

This reading from The Media Equation argues that people treat media (computers, televisions, and other interactive technologies) as if they were real people. The reading backs this up with a series of studies that show participants responding socially and emotionally to computers, despite knowing they're machines. For example, people were more polite when evaluating a computer on the same device that helped them, and they unconsciously assigned personalities to different media sources. Toward the end, the authors discuss how these insights can inform better design, for instance making media more polite and socially aware in order to align with user expectations and avoid unintended awkwardness. The core idea is that our brains are wired to react socially, and that wiring doesn't just switch off because we know we're interacting with tech. The authors make a case that this isn't about people being naïve, but rather it's about how deeply rooted social behavior is in human cognition.

This reading was both fascinating and also super relevant to a lot of interactions I personally have with technology and media. I've definitely said "thank you" to ChatGPT a bunch in the last couple of years. It made me realize that even though I'm aware something is a machine, I still respond to it like it has feelings or intentions (or just feel like it's a good thing to be polite to it). I also liked the study designs (especially the one where people rated the same computer more positively just because it asked for feedback on itself). That said, I wonder how much has changed now that we've had years of exposure to AI and more immersive interfaces. Does that exposure make us treat computers more like what they are? I know that my grandparents are much more likely to believe a fake news article or an AI video is real than I am, so curious if that applies.

Pitch:

The authors argue that people treat media socially because of how our brains are wired—but in 2025, do we still? Or has the rise of virtual assistants, deepfakes, and generative AI changed the way we relate to media? It might be worth discussing whether the "media equation" still holds up as interfaces become more sophisticated.