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Critical and Emergent Media Theory

Abstract: This essay contrasts two different approaches in media theory. One approach is traced back to Immanuel Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment as progress toward human autonomy. For Kant, the "public use of reason" in the mass media of his time (books and journals) was essential for bringing about enlightened individuals and an enlightened society. In the wake of Kant, "critical media theory" until today often normatively questions in how far the media empower or undermine agency and authenticity. A different theoretical approach, represented by Marshall McLuhan and Niklas Luhmann, conceives of the media as conditioning human experience and emerging in the context of historical and technological evolution rather than viewing them through an Enlightenment lens. A contemporary version of such an "emergent media theory" can describe the media as a virtual second-order observation reality enabling the curation of profiles.

Keywords: critical media theory; Immanuel Kant; Marshall McLuhan; Niklas Luhmann; profilicity.

Introduction

In this short paper, I broadly distinguish between two different media theory paradigms. One paradigm, I argue, regards mass (and social) media as a sphere for the shaping of what I call here, alluding to Immanuel Kant, the "enlightened human" (*der aufgeklärte Mensch*): the emancipated, autonomous, and authentic agent. This paradigm judges the media by measuring in how far they live up to the task of fostering "enlightened humans". It stems from the historical assumption that the media (particularly books and journals) can be a forum for autonomous individuals to authentically express themselves on political, scientific, aesthetic or other matters of general interest. In this way, the media could appear, in a Hegelian sense, as a giant *Bildungsprojekt*, a cultivation and education project of political, moral, and spiritual growth and emancipation, helping humanity to *build* itself personally and collectively. Consequently, the question was if the media could meet such expectations, or if they instead undermined the enlightenment promise. Given its focus on critiquing the media by Enlightenment standards, such a theoretical approach can be labelled "critical media theory".

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Different from "critical media theory," the other media paradigm I discuss here assumes that the media have never been geared towards the promotion of autonomy and authenticity. Consequently, they cannot be blamed for failing to do so. From such a non-normative perspective, the media are not a forum, or a showcase of what humans essentially are or ideally ought to become, but instead a condition of human experience embedded in a constantly evolving social and technological environment. This paradigm gives rise to a wider range of more descriptive media theories, including a media theory centered on "profilicity", which will be briefly introduced towards the end of this paper. Given their focus on historical processes not controlled or controllable by human agency, such theories may be labelled "emergent media theory".

Critical media theory

A programmatic definition of the "enlightened human" in terms of the core ingredients of autonomy and authenticity was provided by Immanuel Kant at the outset of his famous essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Here, Kant stipulates that an enlightened person is able to "use one's understanding without guidance from another".[1] The supposed ability to guide or control oneself purely by means of one's inner and original powers of reasoning constitutes the "maturity" of enlightened individuals and distinguishes them from their unenlightened, irrational, immature, and inauthentic predecessors in earlier times.

Kant's programmatic essay not only defines the "enlightened human" as the modern individual capable of autonomously guiding itself by means of reason but also stipulates how the transition from immaturity to maturity – or from inauthenticity to authenticity (in the sense of a person being the *origin* of their thoughts and actions rather than reproducing or imitating what others say or think) – is to be brought about, namely by "the public use of reason". Kant fears that "it is difficult for any individual man to work himself out of the immaturity that has all but become his nature."[2] The march toward enlightenment cannot be private. Although the reason is an inner and individual mental faculty for Kant, its *exercise* is intersubjective. In an enlightened, or self-enlightening society, reasonable individuals reason with one another: "That the public should enlighten itself is more likely",[3] Kant says, than a single person achieving enlightenment on their own. Becoming mature, autonomous, and authentic must be a joint effort of, ideally, all reasonable individuals. But how is this possible? Kant explains: "By the public use of one's own reason I understand the use that anyone as a *scholar* makes of reason before the entire *literate world*."[4] This is to say, enlightenment depends for Kant on the free publication and circulation of printed books and magazines spreading scholarly knowledge, informed opinion, and rational debate throughout society. An important

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[1] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", trans. Ted Humphrey (Hackett Publishing, 1992), https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/kant_whatisenlightenment.pdf.

[2] Kant, "An Answer to the Question," 1.

[3] Kant, "An Answer to the Question," 1.

[4] Kant, "An Answer to the Question," 2. Emphasis in the original text.

aspect of Kant's answer to the question What is Enlightenment? is that Enlightenment relies on mass media (print media in Kant's time) providing an open forum for intelligent communication by means of which the public enlightens itself. Even if Kant's essay is not primarily focused on what is now called media theory, it framed the basic paradigm of authenticity- and autonomy-oriented media theory: A prime purpose of the mass media is to promote enlightenment by enhancing and empowering free human agency and the spread of reason.

Arguably, mainstream media theory today still remains influenced by Kant's ideal of the media as the public sphere of reason and, thereby, as a forum for the cultivation of human autonomy and authenticity. I will merely point out a few examples to illustrate this claim.

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer critically investigate in how far the mid-20th century society fulfilled the promises of the Enlightenment formulated by Kant and other thinkers of his age. Their verdict is highly negative: they feel that "humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."[5] A prime culprit of this reversal of the Enlightenment into its opposite is what Adorno and Horkheimer label the "culture industry", i.e. the mass media of their time. They accuse the media, in particular film and television, of spreading stupidity, uniformity, and consumerism instead of promoting reason, autonomy, and authenticity. Art and science, key elements of an enlightened society, have been perverted by popular media which disseminate only falsehood: "At all its levels, from Hemingway to Emil Ludwig, from Mrs. Miniver to the Lone Ranger, from Toscanini to Guy Lombardo, intellectual products drawn ready-made from art and science are infected with untruth."[6] The ideal of true personhood has been undermined by radio and cinema: "From the standardized improvisation in jazz to the original film personality who must have a lock of hair straying over her eyes so that she can be recognized as such, pseudo-individuality reigns."[7] "Untruth" and "pseudo-individuality" are markers of an all-pervasive inauthenticity brought about by the rise of the media which have betrayed the very Enlightenment that they sprang from.

Somewhat similar to Adorno and Horkheimer, Guy Debord regarded the media as the prime manifestation of the "spectacle" – a new social formation in which all of life has become inauthentic. The media-centered society of the spectacle has turned all of human life into a show business: an economic and political framework based on staging and displaying. Debord defines the spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images,"[8] and its "most stultifying, superficial manifestation"[9] are the mass media. In this society, authenticity has been subverted: "What has been passed off as authentic life turns out to be merely a life more

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[5] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvii.

[6] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 114.

[7] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 124–25.

[8] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, 1995), 12.

[9] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 19.

authentically spectacular."[10] In other words: "The spectacle erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances."[11] Truth, originality, and sovereign individuality have no place in the media-driven consumerist spectacle of the simulated, image-driven reality we inhabit. Echoing the sentiments of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Guy Debord too regards the media as a great anti-authenticity force in a dystopian post-Enlightenment world where "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation."[12]

The bleak assessments by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Debord date back many decades, but newer versions of them abound in current criticisms of social media blaming them for fake news and ushering in an age of post-truth along with spreading inauthentic and irrational "narcissism"[13] that turns the human race into a phony "phono sapiens".[14]

And yet, other 20th and 21st century media theorists still cling on to the old Kantian narrative that views the media as *the* social sphere that promises the rise of reason, liberty, and sovereignty as well as of creativity and originality. A programmatic short treatise "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" [Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien], first published in 1970 by the German writer Hans Magnus Enzesberger, encapsulates the view that media can and ought to function as a liberational sphere of humankind.[15] Framed in a Marxist vocabulary, Enzensberger's essay presents a vision of a future free mass media taken out of the hands of corporate ownership and control by political regimes. This vision radicalizes Jürgen Habermas' neo-Kantian notion of "domination-free discourse" (*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*). Once the media are owned and produced by the people rather than by capitalists or party organizations, they will become truly democratic, Enzensberger assumes. He imagines "a mass newspaper, written and distributed by its readers, a video network of politically active groups;[16] he also depicts potential future electronic interactive mass media which are strongly reminiscent of today's internet: a "linked series of communications"[17] or "a huge linked system – that is to say, it would be such if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of allowing the listener not only to hear but to speak, and would not isolate him but bring him into contact."[18] Such media, it is hoped, would erase all

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[10] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 112.

[11] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 153.

[12] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

[13] See, for instance, Sonia Sodha, "Social Media Fuels Narcissists' Worst Desires, Making Reasoned Debate Near Impossible," in *The Guardian*, November 7, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/07/social-media-fuels-narcissists-worst-desires-making-reasoned-debate-near-impossible.

[14] Byung Chul-Han, *The Crisis of Narration* (Polity Press, 2024).

[15] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," trans. Stuart Hood, in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media* (Continuum, 1974), 95–128.

[16] Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," 110.

[17] Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," 98.

[18] Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," 98.

cultural privileges and hierarchies, and, as a giant public sphere, would make people, as Enzensberger poetically states, "as free as dancers, as aware as football players, as surprising as guerillas."[19] Crucially, such participatory media are meant to enhance people's individual agency and creativity, and to mobilize them to the point that they finally become, as Enzensberger says, "the authors of history".[20]

Variations of Enzensberger's vision of a domination-free, participatory, and de-centralized media network of and by the people have reoccurred frequently in more recent decades. Noam Chomsky, for instance, similarly critiqued the capitalist control of the media and argued in favor of an anarchic-libertarian media structure to empower democratic agency and to eliminate manipulation by the ruling elites.[21] When the Internet emerged in the 1990s and 2000s it was greeted by (cautiously) optimistic media theorists varying the same theme. Some examples are Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (MIT Press, 1993), Tim Berners-Lee's *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web* (Harper, 1999), and Rebecca MacKinnon's *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom* (Basic Books, 2012). From different perspectives, these authors revived and modified the Kantian hope that the (new) media may become a large public forum promoting the self-enlightenment of humankind.

Emergent Media Theory

Not all media theorists, however, share the premise of a critical media theory centered on the question if or how the media can live up to the normative ideal of supporting the self-creation of autonomous and/or authentic "enlightened humans".

Perhaps the most influential "non-humanist" media theorist was Marshall McLuhan. A key quote from McLuhan's book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* is: "Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs."[22] The contemporary "machines" McLuhan was most interested in were "media machines": television, film, etc. These machines turned out neither cornflakes nor Cadillacs, but news, movies, and commercials. And yet, as was the case with traditional machines, McLuhan famously argued that it wasn't such output or "messages" that mattered, but how the media changed the human way of life. Accordingly, the media were not understood as a forum or showcase by which individuals could convey important messages and increase their autonomy or authenticity. To the contrary, as Father John Culkin summed

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[19] Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," 97.

[20] Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," 128.

[21] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books, 1988).

[22] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Mc Graw-Hill, 1964), 19.

up McLuhan's point: "We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us."[23] Rather than empowering human agency or self-expression, media constitute a social and technological environment that conditions humans by conditioning their existence. According to McLuhan, traditional print media had shaped the "Gutenberg Galaxy" or "Typographic Man": a privacy-oriented form of identity.[24] But the entirely different "machines" of electronic media, including TV and film, had gradually replaced "Typographic Man" and established the "Global Village", a modern version of a tribal world based on the simultaneity of events and intense mutual involvement.

Somewhat comparable to McLuhan, the German theorist Niklas Luhmann also described the mass media from a non-humanist perspective as a historically emerging social formation not subject to individual or collective intentional control or design.[25] As an autopoietic (self-generating) social (or communication) system in the context of many others, the mass media system is characterized by its specific "code". According to Luhmann, the code of the mass media is the distinction between what he calls "information" and "non-information". Whatever is selected as "news," for instance, or what is advertised in commercials, is information and what is not is not-information. A peculiar aspect of this code is that once information is communicated it becomes non-information (or old information) and must be replaced by new information: news must always be replaced by newer news; a TV series must be continued by another episode or replaced by a new series, etc. Luhmann writes: "Just as the economy […] generates the never-ending need to replace money spent, so the mass media generate the need to replace redundant information with new information: fresh money and new information are two central motives of modern social dynamics."[26]

All modern social systems, Luhmann argues, fulfill specific functions in society. A prime function of the media system is to provide a common "background reality"[27] of that which is "known to be known"[28] to the world society (faintly resembling Mc Luhan's "global village"). This background reality is constantly updated and modified, and, importantly, not based on agreement – everyone has different perspectives on it. Luhmann states: "Perhaps the most important outcome of these considerations is that the mass media may generate [background, H.G.M.] reality, but a reality not subject to consensus." The non-consensual, dynamic background reality of the mass media constantly "irritates",[29] as Luhmann says, all other social systems and can force them into "structural couplings"[30] with the media. This is to say, for instance, that

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[23] John M. Culkin, "A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan," *The Saturday Review* (March 1967): 70, https://www.unz.com/print/SaturdayRev-1967mar18-00051.

[24] See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962).

[25] Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[26] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 20–21.

[27] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 65.

[28] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 13.

[29] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 22.

[30] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 63–70.

politics and mass media constantly and speedily react to one another – what happens in politics is influenced by media coverage and vice versa. Moreover, politics and media align their structures to one another: elections, for instance, are both political and media events. In a similar way, most other social systems, such as the economy, sports, or the art system, to name just a few, are coupled with the media system.

Another function of the mass media is the provision of "clues" for "work on one's own identity",[31] Luhmann writes in reference to what he calls the "program strand" (*Programmbereich*) of entertainment. In entertainment, such as novels in traditional print media or in film and television in electronic media, readers or viewers observe a wide range of fictional characters interacting with one another. Observing these interactions, Luhmann suggests, invites the audience "to relate what they have seen or heard to themselves."[32] They can build a sense of who they are, or of who they want to be, by comparing the virtual realties of the protagonists, i.e. the displayed behaviors, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, etc., and by trying them out in an imaginary way on themselves.[33]

By stimulating and enabling personal identity work, the mass media system contributes to solving a crucial problem posed by the demise of pre-modern society – the problem of having to find out who one is. According to Luhmann's social systems theory, pre-modern society was characterized by "stratified differentiation", i.e. the division of society into various "strata" roughly equivalent to what in Marxist language are the "classes" of feudal society. In such a stratified society, people were born into the social roles of their respective strata and thereby a certain identity was assigned to them more or less for life. Under such conditions, it was neither possible nor necessary for most people to question their identity; they acquired it by descent. In modernity, however, Luhmann proposes, stratified differentiation was replaced by "functional differentiation," i.e. the division of society into numerous function systems (such as the economy, the legal system, the political system, the education system, the mass media system, etc.). A society constituted by such modern function systems presupposes "individuals who no longer draw their identity from their background but who instead have to shape it themselves."[34] This is to say that "no sooner he is born, every individual finds himself to be someone who has yet to determine his individuality […]."[35] The virtual realities of the media unfold a scope of the currently available options of identity-determination for individuals in modern society.

Next to functional differentiation, another defining feature of modern society is, for Luhmann, "second-order observation."[36] In modernity, Luhmann argues, the observation of observers has become central to the functioning of all social systems.

[31] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 62.

[32] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 60.

[33] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 60.

[34] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 59.

[35] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 59.

[36] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 83–84.

Markets in the economic system are a prime example of this: when assessing the price of a house, one has to assess not the house by observing it directly but rather understand how the house is observed on the housing market. The whole modern economy – think of the financial markets – operates with such second-order observation mechanisms. For Luhmann, the mass media system, too, operates in the mode of second-order observation. He states programmatically: "The reality of the mass media is the reality of second-order observation."[37] Obviously, whenever reading a book, watching a film, or surfing the Internet, we observe the observations of others.

Luhmann's media theory embeds the media in the historical and systemic context of modern society. The media are what they are and function the way they function not for the sake of or as a means to suppress human agency or authenticity, but instead because they emerged in the context of the rise of functional differentiation and second-order observation.

In my own work on media theory and identity, I build on Luhmann's concepts of functional differentiation, and, in particular, second-order observation. Luhmann defines the reality of the mass media as the reality of second-order observation – and for me, the reality of second-order observation is the reality of "profilicity", i.e. the construction of identity or a sense of self through the curation of profiles.[38] I will use a concrete example to briefly illustrate this claim.

In 2001, the talent show *Pop Idol* premiered on the British TV channel ITV. Its US version *American Idol* followed in 2002. According to Wikipedia, *Idol* "has since become the world's most widely watched television franchise, as well as one of the most successful entertainment formats, adapted in over 56 regions around the world, with its various versions broadcast to 150 countries […]"[39] "Idol" is another word for "star" or "celebrity" – and "celebrity" is the new type of "personality" that, as Walter Benjamin noted in his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", was created in the new media.[40] Eventually this new personality was no longer just an exception, but became the norm. Once anyone can learn how to build a sense of self in the mode of idols, this personality can be given a different name: the *profile*. The triumph of *Idol* as "the world's most widely watched television franchise" manifests the proliferation of profilicity in and through the media. When watching, and participating in an *Idol* show, we see how a personality is built: At the outset, all competitors are unknown, average people. They have a very low profile. At the end, at least the winners have become high-profile idols. The essence of the show is not simply to depict, but more intensely, as true *reality TV*, to actually *be* the life path by which a person becomes who they are.

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[37] Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, 85.

[38] Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul D'Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

[39] "The Idol (TV series)", Wikipedia, accessed April 6, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Idol_(TV_series).

[40] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books, 1969), 1–26, https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf.

Arguably, the success of social media today is tied to their use as profile-building platforms. Rather than promoting the rise of the autonomous and authentic agent, the history of the modern media may in hindsight be described in conjunction with the rise of the identity technology of profilicity. The evolution of social media out of the mass media seems to demonstrate an intricate connection between media history and the need, or desire, for profile curation.

A brief conclusion

In light of the broad distinction between critical and emergent media theory suggested in this essay, the question may be posed if the transition from mass to social media and, more recently to the widespread use of AI, supports either of the two approaches. Do social media and AI promote the public use of reason or bring us closer to the emancipatory and participatory media world Enzensberger envisioned? Do they finally allow people to authentically and creatively express themselves free of domination? Or do they represent just another, even darker version of the dialectical turn of the Enlightenment into a "society of the spectacle"?

Or, alternatively, does the reality of algorithm-guided social media from YouTube to Tik Tok, from eBay to Tinder, from "woke" to "alt-right" filter bubbles, suggest that the humanist Enlightenment narrative that searches for autonomy and authenticity in the media was misplaced from the start? Contemporary media and the use of AI may instead reflect contemporary social and existential conditions, such as functional differentiation and second-order observation, within which the media emerged and continue to evolve.

Building on theorists like Marshall McLuhan and Niklas Luhmann, I tend to prefer the second theoretical option which pursues a more descriptive and less normative path. The purpose of such a descriptive approach, however, is not to be uncritical. Instead, the idea is to avoid unrealistic expectations when coping with the very clear and obvious problems posed by the new media and AI, ranging from significant psychological harm[41] to political crises.[42] It may be possible to devise better strategies to deal with such problems when accepting that the media, for better or worse, are, in reality, a space of profilicity rather than of authenticity.

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[41] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin, 2024).

[42] Mostafa M. El-Bermavy, "Your Filter Bubble is Destroying Democracy," *Wired*, November 18, 2016, accessed April 4, 2025, https://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/.

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