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ACOUSTICNESS

NEWSPAPER/E-PAPER

FAKE NEWS

JOURNALISM

NOISE

PARASITE

Noisy Internet! Web Journalism as an Epitome of the Internet's Acousticness

Bernhard J. Dotzler and Solveig Ottmann

Spreading news has been one of the main functions of the internet from its very beginnings. As early as the beginning of the 1980s newspaper publishers started to offer news not just on paper, but online. This serves us as the starting point to scrutinize web journalism. Referring to certain moments in the history of e-news-papers and their utilization of more and more web and social media services, we want to investigate how the change in journalism epitomizes certain characteristics of the internet—or, to be more precise, how certain misconceptions of what e-papers are and of what the internet is overlap. Aiming for a better understanding of today's digital culture we try to develop an idea of what we call the "acousticness," or "noisiness," of the internet, as opposed to the internet's common conceptualization in visual terms.

Issue

*Imagine if you were sitting down to your
morning coffee turning on your home
computer to read the day's newspaper
– KRON-TV 1981, 00:00:00–00:00:06*

Reading news on a computer or a smartphone has begun to replace the classical printed newspaper. Most of the news-producing media—be it newspaper publishers, television, or radio broadcasters—have extended their reach to the *world wide web*. At the same time, the impression of an overwhelming amount of fake news spreading uncontrollably on the web takes hold.

Years ago, at the turn of the millennium, the progressing intermingling of news, newspapers and the web became more and more evident, and this process was accompanied by positive visions: a wide range of literature expected the internet to turn out to be the ideal distribution channel for digital goods and news(papers). Nearly two decades later, news on the web has become common: news of all kinds, including those of established publishers like *The New York Times*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and so on. Journalism has—more or less—fully embraced the internet. However, this development brought about all sorts of negative side effects like the much-heralded decline of professional journalism, the widespread closure of newspapers (*Zeitungssterben*), and the rise of “seemingly ubiquitous” fake news. In the end it seems that the more cautious prognoses (cf. Dans 2000) proved to be legitimate.

Chung, Nam, and Stefanone categorize online news into three categories—“mainstream,” “independent,” and “index-type news sources”—which “encompass the majority of online news sources”:

The most prevalent type sources are mainstream online news that distribute the same content available through their offline counterparts (i.e., *usatoday.com* or *nytimes.com*). . . . Independent online news sources lack the organizational complexity of mainstream sources (editorial staff, etc.) and focus on the production and distribution of news limited to their own websites, such as the *Drudge Report* (*drudgereport.com*) and *Axis of Logic* (*axisoflogic.com*). . . . Finally, index news sources like *news.google.com* and *news.yahoo.com* aggregate

content from thousands of news sources, search engines and Internet portals. (Chung, Nam, and Stefanone 2012, 173)

In what follows we are concerned with the effects of this situation on the first type of news, the “mainstream online news”, or what we call web journalism. We will explore what we view as misconceptions when discussing the current change as the relocation of news(papers) from the offline to the online world. We will argue that web journalism has to be understood as a reversal of the newspaper fundamentals that leads to economic suffering—because of the non-transferability of the printing press’s business model to the web editions of the journals—as well as to journalistic challenges (e.g., from so-called fake news) that emerged on the web. We are thus not dealing with the “remediation” of “the newspaper” into the online medium since the notion of remediation as it has been proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1999) suggests that we view online news as a mere refashioning of an old medium. Rather, we will argue that what is happening is a hostile takeover by the internet, resulting in an inversion of the newspaper’s core principles and, strictly speaking, its dissolution (cf. Bolter and Grusin 1999). At first glance it may seem that the newspaper has nested into the internet in a parasitical way, while in fact the internet as the carrier medium of news content has to be identified as the parasite (cf. Serres 2007).

Drawing on McLuhan’s discussion of newspapers as a medium the similarities and differences between online news and printed newspapers come to light. According to McLuhan:

. . . items of news and advertising that exist under a newspaper dateline are interrelated only by that dateline. They have no interconnection of logic or statement. Yet they form a mosaic. . . whose parts are interpenetrating. . . It is a kind of orchestral, resonating unity, not the unity of logical discourse. (McLuhan 1963, 43; cited in Enns 2012)

While the online news pieces on websites and in social media streams largely adhere to the described form of a mosaic, which constitutes an orchestral, resonating unity, they lack the material unity of printed newspapers that is epitomized in McLuhan’s notion of the dateline. Reconceptualizing McLuhan’s metaphor of the “mosaic” in terms of Serres’ notion of “noisiness” we can say that if the newspaper has already been noisy, online news is even noisier. It continues and simultaneously dissolves the basic features of the newspaper (dateline, integrality).

In addition, the notion of noisiness of the internet allows us to rethink and reframe the debates about “fake news” with respect to the phenomenon of post-truth. Fake news is widely discussed in relation to the visual verifiability (e.g., how to check the sources, how to check the validity of the pictures by performing an reverse image lookup via *Google Image*, and so on). Hence these debates are imbued with visual metaphors. In contrast we propose considering fake news in terms of its noisiness. While it is unquestionably important to deal with the specific manifestations of fake news we believe that considering only the visible symptoms conceals the underlying characteristics and mechanisms of the internet that bring this informational nuisance about: the “acousticness” of the internet that manifests itself in a noisy medium and the consequential “noisification” of web journalism.

History

In 1981, KRON-TV broadcasted a report by science editor Steve Newman on “the newest form of electronic journalism” (KRON-TV 1981). At that time computers had made their way into 2000–3000 homes in the Bay Area. About 500 of these households even registered for a new service that was provided by local newspapers, specifically the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. However, this was not a regional development but a national one, because six other newspapers were already doing the same thing across the U.S. These newspapers were providing an electronic news service that allowed logged-in users to get the latest news on their home computers when connected with the main news terminal, located in Columbus, Ohio, via telephone. After the dial-up, it was possible to transfer the complete contents of a regular edition of the requested newspaper from Columbus to the screens of the users at home, “with the exception of pictures, ads, and the comics” (00:00:48). For this to work, every participating newspaper had been “programming today’s copy of the paper into that same Ohio computer” (00:00:28–00:00:35). Labelled as an experiment, the aim of the project was “to figure out what it’s going to mean to ... editors and reporters and what it means to the home user” (00:00:57–00:01:05), as David Cole from the *San Francisco Examiner* explains. The report predicts that there will come a day when all newspapers and magazines will be accessible on home computers. Even though this prediction has not come true to its fullest extent, it is strikingly accurate: accessing e-papers and (other) electronic news on personal screens has become our daily routine.

The experiments with electronic or online newspapers reach back to the early 1970s. However, the most important developments started in the 1990s with the advent of the world wide web. Greer and Mensing recapitulate this development:

Although the newspaper industry has long experimented with a variety of electronic technologies—including proprietary services, videotext, and bulletin boards—publishing on the World Wide Web has proven to be the most successful and enduring of online newspaper publishing. In the first decade that newspapers have been publishing on the Web, journalists, Web designers, and computer programmers have experimented with a variety of formats and types of content. (2006, 13f.)

While in the beginning these newspapers added only a little interesting extra content, “the most recent online papers are producing sophisticated breaking-news reports, augmented with video, and various interactive elements (Greer and Mensing 2006, 14).

The first American web-based newspaper (the *Electronic Signpost* by the *Star-Tribune* in Casper, Wyoming) launched in April 1994, and the first British web edition of *The Daily Telegraph*, called *The Electronic Telegraph*, followed in late 1994. By May 1995 “150 papers worldwide had Web editions”, in April 1996 775 web editions were counted worldwide, and one year later “nearly 1600 newspapers were published online” (Greer and Mensing 2006, 13). Schoenbach, Waal, and Lauf (2005, 246) even claim that “virtually all newspapers in western developed countries have an online edition. . . [a]nd [that] there are some advantages of online newspapers for their users. . .”

Along with the rising number of web editions and web content over the years, web newspapers were not only able to fill the pictorial gap the first electronic services left, by not being able to transfer pictures, ads, and comics, but they even learned how to augment their static printed newspapers by integrating hypertextual, multimedia-based, and interactive components (cf. Deuze 2003). Furthermore, web news—in spite of “failing to take advantage of it” in the beginning—nowadays utilizes “one of the internet’s most compelling features: its immediacy” (Lasica 1997) and thus has moved from being a “static product on paper to a dynamic service online” (Tremayne, Schmitz Weiss, and Calmon Alves 2007, 826; Lasica 1997).

Noisy Internet: Integrality (Print) vs. Diffusivity (Online)

This paper argues that, in a way, there are no “electronic newspapers.” Online news is neither the electronic analogon nor equivalent to print. “Traditional” newspapers and online news rest upon fundamentally different characteristics. This difference results from their different material manifestations—ink vs. electronics, sheets of paper vs. webpages, paper vs. screen—causing a diametrically opposed way in how news exists offline (integral) and online (diffuse). So, it is due to the ontological state of the internet, which we interpret as “noisy” in all its ambiguity: fussing, roaring, resounding, disturbing.

Upon comparing the process of acquiring printed or online news, and thus the “diversification of news readership” that new media realities bring about (Fortunati, Deuze, and Luca 2014, 122), this difference becomes evident. Every medium has diversified audiences but after “the digitalization process there has been a further fragmentation of many different typologies of news readerships, so the production and consumption of news has become a puzzle . . .” (Fortunati, Deuze, and Luca 2014, 122; referring to Kueng, Picard, and Towse 2008; Deuze 2011). Focusing on textual news consumption, Fortunati et al. highlight that every news platform:

. . . corresponds with a specific model of audience. Print newspapers are part of the ritual of everyday life in which readers move towards the news in that they subscribed to the newspaper for receiving it at home, or they go to a newsstand to buy it. The free press is based on the opposite model: It visits people where they are and move about (in or near train or bus stations, hotel lobbies and other ‘spaces of flows’) aiming to intercept mobile people. . . . The third group, online newspapers, mainly aims to attract (and thereby construct the identities of) desk people (students, employees, professionals, and so on), that is people passing many hours of their workday in front of the computer and needing a break from time to time. Mobile news aims to capture the attention of news users at anytime and anyplace. (Fortunati, Deuze, and Luca 2014, 123; referring to Dimmick et al. [2011])

Despite their variety and heterogeneity in terms of reports, topics, and forms of (re)presentation, every newspaper creates a manageable unity that “can be defined as a closed, static package of news, information, and advertising, constructed in a typical industrial era line of production with

a fixed periodicity or publication cycle” (Tremayne, Schmitz Weiss, and Calmon Alves 2007, 825f.). The recipient decides which paper he wants to read, and consequently can have a look inside this unity: he can delve into it and inform himself in a quasi-encyclopedic way on all kinds of areas (politics, sports, and so on). This unity, however, is created by the editors’ choice of which items of news are bundled by a dateline. In 1974, Marshall McLuhan noted:

Let us look at the image of the newspaper as it still is today after a century of the telegraph. That image is organized not according to a story line but according to a date line. Like a symbolist poem, the ordinary newspaper page is an assembly of unconnected items in abstract mosaic form. Looked at in this way, it is plain that the newspaper had been a corporate poem for many years. It represents an inclusive image of a community and a wide diversity of human interests. Minus the story line of the connected narrative, the newspaper has long had an oral and corporate quality which relates it to many of the traditional art forms of mankind. On every page of the newspaper, in the discontinuous mosaic of unrelated human items, there is a resonance that bespeaks universality even in triviality. (1974, 50)

Thus, the newspaper manifests an integrality, regardless of the quality of its content. The package “printed newspaper” contains a variety of articles in an adjoined manner—advertisements included. Accordingly, Schoenbach, Waal, and Lauf state that:

printed papers, more than online ones, are constructed to guide their audience through the offer as a whole, in an attempt to serve as a generic community agenda or ‘Daily Us’ . . . as opposed to Negroponte’s vision of a customized ‘Daily Me,’ an (electronic) newspaper that would not ‘bother’ its users with topics they are not interested in. (2005, 247)

On the web, one encounters “more of everything” as well as “other types of content”—i.e., different from conventional newspaper reports—including archives, national news, and news wires” (Greer and Mensing 2006, 28). Additionally, the reader faces a “much more dynamic flux of continuous information” and permanent changes that “include the addition or subtraction of stories, the alteration of headlines, the changing or addition of photos, and other multimedia elements” (Tremayne, Schmitz Weiss, and Calmon Alves 2007, 825f.). At the same time, Negroponte’s vision about a “Daily Me” form of news seems to have (nearly) come true. To create a “Daily Me” news version, Negroponte envisions a gadget or “interface

agent” that can “read every newswire and newspaper and catch every TV and radio broadcast on the planet, and then construct a personalized summary” (Negroponte 1995, 153). It would be hyperbolic to argue that Google scans “every” existing news source on the planet. The basic principle, however, is the same. Google’s algorithms work as (personal) filters (cf. Negroponte 1995, 152f.), structuring search results in a certain and personalized kind of way.

Representatives like Google’s chief economist Hal Varian are right: digital communications conquer and outplay newspapers (as well as TV news) in their very own business, for online news is more up to date, cheaper, and accessible everywhere via smartphone (cf. Bernau, Hank, and Petersdorff 2014). Therefore, the plethora of data, information, news and content within the online realm necessitates new strategies for searching and finding relevant bits. Search engines and news agglomerates promise to not only simplify this process but to also provide only relevant results that are classified and pre-selected for the user by an intelligent technology (cf. Bickenbach and Maye 2009, 13f.). This kind of information retrieval promises direct access to relevant information, including news.

Users of web content compiled by a Google search, however, consume information that may originate from any kind of source, no matter who the originator is—in a similar way that acoustically transmitted information surrounds us: “There are no boundaries to sound. We hear from all directions at once. . . . Sound comes to us from above, below and the sides” (McLuhan 2004, 68). Furthermore, “search engines, agents and aggregators automatically research, select and aggregate news ‘from everywhere,’ facilitate access to a multitude of journalistic offers without, however, contributing news themselves” (Neuberger and Quandt 2010, 71). Or in other words:

index news sources like *news.google.com* and *news.yahoo.com* aggregate content from thousands of news sources, search engines and Internet portals. News stories are often categorized and annotated by editorial teams and these sites are known for their algorithm-based editing, opposed to human editors. Index sites like these have emerged as major news sources. . . . (Chung, Nam, and Stefanone 2012, 173)

To *google* has become one of the basic forms of information retrieval today. If the aim is to get information about the latest goings-on concerning certain topics a common process is to feed the Google search with the relevant keyword, e.g., “Brexit” or “Terror attack in. . .” Whether using the

open search or the news search, Google compiles a hit list consisting of the latest, or, according to algorithmic decisions, “most relevant,” content. These entries consist of “teasers and tables of contents” requiring that “one has to click and/or to scroll” (Schoenbach, Waal, and Lauf 2005, 246) to access the full articles, which on their part appear just as single items of news.

This is completely different from the medial integrality of printed papers. In fact, it epitomizes the true nature of the noisy online information space—its diffusivity—regardless of the content’s clarity, focus, or other qualities. The cues of printed papers mentioned above help readers not to get lost in the wealth of news, in spite of its non-linear, mosaic-like presentation. Printed papers create an editorial unity and thus tone down the noisiness of the news with procedures “such as the position of an article within the paper, within a section and on a page” (Schoenbach, Waal, and Lauf 2005, 247f.).

The internet’s “acousticness,” in contrast, operates as a diffuser, a disturber and a creator of a new order of news in the digital realm. We understand “acousticness” in continuation of McLuhan’s concept of “acoustic space” (cf. e.g., McLuhan and McLuhan 1988), as a “unique unvisualizable space. The all-at-onceness of auditory space is the exact opposite of lineality, of taking one thing at a time” (McLuhan 1963, 43; cited in Enns 2012). This acoustic space signifies “the juxtaposition—not the integration or synthesis—of disparate elements”:

[A]ny pattern in which the components co-exist without direct lineal hook-up or connection, creating a field of simultaneous relations, is auditory, even though some of its aspects can be seen. . . . The items of news and advertising that exist under a newspaper dateline are inter-related only by that dateline. They have no interconnection of logic or statement. Yet they form a mosaic. . . whose parts are interpenetrating. . . . It is a kind of orchestral, resonating unity, not the unity of logical discourse. (McLuhan 1963, 43; cited in Enns 2012)

This epitomizes the internet’s (as well as *a fortiori* the web’s) core principle: the Net itself is untraceable and at the very same time ubiquitous. The Net has covered the globe with an artificial sphere, an Infosphere; contents are “everywhere.” Web news aggregated by search engines renounces the unifying dimension of the newspaper dateline and perpetuates the noisiness of news. The ubiquitousness, ephemerality and acousticness of the internet, as well as the noisiness of online news, however, give access to a seemingly endless amount of co-instantaneous available information,

including the not to be forgotten, persistent outdated news that stays on the web and is still findable (cf. Dotzler and Rösler-Keilholz 2017, 205). Today, “the ubiquity of news on the Internet and within social media offer people the possibility to be exposed to news whether or not they [the citizens] actively seek it out. . . .” (Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017, 105).

This availability and abundance of news creates the phenomenon of so-called ambient news (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002, cited in Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017, 106), a concept that “suggests that news today is ubiquitous, pervasive, and constantly all around us” (Hermida 2010, cited in Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017, 106). In our understanding, the concurrence of the noisiness of news with the acousticness of the internet is constitutive for this ambience. Their combination causes the dissolution of the unifying integrality of printed newspapers and revives the acoustic ontology of news—its noisiness and its diffuseness.

Parasite/Noisiness

. . . the noise, the ultimate parasite, through its interruption, wins the game. In the parasitic chain, the last to come, tries to supplant his predecessor – Serres 2007, 4

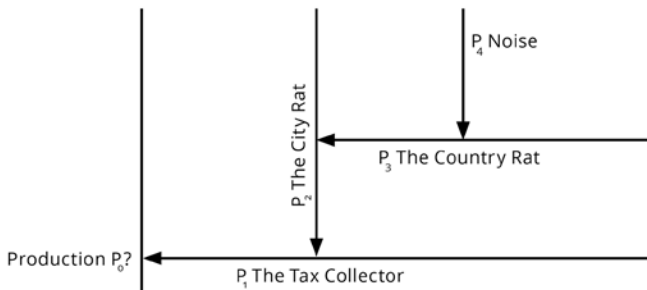
The noisy state of online news culminates in the current disconcertment that centers around keywords like “fake news,” “alternative facts,” or “post-factual era”: a constant state of suspicion regarding the truthfulness of news that also concerns liability, dependability, and the responsibility of published information; not only but also in particular with regard to web news in all its different forms (journalistic platforms, social networks) that become progressively more difficult to tell apart. What Heibach states about forms of knowledge generation in the context of libraries can be transferred to the context of news on the web: the internet created a form of knowledge generation which:

is in part beyond the institutional mechanisms and thus much more susceptible to the suspicion of misinformation than the experts legitimated by their affiliation with educational institutions. . . . The downside of this diagnosis is this: the individual and his information literacy are much more demanded on the internet, because it is not the institution, but he who has to check the knowledge for validity and

factual correctness. (Heibach 2011, 61 [own translation]; cited in Dotzler and Rösler-Keilholz 2017, 218)

Applied to the news realm, the legitimate experts would be journalists and mass media editorial staff, while non-journalistic content can also classify as news—as well as (un)deliberately distributed false/fake news. The reader/user is thus even more obligated to perform a critical assessment of the sources and the validity of the contents than he was before as the authority of the gatekeepers has diminished (cf. Bruns 2009).¹

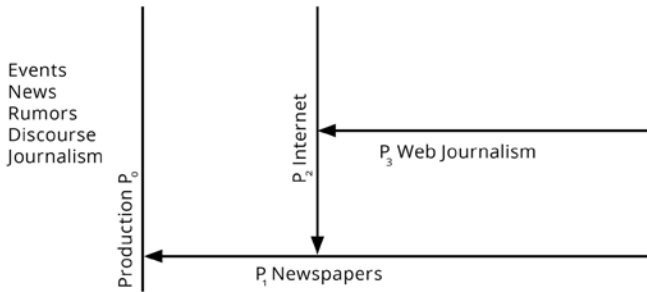
To gain a better understanding about what is happening it is pertinent to reference Michel Serres' conceptualization of the "Parasite"—keeping in mind that *parasite*, in French, not only means just a parasite but also *static*, or *noise*. While at first glance what has happened seems to result from newspapers (and news media institutions in general) entering the online realm or nesting in the internet in a parasitical way, we argue that in fact the carrier medium internet is the parasite living on its contents, i.e., in our case the newspaper. Serres illustrates his concept of the parasite by the fable of the city rat (Parasite 2) and the country rat (Parasite 3) living on the meal of the tax collector the city rat has lodged itself with. However, the tax collector is also a parasite (Parasite 1) as he has not produced the meal himself (cf. Fig. 1; Serres 2007, 4).



[Figure 1] The parasitical cascade (Source: Serres 2007, 4; own slightly altered version).

Transferred to web journalism this means that newspapers live on events, news, rumors, discourse, and journalism, and thus qualify as Parasite 1 in Serres' parasitical cascade. The internet comes in as Parasite 2, lodging itself into and living on the newspapers (cf. Fig. 2: The parasitical cascade of web journalism).

1 For explorations on the media credibility of offline/online news see, for example: Borah 2014; Chung, Nam, and Stefanone 2012.



[Figure 2] The parasitical cascade of web journalism (Source: own figure).

Serres' parasitical cascade ends with Parasite 4: the noise—"the ultimate parasite"—that interrupts the meal of the rats (Serres 2007, 4; cf. Fig. 1: The parasitical cascade). The noise "upsets the game, and the system collapses. . . . The noise temporarily stops the system, makes it oscillate indefinitely" (Serres 2007, 14). However, it is not immediately obvious who is the parasite, and who the interrupter: being a noisy medium as such, the internet is not only the parasite but also the noise that interrupts the system—just as "parasite" and "noise" are synonyms in French. In the discussed case, the noisy internet has sucked itself into "the newspaper" and interrupted its continuity and integrality simultaneously. This simply means that the given system changes and a new system emerges, just as hyperlinking in combination with the multi-levelled and multi-platform options of disseminating and gathering news, as Borah states with reference to other scholars, *can* help to "'understand an issue in depth' (Kovarick 2002), 'provide an element of interactivity' (Peng, Tham, and Xiaoming 1999), increase 'the user's ability to control the information-seeking process' (Dimitrova et al. 2003, 403), and provide 'users with the ability to understand policies and debates with the help of additional information (Jacques and Ratzan 1997)'" (Borah 2014, 579). The internet originates a new—partly similar, partly completely different—system of news that nevertheless must not be mixed up with the integral unity of the "newspaper," being—nevertheless—more noisy than the former news channel.

It is of vital importance that the Parasite only "interrupts at first glance" but "consolidates when you look again" (Serres 2007, 14). Serres' theorem about the noise thus grants the parasite a creative power that, even more so, "invents something new. . . builds a new logic. . . . This novelty must be analyzed" (Serres 2007, 35).

The fact that the noisy internet lodged itself into the news business brought about a new logic of news, both in distributing and in receiving. Due to the characteristics of integrality versus diffusivity described earlier, online news, displayed singularly on the screen and also belonging to the infinite virtuality of all web news—whether with identical or differing content—provides the material indifference that causes the current disconcertment of web journalism, which is under constant suspicion of being a distributor of rumors rather than truthful news. As early as 2004, Keyes postulated that we live in “a post-truth era” (2004, 13), which is in no way a result of web journalism but of the web per se—the internet’s acousticalness.

Events, news, rumors, and discourse enter a state of constant reiteration within the nearly endless variety of available news. In this sense, the plethora of web news makes it difficult to judge what is a “real” message and what is just noise. Serres gives a similar account on the parasite, when stating that “[i]n the system, noise and message exchange roles according to the position of the observer and the action of the actor, but they are transformed into one another as well as a function of time and of the system. They make order and disorder” (Serres 2007, 66).

Another relevant aspect is that web journalism shows the paradoxical development of a reduction in length (shorter news) and a growth in complexity concerning the (virtualized) news sphere as a whole. Consequentially, the task of distinguishing news from noise becomes much more challenging. Additionally, as again Serres notes, “whoever belongs to the system perceives noises less and represses them more, the more he is a functioning part of the system” (Serres 2007, 68). This applies to both the receiver/user as well as the producers of news who must distinguish messages from noise.

To make matters even more complex we have to go back to the altered information behavior described earlier on: search, find, read the news item, leave the page. Users that “only scroll down an online newspaper. . . encounter fewer, and certainly fewer complete, stories than by thumbing through a printed paper” (Schoenbach, Waal, and Lauf 2005, 246f.). At the same time some scholars describe a:

news-finds-me perception and effect. The news-finds-me effect stems from individuals’ perceptions that a) they are well informed about current events despite not purposely following the news, because b) the important information ‘finds them’ anyway, through their general media use, peers, and social connections. (Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017, 106)

This results in a receptive situation of web news that contrasts the mosaic perceptive situation of a printed paper: “clicking and scrolling may draw readers away from the other topics in the online paper, whereas reading an article in a printed edition does not make the surrounding stories on that page or spread invisible” (Schoenbach, Waal, and Lauf 2005, 247). Untruthful news is even more difficult to spot, since the internet has lodged itself onto the newspaper as a parasite, and “separates us, individualizes us” (Serres 2007, 126), just as noise does. This results in a kind of “newsy” noise level or noisy news level that encircles the user, making it difficult to distinguish news from noise:

The thick wall that exists between us is built of noises and cacophony. The monad has neither door nor window; we are deaf, and for others, we are dumb because most of the time what arrives at our sensory apparatus that is always open, our hearing, is unbearable. We are surrounded by noise. And this noise is inextinguishable. It is outside—it is the world itself—and it is inside, produced by our living body. We are in the noises of the world, we cannot close our door to their reception, and we evolve, rolling in this incalculable swell. (Serres 2007, 126)

The Infosphere, that is to say the ubiquitous, noisy internet, encloses us; it is—just as Serres notes—outside and inside; we are in it and cannot close our doors to it.

From the perspective of the producers the situation is aggravated by the simultaneity but also the diametric coexistence of economic (publishing) and ethical (journalistic) symptoms of a crisis and their constant mix-up. This leads to today’s observable self-cannibalization of the well-established/mainstream newspapers, driven by the notorious—yet notoriously misconceived—comparison of newspaper and web businesses. Following Serres’ comprehension of the parasite’s characteristics, this is to be understood as a consequence of the parasite performing mimicry and disguising itself as the host it lives on: “To avoid the unavoidable reaction of rejection, exclusion, a (biological) parasite makes or secretes tissue identical to that of its host at the location of contact points with the host’s body” (Serres 2007, 202). Instead of obliterating “traditional (news) papers,” online news imitates newspapers, or even disguises itself as a newspaper. It seems that the crisis newspapers are facing (decreasing numbers of copies sold, slumping advertising revenues, less time spent on reading printed newspapers, and so on) is a symptom of the internet living as a parasite on the newspaper. What we currently observe, in accord with

Serres, is that the internet (the parasite) keeps its host (newspaper) alive—for as long as possible—before the host might die at some point:

When everything is added up, the parasite would do well not to kill the host on whom it feeds. . . . The parasite lives on the host, by him, with him, *per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso*; it makes him its house, its tent, its tabernacle; it reproduces in him and increases until the inevitable point when the host dies. (Serres 2007, 168)

Conclusion

The producer plays the contents, the parasite, the position. The one who plays the position will always beat the one who plays the contents. – Serres 2007, 38

To fully understand its modes of operation and implications, the internet needs to be conceptualized in acoustic instead of visual terms, as Marshall McLuhan has already suggested for electric/electronic media in general. McLuhan notes that as early as the introduction of the telegraph—the first electric medium—a fundamental process of change was initiated, starting with the newspaper: “since the telegraph, the press has presented a non-linear mosaic, and so have radio and television” (McLuhan 2005b, 8). Even the newspaper can be defined as somewhat noisy-ish and somehow diffuse, in contrast to the linear, integral book. McLuhan diagnoses:

. . . two basic types of order in experience and organization: the visual and the auditory. The basic patterns for ear and eye found in most of the media are in their messages typically non-verbal. And it is even more confusing at first for some to learn that the mosaic of a page of telegraph press is ‘auditory’ in basic structure. That, however, is only to say that any pattern in which the components coexist without direct lineal hook-up or connection, creating a field of simultaneous relations, is auditory, even though some of its aspects can be seen. The items of news and advertising that exist under a dateline are interrelated only by that dateline. They have no interconnection of logic or statement. Yet they form a mosaic whose parts are interpenetrating. Such is also the kind of order that tends to exist in a city or a culture. It is a kind of orchestral, resonating unity, not a logical unity of discourse. (2005b, 9)

What began with the telegraph and subsequently been passed on to the newspaper has nowadays been surpassed by the internet as a noisy and “noisificating” medium. That’s why we must rigorously distinguish between the press and online newspapers instead of confusing them. The visual approach to media is not enough for “acoustic” media in McLuhan’s sense, and even less so for the internet, which epitomizes what McLuhan has stated for the acoustic or auditory space: “Auditory space is that sphere of simultaneous relations created by the act of hearing. We hear from all directions at the same instant. This creates a unique unvisualizable space” (McLuhan 2005b, 6). The digital cultures of today, brought about by the “all-at-once world” (McLuhan 2005b, 6) of the acoustic space, cannot be understood from a visual perspective; a visual perspective that is either affected by “the hypnotic and irrational pressure of the book page” (McLuhan 2005a, 6) or by the screen-fixated perspective. Baudrillard, for example, whose explorations center on the subject which, due to its constant exposure to pictures and screens, he declares to be mesmerized by the video screens, explains that today we live in the imaginary world of the screen (cf. Baudrillard 1989, 114 & 130). Nonetheless, when focusing on the graphical interface and the user level—which are naturally visual—the fundamental nature of these media is misconceived. Electric/electronic media are only becoming fully comprehensible in acoustical terms. Applying the paradigmatic concept of the parasite and noise is a necessary step to “alter our entire sighting and range-finding apparatus” by becoming free of being “oriented to the printed page alone” (McLuhan 2005a, 14) and also becoming able to assess the impact of the internet.

This paper argues that, as much as the internet seems to consist of hosts offering information resources such as online newspapers, it actually is the parasite and not the host. At first glance, it seems that over the past decades, newspapers have tried to establish the internet as a new distribution channel and thus “to parasite” the internet. However, by looking at the nature of the internet from a different perspective it turns out that it is the other way round: the internet maintains a close relationship to all its content, be it news, ads, or so on. Thereby, the internet is not only a new distribution channel for newspapers, but more importantly, it utilizes the newspaper to expand its own presence. In short: journalism acts as the host for the parasitical internet. Even more, the internet is by no means the universal host that is utilized by all sorts of parasitical services for their needs (e.g., email, newspapers, advertisements, streaming services, journalism), but it is the universal parasite that infests—and thus also “noisificates”—everything it comes into contact with.

Consequently, the internet's noisiness, or acoustiness, should be the focus of future explorations into digital cultures.

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