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HAUNTED MEDIA: MOBILIZING RADIO DURING THE NOVEMBER REVOLUTION*

Abstract: Media technologies constitute an integral part of social events and play a significant role in modeling political and cultural transformations and interventions. The implementation of new mass media, such as the development of radio technology in the late 1910s, fundamentally changed modes and methods of mobilization of the public sphere. Radio was the first technological device that enabled live transmission of acoustic material and was able to simultaneously reach multiple recipients in different places. Thus it profoundly modified knowledge production and forms of protest. The emergence of new forms of media protests and mobilization strategies will be traced by focusing on one specific event of revolutionary unrest in the German Empire which used radio technology years before public broadcasting officially began: The so-called *Funkerspuk* (Haunting of Broadcasting). This 'haunting' event occurred in 1918 during the November Revolution, a period of drastic social, political and economic upheaval, when former soldiers, now organized as revolutionary Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, occupied the central news bureau of the German Empire and made use of the former military radio systems to proclaim the victory of the socialist revolution and to coordinate further political actions. From November 1918 to February 1919, they appropriated the state's means of communication technology and were able to effectively challenge the state's news monopoly by transmitting their own messages as well as alternative reports on current events. The revolutionaries used multiple media (broadcasts, telegrams, magazines, street rallies) as tools and techniques for socio-political agitation and extended the previous frameworks for mass mobilization both in practice and in theory. The presentation aims to shed light on a heterogeneous discursive network highly interconnecting media activism and governmental critique of power. Centering *Funkerspuk* as a media event allows the reconstruction of early media usage and ideological history of German radio during the interwar period — and beyond.

Keywords: *radio history, radio experimentation, media archaeology, amateur broadcasters, Funkerspuk*

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1. THE EMERGENCE OF RADIO

The implementation of new media, such as the development of radio technology in the late 1910s, precipitated a fundamental shift in the modalities and methodologies employed for the mobilization of the public sphere. The term 'radio telegraphy',[1] derived from the Latin *radius* (meaning 'ray'), underscores the novel way the medium enabled communication with the public through the circular emission of sound waves.[2] Radio technology enables live acoustic message transmission from one sender to multiple recipients in different places simultaneously. Radio technology thus bridges time and space of message transmission more quickly and efficiently than before, thereby overcoming previous limitations of information transfer.[3] The advent of broadcasting technology can be traced back to the early 1900s, with its initial application being for the purpose of maritime communication, facilitating the coordination of trade. The period during which radio experienced its first peak of mass usage was the First World War.[4] When the war ended in 1918, a novel form of radio usage emerged during the collapse of the German Empire in the context of the November Revolution, as revolutionaries used radio telegraphy to orchestrate their own actions. Their utilization of radio as a communication system independent from the state was characterized by the term *Funkerspuk* (Haunted Broadcasting).[5] During the course of the November Revolution, a transitional period characterized by drastic social and political upheaval, the monarchy of the German Empire was impeached and transformed into the democratic Weimar Republic. In this period, radio technology was appropriated by the revolutionary Workers' and Soldiers' Councils.[6] Radio emerged as a pivotal tool and agent of the revolution, demonstrating a unique capacity to achieve both a wide spatial reach and a 'live' mobilizing power that significantly exceeded the previously established limits of message transmission. During the revolutionary unrest, the episode of *Funkerspuk*

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1 For more information on the history of the term 'radio' see Wolfgang Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," in *HardWar/SoftWar: Krieg und Medien 1914 bis 1945*, eds. Martin Stingelin and Wolfgang Scherer (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1991), 243.

2 Cf. Dominik Schrage, *Psychotechnik und Radiophonie: Subjektkonstruktion in artifizieller Wirklichkeit 1918–1932* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), 216.

3 Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 243. For a concise media history of German radio history see Winfried B. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels* (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1965).

4 For more information on the development of the first radios, see Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 23f.

5 Cf. Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 256.

6 Cf. Friedrich Knilli, *Deutsche Lautsprecher: Versuche zu einer Semiotik des Radios* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1970), 102. For more in-depth information with a focus on historical science, see Volker Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/1919* (München: C. H. Beck, 2018).

functioned as a subsequent rupture because it became evident that communication technology via radio could not only be employed for military purposes but also had the potential to be utilized by revolutionary groups. Thus in 1918, when radio technology was still in its early stages, in a "media archaeological incubation phase",[7] and radio had not been determined for one definitive use as public broadcasting had not yet been established, revolutionary groups used the medium for their communication and mass mobilization.

This paper examines how former military personnel and amateurs appropriated broadcasting systems during the revolution in order to intercept state-led communication. Furthermore, it will be analyzed how the government reacted to this form of uncontrolled communication and which legislation followed the event. Utilizing the methodological framework of media archaeology,[8] the material and logical preconditions of the experimental radio infrastructure during the revolution will be traced.[9] Even though the acoustically transmitted messages of *Funkerspuk* have not been archived — the live oral transmission, without a storage technology posed a significant advantage in terms of revolutionary communication, but proves to be disadvantageous for research of the event — other sources have been preserved. With contemporary newspaper reports, broadcasting regulations published by ministries of the state, and diary entries from contemporary witnesses of the revolution unfolding, the episode of alternative radio usage can still be reconstructed. By centering the mediated event of *Funkerspuk*, both early forms of participatory media usage and the ideological history of German radio during the interwar period can be traced. Furthermore, these newfound possibilities of message distribution, independent from the state, influenced how public radio came to be installed from 1923 onwards.[10]

2. Radio and Revolution

The impact of radio in the context of the November Revolution can only be fully understood when the history of radio development and utilization is taken into consideration: The catalyst for substantial advancement of radio technology was the First World War. Telegraphy and telephony had already been established as means of rapidly transmitting electrical signals; although these forms of communication still

7 Wolfgang Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities," *Media Theory* 2, no. 1 (2018), 165f.

8 Cf. ibid., 166.

9 Cf. ibid., 166f.

10 Cf. Kathrin Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2018), 128.

relied on cables.[11] However, radio technology represented a significant advancement, offering the advantage of wireless message transmission via electromagnetic waves. This invention's usage of radio waves as its base for transmission rendered it highly pertinent for the First World War, as it facilitated novel strategies for the coordination of warfare.[12] The new communication technology could also be used for the disruption of enemy information transmission, rendering interception as crucial as message transmission in warfare. The development of mobile transmitters and receivers commenced in 1916 with the objective of facilitating the coordination of warfare in an even more synchronized and efficient manner. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan later described the evolution of such ubiquitous media infrastructure as "electronic devices [that] create rooms without walls and media fields"[13] Hence the First World War was not solely structured by battle fields, but also by media fields. The temporal and the spatial dimensions of message transfer and coordination of troops became equally important and were organized extensively by media technology.[14] Wireless technology suddenly allowed for live transmission and real-time reception: A previously unknown temporalization of time itself, later described in 1934 by Heidegger as *"Zeitigung der Zeit"*.[15] Because of the acceleration of information transfer, the medium radio is capable of modifying and expanding the sensory, psychological, and physical apparatus of human beings.

Furthermore, the increased significance of radio usage for military operations is evidenced by the substantial augmentation in the number of German soldiers employed as radio operators. The number of such operators had increased twentyfold from 10,000 in 1914 to around 200,000 in 1918.[16] When the war ended, those radio operators found themselves suddenly unemployed. However, they still retained extensive expertise in radio usage and possessed considerable technical knowledge regarding the not yet regulated radio devices. After the First World War massive looting of previously army-owned radio equipment took place, consequently, former military radio operators persisted in utilizing the broadcasting technology of the German Empire for their own experimental transmissions. This theft of state-owned equipment made the event of *Funkerspuk* possible, or, as media scholar Friedrich

11 Cf. Friedrich Kittler, "Rockmusik – ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät," in *Short Cuts*, eds Peter Gente and Martin Weinmann (Frankfurt/Main: Zweitausendeins, 2002), 12.

12 Cf. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 40.

13 Marshall McLuhan in a letter to the NAEB director Harry Skornia, December 16, 1958, quoted in Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities," 170.

14 Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 253.

15 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 380.

16 Cf. Kittler, "Rockmusik — ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät," 17; see also Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

Kittler characterized it, the revolutionary event was accomplished by the "abuse of military equipment".[17]

The event of *Funkerspuk* took place in the early days of November in 1918, during a period of widespread protest and industrial action by soldiers and workers against the war and the resulting food shortages. In the midst of the prevailing chaos and disorder that characterized the early stages of the Coup d'État, Workers' and Soldiers' Councils emerged as spontaneously formed self-organizing entities, drawing inspiration from the Councils movement of the Soviet Revolution of 1917.[18] Despite utilizing the same term of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils for their own revolutionary unrest, the German Councils exhibited more moderate ideological positions and demands in comparison to their Soviet predecessors. This can be attributed to the composition of the councils, which consisted both of moderate reformers and a smaller fraction of revolutionary socialists. Their common ground of aspiration was the desire to exercise an influence on the restructuring of political, social and economic life within the newly forming German state.[19] On the 9th of November the monarchy under the reign of Wilhelm II. was overthrown and subsequently the first democratic state, the Weimar Republic, was installed. The new state was proclaimed on two separate occasions on the 9th of November, as both the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann and the Socialist Karl Liebknecht articulated their respective conceptions of the novel democratic republic to the assembled crowds in Berlin. Theodor Wolff, editor-in-chief of the *Berliner Tageblatt* described the revolutionary unrest in the following way:

> From the editorial office window, I can see large crowds of people carrying red flags marching down Leipziger Strasse. My colleagues come in and tell me that officers are having their cockades torn off everywhere. There are no longer any police officers, the city has changed completely, the trams have stopped running, Wolff telegraph bureau has been occupied by revolutionaries, and the red flag is flying at the Brandenburg Gate.[20]

The news of Emperor Wilhelm II. forced abdication and the proclamation of a new state was initially disseminated by word of mouth in Berlin. By the evening larger parts of the German population became aware of those developments through various

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17 Kittler, "Rockmusik — ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät", 17.

18 Cf. Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1.

19 Cf. ibid., 6.

20 Theodor Wolff, *Tagebücher 1914–1919: Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Entstehung der Weimarer Republik in Tagebüchern, Leitartikeln und Briefen* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 1996), quoted in Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/1919*, 34.

media, including posters displayed on advertising columns, leaflets in post offices and printings from newspaper offices.[21] However, the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were most interested in occupying *Wolffs Telegraphisches Bureau* — the central telegraphy news service of the German Empire, which was responsible for all wirelessly transmitted messages throughout the nation. Thus it was primarily the novel media communication technology that was considered as extremely important for the installment and coordination of their own revolutionary movement as well as for the distribution of their own positions to the public.[22]

3. HAUNTING RADIO: MESSAGES 'TO ALL'!

During the period of unrest that ensued following the overthrowing of the German Empire, former soldiers who had become members of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils occupied the strategically important telegraph bureau in Berlin. Following the successful occupation of the news agency building, the entire telegraphy news service of the nation had gotten beyond the control of the War Ministry. This development enabled the revolutionaries to gain access to a new medium of distribution, previously unknown to the civilian population. The impact of technology becomes evident at the point of disruption and utilization outside of the state. During the era when radio was restricted to being utilized for military applications, its functionality was exclusively within the domain of trained radio operators. From a Heideggerian perspective, the mediums' *Zuhandenheit*[23] rendered it imperceptible to the public, when it served its initial military deployment. Media theorist Wolfgang Ernst elaborates further on this notion and highlights: "It is only in adverse circumstances, which Heidegger describes as 'Störung des umsichtigen Besorgens', that a tool loses its transparency and emerges",[24] It is only when a novel application emerges in the hands of new users that the radio becomes a catalyst for the emergence of a new social movement. During their first transmission from the Telegraphy Agency, the revolutionaries utilized the former military radio systems to — albeit erroneously — announce the triumph of the Socialist Revolution. While Philipp Scheidemann's Social Democrats were instrumental in effecting the transition from the German Empire to a democratic republic, the revolutionaries instead elected to broadcast their own interpretation of the events of the 9th of November. Emulating

21 Cf. Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/1919*, 36.

22 Cf. Wolfgang Hagen, "Kulturinstrument Radio. Zur Genealogie der medialen Katastrophe der Weimarer Republik," in *Populärkultur, Massenmedien, Avantgarde: 1919–1933*, eds. Jessica Nitsche and Nadine Werner (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2012), 80.

23 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 74.

24 Wolfgang Ernst, "Harte Arbeit am Begriff. Medienarchäologische Antworten auf die Frage nach der Technologie," *Mechane. Journal of Philosophy and Anthropology of Technology* 1, no. 1 (2020), 116.

Lenin's famous "radio telegraphy message to all!"[25] from 1917, they did not accurately convey the overthrow of the government that was unfolding; instead, they conveyed the desired sequence of events, via the telegram agency: "To all! Here, the revolution has achieved a brilliant, almost entirely bloodless victory. The control of the Wolff bureau now rests in the hands of the comrades."[26] This public address, aimed simultaneously to all and at the new nation as a whole, was expressed in order to influence the course of the revolution and strengthen one's own movement. This address marks a decisive shift in the realm of radio communication: The capacity for a medium to propagate messages to 'everyone' had never been achieved before, and moreover, this was achieved by entities that were independent from the state. The advent of instantaneous communication has implications for both technological and psychological processes, it has suddenly become possible to observe in real time how a revolutionary movement is formed and begins to coordinate itself via "electronically mediated human communication".[27] The Workers' and Soldiers' Councils thus appropriated the primary issue that radio transmission posed for the military: The possible reception of broadcasts by all, including enemies, within the transmission area, provided the devices were not encrypted. The universal message transfer from one sender to multiple recipients via radio waves was no longer regarded as an obstacle, but was instead employed intentionally and used productively for their own purposes.

From November 9th onwards the Councils initiated a series of political actions, employing wireless information transfer as a primary means of communication. Revolutionary ideas and intervention should be disseminated in a manner that does not rely exclusively on oral communication or printed materials such as leaflets and magazines. The content of broadcasted information transfer no longer consisted of military orders from the state but rather focused on the coordination of a Councils' movement. Because radio technology surpassed newspapers and leaflets in terms of speed and spatial range of distribution, a novel mediation between the private and public spheres was achieved. The Councils did not operate from a singular center, such as the occupied telegraphy agency in Berlin, rather it was from a variety of locations, which were in exchange with each other, as every station was equipped with a radio apparatus and a council member could potentially receive and transmit messages. Radio created a 'global village' thereby allowing the Councils' members to interact with each other, despite their geographical dispersion throughout German territory. The Workers' and Soldiers' Councils orchestrated their own mobilization in approximately forty cities through their radio broadcasts. At that time, radio was

[25] Cf. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels,* 47.
[26] Quoted in ibid., 47–48.
[27] Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities," 170.

still far from being a domestic medium, but rather it was an expensive military device whose morse messages could only be decoded by radio operators. The practice of listening to the radio was not confined to domestic settings; rather, it occurred in community centers. This shift in listening habits can be understood as a form of 'attunement', whereby the act of listening became a collective activity in public spaces.[28] In addition to radio's highlighted ability to bridge great distances, it is also a powerful tool to bring people together and organize them. Consequently, demographic groups that had previously been marginalized and excluded from active political participation found themselves increasingly engaged in state affairs, manifesting as grassroots democratic organizations at a local level. Due to the absence of just one center of power and instead having multiple radio equipment stations available across the nation, it was made difficult to monitor and suppress the Councils' message transfer and to enforce the ban on their specific transfer of information.

By mid-November, the councils had established their own *Zentralfunkleitung*, a radio control center, that operated its information transmission independent from the state. They controlled all forty former military stations and covered a message transfer distance of several hundred kilometers. The form of communication enabled the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils to organize their units in different cities whilst still maintaining a collective body.[29] The absence of a clearly defined center or a static form posed a strategic advantage for the rapidly evolving revolutionary movement, as it enabled the experimental utilization of the radio apparatus to its benefit. It is evident that technical media establish their own internal logic and novel temporal structures of information transmission. A fundamental shift in media infrastructure invariably gives rise to a concomitant shift in the manner in which events are conducted, with consequences for the geographical location and temporal parameters of such events.[30] New media are effecting a paradigm shift in the manner in which people perceive the world, or, to use Walter Benjamin description: *„Die Art und Weise, in der die menschliche Wahrnehmung sich organisiert — das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt — ist nicht nur natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt."*[31] Consequently, novel mobilization strategies are emerging, thereby facilitating the

[28] Cf. Carolyn Birdsall, "Radio," in *Handbuch Sound*, eds. Daniel Morat and Hansjakob Ziemer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 356.

[29] Cf. Georgia Lummert, "Radio speaks to us. Kollektive Einstimmung auf die zeitlose Revolution in Angela Rohrs *Moskauer Demonstration im Radio*," in *Sprachmodalitäten: Das gestimmte Wie des Sprachlichen,* eds. Hajnalka Halász and Csongor Lőrincz (Darmstadt: wbg, 2021), 207.

[30] Cf. Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the age of media mobilities," 169.

[31] Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" [1935], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 439.

emergence of alternative modes of governmental critique of power. The medium functioned as a conduit for the revolutionaries, representing an early form of non-commercial exchange of messages. It served both as a platform for wireless experimentation and as an emergency communication system. This represented a significant milestone in the realm of wireless communications, as it marked the first occasion on which a claim to a communication system had been successfully asserted outside the jurisdiction of German state authorities. From November 1918 to February 1919, the Councils effectively challenged the state's news monopoly by appropriating the state's means of communication technology. By transmitting their own messages and furthermore surveilling the state's proceedings and intervening in them.

The Counsils recognized the potential of this technology and made efforts to achieve a "reorganization of German radio broadcasting".[32] The Worker's and Soldier's Councils sought to fundamentally reorganize the radio system with their new, non-governmental central station. The objective of this initiative was firstly, to coordinate their own political actions, and secondly, to gain a communication tool to address the public. Perhaps surprisingly, the third objective was to help themselves as former military radio operators to gain work in a technical civilian, bureaucratic profession. The introduction of radio as a medium for the masses was perceived as an opportunity for the emergence of new professional activities. It is evident that the Councils pursued both their own civilian interests and democratic goals. For instance, they charged themselves with the supervision of the activities of the newly formed administrative and military authorities. Bertolt Brecht's assertion from 1930,[33] that radio should evolve into a communication device rather than a mere distribution device thus already became reality for the short period of a few months in 1918. It was the endeavors of former soldiers and amateur radio operators that enabled the transformation of every conventional receiver into a transmitting apparatus. What Brecht imagined around 1930 as an alternative to radio broadcasting had therefore long been a reality at the time of his writings but had since become impossible again.

4. Banning the Ghosts: Haunted Printing Press and Government

Both the government and the printing press were equally 'haunted' by these developments and therefore coined the term *Funkerspuk* to describe this period of radio technology under the control of the Councils. From the end of November onwards, the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and the newly installed government

[32] Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

[33] Cf. Bertolt Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat" [1932], in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 18, ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 129.

fought for the control of the radio communications. The bourgeois printing press openly sided with the government in this dispute. The newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* defamed and discredited the Councils' central radio station as operated by "ghostly soldiers with war-torn nerves, foaming at the mouth, babbling with excitement! Demagogues emerged from the darkness, bearers of evil thoughts and wild desires."[34] Military and civil authorities alike reacted harshly, trying to restrict the self-governing Councils drastically. Their physical gatherings, such as assemblies and demonstrations, were banned, community centers closed, and newspapers such as the newly founded 'spartacist' medium *Rote Fahne* were prevented from being published.[35] The moderate Social Democratic Party, together with supporters of the monarchy and German nationalist conservatives, all opposed the Councils' experimental use of former military equipment.[36] The new government's shared and urgent goal was to prevent further unrest and to avert the socialist demand of a council-led socialist republic. An emergency decree on radio use was therefore agreed upon, stating: "The number of secret radio stations seriously endangers the security of the state and public order, as they offer subversive circles the opportunity to create a comprehensive secret communications network that, in cases of danger, seriously jeopardizes the implementation of measures by the constitutional government."[37] All radio broadcasting outside of the state jurisdiction was to be strictly prohibited. Nevertheless, from November 1918 to February 1919, the councils retained control and appropriated radio technology as a means of mass communication. This non-governmental initiative and the emergency communication system it established, frightened military commanders, the social democratic government and bureaucratic agents alike. While the military and civil servants at the *Reichspost* had previously shown little or no interest in the new medium, this changed drastically following the actions of *Funkerspuk*.[38] In January 1919, the newly founded state-run Radio Commission intensified its efforts to strip the Councils of their power. Hans Bredow, a former radio pioneer who would become the minister primarily responsible for this development, launched his attacks on the *Zentralfunkleitung*, stating that only the Reichspost, with its "outstanding forces of scientists, technicians, and administrative officials [who]

[34] Quoted in Angela Schwarz, "Der 9. November 1918: Die deutsche Revolution," in *Tage deutscher Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Dirk Blasius and Wilfried Loth (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 37.

[35] Cf. ibid., 38.

[36] Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

[37] As quoted in Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 99–100.

[38] Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern. Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

were available in the state's telegraph administration",[39] would be able to build a functioning public radio network. He defamed the Council's control centre, claiming that it "consisted almost exclusively of people from all kinds of professions who, without relevant specialist training, had learned nothing more than how to operate a Morse key and to record telegrams in the military".[40] In collaboration with the influential Ministry of Economics, radio was reorganized once again, this time into a 'state-supporting' medium. From February onwards, the government regained complete control of radio, eliminating all traces of revolution.[41]

This reorganization of broadcasting had far-reaching consequences, as it considerably restricted the possibilities for free news production and distribution.[42] Bredow secured the Councils' agreement by promising to implement their demands for a state-independent radio network and 10,000 civil service posts for former military radio operators as soon as they would hand over their communication system to the state.[43] These promised secure civil service positions pacified the idealistic revolutionaries. Although Bredow did not keep these promises, he was able to successfully eliminate all further radio-related issues. The first democratic administration of the Weimar Republic did not perceive autonomous radio broadcasts as a potential conduit for increased democratic participation; rather, they were regarded as a threat of potential revolutionary overthrow of the recently instated republic. Thus *Funkerspuk* — the inaugural albeit illegal episode of 'public broadcasting' — had a formative influence on the great need for control during the subsequent development of public broadcasting. The November Revolution 'haunted' politicians and bureaucrats alike, who feared a collapse of the fragile government and its administrative structures. Paradoxically, it was the fear of uncontrolled revolutionary masses that necessitated the implementation of an orderly public radio, which was realized in 1923. As Friedrich Kittler concisely summarized: "Simply to prevent further anarchist abuse of army radio equipment, Germany got its entertainment radio."[44] A deliberate effort was made to ensure that the public entertainment broadcasting system was devoid of any political influence. This system was established with the intention of regulating the content broadcast to the public through the implementation of advisory councils and censorship. The regulatory

39 Hans Bredow, *Funk im Ersten Weltkriege: Entstehung des Rundfunks* (Stuttgart: Mundus, 1954), 40–50.
40 Ibid., 50.
41 Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 262.
42 Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 132.
43 Cf. Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 255.
44 Friedrich Kittler, "Protected Mode," in *Draculas Vermächtnis: Technische Schriften* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993), 213.

framework encompassed more than mere technical restrictions on radio sets; it also included restrictions such as a complete prohibition on all amateurs operating transmission equipment and the requirement to obtain an expensive license for radio reception.[45] In order to prevent another revolutionary occupation of radio technology, technical seals and legal obstacles were installed.

In contrast to the practices in the USA, where both military and amateur radio operators had been communicating via wireless transmission technology since the mid-1910s, German broadcasting started only in 1923.[46] It was subject to stringent restrictions imposed by the Interior Ministry of the Republic. Mass communication transmitted by radio was only permitted when the state controlled it, with the primary focus being on mere reception rather than interception.[47] Throughout the 1920s, private broadcasting by radio amateurs was considered a subversive threat to the security and order of the state. The state feared the potential of mass media to politicize citizens and thus implemented bans and censorship measures. The state pursued the goal of providing the nation with access to public radio as a form of entertainment, while eschewing any political mobilization.[48]

In 1918, the notion of broadcasting being a catalyst for nation-building was a prevalent contemporary radio theory. According to Rudolf Arnheim, a renowned theorist in the field of early film and radio, broadcasting had the potential to foster the establishment of an "organic national community".[49] One of the primary functions of media is to establish new worlds, to create new collectives and communities — or even nations. The potential of radio, namely its ability to observe society and elevate political issues to general social issues by providing context and commentary, that the participants of the *Funkerspuk* tried to establish from November 1918 onwards, was prevented by Bredow and his ministry colleagues from February 1919 onwards.[50] The four-month period of *Funkerspuk* demonstrates an alternative to state-controlled radio infrastructure. The state-led broadcasting system that was implemented instead *ex negativo* highlights a missed opportunity for broadcasting for and from everyone. The process of *Gleichschaltung* of broadcasting by the National Socialists in 1933, which occurred fifteen years after *Funkerspuk* and ten years after the introduction of

45 Cf. Hagen, "Kulturinstrument Radio. Zur Genealogie der medialen Katastrophe der Weimarer Republik," 77.

46 See Wolfgang Hagen, "Vorwort", in *Das Radio: Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Hörfunks – Deutschland/USA* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005), XXf.

47 Cf. Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 253.

48 Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 126.

49 Rudolf Arnheim, *Rundfunk als Hörkunst* (München/Wien: Suhrkamp, 1979), 48.

50 Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 137.

public broadcasting, was relatively straightforward. This was primarily due to the fact that Weimar broadcasting had always been a state apparatus, and thus relatively minor modifications were required to adapt it for use by a totalitarian dictatorship.

5. CONCLUSION

The event of *Funkerspuk* is indicative of the manner in which radio technology in 1918 temporarily evaded state control, thereby facilitating democratic mobilization during a pivotal juncture in German history. This phenomenon transpired when state oversight of communication had momentarily collapsed. Thus *Funkerspuk* provides an insight into the role of technology in shaping political possibilities, modes of public address, and the structures of media governance. The technological repurposing of radio revealed the latent potentials of a medium that was still in its 'incubation phase',[51] thus unregulated and open to multiple futures. Radio, with its capacity for live, decentralized and wireless transmission, enabled new forms of immediacy and mass participation that disrupted traditional hierarchies of information flow. For a brief period, radio was not yet defined by the logics of entertainment, state authority, or passive consumption. Instead, it became an active and participatory instrument for political mobilization and experimentation. *Funkerspuk* is of particular significance as it was not merely a media event, but rather a media rupture. This event presented a potential turning point in the evolution of the medium, wherein its infrastructure, form, and function could have been organized along radically different lines. By repurposing the military's centralized communication apparatus to serve as a tool for democratic agitation, *Funkerspuk* underscored both the emancipatory potential and perceived threat of unregulated media. *Funkerspuk* demonstrated that events which are mediated are inextricably linked to political desires, institutional power, and historical contingency. As Heidegger and Benjamin have suggested, the emergence of a medium has the capacity to reorganize perception and restructure social time and space. In this sense, radio was not merely a means to distribute revolutionary messages, it was itself constitutive of the revolution's very structure, facilitating the emergence of a novel form of political subjectivity that was collective and attuned to real-time developments across space.

This revolutionary appropriation of military radio infrastructure by the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils — themselves a fragmented coalition of moderate and radical forces — was short-lived, as it was met with suspicion, suppression, and counter-organization by both the government and the press. The term '*Funkerspuk*' itself reflects the profound anxiety experienced by state officials.[52] The state's promulgation of emergency decrees and the eventual monopolization of broadcasting

[51] Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities," 165f.
[52] Cf. Hagen, "Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 256.

reveals how thoroughly the new government feared the decentralization of radio technology, mass coordination, and, crucially, immediate public discourse communication technologies outside their control.

The consequences of *Funkerspuk* also elucidate the reasons why radio under the National Socialists regime was so readily shaped into an instrument of authoritarianism.[53] The state monopolization of broadcasting in the aftermath of 1919 cannot be regarded as a neutral administrative reorganization, rather it constitutes an ideological intervention. *Funkerspuk* revealed the intricate interweaving of political power and media infrastructure. It also demonstrated the influence of fear surrounding unregulated broadcasting and how this would shape the future of public communication in Germany through censorship, licensing and state monopolization. The exclusion of precisely those alternative media practitioners who had once demonstrated the participatory and collective potential of the medium, established the foundation for a broadcasting system that was designed for passive consumption and national unity as opposed to a tool for pluralistic engagement or critical discourse.

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[53] Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern. Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 137.

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