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The Newsfeed as an Algorithmic Palimpsest

How much time do Internet users spend on social media? Statistics on the use of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter regularly make headlines: The average U.S. user spends approximately 1,200 hours a year on the Facebook site; after years of increase, this may be the first time that the trend is slightly downward due to new competition from TikTok. On the one hand, the comparison with other “time guzzlers”—such as the average eighty hours a driver spends in traffic jams in Los Angeles every year—is not flattering: Imagine all the things one could do in those equivalent fifty days a year! On the other hand, sensationalist reports on excessive Internet use are often enough based on the implicit assumption that the time gained—were it not for social media—would always be used productively, as if procrastination and distraction were not a universal trait of human behavior. At the same time, the statistics suggest a pseudo-exactness that hardly stands up to closer scrutiny: Can Facebook use in the Philippines (reportedly 252 minutes per day) really be compared with that of the Japanese (36 minutes per day), especially when, in less developed countries, Facebook is often a more reliable means of communication than the telephone—as well as the fastest means of getting up-to-date information?¹

The reproach of being a waste of time is regularly raised when new media achieve a certain diffusion and challenge established cultural practices; it is often associated with concerns about truth and social norms—and not always unjustifiably, since it often takes a considerable time before binding norms (and mechanisms for their implementation) for the new formats and technologies become established. Thus, revolutions in media typically also represent veritable knowledge crises, as the recent debate on “fake news” and “post-truth” demonstrates.² However, as early as 1807, Thomas Jefferson lamented in a letter to the newspaper editor and later U.S. Senator John Norvell: “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.” Reading newspapers is a waste of time, he said, because “[h]e who reads nothing will still learn the great facts,” and that is far better than filling one’s brain with irrelevant and, at worst, distorted details.³ In the 1980s, Neil Postman struck a similar chord, accusing television and the emerging electronic media of contributing to the “disappearance of childhood.”⁴ In his view, television consumption often exceeds interpersonal activity and

¹ For further information on this topic, see, for example: Michelle Carvill and Ian MacRae, *Myths of Social Media* (London: Kogan Page, 2020), p. 92.

² Axel Gelfert, “Fake News: A Definition,” in: *Informal Logic*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2018 pp. 84-117.

³ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Norvell, dated June 14, 1807, in: *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 10, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905), pp. 417f.

⁴ See: Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982).

serves as a substitute for parents—without being in the least suitable for this purpose. The German edition of Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (*Wir amüsieren uns zu Tode*, 1985) is unambiguous in its imagery: The cover depicts two seated children, their backs turned to the viewer, staring spellbound at a television screen that shows, in small format, the very sunset that unfolds in the background—infinately more impressive, but ignored by the children.

In David Cronenberg’s media-horror classic *Videodrome* (1983), the complete absorption of the user by the medium is depicted even more vividly, for example in the film’s most famous scene, in which the protagonist Max, seduced by the sexualized response of the screen itself, literally crawls into it—and in this way penetrates the media membrane to the point of self-abandonment. Marshall McLuhan’s statement that “the medium is the message” is thus replaced by the consumer becoming one with the medium: *The consumer is the medium*. This and nothing else—albeit in an algorithmically sublimated way—also underlies the business model of Internet-based social media: Advertised as a neutral communication platform for exchanging personal messages, uploading photos, and stylizing oneself as an influencer, platforms such as Facebook earn their money, as is well known, by turning users themselves into products and aggregating them into marketable target groups on the basis of their own surfing behavior—which are, in turn, offered to financially strong advertisers in the sense of “microtargeting”: “The consumer is the product.”⁵

In the new attention economy, it is no longer merely a matter of users spending as much time as possible on the platform in question—which is ensured by the apps forming self-contained “ecosystems” with as few interfaces to the outside world as possible—but rather of enticing them to engage in as many data-generating interactions as possible through incentives, app design, and notifications. This corresponds with the fact that the few reliable measurements of actual exposure time and usage show that, while users objectively spend less time on Facebook than corresponds to their subjective self-assessment, at the same time they log in significantly more often than they realize—in other words, they carry out more interactions in less time.⁶ It goes without saying that, in the zero-sum game of the attention economy, each of these interactions also involves the interruption of an activity, a train of thought, or even just a break. In other words, the structural principle of social media is not immersive *absorption*—as might have been plausible for the passive medium of television—but rather constant *interruption*.

Probably everyone who uses Facebook on a regular basis is familiar with the peculiar state of limbo—somewhere between “flow” and repetition—that can arise when disparate impressions are mixed together while scrolling through the newsfeed and, depending on

⁵ For further information on this topic, see: Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

⁶ Reynol Junco, “Comparing Actual and Self-Reported Measures of Facebook Use,” in: *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2013, pp. 626-631.

one's mood, either arouse curiosity and interest or suddenly change into nervousness and frustration. In his art project titled *It's Complicated*—the precursor to the present volume—Elias Wessel documented this experience through the imaging process of long exposure: Whereas, initially, the resulting superimpositions of Facebook posts and linked images, headlines, and logos seem like static color compositions, a second glance reveals meaningful connections and cross-references that—similar to scrolling through the Facebook newsfeed—are radically contingent on the one hand, but in fact not arbitrary (because algorithmically curated) on the other. This creates algorithmic palimpsests that demand our attention, but without any guarantee that our efforts at interpretation will ultimately be crowned with success. Where our attention does find anchor points—in individual images, names, headlines, or logos—it does so against a shadowy, amorphous background that acts like the visual translation of that fogginess that sets in after spending too much time aimless scrolling and is colloquially referred to as “Facebook fog.”⁷

For the *Textfetzen* (Scraps of Text) collected in this volume, Wessel abstracted from all the graphic color-aesthetic aspects that are otherwise part of the “user experience” in social media—and which are used by the various platforms in proprietary ways to endow a corporate identity. (Thus, various design websites deemed it newsworthy when Facebook changed the color of its logo from “Classic Blue” to “Crayola Blue” in 2019.⁸) The *Textfetzen* are just that: pure text, the graphic quality of which is determined solely by line breaks, special characters, and placeholders. The texts were generated algorithmically from the already mentioned images of the *It's Complicated* series, so that the *Textfetzen* can also be understood as a distillate of a disambiguation carried out by the “image-to-text” transcription software used. In addition to the information recovered by the transcription, there are also various artifacts that symbolize the limitations and biases of the technologies used: for example, the word sequence “Chinese letters” wherever the algorithm, obviously optimized for the Latin alphabet, was overwhelmed by Chinese characters. The technical feasibility of translating images back into texts does not guarantee legibility in the service of human understanding.

The development of Western alphabetic scripts, as Wolfgang Raible argued several years ago, follows a peculiar development: As texts were addressed to an increasingly larger audience, the written form, initially intended as a phonetic correlate of the spoken word, became increasingly enriched by ideographic elements—from initially missing word spacing (as “blanks” in the literal sense) and punctuation and annotation marks to elaborate

⁷ The *UrbanDictionary.com* describes “Facebook Fog” as follows: “The point in which you are so focused on your facebook page that you loose [sic!] all sense of reality and or your surroundings.” <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Facebook%20Fog> [last accessed on March 8, 2022].

⁸ See, for example: <https://brandpalettes.com/facebook-new-blue-logo-colors/> [last accessed on March 8, 2022].

structuring elements.⁹ Longer texts thus became more comprehensible to outsiders, even as text *production* now involved greater effort. At the same time, memory skills were delegated to the texts—which were now pre-structured to a considerable extent—and although they no longer had to be learned by heart, they now required considerable reconstruction work on the part of the reader in order to systematically comprehend the content.

We, who delegate ever more cognitive tasks to the increasingly autonomous technical infrastructures that surround us, find ourselves at the (temporary) endpoint of this development. If texts are increasingly generated and curated algorithmically, it is only a matter of time before they exceed our ability to reconstruct meaning. As an attempted reading of Wessel's *Textfetzen* suggests, this is already true when everyday Facebook newsfeeds are thrown to the transcription algorithms as fodder, so to speak. What we encounter in the *Textfetzen* is, after all, nothing other than our collective, algorithmically reconstituted memories, which we had handed over to the social media at the time. We thus find ourselves on an increasingly blurred borderline between author and medium, between our own memory and algorithmic suggestion, between echo chamber and oracle. But as one of the *Textfetzen* states encouragingly: "*Grenzgänger halten Komplexität aus*" (Border crossers can tolerate complexity).

⁹ Wolfgang Raible, "Von der Textgestalt zur Texttheorie: Beobachtungen zur Entwicklung des Text-Layouts und ihren Folgen," in Peter Koch and Sybille Krämer (eds.), *Schrift, Medien, Kognition. Über die Exteriorität des Geistes* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag, 1997), pp. 29-41.