The New Disconnect: The Globalization of the Mass Media

By Gertrud Koch

Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of 'time' and space' and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men…. Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. 'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We live now in a *global* village…a simultaneous happening.

<div align="right">Marshall McLuhan and Q. Fiore[1]</div>

It is difficult to abstract entirely from the ambiguity in the word "global." It means "world encompassing," as intended above, while, in a more pejorative sense, it labels something inexact or only crudely conceived. Talk about the global is nearly always too global, gaining magnification at the cost of an erasure, of a loss of empirical reality. There is to that extent something permanently speculative, which is both treacherous and appealing, about all attempts to capture the global in conceptual terms. The introductory quote from McLuhan and Fiore preserves an odd paradox, which reproduces this ambiguity in another way: In the aftermath of globalization, the world has become a village. Like a village, today's world is characterized by a scarcity of distance, whether understood in spatial, temporal, or social terms (while real villages make use of a more complex ordering of symbolic spaces to inject distance into the otherwise inescapable narrowness). Everyone is connected to and for everyone else in a circular flow. The image of electrical current suggests that electricity is being conducted simultaneously by every point in the circuit; if just a single point fails, circulation as a whole comes to a stop. Only as long as the circulation of current connects all of us together do we live in a global village. Otherwise, McLuhan's simultaneous happening falls back out of synch. The routes and temporalities of travel reassert themselves, reestablishing the old order of what counts as near and far.

McLuhan, whom I adduce for the sake of brevity as the paradigmatic theorist of the modern media, links the space-time problem to the problem of information and communication: By what means and avenues, when, and how quickly do the concerns of one person become the concern of all? Imbedded here is a question that bears on recognizability as the basis of possible action. Temporal arrangements move logically on the level of the transitive linguistic order: earlier, later, simultaneous. The temporal schema, understood linguistically as an ordering relation, does not disappear. Insofar as it is a part of daily speech, time in this sense

can never be transcended without our giving up the temporal schemata of language itself. But these are precisely what McLuhan assumes when he speaks of a "simultaneous happening." Even accepting a sharp distinction between a "before" and a "now," it remains inescapable that some "later" will arise to invalidate any description of the now as a final state. The category of space seems likewise bound to time. Space as a distance (of a trip or to another place) can be understood as a temporal relation. When, as McLuhan puts it, time is done away with, the plane of action and speech is reduced as well. "Everyone else's concerns" then do indeed get dumped on us, without that meaning that we can reflect on them beyond their immediacy. Here McLuhan betrays what is terrorizing about immediacy – which, however, proves seductively Janus-faced. For although he states that time has disappeared, the claim as a whole is undermined by the temporal ordering schema in which it is expressed. Words such as "now" and "simultaneous" make sense and can be used only as concepts inside a pragmatic temporal order of acts. To the ambiguous quality of the statement is now added a logical impossibility: McLuhan relies on temporal concepts to speak about the end of time. Pushed on by a visionary undercurrent (the real force of which he reserves to the twenty-first century), McLuhan ends up in one of what are obviously the many traps of globalization.

McLuhan's message is that physical time has been out-leveraged by the electronic media. The chronological form lent to time by language and the way we describe things is no longer important. Of moment now is the simultaneity of the happening. Granting, however, that an accident occurring at 8:00 a.m. in New York City can very quickly become an item that by 8:10 has already been fed into the circulating news stream, it will still actually be dumped on the inhabitants of the global village at entirely different times. The chronology of daily life does not take place within the physical construct of simultaneity, but remains keyed to local times as defined by geography. Total simultaneity is an analytical fiction with no corresponding practice. The "global village" as a concept rests on an invalidating ambiguity in a temporal schema derived from the analytical tradition and physics. A "simultaneous happening," in McLuhan's sense, takes place when everyone does the same thing at the same time. When the same thing is being done by everyone one after the other, we have a chain of events with a repetitive character. I insist on what are perhaps minor distinctions because the second description renders palpable the way successive events are punctuated. Who is repeating whom, when, how, and where? Events like the stock market crashing or a bomb exploding take place non-repetitively; news about the event may circulate simultaneously, but it is still received successively at local times. It is probably not altogether wrong to assume that these successive processes are also hierarchical, with a corresponding temporality. Only once an iteration of the news takes place in accord with local time does it become meaningfully part of a local practice. From the technological possibility of simultaneous news dissemination, in other words, not much follows.

Simultaneous dissemination begins to have practical consequences only after the chronological hierarchies have emerged. Simultaneous news dissemination means that expert knowledges can be based on a head start, as in weather forecasting or conducting wars. These extreme examples highlight the practical context of action, and presuppose the existence of articulated interests for whom tactical maneuverings around the time *difference* are rewarding. Viewed against this backdrop, the image of electronic media flowing like a Pentecostal spirit into the passive eyes and ears of the global villagers looks like science fiction. Or, more precisely, like the utopian ideal of a perfectly transparent *unio mystica* being transferred onto technology.

McLuhan and Fiore evoke currents and circulation in the concrete, but the terms must also be understood metaphorically. The circulation of electricity can be figured in more than one way: as circulation within a closed system, for example, or as a system of connections built up of branches being added and removed. In one case, circulation is inclusively comprehensive and self-contained. In the other, it is entirely constituted by connections and disconnections. If, along with the introductory quotation, we assume that the circulation is inclusive, the world gets closed together into a big village. A situation in which circulation is exclusive has to be understood more in terms of centralization around a dominant point. Circulation thus becomes a metaphor for different forms of domination. Only once inclusive tendencies have prevailed and everyone is taking part is the tyranny over time and space broken and do the concerns of everyone become everyone's concern.

Of course there is no obligation to understand this 30 year-old quotation from the old masters of media theory in precisely this way. But doing so points to what seems to me an obsession in the debates over globalization, namely, the race against time. It would be a decade after this quotation before work began on McLuhan's posthumously edited book, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*. And, as the subtitle makes clear, by then the clock had already been set forward.[2] What is impossible to overlook here is the brilliant indeterminacy with which both a future and a present world condition are asserted grammatically. Vision and description, diagnosis and prognosis lie very close together. Something akin to that is what I see repeated in the globalization debates. The characteristic of being "global" is necessarily at odds with the temporality inherent in the concept of "globalization," for one thing. But now globalization itself is also conceived as a process that takes place *in* space and time, subject to interpretation entirely as a present-tense phenomenon. It neither lies altogether behind us, persisting in the form of a characteristic condition of the world (the global village), nor has it been pushed entirely into the twenty-first century future. As a process that takes place in space and time, *hic et nunc*, globalization raises other problems bearing on the nature of power and agency. Accelerating the process or retarding it – depending on what is being globalized and on relations of power and political options – seems either imperative or

something to be dreaded, a development to be dismissed or desired, condemned or hoped for, etc.

In the following I want to trace certain of the signal ambiguities in the current debates back to globalization's paradoxical results, before concluding with a look at possible alternative formulations.

Politics: Prometheus Unbound

At a conference of G7 countries on the "information society" held in February 1995, the discussion returned repeatedly, in both critical and laudatory modes, to a statement made by Al Gore in the *Financial Times*. The popular American politician had announced that "the linking of the world's people to a vast exchange of information and ideas is a dream that technology is set to deliver."[3] Given all that was supposed to come true in the process, Gore's vision sounded most of all like the latest version of the American Dream. The information society, he continued, "will bring economic progress, strong democracies, better environmental management, improved healthcare and a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet."[4]

It could become common sense that emerging communications and information technologies represent sufficient conditions in their own right, which, buttressed by a few categorical appeals to the shared interests of all mortal beings on the planet, would render politics no more than the positive side-effect of the dream technologies. Meanwhile, it is hardly necessary to report that a number of political sticking points – of the sort that can derail the passage of a dream into reality – were quickly tabled to the next G7 conference. Left safely unattended to was a matter raised by a number of African discussants, which is that more than half of the world's population at present has no access to a telephone line, to say nothing of a computer to connect to it.[5] Given the narrowing of the arena of political action, it has obviously become routine for politicians to attribute to technology such endangered local capacities as strong democracy.

It may be that politicians have no need to bother terribly with new concepts of time put forward by media theorists. But there is unmistakable political interest in space, the other category consigned by McLuhan to future decline. The enclosure of space plays a weighty role in all globalization debates, which themselves, as an aspect of geopolitical strategizing, are inseparable from power politics and the wielding of economic, political, and cultural influence. The centralized command controls of power politics are organized in a social-structural space which is not only founded on the unequal distribution of access from the first world to the fourth, but is also subject to national differences in regard to sovereignty and the potential of any particular nation-state to regulate its affairs. Saskia Sassen illustrates the way electronic space is socially structured with a simple example: "Global metropoles are hyper concentrations of infrastructure with limited resources, while major parts of the less developed world are massively under-

supplied. New York City has the highest concentration of buildings with fiber optic wiring, while Harlem, a black ghetto, has just one such building."[6]

But not only does the independent sphere of "electronic space" have an internal social structure. Since the power to decide how technology will be used is allotted in accord with territorial boundaries, the nation-state also represents a dominant factor. The hard core of technology transfer is constituted by territorial use rights and private property rights. Contrary to the elegant lightness of the transfer metaphor, electronic technologies are not deployed into a virtual electronic space beyond national boundaries, but remain bound to locality in the form of broadcast and receiver stations, to which extent they remain dependent on space and time. While politicians like to praise technology as a Promethean force rolling along on its own through the world on the Ariadne's thread of the economy, unfolding as a guide to a new world order, theorists of technology tend to be much more cautious.

Technology: Prometheus Bound

The brakes get applied through the medium of politics. Politicians and free-market liberals (and Marxists) like to appeal to technological development as a productive force, but theorists of the media are by no means so unified about the positive potential of the new media in themselves or as a reservoir of social practices. (The temporal leap in McLuhan's conception pointed out above is itself an indicator of relative pessimism.) Debates about the Internet are now developing in nearly analogous fashion. There were early reservations in Europe about the one-sided integration that accompanies the expansion of the Internet from an expert milieu centered on the university to a "mass medium," and they are now being seconded by others. "Precisely because the Internet is so rare and important as a special space of decentered power, its continued existence is essential. The difference between a poor person's e-mail (slow, at the end of a line) and that of a rich person (fast, top priority) is a reality. It could turn out in the future that the network of the poor man on the margin vegetates in increasing isolation from the flourishing of the rich man's network, which all the while becomes increasingly commercialized and privatized."[7]

That technological progress does not automatically bring social progress in its wake has to do with a complex of factors on the level both of individual societies and the society of the world at large. Social progress is bound inextricably to the principle of justice, so that technological progress can be a medium of social progress, but never the thing itself. Media theorists such as Ithiel de Sola Pool have long pointed out that, as it was put by his posthumous publisher, "technology is to be mistrusted less than governments," since "not computers, but politics, pose a threat to freedom."[8] It could be said ironically, adapting Hannah Arendt, that under modern conditions technology's "moment of natality," that instant of discovery in which it is open (while in fact already contingent upon social inscrip-

tions and support), is extremely brief. The given is "always already" a Procrustean bed enforcing social spaces and temporalities; it is the cradle of discovery, if not the matrix of conception itself. But the question of what determining factors may have been present in the antecedents of the modern media is of little interest here, because not a single practical problem regarding the use of the media will be solved by spiteful references to originary qualities. The point is that once the ideas of simultaneous ubiquity and equal and simultaneous access – which certain electronic media technologies do make possible – become practical in the sense that a shared experience of these media has come within everyone's reach, then it becomes possible to imagine a politics that makes use of the electronic medium of the computer as the decentralized communications medium of a similarly globalized and cosmopolitan civil society.

The Flaming Prometheus of the Media

As events escalated in Bosnia, reverberating back on western and central Europe through the mass media, Graham Bamford doused his clothing with gasoline and ignited himself on Parliament Square in London as a protest against British policy in Bosnia. Making his body into a living torch, he used it as the medium of a message and experience that had become available to him exclusively through the mass media.[9] How can we have arrived at such a pass? As a symbolic political act, public self-immolation is not new. But previously it was a form of local protest by individuals who regarded themselves as affected parties in a conflict. Bamford's case is different. With his physical act he is reacting to a thoroughly mass-mediated experience of horror and physical torment, reacting to the killings of others with whom he was obliged to share neither the experience nor the threat. Neither had the British government tortured or physically threatened British citizens while implementing its policy of non-intervention in Bosnia nor was Graham Bamford threatened from some other angle by the dangers to which he died to call attention.

One possibility is to declare Bamford's action ludicrously inappropriate, both as a personal deed and as a symbol. It is also possible to find reasons for agreeing with him or assessing his act critically in terms of political, moral, or other standards of propriety. The astounding thing is how fully experiences conveyed by the media can occasion identification – identification with the suffering of others who belong neither to one's own culture, religion, nor to any other specific, concrete group with common criteria of membership. It is a case of solidarity among strangers. Aside from short-term moral sentiment that pronounces the concerns of one individual the concern of all, there is obviously little to say about Bamford's motives. His public life coincides with his deed, after which he becomes a public object, but is no longer an actor in public. What astounds is the production of intense moral feeling by the mass media leading Bamford to decide to kill himself. The idea of self-sacrifice, naturally, is not new; it has a long tradition reaching

back to manifold concepts of salvation and redemption both religious and secular. I nevertheless find John B. Thompson's analysis of the situation persuasive. He concludes as follows: "This moral circumstance, in which mediated experience can give rise to claims on the self and to a sense of responsibility for distant others or events is relatively new as a widespread phenomenon."[10] For on the level of mass-mediated affects, the spectacular case of self-immolation no longer appears so isolated. It is the extreme indication among many that the globalization of data streams moves not only information, but also minds.

Another case of extreme action induced by the mass media are the pogroms and attacks committed by German soldiers in the Second World War immediately upon having viewed the anti-Semitic film *Jud Süß*. In both cases the question arises of the extent to which the mass media represent sufficient or necessary conditions for individual motivation. I assume that the showing of the film posed neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the murderous attacks. The disposition for killing Jews, to put it very abstractly, was embedded in a network of structural, cultural, and social-psychological circumstances that existed independently of any single presentation. The mass mediation of anti-Semitism was no doubt part of a strategy of self-legitimation on the part of the murderers themselves, in the sense that object relations with Jews had been transformed into a socio-psychological and cultural phantasm, reducing Jews as pure others to their physical bodies that in turn served as the target of anti-Semitic transference projections. Out of this blend of phantasmatic images and real bodies was formed the topography of annihilation; out of the individual gold teeth taken from the skeletal inhabitants of ghettos and camps was formed the mountain of "Jewish gold," which in retrospect seems to confirm the notion that "the Jews were rich." This is a composite character born of film rhetoric, of which Veit Harlan's film makes eager use. Projective legitimation can be supported by the mass media, but is not itself a characteristic of the mass media. It is a practice made possible by them.

The difference with Bamford's suicide is obvious: Bamford acted because he saw something he wanted to change. He wanted to prompt others to change what they were doing. His action was symbolic insofar as he used his body as the medium for a spectacle, public self-immolation, to which he attributed cathartic power. He used his own body as a sign for the actual deaths of strangers. With his life he stood in for others' lives. Separating him from the usual buddy/body politics of military and paramilitary organizations is the complete isolation, an extreme form of individuation, in which a private determination is made of what counts as distant and what as near. The concrete other becomes virtual. For that the globally operating information media are a necessary condition.

Mass and information media open virtual spaces to which all individuals refer, both in what they think and what they do. Charles Peirce defined "virtual" as

follows: "(1) A virtual *X* (where *X* is a common noun) is something, not an *X*, which has the efficiency (*virtus*) of an *x*. This is the proper meaning of the word; but (2) it has been seriously confounded with 'potential,' which is almost its contrary. For the potential *X* is of the nature of *X*, but is without actual efficiency."[11] It is possible here to replace Peirce's X with "solidarity," whereby solidarity under the conditions of global media communication among separated persons is virtual solidarity; it develops the practical effectiveness of solidarity without being solidarity in the sense of reciprocal organizational contact. The problem of mass-mediated identity can be described similarly. People communicating with each other on the Internet under the assumption of virtual gender is an example. Whether a person communicating as a man or woman is also recognized and acknowledged as such depends on the effect produced by his or her speech acts. Whether this person actually *is* a man or a woman is a different problem entirely, which would become meaningful only in reference to physical bodies together in the same place.

The conditions under which communication takes place do indeed change with the globalization of the mass media. They operate in ways that create spaces and identities which are neither fictional, that is, derived exclusively from a world invented in thought, nor universal in the sense of a simultaneous *unio mystica*. They are virtual in the sense of symbolism or speech acts. If the meaningful expansion of virtual communicative action is to take place, the globalization of the mass media is a necessary condition. This globalization will be reinforced, channeled, and implemented by a further set of necessary conditions which could probably not be listed comprehensively, consisting of established historical, cultural, institutional, political, and social circumstances.

Any conceptualization of media globalization that is capable of accounting for the indeterminacy of the symbolic media and does not succumb to economic reductionism must give center stage to the virtuality (*sensu* Peirce) of communicative action (*sensu* Habermas).

(Translated from the German by Don Reneau)

NOTES

1. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York, 1967), 16, 63.
2. Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village* (New York, 1989).
3. Quoted by Andrew Adonis, "Background Paper: Superhighways and the Information Society," in Deniz-Derman, ed., *Communications Revolution* (Ankara, 1996), 23.
4. Ibid.
5. See Monique van Dusseldorp, "Visions of Shared Human Enrichment… The G7 Conference on the Information Society," in Deniz-Derman, ed., *Communications Revolution*, 57.
6. Sasika Sassen, "Digitale Newzwerke und Macht," in Jörg Huber and Martin Helier, eds., *Konturen des Unentschiedenen*, Interventionen 6 (Stroemfeld/Roter Stern/Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 1997), 193.
7. Ibid., 196.

8. Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies Without Boundaries*, ed. Eli M. Noam (London, 1990).

9. I have taken this example from the book by John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity* (Stanford, 1995), 234. Thompson's source is the *Guardian*, which further describes Bamford as a television watcher only vaguely interested in politics. Televised news reports supplied him with an occasion for his suicide.

10. Ibid.

11. From a definition of "virtual" given by Peirce for James Mark Baldwin, ed., Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, new ed. (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1960), II:763.