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Response to Kerr

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Audiences around the world increasingly experience media technologies and mediascapes as a complicated repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic media, and billboards, with complicated and interconnected effects.[1] Media technology enables, it forces and reshuffles, it misrepresents and leaves out. Anik satellite broadcasting allows an Inuit people in the northern Canadian provinces to listen to their native language. Internet and online news enable diasporic communities to maintain contact with their homeland and preserve their long-distance solidarities, whether ethnic, national, or even continental. Media technologies also force us to witness what we would perhaps rather forget and bury deep down in our "social unconscious." Just remind yourself of the infamous Oliviero Toscani advertising campaign in which white nuns were kissing black priests or the blood-stained clothes of a dead Bosnian soldier were on display around the world under the logo of Benetton. Last but not least, media technologies also blur the lines between realistic and fictional landscapes, leading to constructions of imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects.

In this turmoil of disconnected effects, two notable issues transpire: the agency of the media consumer, with his/her (in)ability to refuse, moderate, and transform the media content served, and the inequalities in representation by the media and access to the media technologies. Aphra Kerr commences a vital discussion of these issues, and it is my intent to move the discussion forward by spelling out the important silences of Dr. Kerr's essay. Rather than as a criticism, my survey of the "silenced" issues should be viewed as opening additional avenues of exploration in the complex *problematique* at hand.

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In her essay, Kerr guides us through the complex interlinkages of media technology, society, and globalization. One major contribution lies in the problematization of four theoretical assumptions often adopted by scholars in the field. First, Kerr opposes *technological determinism*, suggesting that just as technologies are able to shape society, so also does society have the capacity to either accelerate or inhibit the development of new technologies and their adaptation on a mass scale.

Second, Kerr distances herself from the *unwarranted optimism* surrounding the roles and functions of technology, as such a confident, positive attitude reflects a lack of recognition of perhaps a more negative side of media technology. Indeed, new mediascapes can, on the one hand, be viewed as intensified cultural flows, memory banks of culture and potential contestants of stereotypes, devices of visibility, spaces for revolutionary activity, or shopping malls for alternative selves. At the same time, mediascapes can be turned into devices of misrepresentation and cultural homogenization, into magnifiers of consumption and a new societal divide.

Third, Kerr suggests that the *limits of technological propagation* should be acknowledged. Mediated experience must be set into the context of real-life experience, of which it is only a small part. The lack of recognition of this restriction on the effects of technology inflates and homogenizes its effects.

Last, Kerr comments on the tendencies toward *hyperbolic discourse* and *historical amnesia* that often pervade the discussions of technology and globalization. People are inclined to see the present technological change as unprecedented in scope and nature, when in fact what they observe may not be a new artifact but simply a reconfiguration of actors. Drawing on her view of globalization as processes rather than eras, what we witness is changing terms, players, and power axes, yet with the same hierarchies of power in place. What we do not witness is a new society transformed by technology.

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The particular changes of which we are spectators, not only in the case of Ireland but also internationally, are deregulation, media growth, and the concentration of power in a small number of media moguls. Kerr suggests that altogether these three factors give rise to commercialized media, in which the emphasis shifts from so-called "principled pluralism" to a more pragmatic stance. That is, commercialized media appeals to only a limited section of the audience and broadcasts a narrow range of programs. Both audiences and programs are thought of primarily in financial terms, and diversity of content as well as the public and cultural role of the media remain secondary. Commercial media conglomerates tend to shift their reliance on national programs to ones that are more internationally available. Consequently, "audiences tend to become more familiar with the sights and sounds of the

backlots of Los Angeles [or in the case of Slovakia, also with life problems of innumerable characters from Latin American *telenovelas*] rather than receiving representations of their own society and its concerns."[2] The main challenge that such transition brings, Kerr asserts, is how to assure plurality of content, regardless of who owns the media corporation.

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Having briefly recounted the main contributions of Kerr's essay, I now turn to a few curious silences in the text, to their importance, and to the new avenues of exploration that they open in our discussion of media technology, society, and globalization.

One remarkable silence in the text concerns the *demographic analysis of technology propagation*, whether in the world at large or, more specifically, in Ireland. Kerr reminds us that mediated experience is just a fragment of real-life experience, but we do not hear who has the access to modern technology, or where and to what extent they have it, or in what ways this access has been changing over the years. Focusing predominantly on traditional media technologies such as television, cinema, and broadcasting, perhaps she did not deem it necessary. Despite this likely rationale, attention should be given to the fact that "society" does not represent a homogeneous unit.

The "digital divide" or "technological apartheid" is a stark reality, especially if we consider the difference in access among developed and developing countries. A panel of information technology experts commissioned by the United Nations reported that, "although there are now more than 1.5 billion Web sites and billions of e-commerce dollars flowing worldwide, less than five percent of the world's population is online."[3] I believe we all know who constitutes this 5 percent. Just to refresh our common knowledge, the access is not only significantly lower in developing countries (with most of that access accruing to the elites) but there is also a growing disparity between the developed and developing countries in terms of access.

Even in the U.S., however, the gap is not bridged. While the total number of Americans buying computers and getting online increases every day, there are still large segments of the society that are being bypassed in the present Information Age. Penetration rates have risen across all demographic groups and geographic areas.[4] Nevertheless, penetration levels currently differ, often substantially, according to

income, educational level, race, household type, and geography, among other demographic characteristics. The differences are most prominent with respect to computers and Internet access, but apply to other avenues of media technology as well. The following examples highlight the breadth of the digital divide today:

> Those with a college degree are more than eight times as likely to have a computer at home, and nearly sixteen times as likely to have home Internet access as those with an elementary school education. A high-income household in an urban area is more than twenty times as likely as a rural, low-income household to have Internet access. A child in a low-income White family is three times as likely to have Internet access as a child in a comparable Black family, and four times as likely to have access as children in a comparable Hispanic household.[5]

Considering these statistics, it would be interesting to know what the significant demographic divides are in Ireland in terms of information and media technology, and how these are presently changing. Paying attention to the content of what is being propagated by the new media technologies and to the actions on the part of audiences in manipulating new technologies is significant, yet not sufficient. Many people have more steps to take before they can trouble themselves over content and ponder the ways in which to manipulate technologies.

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Let me now explore a related issue, the problem of diversity of content and new multinational corporations. Kerr suggests that concentration of ownership becomes a problem because the quality, diversity, and services offered do not accommodate the cultural and political diversity of the audience while local and state-based media corporations do. First of all, the implicit assumption is that new media content suppliers affect the demand in the country without being considerably affected by the already present tastes. Even though this is a highly disputable issue, it must be acknowledged that many large corporations, such as MTV, strive to become, not just in theory but in practice, "multilocal" rather than multinational.[6] To what extent plural tastes and interests can be incorporated into the agenda of a multinational corporation is a different question altogether. The general idea, however, is that in

order to make profit, in order to constantly "reinvent itself, to lead and reflect, create and capitalize on a particular market, it is vital that it [a multinational company] provides a breeding ground for the national and the local."[7]

On the other side of the spectrum lie the local and the national, which supposedly generate more diversity of content for their audiences. From my personal experience, I would disagree, and instead propose that the local and national acknowledge different tastes and needs, but only of a section of the society. For example, I don't remember ever watching on Slovak National Television a program addressing the needs of the extensive Roma, Hungarian, or Ukrainian minority.

To be sure, this is not an argument about the relative success of multinational companies in comparison to local or national media corporations in providing sufficient plurality of media content. Both fail to secure plurality in their own way. Rather than trying to find solutions in de- or re-regulation, perhaps we should focus more on the agency of diverse audiences, whether as consumers of the mediated product or, more importantly, as its producers. We witness how many minority groups have been successful in manipulating audiovisual technologies for their own causes — for the preservation of their cultures, for increasing their engagement with these cultures, or for more explicit political goals. Examples include the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic, the Zapatistas of southern Mexico, the Aborigines of Australia, and the Maori of New Zealand. Many more minority groups all over the world, however, and not just ethnically defined ones, have not yet taken advantage of the audiovisual technologies of the broader society. These minorities remain "doubly left out" in terms of access to as well as representation in the media.

If one of the complex array of effects resulting from the present concentration of power in a few media conglomerates is the general impoverishment of media content, then we should see increased cultural marginalization of more and more groups around the world, now not merely at the national level but internationally. In that case, it seems that manipulation of technology by the minorities and creation of access pathways to such action would indeed be more effective than re-regulation of the market, which, as Kerr points out, did not bring increased plurality of content in the case of Ireland.

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Leaving the questions of unequal access and content plurality aside, one more remarkable silence in the essay struck me, namely, the role of the government and political actors in the media technology and society interaction. Kerr offers a limited picture of the complex interaction of players. She portrays the new drama as the interaction between audiences (or consumers) and manipulators (or producers). The political actors have not been acknowledged as manipulators, even though they seem to exert much power over the media, and, through the media, over the audience.

Media and information technologies have always been important channels of political communication to the masses. Today, perhaps more than ever before, we are witnessing a strong confluence between political power and media corporations. It is already a well-recognized fact that "parties are increasingly turning, for the creation and diffusion of their image, to advertising agencies that are skilled in applying the criteria of commercial propaganda to political communication."[8]

The Italian political scientist Danilo Zolo, in his book *Democracy and Complexity*, went as far as to suggest that in modern developed societies, mass media are the most central organizing principle of today's self-legitimizing liberal oligarchies, or what he calls "televisual democracies."[9] Danilo Zolo finds an individual trapped within a techno-oligarchic, hyper-real public space, governed by means of images. The power of images, resulting from the impact of microelectronic information, communication, and entertainment media, creates a new axis of power: the media information system or "mediocracy." Mediocracy is corporate-controlled, globalized, and hyper-real. A world dominated by "hypertexts," without sufficient context, plus the corresponding collage effects, has a devastating effect on democracy.

As a result, Zolo postulates that the very nature of political communication through media is noninteractive and asymmetrical, nondirectional, and, in all-important respects, closed to dialogue. What has become a "telecharismatic" public sphere is dominated by consumer-spectators rather than citizens, by telegenic politicians and pundits, and by "demoscopic agencies." A key feature of this televisual democracy is the growing transformation of political campaigns into "meta-campaigns" and of electorates into "metaelectorates."[10] Publicity specialists, pollsters, and media pundits select the appropriate candidates and issues, and frame the boundaries of electoral competition.

Public opinion assessors create a surrogate electorate more important than the real one. The real voters see themselves replaced by their own demoscopic and televisual projection, which anticipates them and leaves them the passive observers of themselves. Such communication breeds apathetic voters, conformity, "political silence," and even the spectacularization of politics.[11]

The work of Danilo Zolo is considered by many to be the most powerful and disturbing analysis of contemporary democracy and democratic theory. In short, Zolo maintains that neither pluralistic competition nor citizens exist in contemporary mass democratic societies. This Hobbesian approach, which marginalizes human agency, allows no space for democratic activity to take place. Furthermore, it neglects the facts of unequal "wiring" to hyper-reality through which mediocracy operates. Many of Zolo's arguments are plausible in themselves, but how far can they be extended? Don't we see in Zolo an example of the theorist who inflates particular effects beyond their reach? There are degrees of incorporation into the techno-oligarchic system. Neglecting this fact means neglecting the "digital divide," which remains a powerful reality despite the attempts of G-7 "dot forces"[12] and bridging projects.

On the other hand, perhaps Zolo's pessimistic outlook *is* more than a frightening social science fiction. Perhaps there is something to be feared in view of the increased confluence between media conglomerates and political actors, and, more generally, because of *increasing* permeation of numerous commercially based mediascapes into our lives. We need to pay attention to this pessimistic scenario and reconcile it with the hybridity thesis and the notion of the active audience.

Notes

1. A. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *The Global Transformation Reader*, ed. D. Held and A. McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 232.

2. J. Petley and G. Romano, "After the Deluge: Public Service Television in Western Europe," in *Channels of Resistance: Global Television and Local Empowerment*, ed. T. Dowmunt (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), p. 29.

3. T. McDonald, "UN Urged To Close Global Digital Divide," http://www.ecommerce-times.com/perl/printer/3598 (June 2000).

4. "Falling through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide," http://www.ntia.doc.gov (U.S. Department of Commerce).

5. Ibid.

6. C. Sturmer, "MTV's Europe: An Imaginary Continent?," in *Channels of Resistance: Global Television and Local Empowerment*, ed. T. Dowmunt (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), p. 52.

7. Ibid., p. 54.

8. D. Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 162.

9. Ibid., p. 161.

10. Ibid., p. 163.

11. Ibid., p. 168. The Slovak parliamentary election campaign this past summer, 2002, is a telling example. Each party, being allocated the same amount of money and broadcasting time, was to devise a creative advertisement for itself. So there they stood, some of our most prominent politicians, holding detergents in their hands and speaking of them as if it was their party; thus selling their parties as any other product, counting more on amusement and image than the content communicated.

12. Short for Digital Opportunity Task Force. Provision of information technology to developing countries; Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society, http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/g7_g8/intro/global_info_society.htm.