## IDLE TALK: ONTOLOGY AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS IN HEIDEGGER

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In Human all too Human Nietzsche outlined the philosophical challenge presented by modern media systems. 'The press, the machine, the railway, the telegraph', he opined, 'are premises whose thousand-year conclusion no one has yet dared to draw'. All of these objects constitute a media circuit which challenge old certainties about community, communication and subjectivity. While others might have failed to syllogise upon the premises of the press, Nietzsche did not hesitate to draw his own conclusions about the brave new world of journalism. 'Just look at these superfluous people', shouts Zarathustra, 'they vomit their bile and call it a newspaper. They devour one another and cannot even digest themselves'. A similar rage appears later in Zarathustra: 'Do you not see the souls hanging like dirty, limp rags? - And they also make newspapers from these rags!' Under the influence of newspapers, spirit has become 'a repulsive verbal swill' (196). In the Gay Science, Nietzsche also equated journalism with the 'prostitution of the spirit'.3 This degeneracy of the spirit he also condemns in Beyond Good and Evil, when he focuses on 'the newspaper-reading demi-monde of the spirit'. 4 Here he also presents 'parliamentary imbecility, including the obligation upon everyone to read his newspaper at breakfast', as examples of European nihilism (138). In Human all too Human he sadly surveys 'the press as it is now, with its daily expenditure of lungpower on exclaiming, deafening, inciting, shocking - is it anything more than the permanent false alarm that leads ears and senses off in the wrong direction?'(287).

One might view Nietzsche's anti-journalistic polemic as a set of local prejudices that remain marginal to a more properly philosophical enterprise. Nevertheless, the newspaper acts as a key metaphor in Nietzsche's texts, sustaining a series of substantial - if implicit - claims about the constitution of subjectivity. Nietzsche suggests that newspapers remove the conditions for authentic subjectivity, although it is a matter of some doubt whether any subject which requires conditions anterior or extrinsic to itself is not already doomed to heteronomy and inauthenticity in Nietzsche's eyes. In criticising newspapers, Nietzsche criticises a vulgar, expressive subject who requires affirmation in the eyes of others. The clichéd vocabularies of 'spirit' in which this expressivity is couched merely confirms a subjective lack; self-expression is akin to vomit, while the hackneyed effusions of the expressive 'soul' merely confirm the latter's absence. Here the verbose self is comparable to 'dirty limp rags'; it is a radically heteronymous creature as fragmented as it is soiled and second-hand. Those who consume such vomit also effect a turn

- 1. Nietzsche, Human all too Human (HTH), R.J. Hollingdale (trans), Richard Schacht (introd), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p378.
- 2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*TSZ*), R.J. Hollingdale (trans), London, Penguin, 1961, p77.
- 3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science (TGS)*, Walter Kaufmann (trans), New York, Vintage, 1974, p103.
- 4. Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (BG&F), R.J. Hollingdale (trans), Michael Tanner (introd), London, Penguin, 1990, p203.

from the self; they hungrily devour others but 'cannot digest themselves'. Newspapers, it would appear, constitute a network of heteronomy and preside over a collective abdication of the self. Whatever the truth of these comments, Nietzsche helped to introduce the newspaper as an object for truth or philosophical reflection. In the genre of philosophy, Nietzsche installs the newspaper as the basis of the philosophical aside, which is only superficially viewed as an aside to philosophy.

Martin Heidegger takes his cue from Nietzsche in his use of a philosophical vocabulary within which the newspaper features as a significant metaphor. Indeed, in his lectures on Nietzsche Heidegger cites with approval his precursor's critique of a media-saturated age: 'Around the year 1882 he says regarding his times, "Our age is an agitated one, and precisely for this reason, not an age of passion; it heats itself up continuously, because it feels that it is not warm - basically it is freezing ... In our time it is merely by means of an echo that events acquire their 'greatness' - the echo of the newspaper." '5 Heidegger's advocacy of Nietzsche's anti-journalistic polemic may seem relatively insignificant. His pronouncements on the press mark perhaps a momentary abandonment of philosophical high seriousness and should be interpreted in that spirit. Or we might conclude that the thorough banality of these views removes any basis for a critical engagement with them. According to Jürgen Habermas, 'Heidegger's critical judgements ... on the dictatorship of the public realm and the impotence of the private sphere, on technocracy and mass civilisation, are without any originality whatsoever because they belong to a repertoire of opinions typical of a certain generation of German mandarins'.6

Heidegger's pronouncements about mass communications are, it seems, banal in themselves and partake in the very idle talk he professes to despise. However, I want to argue that when his local criticisms of media systems are related to his philosophy as a whole, they succeed in raising some fundamental questions about the nature and coherence of that enterprise. Thus, while this essay is primarily concerned with Heidegger's ontology (and its engagement with mass communications largely incidental to this more general concern), the decision to use Heidegger's views on modern media systems as an interpretative avenue into his philosophy is not an arbitrary one. Heidegger's pronouncements about mass communications (and technology in general) reflect his wider commitment to being a philosopher of our public life. According to his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger radically overhauled academic philosophy after the war; he challenged its position of disengaged transcendence and succeeded in rendering philosophy meaningful to a disillusioned generation.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy, it seemed, could once again contribute to the practical task of living and could attempt solutions or, at the very least, lend a determination to problems common to us all. The 'problem of technology', in particular, exercised Heidegger and his entire generation. Moreover, he was intensely concerned about the way technology, through the aegis of media systems,

5. Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche IV: Nihilism (NIV), David Farrell Krell (ed), Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (trans), New York, Harper & Row, 1982, p47.

6. Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (PDOM), Frederick Lawrence (trans), Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987, p140.

7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics (PH), David E. Linge (trans and ed), Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, pp229-230.

encroached upon our everyday speech-environments. In Heidegger's eyes technologies such as radios and newspapers distorted social interaction and damaged the communicative tissue of our world. He had considerable difficulty, however, in identifying with any precision the nature of this damage or the agencies through which it might be addressed.

As we shall see in the course of this essay, Heidegger produces different and often incompatible views of mass media throughout his career. These shifting and contradictory attitudes record transitions in his overall thought. They also reflect, I shall argue, Heidegger's broader difficulty in lending his ontology a critical function or a normative dimension. Not only does Heidegger's personal commitment to philosophy's public vocation demand this engagement, but it is a logical requirement of his own published philosophical views. If *Dasein* is always concern-fully absorbed in its world, if care is a primordial attitude from which all other dispositions derive, then philosophy cannot coherently exempt itself from this attitude of care. How we care about media systems, therefore, raises questions not simply about the application of a philosophy to everyday life-issues, but also the logical consistency of this philosophy. Heidegger's difficulty in responding to the problem of media systems or even identifying what kind of problem it constitutes, reflects, I shall argue, a more general ambiguity in his work concerning the status of problems as such. We shall explore the conceptual nature of this difficulty in some detail later in the essay, but we can begin to sketch out its lineaments by considering the rival interpretations he offers of mass media in the modern world.

Heidegger arrived at two diametrically opposed accounts of the 'problem' of media systems. The first view, which he adopted in Being and Time, presents newspapers and radios as symptoms of das Man or what is often translated as 'the they'. These technologies constitute a media circuit which connives against identity. This circuit is neither a subject nor an object, but is a sort of black hole in which these predicates lose all meaning. Oswald Spengler described the press as 'a monstrous intellectual Something' and Heidegger's das Man is characterised by an equally sublime anonymity.8 As the medium in which das Man moves, newspapers are a site of indeterminacy and a radical dispersal of meaning. This is inauthentic being. Many commentators have disputed whether inauthenticity operates as a descriptive or normative category, but since Heidegger challenges this very distinction in Being and Time, it seems contrary to the spirit of the work to re-install it here. Within this context Heidegger strikes a distinctly Nietzschean pose. Authenticity can only be reclaimed when Dasein rescues itself from this anonymous verbal drift and grounds itself as a self-determining and self-accountable entity. Authentic Dasein distinguishes itself thereby from those newspaper readers, who, as Nietzsche put it, cannot 'digest themselves'. Heidegger returned to this point in a later lecture and insisted that the 'superman's appearance is ... inaccessible to the teletypers and radios dispatches of the press'.9

But Heidegger was also one of Nietzsche's most formidable critics. Not

8. Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, Vol. II: Perspectives of World-History (DOTW), Charles Francis Atkinson (trans), London, Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928, p460.

9. Martin Heidegger, What is Called Thinking? (WICT), F.D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (trans), New York, Evanston, and London, Harper & Row, 1968, p72.

only did he distance himself from Nietzsche, but he also produced alongside this critique an assessment of media systems, which, although equally scathing, was wholly at odds with his earlier views. If newspapers produce the catastrophe of subjectivity and objectivity in Being and Time they constitute their highest apotheosis and greatest triumph in Heidegger's later work. Newspapers, in other words, collude with the modern subject in its ruthless objectification of the world – that is the reduction of the world to the status of brute objecthood. To understand this claim, we need to contextualise Heidegger's later views on newspapers within his wider assessment of modernity. 'The period we call modern', according to Heidegger, 'is defined by the fact that man becomes the centre and measure of all being. Man is the *subjectum*, that which lies at the bottom of all beings, that is, in modern terms at the bottom of all objectification and representation' (NIV 28). Nietzsche, according to Heidegger, stands within this tradition as modernity's greatest and last metaphysician. Heidegger concedes that Nietzsche is one of the most skilled critics of the metaphysics of subjectivism - a tradition which predicates a subject and an object as the generative basis for its own conversations. Nietzsche criticised subjectivism's commitment to moral and epistemological certainty, insisting that the will to certainty impedes the will to power. He repudiated its model of truth convinced that the hypostatisation of being as presence forecloses all possibilities of becoming. But Heidegger remains convinced that Nietzsche's critique is ultimately conducted in the name of a higher-order subjectivity - a subjectivity that no longer requires such metaphysical ballast in order to sustain itself. According to Heidegger, the category of the subject is an illusion that presides over the real domination of the earth. He does not offer modifications of the subject; he does not choose to emphasise the more significant modalities of subjectivity to which subjectivism, itself is blind, but aspires to exceed the metaphysics of subjectivism tout court.

Now while Nietzsche presented newspapers as the antithesis of authentic subjectivity and Heidegger tended to adopt a similar view in *Being and Time*, the later Heidegger often presents media systems as wholly complicit with the metaphysics of subjectivism. If the 'absolute objectification of ... being as such results from the self-fulfilling dominion of subjectivity' then newspapers extend this dominion (NIV 242). As Heidegger put it in his Nietzsche lectures, "journalism" identifies the metaphysical securing and establishment of the everydayness of our dawning age ... through which everyone is provided with the ever-useful objectivities of the day. At the same time, it reflects the self-completing objectification of beings as a whole' (NIV 241). Heidegger, in other words, enlists newspapers in his general account of modernity as the reign of the Ge-Stell - a subjectivist ordering of the world. Under the dominion of the Ge-Stell only those items which affirm the subject's pre-conceived categories and purposes are admitted to the order of representation over which newspapers preside. Oswald Spengler had already outlined the way newspapers 'determine "the truth", insisting

that what it obtains is 'just its truth'; the later Heidegger adopts a similar view but insists that the 'truth' of the newspaper is also the 'truth' of a subjectivist metaphysics (DOTW 461). By reducing truth to representation newspapers collude in the positivistic reduction of the world to the presentat-hand. The world is presented as an object prior to and independent of language, in a way that depletes the world of its history and blinds us to the world-disclosive properties of language. Language now becomes a simple tool or a useful mediator between two 'objective' or present-at-hand entities. The subject wields a tool-like language and fails to consider how the subject is the instrument of language itself. Newspapers intensify this reification of language and prepare the way for the conquest of the world as picture. Congealed thus into an object from which the subject stands removed, the world loses its history and historically variegated aspect:

Everything is levelled to one level. Our minds hold views on all and everything, and view all things in the identical way. Today every newspaper, every illustrated magazine, and every radio program offers all things in the identical way to uniform views ... The one-sided view... has puffed itself up into an all-sidedness which in turn is masked so as to look harmless and natural. But this all-sided view which deals in all and everything with equal uniformity and mindlessness ... reduces everything to a univocity of concepts and specifications the precision of which not only corresponds to, but has the same essential origin as, the precision of technological process (WISCT 33-34)

While the Heidegger of *Being and Time* had emphasised the indeterminacy and vagueness of media, he now emphasises its 'precision' - the 'precision of technological process'. Mass communications are part of an expansive industrial circuit which begins with the forester who produces the raw product for paper and ends with 'newspapers and illustrated magazines'. The latter, according to Heidegger 'set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand'. 10 Communicative interaction is now hypostatised to the level of object for the purposes of mass consumption. According to Heidegger, modern cybernetics typifies this kind of objectification. 'Cybernetics', as he put it, 'transforms language into an exchange of news. The arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information'. 11 The notion of language, congealed into an object and reduced to its function was already implicit in the concept of 'information' for some time. Walter Benjamin, for instance, noted a similar reification of language, in his account of the decline of storytelling in an age of information.<sup>12</sup> Heidegger suggests that information systems such as newspapers preside over what he identified as the 'epoch of the unconditioned and complete objectification of everything that is', which begins with the 'self-fulfilling metaphysics of subjectivity' (NIV 241). Heidegger thus reduces the premises of the press, which Nietzsche had

- 10. Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays (QCT), New York, Harper & Row, 1977, p18.
- 11. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (*BW*), David Farrell Krell (ed), revised edition, London, Routledge, 1993, p434.
- 12. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed. and introd), Harry Zohn (trans), New York, Harcourt Brace and World, 1968, pp83-107.

outlined as a challenge to philosophy, to a more basic set of premises, namely, the subject-object dichotomy of modern metaphysics.

Heidegger's different accounts of the press produce an interesting result. The problem of mass communications outlined in Being and Time can be viewed as the ideal solution to the problem these technologies represent in later phases of Heidegger's work and vice-versa. Heidegger, of course, does not see it this way, nor would any one genuinely concerned by the real distortions of mass communications. But this does lead us to question the adequacy of Heidegger's account of these issues and to consider his larger difficulty with the nature of problems as such. This difficulty can be traced back to his devastating critique of the epistemological tradition in Being and Time and continues to haunt later phases of his work. In Being and Time, let us remember, Heidegger suggested that many of the problems that philosophy has traditionally set for itself are largely spectral problems. These spectres arise from the false priority of epistemological concerns within the philosophical tradition. Philosophy has been exclusively preoccupied with knowing the world, but it is a knowledge forever forfeited by the very terms of its pursuit. We shall soon examine the reasons why a scepticism about the world and a desire for full certainty within it are interminably bound in a lover's quarrel. One can simply indicate at this point that Heidegger proposed to move beyond or behind this aporia, by addressing a more fundamental set of concerns about the nature of Being. For this reason, he famously distinguished between ontological and ontic issues, between descriptions that possess a fundamental import and those that are merely empirical or contingent. Of course, many thinkers have subsequently queried this distinction and have emphasised the issue of methodological selfreference it raises.13 Heidegger proposed to outline the 'ontological' conditions of possibility of purely 'ontic' states, but his subsequent account of Being-in-the-world is organised around the very impossibility of such a transhistorical and non-contingent perspective.

13. For a succinct account of this problem see Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp109-110.

The issue here is not simply one of argumentative consistency. On a more pragmatic level, the transcendental power Heidegger claims for his own descriptions also threatens to disempower these same assertions by removing them from their 'ontic' contexts of use and meaning. Heidegger, therefore, prevents himself from saying anything particularly differentiated or historically specific about ontic problems because their 'problematicity' is always deemed to reside elsewhere. He does not want to provide contingent solutions to contingent problems, but proposes to recover, instead, the more primordial sources of these empirical issues. As we have suggested, however, his account of these sources seems to undermine the very possibility of such non-contingent descriptions. Heidegger quickly appreciated this issue of self-reflexive critique and abandoned his search for the meaning of Being, turning instead to an account of its history. Not only does this permit him to side-step the methodological incoherence of a fundamental ontology, it also allows him to re-engage with issues that he may have formerly deemed

ontologically trivial - although this did not, as his earlier comments on radios and newspapers suggest, prevent Heidegger from ventilating such concerns in the first place. Philosophy can now re-engage with the problems that inhere in our historical life-contexts. Heidegger can treat, for instance, the 'problem of technology', and can turn towards its particular manifestation in the technologies of mass communication. Nevertheless, Heidegger's account of these issues, I want to argue, remains fraught with difficulties.

The main reason for these difficulties is that Heidegger continues to see media systems as symptoms of a more primordial problem - namely, the problem of modern subjectivism. This kind of reduction raises two obvious objections. The first - and weaker - objection is that Heidegger's account of the problem of modern media is unhelpfully abstract. Heidegger says too much and too little about the difficulties that face us in the modern world. Once again he de-differentiates the particular hazards of mass communication and allows for no discussion of their various properties or relative values when he relates them to an all-encompassing world-view or metaphysical system. The second objection - which I want to consider in some length - challenges his account of this metaphysics or, more specifically, his description of its pragmatic effects. If the metaphysics of subjectivism, according to the later Heidegger, is a core problem from which other issues derive, we must strive to establish what order of problem subjectivism represents. The metaphysics of subjectivism, Heidegger argues, culminates in Dasein's self-estrangement and perpetrates a disastrous objectification of the world. However, here we are forced to query the meaning of this charge and to consider how, in the light of Heidegger's own thought, such objectification is possible. For the task of much of Heidegger's philosophy is to show how any attempt to establish the objectivity of objects – to provide, in other words, a non-context-relative account of entities - is bound to fail. This false endeavour – which I will term here 'objectivism' – is a particular aspect of the over-arching metaphysics of subjectivism from which Heidegger wishes to escape. If Heidegger is correct in assuming that objectivity is a metaphysical illusion, it is unclear what descriptive value or ontological status we can accord to the pragmatic outcome of this error. One does not need to confuse the differences between 'objectivism' - a metaphysical attitude - and 'objectification' - the pragmatic result of this attitude - to appreciate the issue of critical self-reference that their relation raises. Heidegger's account of objectification draws its descriptive resources from an objectivist account of entities which Heidegger has already identified as impossible. Heidegger cannot call upon the descriptions of a metaphysical system he has dismissed to characterise the pragmatic result of this system without falling into incoherence.

Let us consider this point in closer detail. According to Heidegger, we cannot ever hope to establish the 'objectivity' of objects. The project is on some level of definition impossible - objectivity understood as a non-epistemic reality cannot possess an epistemic value. Viewed from another

level, the enterprise appears incoherent and presupposes what it puts in question. Subjectivism's sceptical doubts about the world, for instance, still require an understanding of the world to get its sceptical claims up and running. Or we can conclude that it is circular and already assumes what it sets out to prove. In other words, a background account of Being as presence necessarily leads to an objectivist view of entities as present-at-hand. Heidegger is convinced that entities can only disclose themselves as such within pre-established contexts of meaning or use, so there is no such thing as a non-context-relative objecthood. Since entities are themselves contextdependent, it is impossible to determine the objectivity of objects independently of the life-contexts in which they appear. Moreover, the context-bound knowledge we enjoy of entities is not reducible to a set of propositional truths; attempts at such a reduction are either impossible or unnecessary. For instance, if our knowledge of a hammer is testified by our ability to use it, this ability is not something we can describe in propositional form. For this kind of knowledge will require from us not simply an account of the hammer's intrinsic properties or those of its user but also the rules that determine the hammer's use in a particular situation. If these rules are reducible to propositional form, we would still face a need to establish rules of application for these rules and so forth until we find ourselves in an infinite regress. We would then have to conclude that these rules for rules are either impossible or unnecessary. At some point we would have to subscribe to rules that need no further grounding. But then we can legitimately claim that our everyday know-how can similarly sustain itself without further grounding. 14 An exhaustive propositional knowledge about a hammer is, therefore, either impossible or unnecessary.

14. I have relied on Stephen Mulhall's lucid exposition of this view: Stephen Mulhall, Heidegger and Being and Time, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, pp55-56.

Heidegger does not simply reject an objectivist account of entities in order to install an objectivist account of contexts because a context is not itself an entity, but 'a system of relationships' which remains largely indeterminate. What militates against an objectivist account of entities, therefore, is not simply their context-dependency, but also the undefinability of contexts as such. If a context is a field of use then there is no way we can give an exhaustive account of these uses. A hammer, for example, can be applied in numerous ways, as an item for carpentry, as a weapon, as a drumstick, etc. and there is no way of fully accounting for its application. Since a context is defined by these applications then contexts are largely indeterminate. 'The phenomenal content of these 'Relations and 'Relata', Heidegger therefore maintains, 'the "in-order-to", the "for-the-sake-of" and the "with-which" of an involvement - is such that they resist any sort of mathematical functionalization'. 15 An entity is always understood 'in terms of' something else, but there is no way this something else can be rendered fully present. Jacques Derrida drew on a different set of vocabularies to make this essentially Heideggerian point. Signs, too, are always to be understood 'in terms of' other signs, so that meaning is always deferred across language. Meaning, therefore, is never objectively present, but always

15. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (B&T), John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans), Oxford, Blackwell, 1969, pp121-122.

absents itself to some degree.

Derrida's arguments about language are well known, but I want to make brief reference to them here for two purposes. First, they further underline the strength of Heidegger's critique of objectivism outlined above. Second, they emphasise the difficulties inherent in his account of objectivism's pragmatic effects. More particularly, the vocabularies Derrida uses allow us to isolate the problems inherent in Heidegger's description of the objectifying forces of mass communication. Like Heidegger, Derrida believes that meaning is not reducible to its context. However, this is not simply because contexts are indeterminate but it is also a function of the essential iterability of signs. 16 In order for signs to be meaningful, Derrida claims, they must also be repeatable. 'A signifier', according to Derrida, 'is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or resemblance. It is the condition of its ideality, what identifies it as signifier, and makes it as such, relating it to a signified, which, for the same reasons could never be a 'unique and singular reality'. 17 Even if a language changed so rapidly or its user was so adept that repetition never occurred, meaning would be impossible without the possibility of the same expression having a different application. This condition of meaningfulness dictates that a meaningful item is not wholly reducible to its specific context of use.

There is a necessary 'ideality' about signs, therefore, that exceeds the conditions of their application, even if such conditions could be given a propositional form. This ideality cannot be understood in a Platonic way so that signs come to stand for self-present ideas or concepts. For concepts too are sign-like and refer to another series of sign-like concepts for their meaning. Nor is this ideality reducible to a set of linguistic conventions or practices, for this would require conventions to be unmediated, transparent and ultimately un-sign-like. Here an essentialism regarding linguistic conventions would merely substitute itself for Platonic essences or ideas. It seems that, for Derrida, the 'ideality' of signs is not given but constructed. It is a construct wrought from the past and future repetitions of a linguistic item. But, just as Heidegger's hammer is subject to an infinity of uses, the repetitions of a term cannot be exhaustively listed. The meaning of a sign, therefore, cannot be rendered fully determinate; nor can it wholly coincide with its use. A sign qua sign is always to some degree non-present. Signs, therefore, are not reducible to their context of use, for in order to function meaningfully within a context, signs must be in some respect detachable from that context:

This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark ... the nonpresent *remaining* of a differential mark cut off from its alleged 'production' or origin. And I will extend this law even to all 'experience' in general, if it is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks.<sup>18</sup>

16. The following discussion of Heidegger owes much to Samuel C. Wheeler's cogent discussion of Derrida in Deconstruction as Analytical Philosophy, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp15-35.

17. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, Gayatari Chakravorty Spivak (trans), Baltimore and London, John Hopkins Press, 1976, p91.

18. Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, Alan Bass (trans), Brighton, Harvester, 1982, p318.

Now if Derrida's position on iterable marks holds true, then it seems to destabilise the account of mass communications offered by the late Heidegger. For it becomes difficult to imagine how items such as newspapers succeed in reducing all experience - assuming 'that there is no experience of pure presence but only chains of differential marks' - to the level of objectified presence. What is it about the sign 'newspaper' that allows it to uniquely succeed in transforming experience into the non-signlike, into a self-interpreting given or into the objectively 'present'? Of considerable relevance here is Derrida's notion of iterability, because it was the newspaper's iterable nature which was consistently noted by its critics. We have seen, for instance, Nietzsche's reference to 'the echo of the newspaper' and have seen Heidegger endorse the same view in his lectures of the 1930s. According to Derrida, the very possibility of an echo attests to the non-presence of meaning and to the impossibility of establishing a determinate objecthood. This account undermines Heidegger's conviction that newspapers reduce reality to a state of present-at-hand objecthood through a process of iteration. 'Everything is levelled to one level', Heidegger claims, through the influence of a repetitive press. The newspaper 'offers all things in the identical way to uniform views', and 'reduces everything to a univocity of concepts and specifications' (WICT 33-34). But how is an absolute levelling, absolute identity, uniformity of views and univocity of concepts possible through the aegis of iterable signs?

19. Martin Heidegger, Discourse on Thinking, Jon M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (trans), New York, Harper & Row, 1966, p50.

Heidegger understandably argues that newspapers remove language from more local contexts of use or meaning. Indeed, he makes this point in general about mass communications in his Discourse on Thinking: 'All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive man - all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world'. 19 Now whatever the truth about this decontextualisation, one can argue, pace Derrida, that a detachability from context is a feature of all signs; indeed, it is the basic condition of meaning for all meaningful items. These conditions of meaning also throw into question Heidegger's tendency to equate newspapers with 'uniform views' and a 'univocity of concepts'. For meaning, according to Derrida, is always to some extent indeterminate. As we have seen, the meaning of signs is not reducible to the contexts in which they function. Nor are these signs simply the indicators of determinate concepts which are self-sustaining and directly present, for there is nothing to indicate that concepts are not also sign-like. For the same reason, signs are not reducible to subjective intentions, for this would also require a non-contingent given behind language. And even if the possibility of this given was conceded, we would still have to determine how this pre-signifying reality renders itself significant. Either intentions do not signify and, therefore, have no epistemic value, or else they do signify and are characterised by the properties of signification - iterability, difference, and deferral.

If intentions and concepts are themselves language-like, then it becomes difficult to determine how concepts can ever effect a 'univocity'. It is similarly difficult to understand how newspapers 'offer all things in the identical way', for iterability testifies to an essential absence of a determinate identity. The iterability of signs dictates that the sign always differs from itself; this 'itself' is never present but constituted through repetitions past and future. As Derrida puts it, 'it is like the *stigma* of every mark' to be 'already split'. My intention here is not to employ Derrida to dismiss the problem of mass communications, but rather to indicate the difficulties inherent in Heidegger's account of the problem. Heidegger offered a devastating critique of objectivist accounts in the world in Being and Time and in his later work and Derrida conducts a similar project using different vocabularies. However, if these criticisms remain true, then Heidegger's claims that newspapers engage in objectification, univocity, levelling, and other forms of violence against Being are difficult to sustain. Of course, Heidegger may simply be suggesting that newspapers promote a mistaken account of Being, and his term for this error is objectification. But a problem emerges when Heidegger wants to lend ontological substance to this mistake by drawing upon the vocabularies of an objectivism that he has already discredited. Objectivism may be a mistaken view of the world, but it is not a view that can reduce the world to mere objecthood - not if it is to retain its identity as a mistake.

Having examined the problems with the late Heidegger's account of mass communications, I want to conclude this essay by examining the difficulties intrinsic to his earlier account of media. Here it is largely the indeterminacy of newspapers that worries Heidegger rather than their capacity to reduce the world to the status of a determinate object. Drawing once again on the vocabularies of Derrida, one might add that the basis of this anxiety is the fundamental iterability of signs. Heidegger seems to acknowledge that it is the structural possibility of every sign to be severed from its referent or signified, to be displaced from its alleged origin. But, this is something he chooses to represent as a loss of some initial linguistic plenitude, or as a degradation of an originary semantic purity. Arguably Heidegger's entire methodology is a testament to this belief; his etymological investigations, his attempts to excavate a more 'primordial' understanding of Being, his account of an originary Being itself are narratively affiliated to a tale of lost origins. Heidegger's glancing remarks about tradition in Being and Time, for example, lend substance to this charge. Significantly, in his indictment of tradition in Being and Time, Heidegger focuses on its destructively iterative nature:

Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to selfevidence; it blocks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand. Dasein has had its historicality so thoroughly uprooted by tradition that it confines its interest to the multiformity of possible types, directions, and standpoints of philosophical activity in the most exotic and alien of cultures; and by this very interest it seeks to veil the fact that it has no ground of its own to stand on (43).

Admittedly, there is a tentativeness in Heidegger's investment in the 'primordial "sources" that tradition betrays - indicated by the quotations marks around the word 'sources' and by the suggestion that signs 'genuinely drawn' from concepts have only been 'in part quite genuinely drawn'. But, his whole account of a 'thoroughly uprooted' Dasein is predicated on the possibility of a root or self-present 'origin' - the loss of which is testified by words such as 'multiformity' and the corrosive impact of the 'exotic and alien'. It is the very nature of signs, however, to defer this origin, and to expose the futility of any archaeological endeavour which hopes to restore the sign to its source. If this attempt is to succeed, it would require an account of a given that is identical to itself, something outside language that is mysteriously affiliated to language if it is to render itself meaningful. Unless we have recourse to this given, no particular sign can claim priority over another as something more 'prior' more 'real' or ontologically 'valid'. 20 In the chain of signification no one sign can be privileged without this metaphysical investment. Heidegger does, in fact, privilege certain signs and declares that 'the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the force of the most elemental words in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from levelling them off to that unintelligibility which functions in turn as a source of pseudo-problems' ( $B \mathcal{E} T 262$ )

20. There has to be a transcendental signified for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible. See Derrida, *Grammatology*, p20.

Although the later Heidegger wants to defend tradition from the levelling force of 'the modern techniques of communication that assail and drive man', he was convinced in Being and Time that tradition itself engages in this levelling. Heidegger remains ambiguous about the possibility of a 'given' or self-sustaining 'ground' that tradition obscures. The ultimate charge he brings against tradition is that 'it seeks to veil the fact that it has no ground of its own to stand on'. It is unclear whether Heidegger's problem with tradition resides in the fact that it obscures the ground of being, or in the fact that it disables *Dasein*'s recognition of its fundamental lack of grounds. Heidegger's philosophical project, after all, is anti-foundationalist; it is a project organised around the notion that there is no ground of Being that is objectively present as such; his anti-subjectivism is aimed against a subject that masquerades as the ground or origin of Being; and if Being is the ground of beings it is a ground that is always to an extent nonpresent. Despite this anti-foundationalism, Heidegger believes that language has a foundation, a 'ground to stand on' that is gradually eroded both by tradition and by the iterative technologies of mass communication. But this belief cannot sustain itself without positing the existence of an originary sign that is identical to itself - without positing what Derrida famously termed, a 'transcendental signified'. In his account of tradition, Heidegger suggests that language loses its originary plenitude through repetition. Or as he put it in a later lecture, 'words are constantly thrown around on the cheap, and in the process are worn out' (*WICT* 127). But since this repetition is a condition of meaning, this fullness was always already lost. Repetition, not as an empirical fact, but as the structural possibility and enabling condition of all signs, renders an origin irrecoverable.

As an empirical form of repetition, newspapers, one might argue, act as symbol of this more basic ontological feature of language. In Being and Time, however, Heidegger seems particularly disturbed by this feature of newspapers and nowhere is this more apparent than in his account of das Man. Das Man or the 'they', according to Heidegger, reflects and reproduces itself through 'idle talk', or an infinite 'passing the word along' (WICT 212). Through a pathology of repetition or ceaseless copying, Dasein commits itself to a kind of semantic itinerancy or indeterminate flow which has neither origin, end, nor significance. One might argue that Heidegger's account of idle talk is not really directed against modern communicative systems; it assumes a distinctly oral form and seems more affiliated to the traditional village than to a modern urban society sustained by print-systems. However, one of Heidegger's most famous students, Gadamer, admits that the 'bustle of journalism' motivated Heidegger's concept of authenticity (PH 225). Moreover, Heidegger derived his term 'idle talk' or chatter from Kierkegaard who in The Present Age spoke of the devastation wrought on social intercourse by media, advertising and publicity.<sup>21</sup> Everydayness, which Heidegger defines as 'averageness, levelling down, publicness, the disburdening of one's Being and accommodation', were all key features of the Kierkegaardian critique of the modern age ( $B\mathcal{E}T$  166). Finally, Heidegger does, in fact, make explicit mention of newspapers in his account of das Man. 'In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper', he explains, *Dasein* lives inauthentically ( $B \mathcal{E} T$  164).

Heidegger seeks to present 'inauthenticity' as a purely descriptive category relating to *Dasein*'s existential states. His account of 'the they' should not be interpreted, as he puts it, as 'a moralizing critique' (*B&T* 211). But, this amounts to an abstract disavowal of the implications of ordinary language, which leads us to wonder whether there exists any other criterion for such a word choice. And as we suggested earlier in this essay, Heidegger's own account of *Dasein*'s primordial attitude of care undermines his claim to be engaged in a purely descriptive analysis. This primordial attitude of care renders any absolute distinction between descriptive and normative categories invalid. Matter is always a mattering to a people in such a way that any dichotomising between fact and value, knowledge and human interests is ontologically unsustainable. Such a dichotomising issues from a

21. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, Alexander Dru (trans), New York, Harper & Row, 1069

more fundamental subject-object dichotomy which the modern subject installs upon the world. Under this flawed dichotomising the subject can never understand how an objective world gains 'value-predicates'. The impossibility of making fact and value co-extensive is conceded by the subjectivist's very endeavour to bring them together. Only through a recourse to this same dichotomising, however, can Heidegger present 'inauthenticity' as a purely descriptive label. Heidegger's account of the 'they', one might conclude, has an inescapable normative dimension which resists his very attempts to state otherwise.

Heidegger's account of the 'they' stands in direct contrast to his later tales about the world's objectification under the reifying gaze of mass media and presents itself as the ideal solution to the latter problem. The 'they' is neither a subject nor an object, but a site of absolute neutrality, so much so that a 'traditional logic', with its emphasis on presence, 'fails us when confronted with these phenomena' ( $B \mathcal{E}T$  166). The 'they' indicates a space, therefore, in which a subjectivist metaphysics breaks down, or rather, loses all basis for the application of a subject-object paradigm. The conditions of possibility for Heidegger's later account of domination, replicating itself in cybernetics and finding its legitimation in a philosophy of the subject, seem to be dissolved here in the "nobody" to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-another' (B&T 166). Caught in the current of 'publicness' and the flow of 'idle talk' the subject can neither present itself as the origin nor the goal of language. It either stands outside the order of representation and is therefore wholly devoid of significance; or it is fully immersed in this order and ceaselessly bound up with the dispersal and deferral of a non-originary and ultimately anonymous meaning. While the later Heidegger promotes a thorough dismantling of subjectivity, the Heidegger of Being and Time regards this as a matter of extreme concern. Having asserted the priority of the intersubjective contexts of world over a subject-centred metaphysics, Heidegger now seems to resort to a normative concept of the subject in the face of its thorough disintegration. If this constitutes a solution to the problem of mass communications, then it is something that strains against his previous criticisms of subjectivism.

Heidegger does not, of course, having committed it to a rigorous critique, simply re-instate the Cartesian subject and all its objectifications. Rather, using a decisional language, he describes the solipsistic self-positing of *Dasein*, which, as Habermas points out, closely resembles the performative achievements of the Fichtean subject (*PDOM* 151). In his early *Science and Knowledge*, Fichte described a twofold act of spontaneity and reflection, through which the self posited itself, independent of any help from the outside. In a re-description of this self-positing, Heidegger suggests that the certainty of the world is only as good as the subject's self-certainty, so that *Dasein* presents itself once again as an origin or ground of being; as Heidegger puts it, 'Dasein grounds world only insofar as it grounds itself in

the midst of being' ( $B\mathcal{E}T$  111). In opposition to the non-identity of the 'they', Heidegger installs the principle of 'mineness' as the basis of authentic being. Meanwhile, inauthenticity is defined as 'a failure to stand by one's Self' ( $B\mathcal{E}T$  166). This, however, involves something more complex than a simple, existentially toned subjectivism. Dasein always remains a 'being-with' so that 'mineness' is only as good as its intersubjective conditions of possibility. In his criticisms of Heidegger, Habermas seems to overlook this ambiguity in his insistence that Heidegger views intersubjectivity as the negation of subjectivity rather than its further specification (PDOM 149). For Heidegger is careful to insist that 'Authentic Being-one's Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "they"; it is rather an existential modification of the "they" - of the "they" as an essential existentiale' (B&T 168). Nevertheless, it seems fair to ask whether the whole normative thrust of Heidegger's incitement to 'mineness' is justified, when, what is really required, if this principle of 'mineness' is to be secured, is an alteration of Dasein's intersubjective contexts. Rather, Heidegger's account of a self-grounding Dasein seems to distract us from these shared contexts and from the pragmatic task of their repair.

We have seen, then, that Heidegger was deeply disturbed throughout his life by the way modern media systems distorted our attitude to the world and damaged our communicative environments. He arrived, however, at very different accounts of the nature of this damage. In Being and Time Heidegger presents media as a communicative framework in which a traditional logic with its predicates of subject and object completely breaks down. In the midst of such erosion, Heidegger promotes a normative account of a subject which secures itself from inauthenticity. But this solution strains against his prior critique of subjectivism. It also strains against his later critique of a subjectivist metaphysics and its technological executor, mass communications. Here he insisted that the metaphysics of subjectivism and its counterpart, technology, culminate in the brutal objectification of the world. I have argued, however, that the very possibility of objectification is over-ruled by Heidegger's own critique of objectivism. Objectivism is either possible or impossible. If it is impossible, then one cannot simply re-instate its own descriptions to account for either the nature or the possibility of its effects. If objectification is possible, then Heidegger's critique of objectivism is in some degree insufficient. Heidegger, in other words, has extreme difficulty in determining the 'problematicity' of problems on an ontological level, for such endeavours continuously produce their own self-reflexive criticism. Heidegger cannot begin to provide a solution to the issue of technology or mass communications because he cannot produce a coherent account of the problem they constitute.