Editor's Introduction: "There Are No Media"

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If asked for a definition of "media," the answer given by the authors included in this volume would likely be "*Es gibt keine Medien*"—"There are no media." In 1993, Friedrich Kittler published the essay "There Is No Software." Three years later, Bernhard Siegert attacked one of the fetishes of the burgeoning German media studies of the 1990s by declaring that "There are no mass media."[1] Such a dismissal of some of the core concepts of media studies—including any fixed concept of "media" itself—may well be the signature of the type of "new media theory" presented by the modest collection of essays in this volume.

Media studies having broadly established itself as an academic discipline, the question of what a medium "is" has been (and continues to be) the object of heated debate. Rather than defining the "essence" of media as technology, "extensions of man," communication devices, system of codes, and so forth, or describing their social, aesthetic, communicational, ideological, or other functions, the theorists collected in this volume channel our attention toward the "technological-medial a prioris" of culture; that is, toward the function and functioning of media over and against any interrogation of their "nature." Such an approach aims not at understanding media as an ontological concept but rather—as the founding figure, Kittler, put it in an early text—at focusing on the "networks of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data."[2] Within this type of media analysis, institutions play as important a role as technologies, and modes of coding and notation, archiving, and the transfer of data are as crucial as questions of the political or strategic impacts of media. Within the cacophony of divergent and heterogeneous attempts to define the obscure object of the ever-growing German academic field of "media studies," scholars today are caught by the impossibility of finding common ground for what they mean by *media.* Unlike literary studies (the original discipline of many of Germany's chief media theorists) and even gender studies (a similarly recent field but one with fewer problems defining its object), "media studies" seems to lack a consensus about its field and/or object of study. Doors and mirrors, computers and gramophones, electricity and newspapers, television and telescopes, archives and automobiles, water and air, information and noise, numbers and calendars,

images, writing, and voice—all these highly disparate objects and phenomena fall into media studies' purview. Yet the manner in which they are or, rather, *"become"* media (as Joseph Vogl points out in his essay), can be analyzed only in historically singular and specific situations. The notion of "medium" reduces to a fragile and even ephemeral state of "in-between-ness," as much a moment (let alone an object) of separation as of mediation, a moment taken by a virtuality becoming an actuality, a moment of structuring and encoding and thus of the creation of order, but also the source of disruption and "noise." Theorizing media thus means not so much analyzing a given, observable object as engaging with processes, transformations, and events. Media are not only the conditions of possibility for events—be they the transfer of a message, the emergence of a visual object, or the re-presentation of things past—but are in themselves events: assemblages or constellations of certain technologies, fields of knowledge, and social institutions. Such heterogeneous structures form the basis, the "medial a priori," as it were, for human experiences, cultural practices, and forms of knowledge. Regarding media as processes and events, observing their effects rather than their technological forms or ideological contents, also implies a broadening of their analytical frame, which becomes more a certain type of questioning than a discipline in itself. Perhaps such an anti-ontological approach to media, a radical opening of the analytical domain to any kind of medial process, has been more productive and theoretically challenging than any attempt, however convincing, at answering the question of what media "are."[3] The recent boom in institutionalizing media studies in German-speaking countries (more than fifty universities currently have media departments or offer degrees in media studies) has been unhampered by the absence of a general concept, making do with ad hoc definitions primarily adjusted to the demands of the practical uses of media.

What's German about Media Theory? Certainly, there is no such thing as "German Media Theory," whether old or new. Nevertheless, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, probably the most insightful non-German expert on the history of German media theory, recently praised German theory as a reliable brand, not unlike German cars or beer.[4] Despite the absence of any common concept or method concerning media, German theorists share both a propensity for questioning the epistemological foundations of knowledge (and thus for constructivist approaches in philosophy as much as in media theory) and common media experiences: from the propaganda apparatus of National Socialism to the denazifying effects of American rock music, from democratic instruction through television talk shows to near hysterical reactions to the dangers of computer games or cell phone radiation. "There may be a continuity *From Caligari to Hitler,* there certainly is one from Caligari to Kittler," Winthrop-Young has written.[5] Paradoxically,

the theoretical fascination of German scholars with media contrasts with a profound suspicion on the part of the general public toward what it calls "the media," whether it be the mass media's manipulative effects or the pedagogically disastrous impact of computers on tender teenage souls. Despite some rather neglected early forerunners of media philosophy such as Ernst Kapp's *Philosophy of Technology* or Walter Benjamin's groundbreaking design of an aesthetic theory of media, German thinking about media, especially in the wake of the Frankfurt School, often limited itself to criticism of the ideological effects of mass media and communication.[6] Expected of the widespread institutionalization of media studies was often a type of theory that would serve as practical political counseling: How dangerous are media? What is the relation between media and politics? What future trends are to be expected? Standing behind such media-phobia seems to be a profound unease with the ways in which technology permeates everyday life. German media-phobia is, in fact, technophobia and a nostalgic attachment to those media linked to the old idea of *"Bildung,"* or humanist education. Books are good, computer games are not.

The underlying German tradition of technophobia in the humanities may be one of the reasons that the avant-garde of a kind of media theory that derives from Michel Foucault's discourse analysis—namely that of Kittler, Georg Christoph Tholen, Wolfgang Hagen, Jochen Hörisch, Norbert Bolz, and others—turned in the 1980s toward a history of media that emphatically took into account the technological and epistemological structure of media. In the attempt to purge the humanities of their humanistic baggage *("Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften"),* the material and technical foundations of communication, knowledge, and power emerged as cultural history's blind spot. German media theory's early emphasis on technology was aimed at counterbalancing the (potentially specifically German) ignorance of technology. A critical and, perhaps, polemical predisposition led to the development of media studies out of the humanities (the majority of German media theorists today, including most of the authors in this issue, were originally trained as literary scholars, philosophers, or art historians) while simultaneously revolting *against* the traditional tenets of the humanities. Media theory began as a criticism of the quicksand of such predicaments as "sense," "meaning," "interpretation," and "beauty." It rejected the sundering of sciences and humanities; it was cross-disciplinary, experimental, a "gay science" poaching in the game reserves of the traditional disciplines and challenging their internal limitations. Even in certain unsuccessful, early approaches (as shown by Claus Pias's essay in this volume, which reconstructs Max Bense's attempt at establishing cybernetics as a method in cultural analysis) the main

objective was to bridge the abyss that separated the humanities from the methods and objects of natural sciences, mathematics, and technology. Closing this gap via radical transdisciplinarity may thus be the most fruitful impact of media theory on the modern intellectual environment. Media theory has not only established a field of its own, but with perhaps more dramatic effect has transformed the study of literature, art, film, theater, and history (history proper as well as that of science or technology). The question now is whether what was originally a critical and experimental impetus can be preserved as media studies transforms into its own discipline. At its most creative, media theory might *not* be a field in itself but rather a disciplinary crossover or a transdisciplinary pursuit.

For this reason this special issue of *Grey Room* does not aim at a balanced overview of the dominant positions in German media studies. Rather, it tries to pinpoint a younger generation of scholars in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria who retransmit the technology-savvy, cross-disciplinary impetus of their predecessors while taking it in new directions. United in this volume are a number of inquiries from different fields—from media history to law, photography, and the history of science—which reveal, despite their disciplinary diversity, a certain family resemblance. This resemblance comprises two common methodological factors: first, the authors' (post-) Foucauldian (and thus [post-] Kittlerian) heritage—the emphasis on the epistemic effects of media in the production and processing of knowledge and on the medial dimensions of the mechanisms of power; and, second, the authors' implicit or (as in the case of Siegert and Vogl) explicit opposition to any kind of ontological conceptualization of media. All of the authors' theoretical developments are made in reference to a single, specific, and thus paradigmatic historical example, be it the photography of torture and its role in a general theory of photographic evidence (Herta Wolf), the constitution of modern cosmology through the telescope (Vogl), the construction of the body as medium in nineteenth-century hygienic discourse (Philipp Sarasin), or the juridical form of computer architecture (Cornelia Vismann and Markus Krajewski). Vogl and Sarasin, both not only researchers in a Foucauldian tradition but also among the most original Foucault scholars, pursue an archeology of knowledge through to its material foundations. While Sarasin deciphers an implicit theory of the body as a medium in medical texts, Vogl paradigmatically analyzes the telescope as a *dispositif,* an object that *becomes a medium* precisely by becoming epistemologically productive in the constellation of a specific technology, a new theoretical framework, and a visual effect, thereby constituting the cosmos as an "epistemic thing."[7] Whereas Foucault observed the rules and truth effects that governed a given network of historical discourse,

post-Foucauldian media theory broadens the scope of an archeology of knowledge by including the material objects that enable its constitution. From this perspective, historical concepts of, for example, the cosmos or human perception can be reconstructed as media effects.

A different type of media effect is the object of Wolf's essay. One of the foremost experts on the history and theory of photography, Wolf takes the current debate on the Abu Ghraib photographs of mistreated prisoners as a point of departure to rethink photography's specific effect of creating visual evidence. As in Vogl's theory of an object becoming a medium in an assemblage of theory, technology, and perception, Wolf points out how the seemingly "immediate" effect of photographic evidence and referentiality—"*la chose a été là*," as put by Roland Barthes—is in fact not self-evident but created by a constellation of visual and textual information. Given the current overassessment of visual culture ("a picture says more than thousand words"), the pertinence of this argument should not be underestimated. A similarly unquestioned object of contemporary debate is the apparent necessity for the legal regulation of computers and computer networks, be it in the form of copyright, electronic commerce, or user identification. In a brilliant demonstration of media theory's cross-disciplinarity, Vismann (a lawyer and cultural historian) and Krajewski (a media historian) analyze the inherently juridical structure of the computer itself: the act of "personifying" the computer, the sovereignty of the chip, and the hierarchy of operating systems. Their diagnosis of the inherent "computer-juridisms" explains the blind spots of current attempts to develop a jurisprudence adapted to the computer age. Such blind spots, as demonstrated by Pias in his reconstruction of the lost heritage of cybernetics in Germany, are due to a general culture of ignorance toward technology and its epistemic foundations. In the confrontation between Max Bense, the father of a cybernetic theory of art, and the artist Joseph Beuys, whose antitechnological and antirationalistic aesthetic program became dominant in Germany from the 1960s to the 1980s, Pias sees the decisive moment of a lost intellectual chance. While in the United States hippies turned from drugs to programming, developing the personal computer and eventually hijacking the Internet for private and commercial purposes Europeans like Bense and Abraham Moles, somewhat blinded by the Old World obsession with high-brow culture, fantasized about computers as tools to make mathematically beautiful artworks.

Despite Pias's somewhat melancholic account of early German media theory's lagging behind its North American counterpart, today's German media theorists have caught up. Siegert's and Vogl's essays make programmatic suggestions for further developments. According to them, the refusal to define what media *are* leads to a focus on what they *do,* how they charge

and discharge the events for which they are the cause and of which they are a part. While Vogl succinctly outlines a theory of "media events"—media as rendering historical transformation or emergence possible but also being events in themselves—Siegert advances the concept of "cultural techniques" *(Kulturtechniken)* as a term for the operative sequences that constitute media. The reconstruction and analysis of cultural techniques (or cultural technologies) suggested by Siegert allow media to be seen as practices and processes rather than static objects. The theoretical consequences of such a terminological shift are significant. The history and theory of cultural techniques goes beyond any media theory; it encompasses media but also includes, as Siegert points out, body techniques (such as cooking or hygienics), elementary cultural practices (such as cultivating the soil), and symbolic operations (such as writing, counting, or measuring).[8] The breadth of such a concept links media analysis to cultural analysis, media history to cultural history, and might enable the cross-disciplinary momentum of media studies to reshape cultural studies *(Kulturwissenschaften),* leading past the shortcomings and limitations of traditional humanities. Media theory thus ideally goes beyond media. From that beyond, I believe, the importance and scope of new media theory must be measured.

Notes

1. Friedrich Kittler, "Es gibt keine Software," in *Draculas Vermächtnis: Technische Schriften* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993), translated and reprinted as Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," *Ctheory* a032 (18 October 1995), http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=74; and Bernhard Siegert, "There Are No Mass Media" (1996), in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age,* ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 30–38.

2. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900,* trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 369.

3. One of the more complex attempts in this direction of defining media is made by Hartmut Winkler, "Mediendefinition," *Medienwissenschaft* 1, no. 4 (2004): 9–27.

4. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Rudolf Maresch, "Deutschland ist ein Medienprodukt" (20 May 2006), available online at http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/22/22564/1.html.

5. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Cultural Studies and German Media Theory," in *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory,* ed. Gary Hall and Clare Birchall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 88-103: 92.

6. Ernst Kapp, *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik: Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Kultur aus neuen Gesichtspunkten* (Braunschweig, Germany: Verlag George Westermann, 1877). Kapp's understanding of technology as the "projection of an organ" *(Organprojektion)* anticipates Marshall McLuhan's theory of media as "extensions of man." Two versions of Benjamin's seminal essay are published in his *Selected Writings.* Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 101–133; and Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *Selected Writings, Vol. 4: 1938–1940,* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251–283.

7. As for the definition of an object as an "epistemic thing," see Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997).

8. For an early attempt at systematizing the concept of cultural technique, see Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp, "Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik: Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur," in *Bild, Schrift, Zahl,* ed. Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Munich: Fink, 2003), 11–22. For an anthropological theory of media as cultural techniques, see Erhard Schüttpelz, "Die medienanthropologische Kehre der Kulturtechniken," *Archiv für Mediengeschichte* 6 (2006): 87–110.