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„No radio for the digital men?“
Questions (by Heidi Grundmann & Elisabeth Zimmermann) and some humble answers

In the beginning of the 1990s the mass media television, radio and the newspapers were still the leading media of our society. Today, over 20 years later, the traditional mass media are struggling for their existence. When, according to your research and experience, did the erosion of mass media as leading media of our society begin?

As a preliminary remark, it needs to be said speaking of “mass media” in general is in fact a bit dubious and actually has been ever since. We shouldn't forget, the term itself - “mass media” - stems not from any scientific, sociological or political discourse, observation or context, but started circulating in the field of advertising agencies in the USA around the 1920ties. That is to say, “mass media” has always been a parole in the sense of - “mass media”, buy that thing! The reason for the arising of this shibboleth can be figured out easily. Almost of a sudden, advertising planner around 1920 had to coordinate publicity campaigns schedules beside newspapers also for three additional new media, after the appearance of cinema and poster pillars around 1900, now for Radio as well.

Neither sociologically nor politically this new concept made much the difference. Ever since, the printing press and its daily newspapers has been the leading medium in terms of affecting the masses in western societies, and probably emerging the concept of masses itself, from the early 19th century on. In the shadow of the outcome of all these hilarious new electric and electronic media like cinema, radio, television etc., from the 1920ties to the 1950ties, we still can observe a growing influence of the printed press as the factual 'opinion maker'. In the 1930ties, short before Hitler took power, there have been up to 4000 different daily newspapers in Germany circulating, many of them with three and more editions a day. The democratic and anti-democratic public sphere in Europe and in the US, stemming from the revolutions and counter-revolutions since 1800, has ever been driven by the printed press based on the existence of thousands of daily newspapers.

Thus, even after the second world war, in devastating times of ruins and distress there were more daily papers circulating than today, in the early 1950 i.e. ca. 600, to take the numbers from Germany, double as much as in 2014. Against this background, the crisis of the mass media is a crisis of the daily newspaper genuinely, observabe since the 1990ties, caused by many reasons: a) privatizing the radio and television market followed by duplication of TV and radio channels, b) accompanied and somehow ignited by the evolution of micro market formats of informal communication patterns like Pop Radio communities, special interest magazines (the only print market which is not shrinking
dramatically) and special interest TV-Channels c) the digitalization of all communication systems from the 1980ties on, reducing the costs of production processes dramatically in all parts of these media businesses; d) at the end of the century, the transition to the internet would only be the amplification of a process of emerging new informal communication patterns like “Friends”, “Likes” or “Groups” in shape of networked social media applications like Facebook etc.. No doubt, these new volatile and dynamic networked structures of communication are now about to replace the old influential spheres of mass communication more and more as much as they generate new forms of direct-to-people (i.e. ‘viral’) advertising forms, shifting the ad funds further and even faster away from newspaper publishers than before. Now, after so many death of dailies in Europe, we finally “see” the crisis which is in fact ongoing since the 1980ties. The agony of mass media lies not only in this demise of newspapers, but is equally obvious in the degenerated news formats in TV. To hold up with their quota, TV news programs meanwhile outdo one another in outraging and scandalizing journalism, against the trend towards inexorable informalization of communication and the resulting lack of attention.

The interesting point is, new social media networks are not going to replace mass media physically or objectively but arch over them. Network channels within the social media (Youtube as an example) absorb continuously matters from television and radio, whilst these media still continue to exist as long as their aging target groups are not yet died out. As for the radio, we can observe a similar development. Since radio stations are licensed as mere music-playing machines, almost information-free and at best intermitted by a few paltry comedy figures, they have to survive in their market by getting completely formatted with very limited music material. Again, this is (often futile enough) exploiting the societal and sociological effects of music-styles to gain a stable market share. But, studies from the past ten years are showing this doesn’t work out properly enough anymore, at least not with the younger people. As scarcely as the 14 to 29 year olds read any newspaper (only a single-digit percent does) as little they hear radio in the sense of getting to their musical key medium. As far as pop-music is concerned, key medium for the younger generation is the internet and its various sources, again strongly driven by the networked structure of a rapid and far-reaching informal communication. That in turn has a great impact not only, as we all know, on the music industry, which still would not overcome its two decade long crisis yet. Probably its bigger effect lies on the scheme and on the structure of pop music itself. Pop music has been originated within the radio of the 1950s. From these days of “American Graffitti” on, each young generation pushed up the pop oriented radio/record-industries as a steadily growing consumer share. Now, in its current diffusion into the internet, pop music has lost this generational “driver”, running the
risk of completely loosing its inner connection thereby, desperately holding up in endlessly recycling itself.

Thus, same prospects remain for the radio as for pop music and other genres of radio time (radio plays, feature). They will survive for sure, but they will only survive in the net, torn away from their original context. The original context, radio as an integrated mass medium, consisting of information, education, culture and music, is on the way to become a museum form. Nevertheless, museums are important, and where they do exist they have to be obtained exhibiting examples of what has to be developed newly for the internet and in the context of the formatted informality of social media. To meet this need, public service broadcasters in European countries, as far as they still exist, have to take over the according tasks, even though new media laws would have to be legislated since the existing formulate these new challenges rather inadequately.

>>Could you please make a brief analysis of the present situation with its erosion of the role of the mass media which seems to run parallel to the proliferation of internet radios?

I think, both developments, the erosion of the mass media and the inflation of web radio stations on the Internet have to be kept rather apart. The former is primarily a phenomenon of daily newspapers and this again is merely a indirect result of the growth of the internet. However, the newspapers and their associated news agencies, though less significant in the overall picture, are still key in rendering the message flow characterizing the mass media. Don’t forget, not matter how weak mass media have become already in terms of their social influence, our political systems depends on them deeply. Newspapers do sit not any longer on the time clock of the news but still define anything about their scale and their rank. Although reaching out to far more people in the society, Television programs didn’t take over that leading role, since their news broadcasts have rather mutated into partly grotesque entertaining shows, sometimes even acting out as mere ideological propaganda machines, as Fox News in the USA for example.

In contrast, the vast majority of the estimated 20 thousand existing internet radio channels is a comparatively simple outgrowth of a trend of commercial radio stations to become consumer amplifiers. Certainly, we must distinguish between radio stations ‘in the internet’ just simulcasting their terrestrial radio program. These are up to 15 or 20 thousand stations alone. In the times of globalization, this has became a very valuable opportunity, i.e. to get in contact with all the public radios in the world, like with my favorite KPFK in Los Angeles to eventually hear the one and only “Rhapsody in Black” with Bill Gardner on every Saturday. On the other side, we have to look at the internet radio stations that produce only online, but again, things are not so easy here. Many of the so called internet radio stations are concealed spin-offs of existing terrestrial stations, like the
german radio station Antenne Bayern for example, operating another additional twenty or
more internet radio channels. Talking about the most of the “pureplay” web radios, we
have to face a new affiliation of music industry and radio, insofar these countless stations
in the web are nothing else than prepared music channels with a ‘one click buy’ function
connected to a music platform (Itunes, Google Play, Pandora. Last FM etc.).

The trend of deforming radio stations to mere consumption amplifiers did exist before
the internet and does even exist outside still. As already indicated, the decades-long
association of radio and music industry has broken since two decades, after the two
intertwined industries had achieved a sevenfold growth between 1970 and 1995. Today,
terrestrial radio is no longer a ‘frontrunner’ of the music industry, but instead ruminates
over and over again the fruits of their mutual heroic past, by amplifying a pure
consumerism through audio advertising. A spin off of that affiliation and a clever attempt to
revive old bonds, are these “pure web” internet radios, at least in their vast majority.

> Could one claim that radio streamed on the Internet, has become just another "audio
stream" among many, many others…? And IS this still radio?

Good question and a cautious answer. Questions of "What is" are ontological questions
and in the Internet age rather out of place for principle reasons. If you do not remember
when, what, where and wherefrom something 'really' happens, you should be careful with
questions of "what" and “now". Probably, the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics, i.e. the
impossibility, to determine place and time of an event simultaneously, have reached out to
social media and to our whole societal ecology. Strictly speaking, as compared to the old
analog radios circumstances of where transmitter, program and station yet formed a
physical and institutional unity, is what is called ‘Internet radio’ - no radio.

>>Two and a half years ago at a conference in Basel you mentioned the term
"entformtes Radio", a medium that could easily adjust to become other media by emulating
their forms. Could one not also claim that the traditional form of broadcasting content has
become the leading format for internet radio?

Of course, no question. The old forms of radio are the role models for what can be
heard on Internet radios. Radio has become a cultural asset and it is so because of its
forms: all forms of acoustical plays. interviews, contributions with and without original
sounds, live-discussions, feature forms of all kinds, literary reading by experienced
speakers yet doing 'drama' thereby; the particular attitude of moderators in front of the
microphone, DJ-ing, talking over and on music in a bedroom adequate tone etc., - all these
are medial cultural techniques that have been developed on the radio for decades now
thriving on the Internet.
As they are spin-offs of radio as well, particularly important in this context are the countless original radio podcasts in the net because of their interesting intention to re-amateurize the radio in avoiding all the false and chumming linguistic gestures addressing the listener as they have been evolved in the intrusive commercial radio formats. Best podcasts avoid them in favor of a new competent informality of speech that one can listen into contingently as to be gotten to someone who might be a friend even though you do not know him. A new formatted informality.

The term "entformtes Radio" ("demolding radio") meant something very similar. For nearly a century Radio has developed eminently rich forms, which had been emigrated in other media ever since, like the radio-series of the 1930s and 1940s which are still patterns for the current series boom on television today. In its special way of opening up the world, radio has always been an act of "demolding", namely developing completely new ways of speaking and listening, thereby, unlike Günther Anders thought (who coined the term “Entformung”) enriching us. In a sense, finally with the Internet the molds of radio are completely uncovered and free. We are no longer tied to an 'audience flow' of a linear program, but instead radically advised to get into a new non-linearity. That is the main advantage of the "demolding" of the old radio forms and an opportunity for its revival and development.

One of the attractions of on line radio in the form of broadcast radio is obviously that it does not need an institution to exist. The contents can be streamed on line by the users themselves without the bureaucracy of broadcast radio, without master sound engineers, without editors etc.

That's what I mean by "de-molding". Radio nowadays exists only in the cultural techniques that it has been producing in the use of language, the speech and the sounds; it exists only in the attitudes and habits, in the formats and shapes that belong to the history of radio. One could equally say: Would you once again invent a pure audio channel, if it would not exist for some reason? An unthinkable and nonsensical question, but you probably wouldn't. Taking Gregorian music mutatis mutandis as an example, the radio for almost a century long has been able to emerge its forms and techniques, therefore they must be preserved historically in the archives, which should remain accessible or be made accessible again, to be maintained and developed as cultural techniques of the articulation and exploration of the world.

Radio has become visible again after a long time of having been invisible as a given part of the fabric of our daily life. Is radio on the way to become a prae-medium?

If by “Prae-medium" is meant that radio is getting into a state of visibility of its components that need to be set back to a new kind of invisibility, then I would agree.
radio of the future will be a setting of phases in which the pictorial super flux of the world has to be stopped. The radio of the future in a network of flooding images will show how one can even find better through it blindly.

>> How useful was and is historical knowledge in periods of paradigmatic media change?

As I have already indicated, in questions of media a historical thinking is indispensable in times when only presence counts, Otherwise, we would just could rely on what we contingently encounter and what just somehow crosses our path. The radio must be historically understood in its forms, or in the net it will not have any future at all. Current radio stations, fighting against declining advertising revenues, seeking salvation in the new medium, which has made them the money, are not the patterns. They don’t find new ways to be truly successful in this new medium. Instead, they flatten their efforts even more, and this is not the model of how to let rise again an old medium in a new one. The public broadcasters, however, are (still) not clear in their statutory mandate to transfer their tasks from the classic electronic to the new networked media. To solve this problem we need arguments that gain their convincing power from the history of the medium.

>> Do you see any historical parallels between the developments of radio and the internet?

There are a lot of parallels. One of the most striking could be the overestimation of the medium. What was it that Velimir Khlebnikov in 1921 did not believe the ‘Radio of the Future’ should be able to? Bring all the world’s libraries in the villages, and to all lexicons and foreign languages and the smells every Indian plant. We know what did happen and what not, exalted overestimations as we could observe them always when media were new and the expectations on them otherworldly high. The same applies to the Internet. Now all say, an old utopia could be realized that the euphoric young playwright Brecht had developed for the radio: A distribution-apparatus should be changed to a communication-apparatus. But, as WEB 2.0 shows after 15 years, at the most it remains to in the “90 to 9 to 1 rule”, 90 are looking, 9 comment from time to time and one is doing all.

Presumably there are more parallels in the overestimation of the medium, but basically, the Internet and its networked communication structures I would not compare so much with the radio than with the introduction of the printing press. In my view, vaulting the world with networked computers we users assist to, as much as they assist to us, is comparable foremost with the advent of printing. Within a few decades the father of the future mayor of Marseille, around 1530, could gather all the previous knowledge of the West in a personal library for his son, Michel de Montaigne, inflicting upon him a Latin language education from birth on. After having emerged to a new autonomous being, this son would later tell
us in his essays how his awareness and individuation has happened in detail. Individuation and autonomous integrity, grounding the concept of a ‘person’ in the first place, perspective drawing and perspective thinking, abstract space and abstract time, the difference of private and public, - all these conditions of thought, indispensable for the order of our western societies and nations, are - as nations themselves too - a result of the era of printing. The Internet, its aisthesis, its impact on thinking and its action spaces is changing all that. As we can observe it currently, it dissolves economically and juristically the limits of most nations in favor of quite a few. It resolves the difference of private and public and make the actors of social networks hermaphrodites between subjects and objects. Perspective thinking and old point-of-view-ontologies are resolved relativistic, autonomous individuation perspectives vanishes and patterns of a strange new virtual communitarian collectivity arises, all that we still don’t know in its further tailoring. However, the effective use of our data in the thriving global big-data economy shows us already that for the new premises informal communication of social networks is offering us we have to pay a price of a new kind of depersonalization.