

## Nothing Doing: The Remissions of Transmission

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Our understanding of powers, values and virtues tends to be simplistically bipolar, focusing on simple positives and the forces that act contrary to them, which we often mistake for their negations (a contrary is directly opposed to a primary meaning, but a negation may have no relation with it). We are particularly liable to this kind of psychomechanical dreamwork when our thoughts turn to questions of power. But most composite situations and events have more complex and angular relations of contrariety. Power has many different kinds of contrary: acquiescence is not, for instance, the same as submission and having power is not the same as using it, even if it is not exactly its contrary either; as Alain Badiou remarks, it always weakens a government to put tanks on the street, because it allows the insurgency to wonder just how many they have got. I am interested in the complicated forces involved in actions that a bipolar way of thinking might see as a simple absence of agency: we all know that there are many forms of not-doing that are nevertheless not ways of doing nothing at all.

The phantasm of media is of a hungry positivity, without shadow or contrary. It is impelled by a principle of absolute productivity, always aimed at overcoming resistance to itself. Google 'internet free zone', and you get news about lots of zones of free, that is unrestricted internet: free to rather than free from. Similarly, 'data shields' are shields for data, not from it. When we think of what are sometimes rather exasperatedly known as no-fi zones, on the analogy perhaps with no-fly zones, one thinks of areas or periods in which access to media is inadequately provided or actively prohibited. But there are also forms of voluntary sequestering from media. Software packages that help users to keep themselves free from internet contact include *SelfControl*, *AntiSocial*, *Freedom* and *Cold Turkey*.

There are also socially-sanctioned places of retreat or quiet zone amid the hubbub of contemporary communications. British intercity trains are usually equipped with a Quiet Coach, in which the use of mobile phones is strongly deprecated. We know that one of the reasons that overhearing people on mobile phones can be so disturbing is that people tend to speak more loudly and at a higher pitch on telephones, despite the fact that this is not necessary: my mother always stood up to telephone, in the intransitive usage that once held sway, as though to give her voice greater carrying power. In fact, though, the disturbance caused by somebody speaking on a mobile phone also has seems to have something to do with the fact that they are betraying or subtracting themselves from the present-at-hand social space, thereby in a sense not merely ignoring it, as one lost in reverie might, but somehow draining and derealising it.

There are other kinds of quiet zones. Nearly all networked devices allow you to enable Flight Mode which many use on the ground when travelling to protect themselves from

large roaming data charges. Hospitals sometimes impose restrictions on cellphone use in order to avoid interference with sensitive medical equipment. Telephone calls are often interrupted on the 91 bus in London as it passes through what appears to be an area of inhibited signal around HM Prison Pentonville on London's Caledonian Road. Perhaps the earliest and still the most extensive Quiet Zone was set up around the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank, West Virginia., which was built in a valley that already did a good job of keeping out electromagnetic signals. In 1958, the National Radio Quiet Zone was established, forbidding all radio and electromagnetic transmissions. Residents in an area of 13000 square miles sign an agreement that they will forgo the use of microwave ovens, wifi, cordless telephones, even petrol-powered cars, because of the interference produced by spark plugs. Restrictions of varying degrees of specificity apply to the areas around radio telescopes in other countries, but there are as a minimum restrictions on motorised traffic and the erection of radio transmitters: for example in Ondrejov in the Czech Republic, Metsähovi in Finland, Penc in Hungary, Medicina in Italy, and others. In these cases, the zone is much smaller than in the US, typically of a radius of around 2 km. ('Radio Quiet Zones Around Observatories' 2018).

Surprisingly, perhaps, the imposition of the Quiet Zone has not produced widespread protests, or suspicions of nefarious military research, but has rather become a site of pilgrimage, for people believing themselves to suffer from the condition of Electromagnetic Hypersensitivity, who attribute their headaches, nausea, debility, weight loss and other conditions to the proximity of cellphone towers, powerlines, lawnmowers and other electrical devices. One sufferer, Diane Schou explained that 'The electricity became so painful that when a neighbour ran their coffee-maker I was in such pain, with such a headache' ('Why Does This U.S. Town Ban WiFi And Cell Phones?'). In 2015, two filmmakers, Karl Lemieux and David Bryant (guitarist with the band God Speed You Black Emperor!) produced a film entitled *The Quiet Zone*, which explored and attempted to convey the symptoms of those who sought safe haven from electromagnetic persecution in the National Quiet Zone. This is all the more remarkable since part of the work of the national radio telescope in Green Bank is scanning the skies for signs of extraterrestrial intelligence. It seems that the electromagnetic refugees who have settled in the region are more sanguine about the possibility of alien transmissions than they are about the effects of the interior alienation of terrestrial media. It does not in fact appear that sufferers from electromagnetic hypersensitivity can in fact reliably detect the presence or, naturally, the absence, of electromagnetic fields.

Predictably, there is a community, mediated, of course, through websites and internet videos, offering expertise and training and aiming to spread understanding of the dangers of 'electrosmog' and ways of taking refuge from it. There are claims that it is on the rise. Two contributors to the journal *Electromagnetic Biology and Medicine* asserted dramatically that

the group of electrosensitive people around the world, including Sweden, is not just a small fraction that deviates from the rest of the healthy population.

Instead, it points at the possibility that electrosensitivity will be more widespread in the near future. The extrapolated trend indicates that 50% of the population can be expected to become electrosensitive by the year 2017. (Hallberg and Oberfeld 2006, 189).

Some of the persecution-feelings relating to information overload can come close to the ‘influencing machine’ delusions described by Viktor Tausk (1933). But those who seek relief from contemporary media and information seem to see media, not as invasion, but as solicitation – though we might recall that Daniel Paul Schreber’s invasive and emasculating rays produced ‘a greatly increased feeling of voluptuousness’ as well as torment (Schreber 2000, 59). Today’s form of the ‘technical delusion’, as the ‘influencing machine’ psychosis is sometimes called, is likely to be experienced not as taking over your thoughts, but as operationalising your own interior monologue, making it appear, not as an alienating machine, but an immanent machine, a machine that pirates you with yourself.

Ever since *The Parasite* (1980, 1982) and most recently in *Le Mal Propre* (2008b, 2011), Michel Serres has linked communication not only to joy, blessing and invention, but also to dirt, death and the violent appropriation of space. You can occupy space by physical force, but it is much cheaper and more durable to occupy space through media – through making a subject people communicate in your language rather than in theirs, for example, or by drowning out the possibility of communication in noise, hubbub, racket, or, in electronic terms, what has become known in English since the beginning of World War 1 as ‘jamming’. *Le dur ne dure pas, seul dure le doux* is Serres’s motto for this (Serres 2008a, 115). Serres followed his book *The Parasite*, which ends in a paradoxical overload of interferences, with his book *Detachment*, which is an exploration of the saving grace of gaps, remissions and spaces of suspension. The book begins with a nightmarish evocation of intensive cultivation in China and evokes the necessity for spaces apart from such enclosing exposure:

I can breathe freely and fully only in a field because it is bordered by brushwood full of quarrelling birds, because that field lies at the outskirts of a forest, marked by deserted areas, by spaces left fallow, badly tilled. (Serres 1989, 7)

David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin use the term ‘remediation’ to signify ‘the formal logic by which new media fashion prior media forms’ (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 273). If remediation is the word for the self-propagation of media, media mediating themselves, then media remission might be regarded as a kind of remedy for media. Indeed the word remediation, translating Latin *remediatio*, was in use in English from the late eighteenth century to mean remedy or therapy, and the word is still used to mean mitigation or abatement of a wrong or danger. This makes the word remediation something of a pharmakon, at once toxin and auto-antidote. There is an economy of dilation and deterrence in all media, meaning that every mode of media must at some point need to be subject to moderation. Indeed *media* and *moderation* share a root meaning of think, weigh, take account of, as in Greek *μέδομαι* to think, be concerned with. (Ernout and Meillet 2001, 392). Emile Benveniste speculates interestingly on the

relation between words that unfold from the Indo-European root *med-* and *medicus*, a physician, the parallel between Latin *medeor* and Avestan *vī-mad*, to treat or care for the sick, suggesting that the shared conception may be the idea of treating in a measured or appropriate manner. Benveniste finds in the word *modus* the idea of ‘a measure imposed on things, which supposes knowledge, reflection, authority: not a measure of mensuration (as in *mensis*, month), but a measure of *moderation* (cf. *modus: moderor*), applied to that which ignore or violates rule’ (‘une mesure *imposée* aux choses et qui suppose connaissance, réflexion, autorité; non une mesure de mensuration (comme dans *mensis*), mais une mesure de *modération* (cf. *modus: moderor*), appliquée à ce qui viole ou ignore la règle’ (Benveniste 1945, 5). The mediation of medicine involves careful reflection, as attested by the related term meditation. There are very few, if any, groups of humans who do not conceive of health in terms of the equilibrium of quantities, whether of humours, or elements, or *chi*, or other forms of magic energy, implying that there may be quite a dense entanglement between medicine, moderation and media, that goes far beyond familiar notions like music therapy. Calvin Watkins has similarly explored the networks of association in Indo-European languages between poetry, the magical convergence between word and measure, and medicine (Watkins 1995, 537-45).

Every phase of intensified mediation, or medication, every net increase in transmissive capacity, seems to prompt the apprehension of overload and the countervailing necessity for remission, or medical media-modification. The problem of overcoming limits is always liable to flip into, or be shadowed by the problem of resisting limitlessness, or tempering saturation. The mass producibility and reproducibility of texts is remarked on perhaps 2500 years ago as one of the forms of human vanity and weariness in Ecclesiastes: ‘of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh’ (denn viel Büchermachens ist kein Ende, und viel studieren macht den Leib müde) (Ecclesiastes 12.12). Mediation always both impels and imperils propriety (property, appropriateness), allowing for the enlargement of territory and threatening the self-possession of others. The need to keep your data safe increases in parallel with the need to keep yourself safe from data, even, perhaps, your own. This is classically a problem of sound: the increase in the volume, in both senses, of sound transmissions, creates the pressure for noise abatement. But sound typically provides the register in which to discuss the pressure of mediation itself.

Communication is necessary for human social existence, but the more extensively socialised, and therefore the more intensively mediated, human existence becomes, so the more necessary the principles of distance, spacing or suspension are to maintain peaceful coexistence. The moderation or modulation of media is an important part of the codes of politeness which Norbert Elias saw as necessary to the cooling of aggression and violence in what he called the civilising process (1994). Walter Ong is often taken to be the proponent of oral forms of human communication, with their capacity to enact presence and the sense of intensely shared being, but he also warned that oral cultures are often anxious, unstable and violent, precisely because there is

nothing within immediate communication to hold back the communication of violent impulse (Ong 1967, 132-3). For Ong, orality is, as he puts it, ‘adversative’ (Ong 1989, 35), and writing is an abatement of the unquestionable immediacy of voice, helping to scoop out the subject in the fine and private place of the mind (Ong 1967, 135). This in accord with Derrida’s far-reaching remark, made in passing in the context of reflections on a tape-recorded interview, that ‘[I]anguage, in the strict sense, oral discourse, is already, *almost* in its totality, a machine for undoing urgency’ (Derrida 1995, 34).

In fact, remission and transmission are interpenetrating opposites, meaning that transmission must depend upon patterns of interior remission. In English, to remit means both to make a payment as required, and to waive the requirement for the payment altogether, as in the remission of sin in religion. So one remits a payment that is due, but the one to whom it is due also has the option of remitting the debt, that is to say, cancelling the debt, the idea being perhaps that the debt is being sent back.

Freud suggested in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Eros is to connection and complexity as Thanatos is to dispersal and disconnection (Freud 1953-74, 18.55). Perhaps all media are impelled by, or at least amount to, a kind of death drive, aiming at their own abolition, in the absolute immediacy or angel-talk of the perfect mediation. At the same time, there is the impulse to procrastination, or self-deterrence, in every medium, a reflexive self-tending or what Deleuze calls an ‘inclension’ (Deleuze 1993, 3), that makes every medium in part an attempt to jam or interfere with its own work of mediation. This is in fact the real death drive in every medium, that turns it progressively inwards on itself, progressively drowning every signal in the dilly-dally of its own circumstance. It is this deterrence of communication that internet self-denial attempts to deter.

Data-abatement, the remission of transmission, the moderation of mediation, is a kind of mercy as well as a mutilating prohibition. But we should not forget that mercy is a secondary effect of absolute power, precisely as its arbitrary or gracious suspension – as soon as mercy became an established part of a democratic system of justice it would be unjust. That is why mercy and the remission of sin is in the hands of a deity who cannot be sued, only pleaded with.

In fact, media and media systems are not to be thought of as either positively present, or, as it were, positively absent, since, to be effective, every code must be able to encode its own abeyance, transmit its own remission. There are, that is, zones of micro-quiet as well as zones of macro-quiet. Whether in music, language or mathematics, mediation starts to do much more work as soon as there is a zero sign, a sign for the suspension of signification, or communication, as we say, in standby mode. Indeed, the word zero spawns the word *cipher*, which, deriving from Arabic *ṣifr*, the arithmetical symbol for nought, itself a translation of Sanskrit *śūnya*, ‘empty’, means both an empty sign and, from 1528, a secret code (that is, an apparently empty sign that in fact has something to it). There must be what is called in French the *mesure*

*pour rien*. The capacity to be off, or to be put off, must be part of how a medium proceeds or goes on.

All media and all media systems have a dimension of self-inhibition that is intrinsic to them. Media not only have ways of shutting down, they also have means of modulation, that is, quantitative and qualitative variation, whether in the volume control, or the verbal moods with which many languages are provided, through genres, musical keys and so on. Media are capable not only of different forms of amplification, through repetition, propagation and translation, they also include capacities of self-diminishment and self-inhibition. They possess what in the title of one of his texts Samuel Beckett calls lessness. Media not only multiply their own instances and occasions, they also multiply intermissions of remission, quasi-spaces of the 'off', whether offside, offstage, off-air, offscreen, offshore, offline or on- and off-message. 'Standing by' might indeed be another way of understanding the term *abstition*, which I propose as a way of referring to ways of giving way in general (Connor 2018).

The social life of media is built around patterns of exhibition and inhibition. There are no human groups without the power of communication, but equally, and as part of the same condition, no human groups without secrets, obscenities and sacred ineffabilities, things kept incommunicado, all of them, of course, depending on media systems for their existence. The ability to suspend speech in an impulsively vocalising creature like a primate, in which sound-making is closely linked to the limbic system, and so scarcely to be distinguished from the feeling of which it is the index, is largely identical with the capacity for mediation itself, understood as the capacity to be and remain at a distance from what one represents. Articulation perfectly matches the duality of mediation, in that it both connects and separates. One must be able to say no to the medium which itself permits and brings into being the possibility of naysaying. Every medium must have a way of communicating its own zero degree, transmitting its own breaks in transmission. Such a signification is found at the end of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, as the tape spools emptily away. It is in fact a characteristic of all media that being off is a modality of their being on.

There are many modes of remission, operating within individual media, and across the field of media in general. Indeed, modality is itself one of the means of remission, even as it can provide a form of magnification through diversification. One example is the temporality of attention. I remember hearing Michael Grade, in the late 1980s, when he was head of the UK's Channel 4, discussing at a dinner in Birkbeck College the problem of monopolisation of attention. The problem for makers of TV programmes, he said, was that people already watched as much TV as it was possible for them to watch (I remember having the same thought about people who smoked 60 cigarettes a day – they must have to set their alarms early in the morning to get on to the job). Given the absence of virgin times and spaces to colonise, the only choice for TV producers, Grade said, would be to try to split viewers' attention into smaller segments, which would then be available to be shared out among competing producers and, of course, advertisers. This was something like the opposite of Raymond Williams's principle of 'flow' (Williams 1990, 87) – which as I recall it was in any case

not much in evidence in the sludgy emissions of British television in 1974. Deepening saturation requires multiplied divisions and the minor remissions of desisting, transition and resumption they enjoin. The more mediation there is, the less adhesion individual media can compel, making not for total flow, but a fissiparous *perpetuum mobile* of abeyances, in which the mediated middle way between switching on and switching off is what used, in homelier parlance, to be called 'switching over'. All the time this competes with the so-called 'bubble effect', or inverse ratio of availability and choice, that has been amply and repeatedly verified with the diversification of channels and platforms in digital media, in which the larger the total field of possible attention, the more restricted individual media consumers' forms of attention will be. Offer 12 channels, and viewers may encounter 5 regularly; offer 57, and they will cling conservatively to 3. Net increases of clamour produce systematically distributed deafness.

Media are, like many forms of human transport, horses, sledges, boats and trains, books, symphonies and films, both vector and habitat, vehicle and platform, a way of moving and way of abiding. To live out of contact in an unmediated space is still to have some connection to mediated or media-saturated space. Time tends to be made substantial in terms of space, or rather certain ethereal kinds of imaginary 'space-substances', that allow us a material correlate for the idea of a tenuity: as when we say that a signal is 'patchy': something that comes and goes is experienced as a fabric of latencies and potentials. Downtime is in fact disseminated through most forms of media communication, in which concentrated and continuous real time interchanges are split and spread across the episodic intermissions and quickenings of electronic contact, like a speeded-up version of the sedate archaic practice of chess by correspondence.

The immanent silence of a medium, or zone of mediatic auto-remission, has often been thought to be the reservoir of danger – transmitting what is known as 'dead air', an unmodulated carrier wave, is still an offence in the UK – and also sometimes of magical possibility. The 'electronic voice phenomena' which Konstantine Raudive convinced himself he had detected on blank recordings of an inputless microphone (1971) have had a long and excitable career in the ears and minds of those willing, or willing themselves, to believe.

So a crucial part of the potential of media is what Giorgio Agamben called their impotentiality, their power not to be (Agamben 1999, 182). In Agamben's explication, Aristotle distinguishes between a general potentiality, exemplified in the child who, through being able to be transformed by growth or education, may have a potential to become an architect or a poet, and the specific potentiality possessed by the one who already possessed of the knowledge necessary to make buildings or poems:

Whoever already possesses knowledge ... is not obliged to suffer an alteration: he is instead potential, Aristotle says, thanks to a *hexis*, a "having," on the basis of which he can also not bring his knowledge into actuality (*mē energein*) by *not* making a work, for example. Thus the architect is potential insofar as he has

the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems. (Agamben 1999, 179)

Agamben names this capacity ‘impotential’, translating Aristotle’s *adynamia*, meaning not impotence, or lack of a power, but the power, so to speak, to lack. This is Agamben’s explanation:

in its originary structure, *dynamis*, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own *sterēsis*, its own non-Being. This relation constitutes the essence of potentiality. To be potential means: to be own’s own lack, *to be in relation to one’s own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being. (Agamben 1999, 182)

The term ‘radio silence’ indicates the necessity for withholding or retraction as part of the apparatus of media communication. Early radio users adopted the principle of non-overlap through the conventionalised use of the word ‘over’ at the end of one party’s transmission, a word which means both that the utterance is, at least for the time being, over, and also that it may be passed over to the other. Space travel or the necessary delay that comes even with signals moving at the speed of light, fills the plenum of media communication with painful rents and suspensions, the most agonising being the wait for return of radio contact following the ionisation blackout resulting from the frictional heat of re-entry into the atmosphere. No silence is primary, all silence is a subtraction, or holding back, an impotentiating of something held to be primary, but perhaps, following Agamben, can only really have potency if it includes the capacity for self-limitation. But the abeyance of sense can also provide dangerous loopholes. One of the ways into the Enigma code employed in Bletchley Park was the fact that German radio operators in unexciting locations quite frequently reported that there was nothing to report – *keinen besonderen Ereignisse*. These yawning articulations of nothing-doing provided one of the most important blind spots of redundancy that helped the cipher to be deciphered (Milner-Barry 1993, 93-4).

We inhabit an era, or more likely, an interval, of recoil from the seemingly irresistible and omnidirectional propagation of media techniques and effects, of which the expansion of media studies and the very idea of what might possibly count as a medium are a cooperating part. Such recoils are part of the climatic fluctuations of media. The urgent need currently seems to be for regulation on the one hand and stoic self-restraint on the other. How do we know of this recoil, this impulse to manumission from mediated life? In the same way we know everything else: because we can read, hear and see it unremittingly. Whisper who dares: remission is in the air, and everywhere writ loud.



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