

The Way Back from the Digital to the Analog: On Elias Wessel's "Textfetzen"

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Elias Wessel's *Textfetzen* (Scraps of Text) confront us with an everyday experience. Many Internet users inform themselves about current events via social media. In 2021, social media were the main source of news for a quarter of all eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds.¹ The newsfeed on Facebook is a never-ending stream of news that is designed to constantly generate new interest. The "feed" delivers—literally—fodder, small morsels thrown out for us to scoop up. Attention is held for a short time before the eye is drawn to yet another hot topic that leads to the next click. This click-baiting is in line with the economic logic of platforms that do not want to let us go. Longer dwell time means more data, and more data improves behavioral predictions—that is the platforms' business model.²

In the newsfeed, various spheres of life intermingle: news and entertainment, the professional and the private, advertising and political activism, the earth-shattering and the banal, serious and dubious sources. The boundaries between the spheres are dissolving. And here we are talking about boundaries that are actually meant to provide orientation. The opposite of the newsfeed is the daily newspaper: It is orderly, it has a beginning and an end, the text is fixed on paper—it does not update itself. The editorial team selects and pre-sorts the reading material. The news overview on the front page is followed by politics, business, culture, sports, and local news. The intention of the text can be recognized in the way it is presented: News and reports strive to inform factually, commentaries and reviews evaluate, reportages and features tell stories and provide frameworks. Paid advertisements are separated from the editorial section. Clear, parochial relationships.

In contrast to this, the newsfeed does not differentiate; everything is mixed into a uniform mash. A hodgepodge of topics that come and go—algorithmically controlled and tailored to the presumed personal interests. This collapse of contexts challenges users or puts them in a trance. It requires effort and willpower to immerse oneself only in what is truly important. It is much easier to let oneself drift. Guilty pleasure, pastime, distraction, diversion—like zapping back and forth between television channels. Voluntarily surrendering to the algorithm and letting it do the choosing for you is known as "comfortable paternalism."³ I do

¹ Sascha Hölig, Uwe Hasebrink, and Julia Behre, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 - Ergebnisse für Deutschland* (Hamburg: Verlag Hans-Bredow-Institut, June 2021), p. 19.

² See: Shoshana Zuboff, *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2018).

³ Pascal D. König, "Die digitale Versuchung. Wie digitale Technologien die politischen Fundamente freiheitlicher Gesellschaften herausfordern," in: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, no. 60, 2019, pp. 441-459, here p. 443 [translated].

not search for the news, the news finds me.⁴ Research reveals the impact of social media use: The abundance of unsorted material overwhelms users, the casual intake leads to a merely “felt” informedness, the origin of the information becomes secondary, the mixture of real, half-real, and fake news promotes a relativistic world view, trust is lost, as is the feeling of having a civic duty to inform oneself thoroughly in order to be able to have a say in politics.⁵

The *Textfetzen* immobilize the newsfeed, inviting us to linger and immerse ourselves, to draw associative lines between the “scraps.” Wessel objectifies the result of his own Facebook reception. He transfers the newsfeed into other, classic media formats: As a color photograph, as an audio file, and as text in book form, they make their way back from the digital to the analog. Fixed, limited, and authorized by the artist. This intermedial shift brings to consciousness what otherwise rushes by: the fragmentary and that which is relieved of meaning. In any case, the *Textfetzen* do not function as a linear, coherent text that follows a logical thread.

This can be seen as a debunking of the promise that search engines and social networks would create a better world and better understanding between people (“Don’t be evil,”⁶ “leave the world a better place”⁷). The platforms, which permeate all areas of life, have gained enormous and uncanny market and opinion-making power, the mechanisms of which are difficult to see through from the outside.⁸ The platform operators have thus far failed to live up to the social responsibility that arises from this, a fact that has been widely and rightly criticized.⁹

⁴ See: Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Nadine Strauss, and Brigitte Huber, “The Proliferation of the ‘News Finds Me’ Perception Across Societies,” in: *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 14, 2020, pp. 1605-1633.

⁵ For an overview of the research, see: Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw, “Die Individualisierung der Nachrichtennutzung als Treiber der gesellschaftlichen Vermittlungskrise,” In: Otfried Jarren and Christoph Neuberger (eds.), *Gesellschaftliche Vermittlung in der Krise: Medien und Plattformen als Intermediäre* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), pp. 93-117. Individual studies include, for example: Su Jung Kim and Lena-Maria Schwarze, “Cross-Platform News Media Repertoires and Their Political Implications,” in: *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 15, 2021, pp. 4619-4638; Anna Sophie Kümpel, *Nachrichtenrezeption auf Facebook: Vom beiläufigen Kontakt zur Auseinandersetzung* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019); Philipp Müller, Pascal Schneiders, and Svenja Schäfer, “Appetizer or main dish? Explaining the use of Facebook news posts as a substitute for other news sources,” in: *Computers in Human Behavior*, no. 65, 2016, pp. 431-441.

⁶ Larry Page and Sergey Brin, “‘An Owner’s Manual’ for Google’s Shareholders,” <https://abc.xyz/investor/founders-letters/2004-ipo-letter/> [last accessed on Mach 7, 2022].

⁷ Mark Zuckerberg, “A letter to our daughter,” <https://www.facebook.com/notes/770757020443898/> [last accessed on Mach 7, 2022].

⁸ See: Ulrich Dolata, “Plattform-Regulierung. Koordination von Märkten und Kuratierung von Sozialität im Internet,” *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, no. 69, 2019, pp. 179-206.

⁹ See: Zuboff 2018 (see note 2).

Beyond this—obvious—interpretation, however, one can ask: What is the radical novelty of the digital revolution?¹⁰ Multimedia technology expands the options for action—and does so for a large number of participants who can help shape things. Participation is supplemented by automation. Both principles result in polymorphism, the impression of the amorphous, fluid, and unsorted nature of the digital world. At present, the digital increase in possibilities is leading to a brutalization of public discourse (hate speech), escalating communication dynamics (firestorms), a polarization in disputes, violations of the truth (fake news), the spread of irrational explanatory patterns (conspiracy theories), inequalities in the use of the Internet (digital divide), and an algorithmic manipulation of public opinion formation (social bots). We are obviously dealing with texts from an “anti/social network.”

Paradoxically, the more perfect technology becomes, the less important it becomes. It is no longer the medium that determines the message, as Marshall McLuhan once claimed. Rather, according to Manuel Castells, “in the new media system, the message is now the medium [...]. That is to say, the properties of the message shape the properties of the medium.”¹¹ When technology can do everything, the question of meaning comes into focus:¹² “Suddenly, it’s about what we want; not what the distribution channel wants.”¹³ The technical design scope allows for a great deal, but it takes sense and reason to make something out of it. Do the scraps of text in the news feed make sense? At least Wessel’s volume has chapters as units of meaning and chapter headings as references to meaning.

There are parallels between Wessel’s examination of the Facebook newsfeed and Pop Art.¹⁴ Pop Art also turned—a few decades earlier—to the secondary reality of the media, drawing material and motifs from them. “Not the thematization of reality, but rather the thematization of its interpretation conditioned by eye-catching, photographic, typographic, or journalistic reproduction, namely the reflection of reality appearing in the mass media, is

¹⁰ See: Christoph Neuberger, “Digitalität: Macht die digitale Revolution die Welt immer analoger?” in: Jutta Allmendinger, Otfried Jarren, Christine Kaufmann, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Dorothea Kübler (eds.), *Zeitenwende: Kurze Antworten auf große Fragen der Gegenwart* (Zurich: Orell Füssli, 2019), pp. 69-77.

¹¹ Manuel Castells, *Der Aufstieg der Netzwerkgesellschaft [Das Informationszeitalter. Wirtschaft. Gesellschaft. Kultur, 3 vols., vol. 1]*, (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2001), p. 388 [translated]. Nicholas Negroponte comes to a similar conclusion: “In a digital world, the medium is not the message—it is only one possible means of expression. A message can take on different embodiments, all emanating from the same data.” Nicholas Negroponte, *Total digital. Die Welt zwischen 0 und 1 oder Die Zukunft der Kommunikation* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1995), p. 92 [translated].

¹² See: Gerhard Schulze, “Vernunft im nachtechnischen Zeitalter,” in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, no. 303, December 30/31, 1995, p. 47.

¹³ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail. Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2008), p. 198 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁴ See: Christoph Neuberger, “Wie Kunst die Mediengesellschaft reflektiert,” in: *Andy Warhol bis Cindy Sherman. Amerikanische Kunst aus der Albertina*, exh. cat. Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Linz, 2019, pp. 32-39.

the object and the actual reality of the image.”¹⁵ The “exposure of the unaltered object”¹⁶ can be observed in the appropriation of television, press, and advertising in the work of Andy Warhol. He highlighted as art that which in everyday life is only a fleeting experience of reception. Warhol presented “the objects *themselves*, no longer as quotations, but rather as replicas.”¹⁷ He largely dispensed with interventions and the editing of the set pieces. Pop Art blurred the line between high and popular culture, between the media and art. We look at, listen, and read the Facebook newsfeed—shaped by Wessel—and ask: “Is it possibly art?”

¹⁵ Max Imdahl, “Probleme der Pop Art” [1968], in: Charis Goers, Stefan Greif, and Christoph Jacke (eds.), *Texte zur Theorie des Pop* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013), pp. 64-75, here p. 71 [translated].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66 [translated].

¹⁷ Cord Barkhausen, “Das Medium der Medien. Ein Versuch über Andy Warhol,” in: *Merkur*, vol. 47, no. 534, 1993, pp. 875-886, here p. 877 (emphasis in the original) [translated].