Media Theory at the Limits of Communication

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Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*. University of Chicago Press, 2014. 210 pp.

> "By being off the radar, you move in a different space, a jubilee zone of exception."
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> — John Durham Peters, "Speaking Into the iPhone"

Like all such rare and catastrophic events, the disappearance of flight MH270 during a routine flight between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing in March 2013 spurred a frenzy of media coverage and public fascination. But what made this particular incident unusual was that there was no story, in the sense that the story was unknown, its telling based on hypothetical theories rather than fact; the missing aircraft could not be found, there were hardly any traces to follow and the leads were ambiguous at best. Indeed, the mystery of flight 370 became so unsettling because it broke the illusions of a media age: despite the highly sophisticated technologies of space exploration, global communication, satellites, personal mobile devices, surveillance and monitoring, it was still possible—despite the efforts of governments, industries, experts and families—to lose a plane with 239 passengers and crew on board. The infrastructures of hyper and excess communication, it turned out, still allowed for a commercial plane to disappear from the grid without a trace, the usual signals, tracking and communication methods providing no definite answers to its whereabouts. What the public learned in the endless hours of news coverage, which for weeks spun increasingly outlandish and hyperbolic stories to fill airtime and the appetite for some, any, information, was how fragile and flawed our infrastructures—of communication, not to mention aviation—really are. To compound this unsettling realization, as the search for the plane progressed and turned to the Indian Ocean the public also learned that its depths are more mysterious than the moon, and that our technologies and knowledge are extremely limited when it comes to assessing what is deep inside the waters that cover most of our planet. The general confusion caused by the vanished plane turned into a confrontation with the mysterious, unknown and insurmountable limits of communication and with the possibilities of being excommunicated—of escaping, disappearing or going missing—from the world's communication channels, networks and tracking systems. There quickly surfaced a

host of conspiracy theories to explain this bewildering, inconceivable even, situation, turning to everything from aliens to supernatural occurrences to account for this loss of sight, this silence, and the absence of not only communication, but of communicability itself. A fundamental aspect of the human condition, as John Durham Peters argued in *Speaking Into the Air,* is the problem of communication, of finding empathy through communication, and thus of finding ways to bridge the gap to the other that ultimately allows us to coexist together. It is remarkable, considering this political and ethical significance, that there is so little attention paid to what happens not only when communication fails, but when it becomes impossible.

What is beyond the possibility of mediation? How is it possible that we may miscommunicate so thoroughly as to lose a plane, or shoot one down by accident (as was allegedly the case of Malaysia Flight 17 while flying over Ukraine in summer 2014)? This broad and multifaceted concern into that which cannot be communicated and where mediation is impossible is at the centre of *Excommunication: Three Inquires in Media and Mediation* by the seasoned New York-based media scholars Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark. The book is structured around a co-authored introduction, which is followed by discrete 'inquiries' contributed by each of the three respectively. Each of these may be read as an independent essay though there are clear threads that weave them together, for example through a shared conceptual and theoretical approach built on the German media theory of Friedrich Kittler and an explicit engagement with Continental philosophy in general. The authors of the book are in particular indebted to the writings of François Laruelle—"the most important author today for any theory of excommunication" (52)—who has developed a philosophy of the "non-communicability of the real" (164). Also apparent throughout is the influence of figures like Jean-Luc Marion and Raoul Vaneigem, from whom they draw to investigate this idea of communication at its limits.

In the introduction the authors boldly lay out their dissatisfaction with the current state of media studies, and sketch out a manifesto for a new kind of media theory. Arguing that the story of media theory in the 20th century has yet to be written, that "media studies today operates with a somewhat limited conception of what media are" (7), the authors aim to expand the boundaries of this often ambiguous field. The ambition of the volume, as set out in the introduction, is that of pushing the study of media and mediation across the vast terrain of humanities scholarship, transcending disciplines to move towards a "media theory without qualification" (3) where "mediation does not merely add something to the existing list of topics that scholars study. It changes the practice of study itself" (1). Though the study of communication and media is often preoccupied by its responses and reassessments of the 'new' (new media, new gadgets, new technologies), the authors argue that the exertion of so much energy on all of this 'newness' is a distraction. The conditions and problems

of mediation and communication, which we are working so feverishly to resolve through 'newness,' are in fact ancient and distinct from questions about the tools, or media, of communication: "does it have to be new to be an object of a theory, can we think about media without thinking about temporality, about whether it is new or old; what exactly is new?" (1). Having a grasp of media as material is essential, but the authors urge us look passed the smokescreen of novelty and look at our media conceptually, as mediating particular processes and transformations that "affect conditions of possibility in general" (1). They locate their discontent by pointing to influential traditions such as the Frankfurt and Toronto Schools, which, by laying the groundwork of 'media studies' in a focus on devices have put aside the exploration of mediation itself. The authors move freely in the language of philosophy, the classics, religion, hermeneutics, materiality, literary theory and art history, outlining a media theory that addresses their fundamental concern: "Have we not forgotten the most basic questions? Distracted by the tumult of concern around what media do or how media are built, have we not lost the central question: *what is mediation*? In other words, has the question of 'what' been displaced by a concern with 'how'?" (9).

Pushing the questions of mediation to its limits by entering the space of excommunication, the authors' bold intervention compels us to consider what happens when mediation is not enough, when it becomes insufficient or impossible, when what is on the 'other side' of media is unknowable, incomprehensible or radically unhuman. Turning away from the Socratic tradition, where communication is tied to truth, presence and reciprocity, the authors position excommunication in the realm of theology, where it is tied to judgment and "implies an original infraction, an infraction which elicits some kind of removal" (15). Specifically, what they have in mind are those "mediative situations in which heresy, exile, or banishment carry the day, not repetition, communion, or integration" (10). Excommunication, in this Christian ecclesiastical meaning, is a termination of communication tied to the ousting from a human community. To explain this exclusion the authors propose "not so much a post-media condition but rather a non-media condition, not so much extensions of man but the exodus of man from this world….a glimpse into the world of the *nonhuman*" (21).

In "Love of the Middle," Galloway lays the ground of a theory of excommunication that is still centred around the human, and sets up four models of mediation—what he calls middles—that explain the kinds of relationships that happen in the quest for communication. He first turns to the Greek classical figures ("avatars") of Hermes and Iris as the canonical binary that has shaped thinking about how we communicate. From the influential Hermes came the hermeneutic tradition, where mediation became rooted in ideas of interpretation and meaning, and aligned with concepts such as representation, circulation, exchange. The counterpoint to complicated Hermes

was the clarity of Iris, where light as pure information formed a tradition of communication based on iridescence and illumination, and from where come the ideals of communion, immediacy and immanence. Galloway proposes an additional model based on the Furies as a reflection of our current world, characterized by infuriation, the dissolution of the human body and the introduction of new complex system like swarms, assemblages, networks and rhizomes that dissolve the traditional models based on Hermes and Iris. All three of these modes however also contain paradoxes, excesses or perversions, and by acknowledging the possibility of the unknown that happens at their limits they "incorporate the logic of excommunication into themselves, since they each acknowledge the impossibility of communication, whether it be via deception, immediacy, or multiplicity" (30). Galloway's fourth and final model is based on Aphrodite, where after the formless frenzy of the Furies there is a return to presence and the body. As a sexual mediation Aphrodite transforms her reputation as *genial* in the sense of convivial, "the lover of smiles," to include the desire of sexual appetites, "the lover of the sex" (68). Galloway argues that Aphrodite brings together and traverses the other modes of communication as the mediation of the middle, a pure communication before or beyond the chasm between bodies has been created, a communication without division, "never lost in foreign lands like Hermes, or so ethereal and light like Iris, or horrifyingly chtonic and nonhuman like the Furies" (64).

In "Dark Media" Eugene Thacker takes the reader into the world of the Furies and the nonhuman. He reaches to the spiritual and supernatural realms, where communication becomes uncanny and strange, and media become haunted, dead or weird, not because they are malfunctioning or misused, but because they are working too well, transformed from mediating the epistemological, to mediating different realities and ontologies (101-102). In excommunication, he argues, there is an attempt to mediate not between humans, but with the ontological other. At this limit, beyond this threshold, is an annulment of the very possibility of communication. In Thacker's dark media, media are not mere artifacts but rather portals into other worlds, to 'other-worldliness' or the divine, trying to mediate that which is inaccessible to overcome the space between object and thing. He points to an interesting paradox of today's devotion to technology: though the public has become savvy to the machinations, manipulations and distortions of media and mediation, it also holds on to a belief or hope that perhaps these media may mediate something yet unknown, that these machines could explain, reveal or lead us to a somewhere 'beyond.' Thacker turns to medieval mysticism and the genre of supernatural horror to explore the dark media that bind the human and the nonhuman, this world and another, asking "what role media play in this charged space between scientific reason and religious belief" (87). In the 'Information Age' we still wonder about other dimensions, and in this lies the appeal of the portals of dark media, the mystical passage that may lead us to another 'unreasonable' world.

Finally, in "Furious Media: A Queer History of Heresy" McKenzie Wark moves the conversation to another kind of excommunication, from the supernatural to the heretic. He develops the concept of xenocommunication, a "communication with the impossible, with the infinite, with the great outdoors—the totality, "(161) focusing in particular on Christianity and its "authority to speak of, and speak with, God" (184). The portals of xenocommunication, of communication with the 'other-worldly', claimed by philosophy and religion, in turn produce heretical disruptions where "what has to be excommunicated is the swarm, the plurality of protocols, the free openings and closings of portals of xenocommunication outside of central control" (178). Only through excommunication is communication possible; only through excommunication is the Christian church possible. Inspired by Raoul Vaneigem, Wark plots a heretical counter-history of Judeo-Christianity, where heresies become tactical media theories (195), and the protocol of xenocommunication is one of controlled access and exclusion to the portals of mediation.

Excommunication provides an inroad to a new kind of media theory and philosophy and exactly the kind of original response we now need in order to engage the novel media situations that are transforming how we 'do' media studies (Lovink). Drawing on French philosophy and Greek classicism results in a book with compelling proposals for the philosophy of media and mediation. Taken together, the three 'inquiries' collected in this volume point to the versatility, complexity and usefulness of the idea of excommunication. References to the supernatural, alien and divine notwithstanding, where the idea of excommunication may be felt most immediately is in tapping into the simmering desire, for those who have such a choice, to disconnect from the frenetic energies of hypermediation, and to find opportunities of contemplation and reimagination in the spaces of communicative exclusion. The book provides a model for productively engaging with those messages—emerging, for example, from states of personal or political apathy, silence or refusal—which declare that there will be no more communication (10). The search for silence, retreat, withdrawal, unplugging, all reflect a longing to step outside of the limits of communication, to remove oneself, to indeed excommunicate oneself, if temporarily, from the excesses of the Furies.[1] Through this mode of inquiry, the authors suggest some important questions that

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[1] See, for example: *The Retreat*, eds. Sarah Blacker, Imre Szeman and Heather Zwicker, *PUBLIC Journal: Art Culture Ideas* 50 (Fall 2014); Daniel. A. Gross, "This is Your Brain on Silence," *Nautilus,* 21 August 2014, http://nautil.us/issue/16/nothingness/this-is-your-brain-on-silence; Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014); Chloe Schlama, "Silence Is Now a Luxury Product," *New Republic*, 4 March 2014, http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116846/how-silence-became-luxury-product; Pico Iyer, "The Joy of Quiet," *The New York Times*, Sunday Review, Opinion Section, 29 December 2011.

update media studies for a current age, acknowledge the limits, the overabundance, the exhaustion and dissatisfaction that characterize this moment, and rightly remind us that there exist worlds outside of what can be communicated and mediated, and that this is where media studies, beyond disciplines, must take us.

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