Rezensionen

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Media and Political Meaning in a Post-Truth World

Review essay of: Hannah Richter, The Politics of Orientation: Deleuze meets Luhmann. Albany: State University of New York Press 2023, 232 p.; Toru Takahashi, Observing News Media in a Complex Society: A Sociocybernetic Perspective. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2024, 128 p.

https://doi.org/10.1515/sosys-2024-0012

Niklas Luhmann posited that 'meaning' was sociology's basic concept but that the attention paid to it by the discipline was "rather modest" (Luhmann 1990a, 21). Not only is it essential for an individual or social system to make sense of the complex world, but it also makes it possible for the observer to establish its own identity through recursion. In a world that is only increasing in complexity, with ever-new distinctions being drawn, including themes such as 'identity politics' and profilitic identities constituted by new forms of media (Moeller/D'Ambrosio 2021), meaning itself seems to be disappearing across its horizon. The political landscape and how it is shaped and reflected in the media seems to have undergone a vast change in the last decade or so.

Recently, two English-language books discussing the intersection of media and politics have seen the light of day. Both publications attempt to make sense of recent changes in politics and media through social systems theory. The first contribution is by Hannah Richter, who, with a pronounced philosophical approach, writes about Gilles Deleuze and Luhmann's political writings but grounds it by examining the utility of analysing post-truth and right-wing populism through that theoretical encounter. The second is authored by Toru Takahashi, whose approach stems from media studies rather than philosophy. If Richter shows the role of meaning in ever-changing politics, he addresses populism and post-truth as challenges to the identity and meaning-making of the media. It is worth reading these two works together, for while they identify similar social questions and share a

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methodological approach, they complement each other by focusing on different social systems.

Despite Luhmann's queasiness with the label 'postmodern', his closeness to Jacques Derrida is attested to, and work has been done to draw the parallels between them (Teubner 2001 and 2019; Thyssen 1999). In this light, perhaps it is strange that more energy has not been expended to think through Luhmann's work with Gilles Deleuze, Derrida's contemporary.[1] Given Deleuze's establishment in the canon and unabated rise in popularity, the prolonged absence of a monograph-length study on Deleuze and Luhmann is surprising. Finally, this *lacuna* has been addressed, presenting itself as "The Politics of Orientation: Deleuze meets Luhmann" by Hannah Richter.

Given the broad scope of both Luhmann's and Deleuze's writing, a general comparison would be an overly ambitious undertaking. Richter wisely restricts her analysis to political theory, uncovering the creative resonances and tensions between the two thinkers. The author admits that her two protagonists seem like an unlikely pairing at first glance. Nevertheless, despite his insistence on being only a sociologist, Richter, in the style of Gumbrecht (2012), takes Luhmann seriously as a political philosopher. She finds the intersection of his thought with Deleuze's in the emphasis both place on understanding as emanating – in a shared ontology of a world marked by chaos, indeterminacy and contingency – from 'inside' where authority is partial, and legitimacy is dependent on politics' ability to reduce complexity for sense-making (an important theme, as we shall see, in Takahashi's analysis of the media). This implies a loss of steering capacity for politics, which, Richter argues, necessitates a switch to a 'politics of orientation'. However, the unfortunate by-product of this adaptation is the rise of post-truth populism that can successfully provide orientation through its ability to effectively reduce complexity and give, albeit severely lacking, versions of sense or meaning.

Richter constructs her argument in two halves. The first half of the work attempts to find the theoretical commonalities and differences between Luhmann and Deleuze. She finds four philosophical themes in which a comparison is fruitful: sense or meaning, individuation or autopoiesis, time, and the event. It can be said, however, that the latter three emanate from a shared conception of sense and as such, it must be regarded as primary and discussed first. The second half of the book turns to the practical. It uses the insights from the philosophical analysis constructed to create a theory for understanding post-truth populism under the name of a politics of orientation.

1 See Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2013a; 2013b) and Buitendag (2022) for briefer ventures into this terrain.

Perhaps because it is a basic element of sociology, the first bridge between Luhmann and Deleuze that Richter builds is in their similar treatments of the concept of 'sense'.[2] In both thinkers, sense-making can be understood as an operation that distinguishes sense and nonsense. Like all distinctions, the lines drawn are observer-dependent. That means that sense is always both immanent and world-making. Deleuze's contribution in 1969's *The Logic of Sense* is his recognition that nonsense is not the opposite of sense but merely the blind spot of the observer (Deleuze 1990). Nonsense, thus, cannot be discarded; it is made of the same 'stuff' as sense and could be relevant for another observer. The implication is that ideas, not objects and propositions, drive world-making. It is in the contingency of this selection that Richter sees creative potential (Richter 2023, 25). While Deleuze wrote about sense in terms of individuals, Luhmann extends similar principles, with a reference to Deleuze in *Theory of Society*, to his social systems attempting to grasp their environment from one moment to the next (Luhmann 2012, 18). However, first by drawing on Spencer-Brown's calculus to directly refer to sense as both a meaning and a form and second, by breaking with traditional sociological accounts of meaning by placing meaning-making prior to symbol-display (Morgner 2022, 14), Luhmann radicalises the creative potential of Deleuze's conception. Both individuals and social systems operate through sense-making rather than understanding to build expectational structures.

The second parallel develops in sense-making's role in identity formation. While Deleuzian individuals and Luhmannian systems make their worlds through the selection of sense, this act is also unavoidably self-making or autopoietic. Like world-making, self-making is also contingent and changeable or nomadic, in Deleuze's terms. Deleuze's thinking was inspired by Leibniz's monads, the 'rooms without windows', where productive relations of sense-making are necessarily created internally. Richter (2023, 54) identifies the same attitude in Luhmann even before his autopoietic turn by citing his debut *Der Funktionsbegriff in der Verwaltungswissenschaft* from 1958, where he already identified that an organisation's function was internally, not externally, determined (later, Luhmann would push the concept further by introducing a second-order observation into the first distinction between internal/external). Deleuze shares a similar conclusion regarding the self-production of function in the individuation of humans when he writes that

2 Although *Sinn* is usually translated as 'meaning' in the English versions of Luhmann's writing (Morgner 2022), Richter clarifies that 'sense' is an equally valid translation that has the benefit of corresponding to Deleuze's French terminology (*sens*) and its subsequent English translations, most notably his early monograph *The Logic of Sense* (Deleuze 1990; Richter 2023, 20; Moeller 2006, 65–71; 2012, 76). In this essay, the terms 'sense' and 'meaning' will be used interchangeably, since the second work discussed here, by Takahashi, retains the usual English terminology.

the monadic soul invents its own motives. This connection is perhaps not surprising if one remembers that Deleuze's concept of individuation was inspired by Gilbert Simondon (2017), who in turn drew from early cybernetics, with an emphasis on the continuous nature of becoming, of self-reference and, consequently, an emphasis on the inside/outside distinction.

Richter logically places the self-production in sense prior to functional differentiation. This means that a functionally differentiated society is thus only contingent and not necessary. The problem is, instead, how to allow already individualised individuals to participate in society (Luhmann 2022, 226). While this agrees with Luhmann, it begs why he did not think beyond such a society. Richter answers that he did so first to avoid political commentary and second that he was not interested in social change. A different world, while possible, could only be conceivable retroactively after it had been produced in sense (Richter 2023, 70).

After comparing Luhmann and Deleuze on sense and autopoietic individuation, Richter draws comparisons around the third theme, time, as another axiom for orientation. As with the previous two concepts, time is also shown to be necessary but contingent. Individuals and systems require temporalisation to stabilise sense: it is a (productively) limiting function on the creative trajectory from nonsense to sense to individuation. Luhmann understands this by describing time as not ontological but operative and system-particular. When sense-making occurs inside a system, it also creates its own timeline. Importantly, and drawing on Edmund Husserl, this time-sense is regarded as irreversible: history is history, decisions made must now be kept in mind (legal precedent must be followed, yesterday's economic transfers justify current property relations today, etc.), and causality for our current situation can now be attributed to events that have passed. Seen this way, the present is subject to a great responsibility to reproduce the past moment-by-moment. This is not a conservative statement; instead, it contains its contrary or negation. On the one hand, it emphasises the tremendous productive effort required to maintain and recreate the status quo. Similarities can be drawn to Nietzsche's eternal return as a similar description of temporality, which is both ordering and open-ended simultaneously (Richter 2023, 84). Time simultaneously orders and entropically disorders the world. On the other hand, the creative responsibility of the present leaves society's contingency exposed, leaving the present always open to a Deleuzian 'line of flight' in a novel direction (Deligny 2015).

Interestingly, Richter (2023, 87) points to the almost accidental political dimension of Luhmann's temporality. As mentioned above, time's irreversibility depends on contingent selection, to which political observations can be attributed. Whose decisions and which actions are irreversible, in other words non-negotiable, create constellations of power and property relations, maintained from moment to moment through a significant expenditure of energy. Additionally, the cult of speed

described by Paul Virilio is complexified if we keep in mind that society consists of not one time but innumerable individuated timelines, which leaves us with no time for contemplation or intervention. Instead, society can achieve a measure of meta-stability only through synchronisation, 'choreography' or, as Luhmann (2012, 26) puts it, 'coordination' (Richter 2023, 88).

If time is always open for Luhmann as a functional necessity for systems' orientation, which holds no particular political significance, Deleuze's theory of time sees this openness as clearly political. Deleuze provides three syntheses of time. The first synthesis of time – the unity of two moments – into the present happens through a subject's passive contraction and contemplation. Selecting an individuated timeline or linear narrative makes sense of near-infinite complexity. However, this present always passes. In that sense, it is always in becoming, an absent in its openness, while the past is all that can be said to be. In the second mode, all recollections of the past necessarily occur in the present, meaning that such a moment is simultaneously past and present, and further, like infinities placed within infinities in a Cantor set, that *all* past is contracted and synthesised to coexist with the present. Thus, paradoxically, the present always passes while the past never passes. The third synthesis concerns novelty, a break from the past or, in Luhmannian terminology, difference. It is the pure event that splits time. The production of difference heralds the new, which, for Deleuze, is the essence of time (Smith 2023, 56–60).

Despite some differences, Richter points out that time is implicated in sense-making and individuation for both thinkers. As important as it is for the creation and orientation of the subject, be it an individual or social system, it remains artificial and contingent. Yes, this means that it could have political implications. It also means that, inextricably, it is open-ended. As Spencer-Brown (2010) has shown, selections can always be made otherwise, new differences can emerge, and thus, with new distinctions, new worlds come into being.

The fourth and final concept directly builds from the previous in the shape of a comparative analysis of the political event. While the event represents a temporal difference, it is also connected with the prior notions in that it, too, requires individuated sense-making. For Deleuze, a true event is open and creative in that it, almost retroactively and contrary to traditional causality and teleology, constitutes its causes, subjects and significance (Richter 2023, 105). While events have corporeal causes that make them happen, the incorporeal quasi-causes in the realm of sense are what makes them creative. The difference of the event must be marked on two levels: the material and the sensual. The implication is that events cannot be brought about only through force of will. In other words, for Deleuze, the change brought about by the event is not (simply) through the actions of subjects but through their *ex post facto* interpretation.

This modest role ascribed to individuals, who act with little control over its outcome, is mirrored in Luhmann. As Richter (2023, 113) points out, Luhmann uses the term 'operation' more commonly than 'event', which means, she argues, that the event is central to his understanding of systems as the driver of autopoiesis. As a system encounters novelty or complexity in its environment (as observed and made sensible by itself), it is faced with the challenge of connecting it with its existing elements to reproduce itself. The difference here is that for Deleuze, the event is an opportunity for potentially radical creativity, while for Luhmann, the interest is in how relations reproduce continuity in the face of change. Richter solves this apparent contradiction by depicting continuity as ultimately a choice made among other alternatives at the moment of an event that also requires creative and productive work to realise (Richter 2023, 117).

A short detour is taken through one understanding of the (political) event, the exception, described most famously by Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben (Schmitt 2005; Agamben 2004). The state of exception is an extraordinary moment where the normal cannot continue, and decisionism rules the day. The exceptional event is depicted as necessary for the existence of the sovereign and, particularly in Agamben, serves to mask that the sovereign emperor is naked. If Luhmann can be understood as a political decisionist, however, it must be of the opposite sort. In its continuation, the political system never makes the great decision. Instead, Richter points out, the political system successfully reproduces itself by upholding the status quo despite crises like climate change, pandemics, and social inequality. Politics cannot, like any other system, address and decide for society totally. Suppose the great decision masked politic's vacuity to Agamben. In that case, Luhmann reduces the great decision to its banality as simply one political decision among many others, each as limited and absurd as the next. The political system is, in the end, simply the generation of more decisions.

Thus, Richter effectively lays the philosophical foundations shared by Deleuze and Luhmann. By comparing the themes of sense, individuation, time and event, it is convincingly (or at the very least, plausibly) argued that thinking of these two authors together can be fruitful. They have a sufficiently shared understanding of sense as a contingent, observer-dependent act of meaning-making that is reflexively essential in the constitution of the observer. Time forms part of this self-definition, and as something that can only emerge through assigning meaning, it also has creative potential. This creativity, understood as difference, presents itself as an event. While Deleuze attaches a normative concern to the event's potential, Luhmann is more interested in describing the no less remarkable feat of continuity despite difference.

This shared framework can result in the concept of a politics of orientation, which Richter then trains on the contemporary political problems of right-wing

populism fuelled by post-truth media. The notion of a politics of orientation is developed by starting with Deleuze's well-known *Postscript on Societies of Control* (Deleuze 1992), which painted a picture of governance as decentred and permeated through technological modulation rather than the disciplinary subjectification by institutions as described by Michel Foucault (or, for that matter, by Schmitt and Agamben). This raises the question of why political institutions persist, which Richter answers through Luhmann: because the entirety of the political system is occupied with legitimising itself (Richter 2023, 126). Returning to our discussion above regarding decisionism and the event, we can understand politics as a reproductive decision-making machine grounded in nothing but itself. Governance is effected through Deleuzian control, algorithms, and codes, leaving the political system free to dispense with that responsibility and instead expend its energy on decision after decision, which only legitimises its authority to make more decisions, per Luhmann. The problem is that this mask no longer works, and trust in the political system is relatively low – "its style of practice fools no one" (Luhmann 1990b, 114).

Despite Luhmann's antagonism towards the Frankfurt School (Luhmann 2002), Richter draws out a critique of political economy from him, if only an implicit one. She points to Luhmann's complicated relationship with Karl Marx's thought, showing that rather than wholesale rejection, the later thinker could recognise his predecessor as correctly identifying the evolutionary contingency of the (capitalist) economic system, constantly reproducing the conditions of its necessity (Richter 2023, 135). In fact, Richter argues that functional differentiation itself can be understood as a division of labour for the benefit of increased efficiency, which reproduces itself and the social sense relations around it. If Marx could describe capitalism as vampiric, social systems could be described similarly (or, to suggest a different term, parasitically) (Serres 2007). Their contingency and meta-stability point to a vulnerability and their Deleuzian potential to be re-imagined.

However, if politics is as stripped of power as argued, as simply a multiplier of decisions that mainly reflects society without steering it and has subsequently lost public trust, how does it retain legitimacy today? Keeping the centrality of sense in mind, Richter contends that the function of politics today is to provide orientation to society. Politics aids in making meaning, not because it can govern society, but because it "holds ready" the capacity to make decisions. If trust in political effectiveness has declined, it seems that *hope in its potential to be effective* is still alive. This hope alone seems to be sufficient to reproduce politics. Further, this hope efficiently structures social relations around specific topics that provide reference points – at least semantically – for society to construct meaning and orient individuals (Richter 2023, 144).

This can be seen today in post-truth, populist politics. 'Post-truth' is defined as a widespread mistrust in communication from the scientific system to mainstream

news media. Populism is the outcome of a moral antagonism introduced into the political system between the 'authentic' people and the 'corrupt' government. This moralisation creates a mood of resentment. Such a simplistic message (the government is corrupt, the old way of life is threatened) offers an easier orientation than post-war liberal democratic institutions and values. The narrative framework and how it poses its problems and its solutions is currently more effective.

Indeed, the media system has played a large part in this. The differentiated media system has made society, including its self-observation, much more complex. New communication technologies have not only increased possibilities but, as Deleuze points out in the *Postscript*, also multiplied individual's obligations and demands on their attention. It has left individuals with the knowledge that they can never know everything and the belief that there are actors who probably purposefully obscure some facts (or invent fake ones). This disorientation is remedied with a re-orientation in the mode of post-truth populism. As Richter (2023, 165) points out, complexity is the "most urgent challenge requiring social steering". Politics, in turn, reflect the themes that are most easily employed for sense-making: claims around bodily autonomy such as sexuality or masks and vaccines, immigration, or illegal invasions and occupations. These have largely replaced ideologically worked-out demands and programs (Richter 2023, 168). The pressure individuals feel can be addressed by reducing complexity, not at the systemic but at the personal level through a meaning-giving politics of rejection, intensified by modern media.

In sum, Richter paints a picture of a world made up first of sense, using the colours of Deleuze and Luhmann, which underlies individuation, our understanding of time and how political events transpire. In Deleuze, capital is a system that comes into being and further reconstructs itself through a particular framework of meaning. For Luhmann, those foundations led more broadly to the functional differentiation of society into multiple social systems. This leads to an exponential increase in complexity, exacerbated by the media, that leaves individuals disoriented. In order to regain orientation, subjects adopt political worldviews, such as post-truth populism, that oppose more traditional political orientations, which, for many, have lost credibility.

It seems reasonably likely that the loss of credibility that has proved such a fertile ground for populism has, in no small part, been cultivated by a media system quite different from what has come before. This line of thought is explored in *Observing News and Media in a Complex Society: A Sociocybernetic Perspective*, authored by Toru Takahashi, an influential scholar and translator of Luhmann's work in Japan. While Luhmann's theory represents the main theoretical thrust of this work, it also employs a wide variety of theoretical insights from the field of media studies.

The reference to complexity in the title captures the initial premise of the work, much as it is also the problem in Richter's. While broader society is already complex,

the rapid advancement of media technology has exacerbated this, with implications for the media system and other social systems. With news media being so closely associated with the political system, Takahashi brings the relationship between these two into sharper relief. The matter becomes multi-faceted. First, while news media has shaped societal meaning from its beginning, the flood of information today requires changing how the news can (meaningfully) continue to provide meaning. From the unavoidable reciprocity that occurs when media and politics observe one another, other questions arise, such as the importance of agenda-setting and how to frame (or make sense of) conflict. Finally, the study highlights how communities, relying on the media system, can respond and organise around problems they face.

In this work, too, the challenge is how to find meaning in a sea of complexity. Drawing on Geyer (1980; 1996), Takahashi (2024, 4) points even more directly to "the problem of meaninglessness" in modern society. Keeping this in mind, we know that media can construct a 'shared reality' for society (Luhmann 2000). Additionally, communication technology creates structural conditions for different modes of meaning construction and circulation. Thus, each successive technological step – print, radio, television, internet – brings about not merely a quantitative increase in communication but a qualitative transformation, too. The increase in the amount of information and the mode of transfer necessarily changes the content of meaning.

From these premises, Takahashi proceeds with an analysis of communication and its role in governance. Rather than Deleuze, Takahashi starts with Maturana and Varela (1980) to reject the 'transmission mode' of communication. The effect of this is to place an observer as something of an antisocial, alienated outsider to the black box of the system, which creates the need to create some or any kind of meaning. Reference is made to the textual exchange between Luhmann and Heinz von Foerster in the early 1990s (Luhmann 1991; 1993; von Foerster 2003), in which the latter discussed non-trivial machines in which output recursively re-enters its input. While such a situation would still be monological, the superimposition of two such machines (perhaps we could call one 'media' and the other 'politics') would create a dialogical system from which stable eigenbehaviours could emerge. We could add that this indeterminable reentry is attributable not to external effects but to the system itself; meaning arises, and individuation occurs (Luhmann 2012, 19). For von Foerster and Takahashi, this process gives rise to an ethical responsibility (Takahashi 2024, 15).

In this dialogical, self-referential setup, the familiar schema of Luhmann's communicative theory – that of information, utterance and understanding – can be placed. These three selections must overcome at least three additional improbabilities: reachability, understandability and acceptability. Symbolic media or basic values (such as human rights, but also property rights or protecting tradition) can

aid in communication's attempts at success, success being defined as creating a premise for subsequent behaviour. From this process emerges communicative eigenbehaviours, which can eventually be designated as 'culture', and social problems, which require governance through further communication to create opportunities for new behaviours (Takahashi 2024, 28).

The news media have an essential role in this communicative process of meaning-making. News, too, is subject to a range of selections as outlined above: from what information to report, how it is presented, how much time or space is devoted to it, and more. Takahashi (2024, 31) is able to successfully place Luhmann's work within the broader context of media studies by directly comparing the latter's criteria for news selection with other authoritative schematisations by (Galtung/Ruge 1965; Harcup/O'Neill 2001). Media's structural coupling with politics becomes essential in that the news, through observation and communication, co-constructs the public sphere where (partially) shared expectations of the environment can proliferate. The advent of social media has obviously changed the outlook thoroughly, increasing non-mediated news communication. Suppose the selections of journalists had previously fulfilled a gatekeeping function to restrict the available material for meaning constructively. In that case, we are faced today with a deluge of information that cannot be gatekept but only 'gate watched', returning us to the problem of complexity with which we started. The upshot of this development is that the public sphere increases its capacity for problem-solving by allowing for new opportunities for community-building or rapid organisation (in other words, orientation) during disasters. The increased publicity of second-order observation of news media has clear implications for the continued relevance and autonomy of the journalistic profession.

Takahashi (2024, 41) points out that the political system can hardly function today without structural coupling with the media and the second-order observation that goes along with it. Parties and leaders in a democracy cannot hope to be successful without skillfully playing the media by observing how they are observed. On the other hand, the news relies on political decisions and scandals for its theme-selection. While this has the aforementioned benefit of fueling the public sphere, the dependence on political popularity and attention in a competitive media landscape creates a heavy reliance on moral communication, which, as we have seen, has the danger of leading toward populism. Coupled with social media, the virtual public sphere has, in recent years, testified to this. Much as social media has bypassed institutional news media, populist politicians can be defined, in part, by their anti-institutional orientation. A moral appeal is inherent: a charismatic leader representing the 'pure' people can genuinely express the *volonté générale* against a 'corrupted' state ("drain the swamp"). Takahashi employs Luhmann's insight that moral communication exacerbates social conflict to show that populist leaders and their followers use new media to drive their agendas and fragment their consensus reality that was the

function of traditional media. In extreme cases, this tension can find expression in terrorism, defined as when a group rejects some parts of society and acts against it in ways designed for maximum media attention. It is interesting to regard terrorism not as only a political event but as one also explicitly aimed at the media system. Another, even further-reaching example can be found in armed conflicts, which are ultimately parasitic or destructive to broader society (Takahashi 2024, 54).

It is thus clear that news media today consists of a hybrid form between the traditional and the disruptive new, which has implications for meaning-making. More specifically, if traditional media solved the problem of disseminating information and creating shared meaning – sifting the sense from the nonsense for society – the digital era has made it a victim of its success. A flood of information has caused a surplus of meaning, leading to increased dissensus and, ultimately, more social fragmentation. Takahashi (2024, 67) turns to public or civic journalism as a possible counterbalance, where traditional journalists reinvent themselves as curators of public debate. In this way, journalism can remain a by-now essential part of governance and contribute to collective problem-solving in society. This would entail partially abandoning journalism's historical pretence toward objectivity (as if it ever could have observed 'from nowhere') in favour of more direct engagement and orientation towards 'solutions.'

If media has described itself as a watchdog of other social systems, especially politics, Takahashi's redefinition would call for a journalistic institution that, first and foremost, reflexively watches itself. While value judgments have always been present in what is reported, this reflexivity would carry the benefit of making this curation explicit. More abstractly, rather than quietly assuming its necessity in collective meaning-making, the media can more accurately build a self-description as active managers of meaning, perhaps justified by the proliferation of both true and false information. The political aspect of the media, described here as governance, is then, at the very least, not obfuscated. This risks increasing the growing distrust in 'mainstream media'. On the other hand, by orienting it directly to social problems, as Takahashi implores, and if it can achieve a measure of success in solving them through emergent networks that share meaning as to solutions, the media system may yet find new meaning, and thus self-definition, by carving an alternative systemic space for itself in society.

In conclusion, these two monographs highlight the sensitive interplay between sense and nonsense and how politics and the media are directly influencing and being influenced by it. The decline of traditional news media's gatekeeping role and the rise of post-truth populism illustrate a shift towards a more chaotic and individuated interpretation of facts. While Deleuze and Luhmann both recognised that meaning has to be remade every moment in the present, the alienation caused by increasing nonsense has probably made this even more difficult than in the

time of both of their writing. Both Takahashi and Richter's works are welcome for approaching Luhmann from the concept of meaning before system, echoing Christian Morgner (2022) in this shift in emphasis. It underlines the need to rethink social systems, whether it is for the media to change their social role or to understand politics as an expression of identity rather than interests or a mode of orientation. When considering the future of democratic engagement, the dual insights of Richter and Takahashi provide a framework for addressing the challenges of the digital age. It becomes clear that enhancing public trust requires an effort from the media to promote coherent narratives while not losing track of diverse individuated realities.

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