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"A MEDIUM IS NOTHING BUT AN OBSERVATION" MARKUS HEIDINGSFELDER ON MEDIA



Interviewee: **Dr. Markus Heidingsfelder**, Assistant Professor of Media Studies, School of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, Habib University, Pakistan

Interviewer: **Dr. Sangita Ghodake**, Associate Professor of English, PDEA's Baburaoji Gholap College, Sangvi, Pune

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Dr. Markus Heidingsfelder is a media theorist and documentary filmmaker, teaching in Karachi, Pakistan. His films and his research in communication media and popular culture has brought him worldwide acclaim. He never hesitates to deliver straightforward, bold and honest opinions. His talks are engaging and challenging - an intellectual treat for his audiences. We sat down with him for an exclusive interview on his career and his thoughts on media and media theory.

Sangita: Hello Markus. A warm welcome! May I ask you to introduce yourself briefly?

Markus: Hi. I'm Markus Heidingsfelder; a media theorist, documentary filmmaker, teacher - and a few other things like coffee-addict, but let's not get into all that.



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So you're a German national, but you are currently working with a developing third world country like Pakistan. A shift from Europe to Asia! Any special reason?

Well, which country is not developing? That's a strange distinction. And ranking them - first, second, third? I would prefer not to. About being German, I am never really sure what that means. But everyone else seems to know: people expect me to be organized, disciplined, and precise. I don't mind of course! (laughs) My friend Thomas Muhr who has just been joining us at Habib University always says that he thinks being German means being direct; maybe even somewhat blunt. It seems we don't want to waste too much time with pleasantries. The Spanish call us 'cube heads'. We say "Guten Tag" and that's it, whereas the Americans say "How Are You?" They ask a question! Anyway, the good thing is, Germans are very well respected in Pakistan. Not only because of this universal cliché - that we build great cars, although this cliché has suffered a little lately, thanks to Volkswagen - but because of Adolf Hitler.

Are you kidding me?

Seriously. Hitler works as a kind of metaphor here, his name just stands for a strong man, love of nation etc. They even have a shop in Karachi called "Hitler", but they don't sell any military stuff there. It's just an ordinary clothes' shop. Someone recently asked me if we have a Hitler day in Germany, and when I said no, he just couldn't understand it: "Why not?" Anyway, since I'm working in Karachi, I thought a lot about questions of nationality, the nation state as a construct of social evolution in general and the German way in particular. But I wouldn't call myself a German. I consider myself a European. And I'm a Kölner - a person from the city of Cologne (Köln).

About the reason, who really knows? We're always rationalizing, telling ourselves stories about why we did this, moved there, married that person ... One answer would be: coincidence. I wanted to teach abroad, had something in the UK in mind, came across this job offer, where they had just started this university in Karachi, I ended up doing pretty well in the interviews - my former Dean loves German philosophy, especially Heidegger -, they desperately needed a media scholar to design their curriculum, they wanted to hire foreign faculty - disciplined and highly organized Germans! So here I am.

It's funny, it seems that people can't understand why someone would move to Pakistan - especially the Pakistanis themselves. They are so thankful, as if this is some kind of gulag I'm visiting. Anyway, the story I tell most of the time is that I wanted to participate in building up the first liberal arts institution in this country. Sounds good, doesn't it?

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Indeed. Too good to be true! So you were never skeptical about marginalized countries like Pakistan?

Not about the marginalization part. The most things I knew about Pakistan before coming here I knew from the mass media - terrorism, Taliban, religious fundamentalism. Now, I am a media theorist and I know that and how the media are constructing this Pakistani reality, but I simply had no other resources. And my family was quite afraid, especially my mother. So I called the German Consul in Karachi, the amazing Dr. Kliner, and I also talked to the director of the Goethe-Institute there - and they both convinced me to come. The Goethe director said something many Pakistanis or Indians might not say, but it helped me a great deal: "This is not the Middle East - this is India!" Back then I didn't know much about this country's history, so that helped me a lot to understand what I was going to be dealing with.

No regrets so far, quite the opposite! It's a great experience. And for a sociologist, the combination of a so-called modern or - as us systems theorists like to call it - functional differentiation with archaic traditions and structures is highly interesting. Oh, and the Karachi traffic - that is order from noise, self-organization at its best.

And personally, this may sound strange to you, but they have these power cuts here, sometimes it's load shedding, but the effect is the same, and when that happened to me for the very first time, it came as a shock. I was sitting at my computer, writing an article - all of a sudden: everything just disappears and I'm sitting there in total darkness. It was a shock, but ... I also kind of liked it - from one moment to the other, I wasn't a modern man anymore, no longer connected. I was thrown back to myself, to this body in time and space sitting in the dark. Back then I decided to not get a generator. This experience brought me to consider that we need to reflect on electricity a little more - computer scientists never actually do, nor do media theorists these days. But without electricity, there would be no digitality. Of course they were building mechanical computers at some point. But nowadays, 0 and 1 are implemented as 0 and 5 volts. So we should maybe say: no electricity, no digital culture. No modernity!

But what about terrorism? Pakistan has become a metaphor for that. And just recently there was this terrible attack in Sehwan.

You're right of course, in the media, especially in Hollywood movies, Pakistan has become a synonym for terrorism.

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But terrorism is a global phenomenon, as you know. So calling Pakistan the most dangerous country in the world doesn't make much sense. Yes, there are some areas like parts of Baluchistan which are considered more dangerous than others, just like I would not take a walk in Lyari (a neighbourhood in Karachi, S.G.) at night. But whenever I visited Europe in the last years, terrorist attacks or assassinations took place there too. Berlin, Ansbach, Würzburg, Nice - or think of Istanbul. I haven't been to the North, but the security situation in Karachi is much, much better since the Rangers have a security mandate here. Karachiites were afraid to go out for many years, but in 2016, they all celebrated the National Day on the streets - that was something new, and they all loved it.

Having said that, of course, a lot of things are still not ok. You just named Sehwan. Since I've been here, they killed *Sabeen Mahmud*, who I had the pleasure to meet shortly after my arrival, and many other activists. Professors criticizing the Mullah regime are constantly disappearing, just as people who talk about the genocide in Baluchistan - which was the reason why Sabeen was murdered. The first concert my colleagues took me to here was by *Amjad Sabri*, it was such a wonderful experience, it helped me arrive in this culture, and he is such an amazing artist - or I should say was, because they killed him too last year. The blasphemy law is still on. And the guy who killed *Salman Taseer* ...

A Pakistani liberal politician who was criticizing the country's blasphemy law and was assassinated because of that.

Yes, by his own body guard - shot in the back. This guy, he still has a Facebook page, with around 30.000 people 'liking' and following this murderer. The judge who was responsible for the death sentence had to leave the country. And let's not forget that *Shahbaz Bhatti*, another politician who was critical about the blasphemy law, got killed shortly afterwards, too. So it's far from being ok.

But again, terrorism isn't a Pakistani problem. And then, are we really only talking about terrorism here? I am nevertheless hopeful. It is not easy to apply certain norms here - political, juridical - against such a completely differently oriented reality. But the history of human rights shows, however, that it is in principle possible. German sociologist *Niklas Luhmann* has once pointed out that the human rights were proclaimed in a society in which slavery was part of everyday life, in the American society around 1776. The rule of law can thus be enforced in Pakistan - and the law shows 'enormous endurance' to ensure the enforcement of legal norms in this country. As we all know, this is also a problem in the Western democracies.



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Ok, let us switch from politics to the media. How would you describe the journey of media from the olden days to the post-modern?

First of all I think power - or politics - and communication technology are closely linked. But we can maybe get back to that later. Secondly, my concept of 'medium' is highly abstract, I don't think of a medium as a thing but as a difference, the difference between medium and form. It is originally a definition by German psychologist *Fritz Heider*: A medium consists of loosely coupled homogeneous elements; whereas form is the tight or strict coupling of these elements. But, and this is important, media from my perspective are nothing but observations. Media theorist *Lisa Gitelman* once said: "The media are. A medium is." And I would always add: "... being observed." Something like a book or a pop song can be observed as a form, but it can also be observed as a medium in which certain forms can be inscribed. The structure, the "relation potential" of the medium, decides which inscriptions are possible and which are not. Another important part of that definition is the idea of an energy or "outer determination" that is responsible for these couplings to take place - quite literally.

Can you give us an example please? It appears to be very abstract.

Well, it *is* very abstract! The usual example here is sand - and then Friday comes along, as the personified outer determination, strictly couples those loosely coupled elements, and voila: a form appears - his footprint. Or think of water as a medium, and waves of forms. Of air and wind. Words and sentences. But we can also think of our universe as a medium and of stars, galaxies, and black holes as forms or 'inscriptions'. And how would I define this journey - I guess I would first distinguish between natural and technical or artificial media, and then start my media history with the human body, paying special attention to the brain, then move on to what I call 'social media' like gestures, language, writing, and finally take technologies like the printing press and the computer into account - but I wouldn't call writing a technology, like *Walter Ong* did. So you see, what I do is not really new, it's a re-description of already existing descriptions and concepts from a highly abstract perspective. My main focus lies on a consistent theory design. As Luhmann once put it, "I may be wrong, but if my design is right, then I'm at least correctly wrong." I think he himself used a kind of re-description here ...

I assume that you are referring to Paul Dirac's famous phrase, that it is more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit experiment?

Yes, that's indeed the one I had in mind. And Luhmann's theory is actually very beautiful, at least that's how I feel about it. But we are of course scientists, our preference value isn't beauty - it's truth. Or, as Luhmann, puts it, the 'Bewährung' of our theses in reality - there is



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no adequate English word here, because there's still 'Wahrheit' (truth) in 'Bewährung'. Probation comes closest.

How do your students deal with such abstract concepts?

There are two ideas here; the first one is to encourage them to risk something by not using the usual paths of thinking, by not doing mainstream theory. No actors, only communication. The second one is to be able to give them the 'big picture', to help them understand this highly complex modern world. The social mechanisms of the mass media, or politics, or art. Why do 'the media' for instance love Trump so much? As always, some are better at it than others. Many still prefer to use the traditional idea of a medium being a 'channel'. I don't mind; think of *Innis*, who thought of real channels - canals and rivers and streets - as media. A German philosopher lately called the ocean "the first internet"! But I do think that this concept of medium is too limiting. And it's ontological of course, it assumes that there is a thing out there, a media object.

I do agree with the main ideas of my colleagues about media though: They are not the agents of change. We are. But they work as accelerators. And I do agree with them that media are invisible, first on a general level, as we can only see forms, never the medium in which they are inscribed; the traditional distinction dealing with this was figure/background. Which is why the example of sand is a little bit misleading since sand is actually visible. Secondly, we are kind of blind when it comes to using media technology. We don't think about the "essence", to refer to Heidegger, of our smartphone when we're texting someone. Or think about this interview - if I started to talk German now, you would perhaps begin to consider the media character of language. And an interview can be observed as a medium too, of course. I just need to start asking you questions: Describe yourself briefly, Sangita! (laughs) The idea is that we get to see a medium when it breaks down - when we witness a 'crisis', a media catastrophe. But of course, even then, all we see are forms. Sentences. Words. Letters.

A last remark, I'm never sure about postmodernism - I would agree with *Luhmann* that we still live in a modern world, as all the dominant structures of modernity continue. But maybe the transitional state we're in now could be called post-modern. Or pre-digital.

How did you get drawn into Media studies?

I started as a journalist, writing about music mainly, and then worked as a television producer for a long time. When I did an interview with systems theorist *Peter Fuchs*, he asked me this question, I remember it very clearly, because he really played into my narcissism: "*Was ist eigentlich mit dem Akademischen? Die Studenten würden Ihnen nachlaufen.*" (What about



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academia? Students would love you.) I had an MA from the University of Cologne, but have never thought of a career in academia, maybe because my father was a teacher. Or maybe because back then I hadn't found my theory yet. I was always interested in systems theory though, but none of my professors in Cologne really understood it. Peter did - no wonder, he worked with Luhmann's for some years, and he is know, along with *Dirk Baecker* and *Armin Nassehi*, one of the most important systems theorist in Germany. But much more important, he was the best teacher I ever had! And the way he taught me was, we first wrote an article and then a book together. Learning by doing. And then he suggested that I write my dissertation, he introduced me to *Bernd Scheffer* and then *Oliver Jahraus* at LMU (Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich), both excellent media theorists, and I was lucky enough that they accepted my idea to write about pop from the perspective of systems theory. So you could say the reason was Peter Fuchs. He was my mentor and - he would hate that, he hates such sentimentality - well, my savior. My life would be quite empty without systems theory, it helped me on so many levels. And it's fun also! I'm happy to say that Peter and I are friends now and I am looking forward to many more projects with him.

I hope you noticed that this is just a story - a specific form that is being inscribed into the medium of language, killing all simultaneity.

Yes, but I'm not sure about the outer determination. Anyway, that's an amazing journey - from a music journalist to a media theorist. Tell us more about the different forms of media. Can you differentiate between media, multimedia and mass media?

Again, my definition of medium is highly abstract and not limited to the idea of a physical carrier or container of information. Luhmann for instance thinks of the mass media as a social system, so he is not looking at technology but at a specific form of communication. His main media distinction is the one between 'symbolically generalised media' and 'Verbreitungsmedien' (distribution media) like language, writing, books, newspapers, records ... I am not at all sure about the so-called 'sgk' though, which I would not conceptualize as media - money, power etc. It's the media concept developed by *Talcott Parsons*, and it does not really match with the concept of Fritz Heider, although Luhmann tried very hard to fuse them. And multimedia can be observed simply as a combination of different media, or as a program of art, using 'installation' as a form.

Media can bring about revolutions in the world. How would you describe it?

We already talked about that. There is a kind of consensus in media theory nowadays, that media are not doing anything - they are not movers and shakers, they don't make revolutions. In my terminology: They don't have any operations. This idea that they do has historical



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reasons that can be directly related to the ‘invisibility’ of media, and that’s *Marshall McLuhan’s* starting point. You know his famous sentence that the medium is the message, or that they are ‘massaging’ us - and McLuhan pointed to the fact that no one has ever really noticed that because of their invisibility. He was also one of the first people to focus our attention to the importance of the printing press as a kind of game changer. Now McLuhan wasn’t really a thinker, he was very intuitive, chaotic also, if not manic, but he inspired scientists like Elizabeth Eisenstein to take up his ideas and turn his one-liners into theory. The problem is that Eisenstein kind of isolated print - so I do not agree with Lisa Gitelman when she says that specificity is key, and that we should not say ‘the media’. Apart from the fact that this is exactly how people talk, they say ‘the media’, so we cannot ignore that ‘the media’ are obviously being observed, like it or not. Secondly, a singularity can never be a theory. But it's also not fair to criticize Eisenstein and McLuhan in the way many colleagues do nowadays - no theory is forever. McLuhan was not only a great inspiration to many theorists, he was also a perfect media person - he made media theory popular. He was the first TED talker if you like, only without TED.

Getting back to this idea of communications revolutions - I think one of the first persons who came up with a systematic investigation was *Robert G. Albion*. It is helpful, as a heuristic device, just like we can look at the evolution of society dividing it into different stages: segmentary, stratified, functionally differentiated etc. But we should be very careful with divisions like that, we cannot stop here. I like to look at feedback processes - without education, without all the schools that turned children into readers, illiterates into literates, the printing press wouldn’t have had that effect on society. My German colleague *Wolfgang Behringer* made an important contribution lately, pointing at the importance of the postal system or the “Taxis Galaxis” as he calls it for the development of modern society, namely the establishment of a standard time and the acceleration of communication. That’s what I pointed at when we started, that we cannot isolate the media - it’s always about media and society: media and politics, media and economy, media and religion.

But one thing is for sure, media or communications revolutions are being observed. The mass media for instance have no problem with that, they just call ‘swiping’ a communications revolution, and everybody knows what they mean. Everybody expects massive changes nowadays because of digital technology, because of social media, some scholars even assume that a new form of society is about to take place, and we can find a lot of evidence that this kind of shift is actually happening. But we need to be precise here. What is a revolution? It is a disruption, a break. Is this what is happening? You may have heard of the concept of a ‘Long Revolution’ ...



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Yes, I think *Raymond Williams* coined that term.

Right, and of course the question then becomes: does it still make sense to call a long revolution a revolution? To develop a concept, it's always helpful to ask, what's on the other side? So what is on the other side of revolution? Communists would say reformation. (laughs)

You work as a trainer. What are the courses that you have designed? What kind of short term courses that can be introduced at primary and higher level of education?

I would not call myself a trainer, as teaching in a liberal arts context isn't so much about training - teaching skills. It's more about 'cultivating minds' if you like. I love *Harrison C. White's* idea of teaching, he says he wants to 'get the students going'. That's what I try to do, get them going, help them cultivate their passions, mostly through project work. From a systems theoretical perspective, learning is always self-learning - I cannot operate into the brains of my students, they're 'operationally closed', I can only irritate them, make offers.

But you have to grade them, assess them.

Yes, but especially when it comes to the humanities, that's highly problematic. Educationists like to forget about that, they betray themselves, coming up with 'objective criteria'. But we should not fool ourselves. They're mostly there for the students, to justify ourselves ... I love it when my students question my questions, when they come up with alternative answers. All I am asking for is consistency in their arguments - consistent concepts. And there are a quite few simple rules that are helpful when it comes to mediating knowledge. My colleague *Gerhard Roth*, a neurologist and fortunately also a systems theorist, wrote a remarkable book about pedagogy lately, looking for example at the capacity of our brain to process new information: You shouldn't be too fast, you need to deal with the student's stress, anxiety, and you also need to deal with the fact that new information that gets repeated turns old, so the brain gets bored, loses interest - how to deal with that? But the main and most important aspect for Roth is the teacher's personality. A teacher needs to be 'authentic'. He or she is always much more than a trainer, a knowledge-mediator. Especially in a liberal arts context!

But how *do* you actually deal with this problem of the new becoming old and students getting bored when you repeat content?

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Well, you present the old in a new context for instance. And I think practice is important. To understand what a medium like film is all about, how they function, it's not enough to study them, read about them, you need to actually make a film. That's something that *Ernst von Glasersfeld* noticed when he worked as a skiing instructor - you cannot *explain* to the kids how to do it, that's not how it works. That's why I came up with the slogan 'Think media - make media' for our curriculum. You cannot fully verbalize practical experience, you need to actually demonstrate it, show it. This is why most of my courses have a practice component. For instance for the first part of my media history course, students had to print a small book, and they all loved it, they said it helped them much more to understand this technology. This term, a good friend of mine, the famous Pakistani graffiti artist Sanki King, will join us - I hope Habib allows us to do one of their walls ...

I will be teaching a course on "Body & Identity" this term, and an important part of it will be a dance module - my friend *Furqan Raja* who founded the Lyari dance group *We Are One* will be co-teaching it. I also designed a course about the relationship of words and music, comparing the medium of music with language, and composer *Arshad Mahmood* of the National Academy of Performing Arts, Karachi (NAPA) will be demonstrating how to set music to words. Not to mention my colleague at Habib, *Yousuf Kerai* - he's a gifted tabla player, and he's also brilliant in explaining the intricacies of Eastern music, about which I don't know too much. I love that, to invite professionals and practitioners to my classes.

What steps should be taken in spreading awareness of this branch of knowledge amongst the students?

You mean what kind of courses we should be offering?

Yes, what can be done - either by designing courses or introducing these concepts in traditional courses - that will get students to engage with more experimental ways of learning?

The problem is that everyone now desperately tries to integrate computers into teaching, they call this 'blended learning' - while at the same time banning smartphones from the classroom.

The main advantage from my perspective is to develop new models of teaching. In one sentence: less content, more methodology. The content is available on the net anyway. And



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talking about the net, to refer to the students' everyday media experience of course, and then enable them to look at it from a distance. Which is exactly what the words 'theoria' or 'visio' mean.

What is the role of social media in popularizing innovative and healthy social practices?

First of all, I don't like the term 'social media', as though language or writing themselves are no social media. Secondly, I don't think I should be the one to decide what a 'healthy' social practice is as opposed to an unhealthy one. And then, I'm not sure whether that is the function of Facebook or Twitter - to popularize healthy social practices. Social practices, yes - innovative, maybe - but healthy? I don't think so. But of course we need to analyze those platforms properly. Look at how Trump uses Twitter, not only during the election, but also as an instrument to govern, to influence economy. Because of those new communication technologies, what *Jürgen Habermas* once called the public sphere is transforming. Newspapers were once seen as 'the fourth estate', and their role was - ideally - to control those in control, think of Watergate. Some things seem to be fundamentally changing here. Facts are not that important any longer. Some people even claim that we enter a post-factual era, that term was word of the year in 2016 in Germany: "post-faktisch".

But do you, as a constructivist, believe in facts?

Fact comes from 'facere', which means 'to make'. Any fact is being constructed, it is not lying around somewhere. So self-implication is important. Your perspective is just one perspective among others, and that is what needs to become part of your thinking - you have to constantly remind yourself of that. But of course that doesn't mean arbitrariness, that you can just come up with 'alternative facts', like the Trump administration does. There are ways to find out whether something is a fact or not - I wouldn't talk of truth, but of plausibility. Or again, of 'Bewährung'.

But coming back to your question, I do think that concepts like 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' do need some refinement - filters in itself for instance are nothing bad, quite the opposite, they are essential. Think about socialization or about our perception - do we see infrared? Without filters we would end up like Ray Milland in "The Man with the X-Ray Eyes" - seeing everything, which means seeing nothing. And the term 'bubble' indicates something that is unreal, that is about to burst, which is why it worked so well when related to the financial crisis - think of the housing bubble. The term makes sense here because of the



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separation of speculative capital, that has no connection to the productive capital any longer - to the real world if you like.

But when it comes to social media, I think we need to come up with another metaphor. A newspaper like The New York Times or a TV station like Fox also act as filters. The new quality is that, if you read the New York Times or watched Fox, you knew what you were getting, and that everyone else was getting the same thing. *Walter Lippman's* coined this term back then, “gatekeeper” - it's the journalists who decide what we were getting. So they are - well, creating these gates to the bubble. But with filter bubbles today, no one gets the same thing and it's almost impossible, if you want, to see what someone else's looks like. Well, one could build a tool like Red Feed, Blue Feed, but who does that actually?

For *Vicki Boykis*, a data psychoanalyst from the US - by the way, she'll also be joining us in class! -, for Vicki, that is the real danger, because we don't know how to empathize with people anymore. I do think that empathy is overrated, so I'm more interested in the ‘how’. No one really knows how their algorithms operate - it's Facebook's best kept secret. The only people who know how FB's algorithms work are people who work on them on a daily basis, and of course they are very secretive with their methodology. That's why I'm thinking of a research program that brings together media scholars and ‘hacktivists’.

What are the Do's and Don'ts for social media today?

I'm a scientist, which is why I try to avoid morality - to tell social media what they should or shouldn't do. I look at what they actually do, my job as a scientist is to observe and analyze. So what Facebook for instance does is to collect data, and quite a lot of it - as much as they can. Vicki has been publishing this remarkable text recently, summing up many things we already know about Facebook, so what she says is nothing new in itself, but to see that long list made quite a difference ... because it *is* a lot. They have a kind of keylogger-spyware installed. They register whatever you are typing, all the keystrokes, even if you delete them, even if you do not post the post. They can track how your cursor moves across the screen ... everything you do is tracked by them and saved on their servers. Even if you log out, they can track you through cookies. That is what they do. They try to make you stay on their page, and using filter bubbles is one way to guarantee that. *Should* they do it? That's another question.



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Vicki told me that there are lots of efforts right now to make data science more ethical - which means to establish those Don'ts you are talking about. Because Facebook could not anticipate the kind of surveillance they have now. Her major concern is that those data cannot be deleted. So that would be another Don't. Now Vicki does not work with Facebook, but I do, and from a private perspective, a client's perspective, I think these companies should invest some more money in their control mechanisms, whether it's human editors or stupid algorithms. To delete "L'Origine du Monde" by *Courbet*, like Facebook did, that's just insulting - I guess some badly paid, poorly educated teenagers were responsible for that. At least that's what I hope. Or think of *Tom Egeland's* post, where he used the iconic Vietnam war photography by *Nick Ut* that they deleted. So that's my Don't. But of course Facebook doesn't identify itself as a media house, that's how they justify their politics. Motto: If our users or clients are racists, then they should have the right to post racist stuff, we're only service providers, and the other clients should stand up against it. So they try to sell their commercial attitude as something good, I don't know, as democratic, responsible, leaving it to the community, whatever. That's nonsense of course, because they obviously do have massive problems with nudity, but not with racism, with violence. But let's see, *Mark Zuckerberg* introduced this new filter function for nudity and violence just a few days ago - unfortunately, it's also one that is supposed to detect blasphemy.

Maybe one should analyse them within an economic framework first. Google and Facebook are both companies, they want to make money. Moving on, let us discuss a few limitations of your field.

Well, *Bob Craig* wouldn't even call it a 'field'. He wrote a long article some years ago in which he suggested a way to unify all these heterogeneous schools, to reach a kind of common ground, a consensus, but he wasn't very successful in doing that, of course not. There's no way to control communication. He should have been reading some more Luhmann instead of all that Habermas. (laughs) Plus, I don't see this heterogeneity as a disadvantage, quite the contrary. But of course there are limitations. The biggest one: it's science. And of course, media theory is about media, just like systems theory is about systems.



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I would like to know more about you as a practitioner of media, a ‘media maker’. You once held a talk on how to “build documentaries”. Take us through the steps that are involved in making documentaries.

Oh, there are many ways to build a documentary. I used the word ‘building’ back then because I was talking about my documentary on architect *Rem Koolhaas*, and how this film about him, “A Kind of Architect”, came about. That’s quite a story on its own, would you like to hear it?

Yes, please. I’d love to.

Well, my first idea was to bring together composer *Karlheinz Stockhausen* and architect *Daniel Libeskind*, to create a dialogue between those two professions, and they both agreed to participate - and then 9/11 happened and Stockhausen made this comment about the “greatest work of art” ever, and you may know that *Libeskind* was first supposed to build the Twin Towers-follow up, so quickly after that he told us he isn't interested any more. I had to start all over again. So I think flexibility is important. I then asked German sociologist *Dirk Baecker* to meet *Koolhaas*, went to Rotterdam and shot the interview without the confirmation by German television station ZDF. And afterwards they said, they want a *Koolhaas* portrait only, not a dialogue on eye level. I was lucky, because Dirk was really cool, and he understands the way mass media work, so he told me to go ahead. But he was important, because he challenged *Koolhaas* in a way I could have never done it, and because Dirk is a real thinker, *Koolhaas* also had a lot of respect, which also worked for us. So again, I was lucky. Also in having a partner like my friend *Min Tesch* who animated all those plans and models - he made a hell of a career after that, was involved in many big Hollywood productions since then, for instance Tom Tykwer’s latest movie (“A Hologram for the King”, S.G.). I shot and edited the *Koolhaas* movie myself, and because it was my first major production as a producer and director, I made a lot of mistakes. And Min acted as sound engineer, although he had never done it before, imagine that!

The *Koolhaas* movie has this MTV-like style, it’s fast, colorful, thought-provoking. For another one of your documentaries about muses in music, you chose a completely different style.

Oh, you are talking about “Girls in Popsongs”. Well, it’s all about motivation. That's good old Goethe: Make sure your aesthetic decisions are motivated. So in this case, I wanted a more conventional approach - I wanted to create this nostalgic feeling. And those amazing songs did half the job, I didn’t have to do too much.

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I was working with a fantastic editor on this one, also a good friend of mine, and he contributed so much to it - it's a bit like in architecture, there's a team of brilliant people working on a building by Koolhaas, and in the end, it's his name only. So my suggestion is, get great people for your team. And make sure your aesthetic decisions are motivated. About the steps: Make sure to think it through before you actually start. Which is something I never do, I just go ahead, which means that I have to invest a lot of time to fix all the mistakes afterwards. (laughs)

How did you go about it all though? I mean where did you first get your ideas, plan your budget, draft a proposal, get funding and then finally sell your documentaries?

How do you get your ideas, Sangita? We usually don't know where they're coming from. In the case of Koolhaas ... I was curious what an architect would have to say to a composer and vice versa. You probably know this famous phrase, that architecture is frozen music. When *Libeskind* dropped out and Stockhausen wasn't interested any more, I was looking around and then stumbled upon this Koolhaas interview in German magazine *Der Spiegel* and thought, this guy would be great. I didn't know how to get him, the no. 1 European star architect. But Koolhaas is a curious person and always looking for inspiration, so I sent him this text by *Dirk Baecker*, in which he looks at architecture from a systems theoretical perspective, and that got him interested. How did I sell it? Well, I heard about the guy who was responsible for the ZDF/ARTE program from a friend - so Min and I did a little trailer, and then we called him and called him until he finally agreed to meet us. And then we were lucky. He liked us, he liked the trailer - and he let us do it exactly the way we wanted to do it. And sometimes, when your films are shown at festivals, people come to you.

But you should talk to my friend *Till Passow*, a fantastic documentary filmmaker, about funding, he's really good at that. He will be giving workshops at our university about that soon. So I'm lucky to have friends like him or *Jamil Dehlavi* who teaches film at Habib to help me. The thing is, money gives you lot of options - but I also like to be completely free, to not have to justify what I do to anyone but myself.

You are well versed in script writing and editing - which can be challenging tasks. How can one master these arts?

No, that's not true. I write, but I am not a script writer. And as an editor, I am 'passabel' - German for just ok. How to master these arts? The boring answer is: practice, practice, practice. If you want to be a writer, write something every day. Learning by doing! I love that fact that when I teach, I'm actually learning - every day. How to teach. Trial and error. And it's wonderful how much errors sometimes contribute to the final product - showing you



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possibilities you haven't even thought of, especially in filmmaking. So a certain openness, a certain sensitivity to errors, to coincidence is important, too.

What is the difference between a documentary and a feature film?

Well, it certainly wasn't a difference early film audiences cared about very much. *Hayden White* would say, the factual is fiction, too. So first of all, they have a lot in common. A narrative structure, a beginning and an end. And this structure very much determines what you do - both in feature film and documentary film. But of course there is a difference - it is being observed.

The thing is, the genre of documentary filmmaking has developed so much over the recent years, it is not that orthodox, dogmatic program any longer with all these ideas about objectivity, how reality should be represented, that you should for instance never stage anything - some colleagues think that *Robert Flaherty* was betraying his audience because he staged some scenes in "Nanook", especially the hunting and fishing scenes. In retrospect, some of them actually look very funny - think of this tug of war with what is supposed to be a seal, but it's actually Flaherty or one of his team members at the other end of the line! But I'm not sure whether they looked funny to past audiences. And yes, he asked the Inuit to not use their rifles but traditional harpoons instead, so he did not document their reality - ok. But it seems he was simply more interested in showing the eternal drama of 'Man vs. Nature' than in being some kind of ethnographer. So I wouldn't agree here. To stage something does not necessarily mean that you're a liar. It depends, like always. For example, "A Man With A Movie Camera" by *Dziga Vertov* - what a brilliant movie! But because he had staged several scenes, he was criticised for not showing 'real life'. That's the thing though; he wasn't only interested in being a documentary filmmaker, although he hated fiction - he wanted to be a filmmaker, he wanted to create a kind of visual essay, a new language made from images.

But as I said, I think documentary film is one of the most innovative and promising programs in art nowadays. Think of "Waltz With Bashir" - a fully animated war documentary! Or of *Michael Glawogger's* amazing movies. By the way, "Workingman's Death", which was partly shot here in the Gadhani ship-wreck, was one of the reasons why I wanted to go to Pakistan.

But it works in both directions, feature films like "Interstellar" use documentary forms to create reality, and filmmaker *Uli Seidl*, also an Austrian like *Glawogger*, does these disturbing, provocative films by mixing both programs, using amateurs or 'real people' instead of actors. You know the term, 'scripted reality', I prefer to call it unscripted fiction. And some documentary filmmakers also use actors to make their point. But I would still talk



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of two different programs - you expect something from an action movie that you don't expect from a documentary film. I would describe these new forms as “re-entries” - elements of documentary filmmaking entering the area of feature films and vice versa.

You can see the border between fact and fiction appearing in those new TV-series, especially if they're going over 4 or 6 seasons, like “Homeland”. They call that ‘character development’ nowadays, but it's actually just a nice name for the problem of stretching a story - normally you have a set of characters, then there is development, and then: the whole thing ends. Now, with “Homeland”, such a series does not end - at least, they have not decided about it yet - and the scriptwriters have to guarantee that it can go on. They have to create this intricate balance between always closing the story on the one hand and leaving it open on the other. So the characters are constantly changing, going through the strangest, most implausible transformations, and it's fun to watch how the writers do that - we expect this implausibility nowadays, we're looking forward to strange transformations. Especially since “Game of Thrones”, when they actually managed to develop Jamie Lannister from a negative into a positive figure, a real coup back then.

Another big difference is in production costs, but some of those re-enactments or of those BBC productions are really expensive, and you do see that.

Maybe we should replace fiction with ‘alternative facts’, what do you think?

Well, there is a saying, “truth is stranger than fiction”.

Good point. Think of this *Netflix* series, “Designated Survivor”, in which this secretary of housing and urban development played by *Kiefer Sutherland* suddenly becomes president - he's a careful, reasonable man; he has principles, although the reality of his job doesn't always allow him to live up to them. And then look at Trump. Nobody could have invented such an ‘unpresident’, to use his own words. “Homeland” was wrong, too, they expected a woman to become the next president. Nobody could have even conceived of someone like that - a racist and a sexist, a politician with the vocabulary of a ten-year-old, going against the constitution. But you could actually write an interesting systems-theoretical analysis of his presidency, because he has obviously not understood functional differentiation, the mechanisms of the political system. He thinks he is still doing business.

I find this fascinating - reality. Maybe that's why I love documentary film so much. I'm for instance curious to see how Trump will manage to stop globalization - to just end it. I do think that predictions are highly problematic, but I think that - if he continues that way - he

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will make sure that America's long awaited downfall starts a lot earlier. I mean, he's probably the best thing that could have happened to China and the IS.

Personally, I'm very interested in creating educational movies, to visualize knowledge. One of my students, a freshman back when she was in her first year, did a nice little clip on systems theory, and she got Jamil Dehlavi as a narrator, you may want to check it out. (<https://vimeo.com/153754968>)

Moving on to your contribution to Popular Studies: your dissertation on pop uses a systems-theoretical perspective, which is a novel approach to understanding pop or pop music. Can you tell us a little more about it?

I'm asking a simple question: What if pop was a system? But I was always more interested in asking the question, as a heuristic method, than in actually answering it.

Forgive me, but seeing pop as a system? That doesn't sound very convincing, does it?

A lot of people would agree ... And when I started my research, I was skeptical, too. But very soon I realized that it's not about deciding whether pop actually is or it isn't a system. That's an observation anyway, and either it's plausible or it is not. No, it's more about what I find out along the way when asking that question - again, as a heuristic device. My main motivation was to present an alternative to those neo-Marxist approaches that think of pop as subversive, or - here we go again - revolutionary, with the consequence that they had to exclude all those forms of pop that are considered to be affirmative or conservative, *Pat Boone*, *Phil Collins*, and *Celine Dion* for instance - or what we call Schlager in Germany, a strange program that exists only in my home country. I wanted to define pop in a consistent way, to create a consistent theory design, in which most of the authors that belong to the field of Cultural Studies are obviously not interested.

So if you're wrong, you're at least correctly wrong.

You got me. (laughs) No, seriously, I'm interested in the reality of pop, not in creating an alternative fact.

What about pop culture?

Luhmann always had problems with the term culture, his question was, what is not culture? How does one distinguish culture and society? Some scholars fuse pop culture and Adorno's



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culture industry and talk of the 'industrial popular culture' - well, why not, let them do it. But such a culture cannot be a system, it cannot observe and identify itself. This is why I don't look at pop culture, although I deal with that question in the first chapter of my book, but at pop music. That's the nucleus. This rhetoric of pop culture came up much later, around the end of the sixties; it was invented by the mass media, because of what I call the structural couplings between pop, art, and the mass media. *Andy Warhol* is crossing from art to pop, *John Lennon* crossing from pop to art, with albums like "Two Virgins". Or think of "Sgt. Pepper", the idea of a concept album. Or of pop operas, of writing overtures and - that's pop! - 'undertures'.

By the way, my friend *Jenn Lena* has developed another interesting alternative. She uses network theory to look at pop's dynamics. But so far, it's still the Marxists dominating the field. Paradigms die hard.

There are so many other fields that you have experimented in, which we have yet to discuss. Please, tell us about your experiences with radio, television, journalism and such.

As I said, I started out as a journalist. And I was always fascinated by the different possibilities of the different media forms and formats. Radio, for instance - you can do so many things that wouldn't work in a movie. And you produce for a different audience - I got so many letters from people who listened to my radio shows while they were driving!

My first print articles were for the school magazine, and I was lucky - luck is so important, we underestimate that, but it's really not only about having great ideas and working hard - I was lucky because one day we got a new teacher, and this guy - *Wolfgang Baudouin* - was one of the music critics I adored. We didn't know first, because he had this acronym, WB, but somehow we found out, and he kind of liked me and my way of writing and supported me. Another important step was "Spex" magazine, and again, without luck - or God, who knows - this wouldn't have happened. My classmate *Boris Löhe*, who later became the boss of record label Mercury, got me in contact with them; they started off as a kind of fanzine in Cologne, trying to establish a form of music journalism that had the spirit of Punk. I remember how nervous I was when I first visited one of their meetings beginning of the 80's, but these people - *Gerald Hündgen*, a fantastic soul journalist, and a wonderful human being, who

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sadly passed away a few years ago, *Clara Drechsler*, the best German music journalist ever from my perspective, or *Dirk Scheuring*, what an amazing writer, or photographer *Wolfgang Burat* - they were so kind, they let me do my thing. They encouraged me, although I didn't know much about all those new bands, and so I was able to find my own voice.

After “Spex”, I wanted to write about classical music, because I was fascinated by this Alte Musik (Old Music)-movement. I just went ahead, sent the text to someone at the conservative German newspaper “Die Welt” (The World), because I had also published in the “taz” (The Daily Newspaper), and I wanted to have both democratic and republican newspapers in my portfolio - and again, I was lucky. The guy who was responsible, one of their star-writers, said, “That's certainly not how you usually write about classical music, but that's exactly what I like about it”.

Producing chart shows for MTV was fun, and also easy, because I had a great team, fantastic writers, great VJs, and they did most of the work; so my job was mainly about selecting the right people and then giving them room to do what they want. But it was also kind of boring.

Do you have any plans to make a documentary or a feature film on the different things you have encountered in your time here? What are some of the themes that you would like to explore?

I have already been shooting a lot of material here. I'm planning to do a little autobiographical essay about my years in Pakistan one day, but nothing big, just some of my observations. A film that shows my Pakistani reality - it differs very much from the reality the media are creating. Let's see. The themes - well, there's so much. The university we're trying to build up here of course. I have met some amazing artists, painters, musicians, filmmakers ... I am mostly impressed by the female slam poets here in Karachi, what they do is a form of activism actually - they are so courageous.

Alright, we're nearly done. Just three more questions. What is your definition of religion and culture with reference to globalization?

From a systems-theoretical perspective, religion is a system - along with politics, economy, law, education etc. This is what religious fundamentalists do not like - they want religion to be a kind of super-system, controlling all the others. All that religious fundamentalism and



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the religious terror can be seen as a reaction to contingency, which to me is the main characteristic of modernity, of our times. There is no absolute truth any more, and this is why people are looking for it, desperately, and religion can offer all that: orientation and identity. You can stop thinking. So religion is solving this problem. But as Max Weber once said, the fate of our times requires a certain - one wouldn't phrase it like that today, it's not politically correct - a certain manhood, manliness ("Männlichkeit"). It's hard work! Religion is an easy way out. I find it a bit sad that even intellectuals and academics here in Pakistan often seem to identify their culture with religion only. And let's not forget, an imported religion, one that their former colonizers brought along.

May I ask if you are religious?

I'm a Catholic. I grew up going to church and praying with my mother; and my grandfather was a Catholic writer, fighting against the Nazis - *Georg D. Heidingsfelder*. They even named a street after him in Würzburg! But I am very careful to not let any religion interfere in my scientific studies. Although I do like how Marshall McLuhan did it, Catholicism helped him a lot to develop a positive, affirmative attitude towards the media.

Let me wind up by wishing you all the very best for your future prospects. Would you like to share some of your future plans?

Thank you. Well, there are too many, that's my problem. Making some more documentaries - I'm working on two different projects right now. Then there's this conference in Sri Lanka I'm organizing, "Futures of Media" with the guys of TIKM and my good friend *Holger Briel* of XJTU-University. What else? I will be co-editing a special issue of "Cybernetics and Human Knowing" with *Steffen Roth* on media effects this fall ... Not to mention my book about media, but that's a long-term project. Hopefully all these plans will work out. As they would say in Pakistan: Insha'allah. The general plan is to spend some more years in Asia; I'm really fascinated by the Asian culture. Maybe India is next, who knows? But my first batch of students will graduate next year, and I would just love to stay and watch that. It would be a beautiful moment for me to send them - well, 'out into the world' after nurturing them for four years.

I wish you the best of luck. And please ... it would be lovely if you explored India in the near future, too.

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IMPACT FACTOR –

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There are people who prefer to build walls - and there are bridge-builders like Markus Heidingsfelder. Although Rudyard Kipling has stated that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”, visionaries like him may prove Kipling wrong by helping the world in bridging the gap between the East and the West. Or as Markus would probably say: “There is no East, and there is no West - both are nothing but observations.”

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