

The Media Have Become Superfluous*

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After the Media: Introduction

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Introduction [The Argument]

The first decade of the twenty-first century was basically nothing more than an extension of what had gone before. When I began writing this book in the autumn of 2010, I had the feeling that we were still in the twentieth century. In the area of technology-mediated communication, there were scant grounds for speaking about the experience of a different historical quality. The first ten years after the zeroes rolled over to 2000 largely confronted us as the consequential fulfillment of processes that can be regarded as characteristic of the twentieth century: the implementation of a techno-scientific picture of the world as the determining worldview—despite the unfathomable catastrophes of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki (which were also consequences of humankind's merciless measuring of the world); the enormous boost in standardization, both of technology itself as well as of the natural organisms processed by it; the expansion of the electronic control of technological conditions; the establishment of an aggressively advertised regime of media which offers to help the individual consumer cope with real-life deficits, breaks, and damages without going insane.

The beginning of the second decade of the new millennium was marked by an enormous discharge of the extreme tensions between nature and technology, which had been systematically cultivated in the twentieth century. In Japan of all places, whose population had already experienced at first hand the terrible destructive qualities of aggression-oriented nuclear technology, a new nuclear catastrophe took place, with unforeseeable consequences. When one of the high security facilities for producing the allegedly cleanest and most effective form of energy collapses, it creates an uncontrollable maximum of lethal filth. What the monstrous power plants were actually built for, namely to generate energy, was brought to a standstill after nature massively intervened. The Japanese island of Honshu, including vast parts of the ocean in which it lies, was exposed to horrendous poisoning by radiation. The operators of the nuclear power station, and the politicians who shield them, have recklessly and with matchless arrogance played with the health of countless people for many generations to come. And they did not stop issuing statements about matters that lie well beyond their limited area of competence. The elaborated technological systems of communication perish in the face of the power that liars possess. Information does not happen.

A decade before the catastrophe in Japan, highly ideologized or bought suicide squads announced that the economic, political, and cultural order of the world, which the capitalistic West had determined upon, would not last forever. The incredibly brutal and also desperate attacks on the World Trade Center in New York not only led to tight security measures as the normal state of affairs. For millions of young people in Africa and the Arabian peninsula, this showed that using their bodies as weapons could trigger profound political shifts. Even though the price for this is very high indeed.

With propagandistic catchwords such as Twitter-, blog- or even Facebook-revolution (which from now on we will not use) at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the international mediaocracy is suggesting to us that the world will now become entirely different because nearly everybody is able to exchange texts, sounds, and images with almost everybody else. In fact, commercial telematics are being used to organize rebellion against fossilized structures and brutal dictators with whom the affluent oil-dependent world had only recently done wonderful business. The message the insurgents have, though, is not immaterial. Except for their lives, these young people have nothing to lose. With the entire dignity powerlessness, they throw their bodies into the lethal interplay between different power constellations in the hope that those who shortly before had shamelessly applauded and supported dictators for egotistical reasons will now grant them their favor.

As a communicative system, globalism seems to work very well. Many want to be voluntarily included and respected within it, want to live like the Western and Northern Europeans, at least with regard to the constitution of their social and political orders and the level of their consumerism. The Internet, in its ambivalence as a techno-political tool for integrating the heterogeneous democracies and marketplaces and as adventure playground for delirious communications of extremely diverse kinds, is very hard to control and has established itself as the youngest mastermedium in history. In many regions of the Earth, millions of individuals have settled into the most impossible places. They have appropriated the new media and their cheap artifacts and have now themselves been appropriated by them with their promises. In this interaction, the potential of the media and its artifacts unfolds. Brecht's verdict from the late 1920s—that everybody now has the possibility to tell everybody anything, and immediately—is now an effect installed in everyday life.

The organization of life-threatening rebellion has become part of a process in which the utiliza-

tion and provision of communicative services as a civil right are interconnected. Young people especially react to what kinds of notions of freedom, global brand-worlds, and popular culture are visible on the Internet. They want to participate in the redistribution of the world that is taking place at the moment. They also want to talk to everyone, travel everywhere, and buy everything. It was not a state, but the Hungarian multi-billionaire George Soros who managed to implement all over the world his idea of an Open Society, which is the name of his powerful foundation. As a result of highly successful speculations on the stock market, he is in a position to support processes for installing market-based and market-cultural ideas of freedom. It began in the 1990s in Eastern European countries; now the continuation of those developments has reached the Middle East and North Africa. The imaginary movement knows no boundaries because it is not primarily about territories or other physically experienceable qualities or about familiar political values. Openness and happiness are the objects of desire, and these are repeatedly cited by the individual protesters; nothing more, but also nothing less.

We are gradually becoming accustomed to paradoxical interaction processes. Crowded together in the telecommunicative networks are the most banal private things, the most hidden dirt, and the most desperate forms of prostitution in the dubious twilight of delirious publicity. However, when it comes to sensitive events and decisions that potentially affect existing power structures, these increasingly take place well away from this techno-communicative transparency. The only witnesses of the shooting of Osama Bin Laden are most likely the automatons of the killer commando themselves, and the only ones, who in the most direct sense of the word were actually allowed to be in the (recorded) picture, belong to the innermost circle of power at the White House.

We do not live in an Internet society, nor has the communicative action, which Jürgen Habermas once outlined as his utopia of an imaginary regency of enlightened actors, secretly taken over power. The advanced level, the basic openness, and the existing wealth in the communication situation stand in diametrical opposition to the conditions of everyday life for the majority, in which there is a huge lack of basic necessities and any surplus that makes life worth living, and in which the murderous terrorizing of others is a daily ritual. In this sense, too, the communicative Nirvana of some is entirely detached from the real hell of many.

For the Orient (to which China and India also belong from a Hegelian perspective), a new century has long begun. Furthermore, we are begin-

ning to sense that the future constellations of a *mondiale* society are unimaginable without the countries of the African continent. The Japanese calendar scheme has begun a new era, given that coherence is imperative, Nevertheless, in the East a pronounced qualitative transition to the twenty-first century has not yet taken place. A strange lethargy and satisfaction with what exists holds sway. We first have to create new qualities with our own intellectual, political, and artistic activities, which can stimulate or irritate us and others, otherwise they will never exist. Or new qualities will be forced upon us by others, something we should not accept.

II.

So that misunderstandings do not pile up during the course of my argument, an explanation right at the start is appropriate. I do not share the comfortable view that we no longer need a concept of what we term media or the media. Terms are the frameworks of abstraction, which we need for thinking and acting in ways that are interventions. The definitions that we make should satisfy two important criteria. They should be of a provisional character and should be open enough to allow further operations.

What I describe as media has developed into a heterogeneous, interdiscursive field. As a multifarious phenomenon, media process a variety of concrete, resistant artifacts, programs, and issues located between the arts, sciences, and technologies. These three meta-discourses form tension-fraught relationships with each other as well as with other discourses such as economics, law, and politics. These relationships are embedded in overarching *dispositifs*, to which so far mainly truth, knowledge, and sexuality belong. Many years after Michel Foucault's great work, this does not need to be repeated time and again; it is implicit throughout the entire presentation. **If one thinks of a *dispositif* as something which is a given in a concrete situation and which fundamentally determines our behavior, it may be necessary to expand the above set of *dispositifs*; namely, by adding the concept of unconditional connectivity as a result of the idolization of technologically mediated dialogue.** This remains to be seen.

III.

From time to time, a deep-time view of developments suggests that one should risk a quick look from a bird's eye view. Here one accepts, of course, that this perspective has the greatest possible distance from the viewed object of both

photography and cinematography, and that it is only possible to produce through artificial means, as with flight via airplanes. As an experiment, such a view can be helpful. With regard to history it is informed by the interest in understanding the past not as a collection of retrievable facts but as a collection of possibilities.

Under the assumption that we are not only dealing with European Modernity but different competing Modernities which evolved at different times in different places, it makes sense to locate the development of the modern relations between arts, sciences, and technologies at an earlier period and not in Europe. The Mesopotamia of the late eighth and early ninth century of our calendar is very suitable as an operational starting point. With regard to the last 1200 years, interesting and also quite regular fluctuations in the temperature of the relations between arts, sciences, and technologies can be observed. In the following these will be conventionalized.

With the invention of programmable universal musical automatons and a constant supply of energy to mechanical devices by the Banū Mūsā brothers, the House of Wisdom in Baghdad marked a strong increase in temperature in the early ninth century. During the turn of the ninth to the tenth century things slowly cooled down again. At the beginning of the eleventh century, relations heated up again enormously through the groundbreaking work on optics by Ibn al-Haiṭham. Devices such as the camera obscura were described exactly. Visual perceptions were rendered comprehensible as cases of mathematical-geometrical perspective and as a parallel activity of the brain. Above all a culture was established in which experiment was not only understood as an illustration of the correctness of an a priori hypothesis, but also as a process in which new knowledge could be gained. The development of the very rich Muslim automaton theater based on Alexandrian, Byzantine, and Greek traditions began in the new millennium with the Book of Secrets which the Andalusian engineer Ibn Khalaf al-Muradī wrote down at the beginning of the eleventh century in Spanish Cordoba. With the compendium on theory and practice of the mechanical arts by the genius Ibn al-Razzāz al-Jazarī, a Kurdish engineer from around the year 1200, this development reached its zenith.¹

In the following centuries, the knowledge discovered and invented by Arabic scholars was enlarged upon, shamelessly exploited, and spread across Europe. Arab scholars' translations and adaptations of works from Ancient Greece, plus their own innovative additions, were translated into Latin, frequently without crediting the source, and then assimilated into Western knowledge. By the

fifteenth century, the tensions and frictions intensified again enormously due to the protagonists of the second Renaissance, from Filippo Brunelleschi and Leonardo da Vinci to Alberti. During the second half of the sixteenth century, Giovanni Battista della Porta contributed to an enormous popularization of experimental and technical knowledge. In 1600, William Gilbert laid the foundations for a systematic conception of diverse magnetic phenomena prior to their emergence as electricity. This strange stuff on the borderline between materiality and immateriality, related to the Greek *nous* and at home in the imaginary ether, can at this point in time be considered as discovered.

During the developments in the run-up to the European enlightenment, alchemist and physicist Isaac Newton is an exceptional figure who does not fit in with the concept of the subsequent cooling down period. By comparison, Kepler, Galilei, Descartes, and Huygens were cooler, with primarily mathematical minds. They formulated the essential foundations of modern science and systematized the scattered, fragmented knowledge of the previous centuries. Athanasius Kircher, primarily a collector and a genial recycler of ideas, was a thinker who generalized the particular in the spirit of Catholic theology and natural philosophy, and in this specific sense was not only a polymath but also an early strategic media expert in the service of the Vatican

Shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century, the formulated abstractions and separations under the sign of the new scientific rationalism caused the temperature to plummet in the relations that interest us here. Whereas for Julien Offray de La Mettrie in the 1730s bodies were eternally unorganized and uncontrollable, at a far remove from anything mechanical, in the writings of the Marquis de Sade lust became the object of a shameless and painful perversion of rationality. At the end of the eighteenth century, *Justine* and *Juliette* (1797–1801) formed the positive and negative poles of a morality that ran amok in quantifying the immeasurability of sexuality. “Something that is supposed to open the audience’s eyes,” commented Hans Blumenberg on the then flagging automaton culture of the Enlightenment, “now only induces the cheapest kind of stupefaction through effects whose mechanisms are concealed inside casings.”² Exactly at the end of the century, in his 1799 *Hymns to the Night*, the Romantic poet Novalis lamented the passing of the gods: “Alone and lifeless stood Nature. It was bound with an iron chain by dry Number and rigid Measure. Like dust and air the immeasurable flowering of life crumbled into words obscure.”³

A friend of Novalis’, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, initiated a long heated-up phase in relations

between the arts, sciences, and technologies with his notion of electricity as a new *central phenomenon* that maintains everything in a perpetual state of tension and oscillation. This phase was the founding era of the new media, of the technical image, of sound recording, and of telematics. The excitement about the media age lasted well into the twentieth century with its gigantic agglomerations and discharges, destructions and explosions, in which the media was already involved to a large extent. At the end of the century, the Internet seemed like a gentle dissolution of the concentrations—fascisms as Flusser termed them—which historically had been pent up for a long time. The digitally connected warehouse, with its seemingly infinite stock of images, texts, sounds, commodities, and services, offered the mobilized private users from Capetown to Copenhagen, Shanghai to Dublin all the possibilities of an up-to-date existence and state of the art cultural and technological sensibilities. For a great many people, social relationships would become primarily technology-based relationships. Henceforth, telecommunication would connect even more effectively and efficiently, but it would connect what is already deeply separated, as Guy Debord had announced in his *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967.

IV.

Now the media exist in superabundance, there is certainly no lack. For the thoroughly media-conditioned individuals media cannot possibly be the stuff that obsessions are made of any longer. What has turned into a given that is at one’s disposal is now utilized and defended as property, but it is no longer a coveted object of desire. In this specific sense, the media have become **superfluous**. Through the monumental exertions of the twentieth century, they have also become **time-worn**.

An update of the promise that the media could create a different, even a better world seems laughable from the perspective of our experience with the technologically based democracies of markets. As an ersatz utopia, this promise appears to be **obsolete** in the formerly hegemonic regions of North America and western and northern Europe.

Now that it is possible **to create a state with media**, media are no longer any good for a revolution. Media are an indispensable component of functioning social hierarchies, both from the top down and the bottom up, of power and countervailing power. They have taken on a systemic character. Without media, nothing works anymore. Media’s still surviving color supplements what we, in a careless generalization, continue to call

a society. Media are an integral part of everyday **coercion**, which is termed “practical constraints.” As cultural techniques, which need to be learned for social fitness, they are at the greatest possible remove from what whips us into a state of excitement, induces aesthetic exultation, or triggers irritated thoughts.

At the same time, many universities have established courses in media design, media studies, and media management. Something that operates as an intricate, dynamic, and edgy complex between the discourses—that is, something which can only operate interdiscursively—has acquired a firm and fixed place in the academic landscape. This is reassuring and creates professorial chairs, upon which elements that were once anarchic can be pondered over and developed into **knowledge for dominating and controlling**. Colleges and academies founded specifically for the media proactively seek close relationships with the industries, with manufacturers, and with the professional trades associations of design, orientation, and communication. In one of the myriad practice-oriented study courses of the late twentieth century, responsibility for a few weird television programs was sufficient qualification to be made a professor. A standard answer by many grammar school students to the question, what they would like to do in the future, jobwise, is “something or other to do with the media.” If one spends hours a day in various connections to the technological worlds of communication anyway, then one might as well try to earn a living with it. Parents who, with the best intentions, want to give their children a safe future recommend them to train as a data processing services salesperson or as a communication designer, because if the kids put enough into the job they may reach the desirable position of a manager of a complex, the ramifications of which the parents themselves are unable to appreciate any longer.

“In a certain sense, we have transformed the entire world into a place, which is perfectly suited for analytical techniques.”⁴ Technology-based communication has superbly established itself. In such a clear cut situation—at least with regard to the media—it seems necessary to attempt to summarize, highlight certain points, and above all open up this familiar field for questions. How has the strategic option of the media developed over the last decades? What role did theory play in it? How did the current situation of stabilized boredom with respect to the media develop? Is it possible to at least sketch the contours of what quality may come afterwards?

The attempt to pursue these questions and to define them more precisely involves a certain risk. One has to reflect critically on how the main

argument-configurations of various media discourses have developed in the past six to seven years. As I am involved in this process myself, this also implies that my own opinions must be called into question and **should not be taken too seriously**.

Detlef B. Linke, professor of clinical neurophysiology and neurosurgery rehabilitation, whose life was, with tragic irony, cut short in 2005 by a brain tumor, said that criticism is no longer effective because people are far too occupied with surviving the crisis. However, I am quite willing to accept its relative ineffectiveness, by which I also acknowledge my powerlessness. The position from which I believe it is still or is again possible to formulate criticism is located on the periphery, not in the center. This position can be found everywhere new ideas have been developed, before they are celebrated as fashions and trends in the metropolises and centers, before they are matured as products and marketed as commodities or services. Let’s take a chance and try to reactivate a profoundly dislocated point of view again.

Notes

1. See *Variatology 4 – On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies in the Arabic-Islamic World and Beyond*, eds. Siegfried Zielinski and Eckhard Fülus (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koenig, 2010).
2. Hans Blumenberg, *Geistesgeschichte der Technik*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 62.
3. Novalis, *ausgewählte Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Bölsche (Leipzig: Max Hesse, n. d.), vol. 1, 23; online: Projekt Gutenberg, Hymn 5; trans. George MacDonald (http://www.georgemacdonald.com/etexts/hymns_to_the_night.html).
4. Manuel De Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, (New York: Zone, 1997), 41.