such an approach considers that technological affordances, or the design features of the new media, do not dictate user behaviour but interact with user intentions, contexts, and interpretations producing various outcomes.

Following similar lines, Skeggs and Orben (2025) categorise current interventions to improve wellbeing in terms of the context in which they operate: social media platforms, devices, individual users, families or close communities, and society at large. Interventions at the platform level refer to modifications to social media features, such as for example hiding like counts, but we lack systematic evidence to prove their effectiveness and platforms are unlikely to share any insights they may have. Device-level interventions include both built-in features, like screentime reports, and third-party apps designed to restrict or monitor social media use. Skeggs and Orben report mixed evidence regarding their impact on wellbeing: meta-analyses suggest these apps can reduce device time, but their direct impact on wellbeing is less clear. At the individual or user level, interventions include strategies like

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digital detoxing. Evidence for the effectiveness of such interventions is also mixed, with studies reporting both positive and negative effects on wellbeing.

The key takeaways from this overview on digital wellbeing is that we are at the early stages of trying to figure out better ways of connection. The diverse views and occasionally also conflicting interests and power differences between stakeholders, especially platforms operating for profit and parents concerned for their children, further compound the issue. Platforms are incentivised to keep us as engaged as possible while most users want to have more control and autonomy over how they access and engage with platforms. A true equilibrium is likely to be reached when human wellbeing and flourishing is prioritised over profit, but until then, having voice, input and participation in decisions around social media use is key.

Research Activity 1.1 Media Object Analysis through Archaeology

Objective: To apply media archaeology in practice.

Description: Begin by selecting a media object that is no longer current but was once widely used: this could be a cassette tape, VHS player, first-generation smartphone, a gaming console, or an early social media platform. Once you have chosen your object, conduct a thorough investigation into its background and significance. Start by researching the historical context in which the object emerged. When and where was it introduced? What technological or cultural needs did it respond to at the time? Consider what other media technologies existed alongside it and how this object fit into or disrupted the media landscape. Next, examine the technical components and material base of the object. What was it made of? How did it function mechanically or digitally? If relevant, consider how it was manufactured and distributed, and which companies were behind its development. Then, explore the cultural and social practices surrounding the object. Who used it, and how was it used in everyday life? Try to uncover details such as the economic cost of purchasing the device or subscribing to its related services. Was it widely affordable, or a luxury item or did it evolve from a luxury item to an everyday one? Who was the intended or ideal user by age, class, lifestyle, or region? After this, analyze the object's path to obsolescence. When and why did it fall out of use? Investigate any environmental, political, or ethical implications associated with its disposal, legacy, or continued existence as digital waste or cultural memory. Conclude your analysis by reflecting on what this object reveals about the media system of its era. What values, infrastructures, or ideologies does it embody? What lessons can be drawn about technological progress, media consumption, or cultural change from studying this now-obsolete artifact?

Sources: Parikka's Media Archaeology