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The Relationship between Vilém Flusser and Günther Anders
in Media Studies and Politics

"I had the clear sure perception ... that I was free to choose any or several of these attitudes and activities; that this choice would have definite and unavoidable effects which I could foresee and of which I was fully responsible."

Roberto Assagioli, Freedom in Jail, 1940

"The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed?"

Hanna Arendt, The New York Review of Books, 1974

Introduction

The relationship between technology, media, and politics has always fascinated me. I have often wrestled with the tension between two seemingly contradictory perspectives: on the one hand, the pessimistic, almost dystopian warnings of thinkers like Günther Anders, who saw technology as a force of alienation and dehumanization; and on the other, the more playful, constructive approach of Vilém Flusser, who saw in media technologies the potential for creativity, resilience, and transformation. My own engagement with the field of media studies has been shaped by these views. In this essay, I reflect on how Anders and Flusser improve my knowledge of the complex relationship between media, power, and human agency. At the heart of their work lies a fundamental question: do technological advancements inevitably strip us of autonomy and make us passive spectators in a world ruled by algorithms, mass media, and automated decision-making? Or do they create new possibilities for resilience and the reconfiguration of political and social realities? In a world where digital media and AI-generated content shape not just how we communicate but how we think, act, and organize politically, this question is more urgent than ever. The two thinkers offer different answers -one leaning toward despair, the other toward possibility- and it is between these poles that I want to situate my own reflection.

The Burden of Responsibility

Reading Günther Anders often feels like being confronted with a ruthless but necessary truth. His concept of the *Promethean Gap* – the idea that technology has outpaced our moral and cognitive ability to grasp its consequences – resonates deeply with my own anxieties (Anders 1956). In an era where artificial intelligence generates content, algorithms shape elections, and nuclear weapons remain a persistent global threat, it is hard not to share Anders' warning about the ethical paralysis that technological advancement can produce. Anders was particularly disturbed by the way media and technology create distance between actions and their consequences. His lucid analysis of mass media as a tool for desensitization strikes me as especially relevant today. The ways in which war, environmental destruction, and systemic injustice are mediated through screens (often transformed into mere "spectacle", to borrow Guy Debord's term) amplify his warnings about ethical disengagement. For instance, Anders noted how the bureaucratic nature of modern atrocity – epitomized by Adolf Eichmann's administrative role in the Holocaust – allows individuals to commit or facilitate horrors from behind a desk, without ever confronting the human reality of their actions.

In the digital age, this problem has only intensified: drone warfare enables killing at a distance, while misinformation campaigns manipulate public opinion without individuals fully grasping the consequences. I can only connect Anders' insights to my own experiences as a media scholar and teacher. So much of contemporary media theory warns us about the dangers of passivity in the face of algorithmic control, the monopolization of information, and the erosion of public discourse. Anders' critique of mass media as an instrument of manipulation feels almost prophetic when I consider how social media platforms shape public perception, often reinforcing existing power structures, rather than challenging them. His warning that technology can create a system where individuals become mere gears in a machine, alienated from any sense of agency or responsibility, aligns with my fears about the direction media technologies are taking.

In this, Anders' pessimism has indeed a moral urgency: he asks us to recognize the weight of our responsibility in a world where technology mediates every action. Notably, Anders' grim outlook finds an echo -perhaps surprisingly- in Flusser's own analysis of the worst-case scenario of technological society. Flusser also recognized that humans could be reduced to functionaries of apparatuses, devoid of genuine ethical agency. In one of his late reflections on the Eichmann trial, Flusser remarked that someone like Eichmann is "no political being… but a machine in human form", a chilling characterization that leads him to conclude that "politics is in Auschwitz dead" (Flusser 1983b: 33). In other words, the triumph of a total technical-bureaucratic apparatus in Nazi fascism meant the collapse of traditional politics and moral judgment. Both Anders and Flusser

thus diagnose a similar threat: a technologically driven annihilation of human responsibility and politics, a kind of media-driven fascism by which human beings become cogs in an inhuman system. However, as we will see, they diverge on how to respond to this threat.

Flusser's Playfulness

Despite my agreement with Anders on many points, I find myself drawn more and more to Vilém Flusser's alternative vision. Whereas Anders' view of technology often seems frankly suffocating, Flusser offers an approach that, while no less critical, feels more open-ended and solution oriented. Instead of seeing media technologies as inherently alienating, Flusser insists that they can be manipulated, played with, and reimagined in ways that open up new creative and political possibilities. Where Anders sees the individual essentially as a victim of technology, Flusser sees the individual as a potential player in the technical arena. Flusser's work often emphasizes a shift in perspective from viewing humans as tool-wielders (*homo faber*) to viewing them as players of games (*homo ludens*). He argues, for example, that a photographer using a camera is "not a worker but a player: not Homo faber but Homo ludens" (Flusser 1983a). By this, Flusser means that taking photographs is less about traditional fabrication and more about exploring the possibilities within a game-like apparatus.

The camera, like other technical media, is an apparatus – defined by Flusser as a kind of "plaything or game that simulates thought; an organization or system that enables something to function" (Flusser 1983a). The photographer operating it becomes a functionary of the apparatus, engaging with it much as a gambler engages with a slot machine, by feeding it programs and permutations. This might sound as though Flusser is reducing humans to mere components in the machine (much as Anders does), but there is a crucial difference: the player has the capacity to play against the apparatus. The very notion of being a player within a system implies that one can also subvert the rules of the game. What I find most interesting in Flusser's work is his insistence that media users are not doomed to be passive consumers. Even though the apparatus comes with a fixed program of possibilities, we are not entirely trapped. Flusser's concept of technical images (photography, cinema, television, and in our time, digital media) suggests that rather than simply absorbing images, we can learn to decode and reprogram them. In other words, we can misuse the apparatus for our own creative purposes.

As Polona Tratnik, professor at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia observes, Flusser does not explicitly use heavy terms like "resistance" in his theory of photography, but his notion of genuinely artistic photography essentially involves "resistance to the

program and the power of the apparatus" – a creative misusing of the camera's program and a subversion of its power structures (Tratnik 2016:3). Flusser himself makes this point in his paradoxical style: "photographers do not play with their plaything but against it" (Flusser 1983b:27). In other words, the photographer's game is to search for possibilities not yet discovered in the camera's program, to outwit the apparatus by finding images that were not anticipated by its designers (Flusser 1983a). This oppositional play is a subtle form of resistance from within. Flusser does caution that even this resistance remains bounded by the apparatus – "Photographers can only act within the program of the camera, even when they think they are acting in opposition to this program. This is true of all post-industrial acts" (Flusser 1983b:38) – yet the very act of thinking one is opposing the program hints at an awakening of agency. We may not escape the apparatus entirely, but we can make it yield unexpected outcomes.

In his newspaper columns and essays, Flusser repeatedly argues that media are not just instruments of domination, but also spaces for subversion. He wrote that "the function of the press is no longer to inform, but to shape the reader's imagination" (Original in Portuguese: "*A função da imprensa não é mais informar, mas moldar a imaginação do leitor*", Folha de S.Paulo, April, 7, 1972), a statement that still rings true today. If information is now routinely manipulated and shaped by those in power, our responsibility is not just to critique this reality but to reinvent the way we engage with media. For Flusser, it is crucial that we become conscious of the codes and programs underlying our media systems so that we can begin to rearrange them. He challenges us to recognize that media do not simply reflect reality; they construct it – and if that is the case, then we who consume and produce media must learn to construct and deconstruct reality in turn. In another article, Flusser put it succinctly: "*the press does not inform, it forms*" (Imprensa, May 1985). This is both a warning and a call to action. It warns that media content is never neutral information carrier, it is always shaping minds and worldviews. But it also calls us to action: if the press (and by extension all media) forms reality, then we as readers, viewers, and users of media must grasp this formative power and wield it ourselves.

This perspective has profoundly influenced my own way of thinking about media activism, for example. Rather than seeing digital platforms merely as spaces of control (as one might in an Anders-influenced view), I became interested in how they can be repurposed for resistance and resilience. The central question then becomes: how do we move from being programmed by media to actively programming it? How can we engage in what Flusser might call playful resistance, where we use the very tools of media manipulation against those who seek to control the flow of information? Here again, Flusser's ideas say that we must become the programmers of the media apparatus. Indeed, he suggests that true creativity in the information age lies with whoever programs the programs of the apparatus – those who design and hack the systems, rather than merely playing

within them (Flusser 1983b). In contemporary terms, this might translate to learning code, algorithms, and narrative and storytelling techniques to subvert dominant platforms from within.

Mass Media and Political Struggle

The tension between passivity and engagement in media became central to my own research and even teaching. Both Anders and Flusser recognize that media are powerful tools that shape political realities, but they diverge in their assessment of how individuals can respond. Anders emphasizes the dangers of apathy and the way mass media can render us politically passive, whereas Flusser sees opportunities for subversion and resilience through active engagement. The modern political landscape is, regrettably, an ideal testing ground for their theories. In the digital age, we are witnessing both the worst and the best of media's potential. On the one hand, propaganda and misinformation campaigns spread with alarming speed, reinforcing Anders' anxiety about media as tools of control. Examples abound, bots and algorithms amplify extremist propaganda, "fake news" undermines democratic discourse, and echo chambers create a false sense of reality.

These phenomena underscore Anders' point that technology can anesthetize our critical faculties and turn us into unwitting collaborators in our own domination. Flusser, too, was aware of this dark side. He warned that unless we counterbalance mass media with dialogical communication, we risk a new form of totalitarianism emerging from our apparatuses. In his view, the breakdown of genuine dialogue in favor of omnipresent technical discourse could lead to the "installation of an apparatus-totalitarianism" – essentially a high-tech, media-driven fascism that must be prevented at all costs (Flusser 1984). This is the scenario where media become so one-sided and manipulative that they extinguish the space of politics altogether. Flusser located the origins of this menace in the 20th century: he noted that the collapse of the public sphere and the rise of technical images helped create the climate in which Auschwitz became possible (Flusser 1984). Therefore, to preserve freedom and dignity in what he calls "post-history", society must restore a balance of dialogical communication to counter the top-down programming of the masses (Flusser 1984).

Anders would certainly agree with the diagnosis of the problem – the omnipresent danger of media-induced political paralysis – though he did not share Flusser's optimism about a solution. On the other hand, we have also seen media's liberating potential. Social movements from the Arab Spring to contemporary climate activism have used digital platforms to mobilize people, counter dominant narratives, and reshape political discourse. Grassroots activists use Twitter, YouTube, and other tools to bypass state-controlled media, telling their own stories and coordinating action on a mass scale. This exemplifies what Flusser sees as the other side of media: the

possibility that networked communication can empower individuals and communities. Flusser's argument that media users must become "programmers" rather than passive consumers has never felt more relevant.

The rise of independent journalism, citizen media, open-source information networks, and creative digital activism all suggest that the political possibilities of media are still open. When Flusser says "*the press does not inform, it forms*", he is highlighting that media power lies in shaping realities. Therefore, true political engagement in the digital age requires the ability not only to critically consume media, but to proactively reshape media's logic. We see this in practice whenever citizens collaboratively fact-check false information online, or hackers expose and redirect corporate and government propaganda, or artists remix and meme official images to undermine their authority. All these acts represent people reprogramming media in a playful, insurgent way – fulfilling Flusser's vision of users as active participants.

Flusser's vision anticipates the emergence of what he called a "telematic society", a society built on many-to-many network communication, rather than one-to-many broadcast. In the 1980s, Flusser foresaw a shift from traditional technical images (like photographs and television, which are produced by apparatuses for passive consumption) to new dialogical images that are interactive and enable the viewer to respond and even create in return (Flusser 1983b). We see this today in the form of interactive digital media. Unlike a television broadcast that imposes content to a passive audience, digital media platforms allow users to talk back, modify, and distribute content on their own terms.

As the Dutch scholar Arjen Mulder explains, dialogical images (for example, an interactive website or a video game) "are interfaces that allow their viewer/user to click beyond the image, change it when needed, or even synthesize [it] from scratch, in purely numerical form" (Mulder 2016:2). In such systems, the viewer becomes a participant with real agency. This transition - from broadcast media to interactive media - is precisely what allows those social movements and citizen journalists to flourish. The architecture of our new media (the fact that anyone can publish a tweet or start a blog that potentially reaches millions) provides a structural basis for resistance that was absent in the era of top-down mass media.

Flusser's optimism was grounded in this potential for a more democratic media landscape: a world where information flows horizontally through networks, rather than vertically from a few hubs. We are not fully in that utopia yet (powerful gatekeepers and algorithms still control much of what we see) but the very existence of peer-to-peer communication channels has given citizens new levers of power. In this sense, Flusser offers a counterargument to Anders' despair: yes, media can be used to enslave minds, but they can also be used to liberate them.

Mediated Responsibility

Perhaps the greatest challenge that both Flusser and Anders pose – a challenge indeed still unre-solved – is the question of responsibility in a mediated world. How do we, as media users, scholars, and political actors, exercise responsibility in a world where technological mediation distances us from the consequences of our actions? Anders calls for an almost absolute ethical responsibility in the face of technological alienation; he wants us to recognize the grave stakes and refuse to be involved, even if it means a kind of moral asceticism (refusing certain technologies or uses outright).

But his outlook often leaves little space for action beyond this principled refusal or for addressing the system. Flusser, on the other hand, offers a more proactive response: he locates responsibility in our ability to intervene, to decipher the codes of media, and to reshape its struc-tures from the inside. For Flusser, being responsible in the technological era means learning the "rules of the game" and then bending or reinventing those rules through play and creativity. I often feel caught between these two visions. Some days, I share Anders' pessimism – especially when confronted with the overwhelming power of tech corporations, the surveillance state, the deluge of disinformation, and the many ways media serve as tools of control. On those days, Anders' firm warning that we must not allow our morale to be numbed by gadgets is at the forefront of my mind. But on other days, Flusser's playful optimism lifts me. He reminds me that media can be repurposed and reimagined, and that political struggle is also about creativity and reinvention. Flusser essentially challenges us to become literate in the new sense: not just able to read and write text, but able to read and write media. He suggests that we must "learn to navigate the flood of images, not just passively drown in them" (Flusser 1990:84) – implying that media literacy is not enough; we need what we might call media fluency. By media fluency, I mean the ability not only to critique media messages, but to actively code, decode, and recode them for our own purposes. This is strongly reminiscent of Flusser's *homo ludens* paradigm. In a way, Flusser is asking us to become a new kind of human: a player who takes responsibility by playing well.

Media philosopher Suzana Alpsancar discusses something similar when she talks about the playfulness of our "post-historical" condition. She interprets Flusser's vision of the future human as a *Homo ludens* who has transcended the old role of *Homo faber*. In this view, responsibility in the future will lie in how we play. It will lie in whether we use our new technical freedom to create new meanings, new forms of culture, and new social bonds. Flusser imagines that once freed from the burdens of traditional work, people could "realize themselves fully as players with information", and that only such a society -one that values playful creation- "would appear as a truly free one" (Alpsancar 2015:136). This implies a profound shift in values: from the work ethic of industrial society to a play ethic of the information society. Education, accordingly, would have to change.

Flusser (and those inspired by him) envision a "new school" that unites media critique with aesthetic play, dissolving the old boundaries between science, art, and politics. In such an educational project, students would be encouraged to engage in "playing against the apparatus" in networked dialogue, thereby developing not only media competence and content but also play competence and, ultimately, life competence (Alpsancar 2015). In other words, learning to play creatively with media is how we cultivate the skill to navigate life in a techno-mediated world responsibly and freely. I see my own teaching efforts aligned with this: I encourage students to not just analyze media texts but to remix them, hack them, and produce their own: to intervene, rather than just observe. This is where I believe Flusser offers a truly constructive path forward. He shows that our freedom within technological structures depends on our willingness to play with those structures in unexpected ways. Responsibility, paradoxically, may mean not always following the "rules" that are given to us, but rather using our wit and creativity to imagine new rules.

Conclusion. Choosing Between Despair and Possibility

Reflecting on the comparing and contrasting the two thinkers' ideas, I realize that both offer invaluable insights into our current media landscape and its relationship with those in power and those in politics. Anders provides an urgent warning: technology, if left unchecked, leads to alienation, passivity, and the erosion of ethical responsibility. Flusser, however, provides a counterargument that I find honestly inspiring: media technologies, despite their inherent dangers, are not inevitably oppressive. They can be used to create new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting.

In a sense, the choice between Anders and Flusser is a personal and, perhaps, an existential one. Do we give in to despair, acknowledging the overwhelming power of technological systems that shape our lives, and retreat in protest? Or do we embrace the possibility of intervention, resilience, and reinvention from within those very systems? For me, the answer has become clear over time. While I share many of Anders' concerns, I find that Flusser's vision offers a more hopeful approach. The world of media is not fixed; it is an arena of struggle. It is a dynamic, ever-evolving ecosystem, where power is contested and where creativity can still serve as a form of resistance and resilience. Yes, there is a risk of falling into what Flusser called "apparatus totalitarianism". But there is also the potential to thwart that fate through human agency, if we accept Flusser's challenge to become active players. If we embrace the role of programmers rather than passive consumers, then media can be more than a tool of domination, it can become an open space of boundless possibilities. In choosing between despair and possibility, I choose to stand with Flusser's playful hope, equipped with Anders' lucid warnings. In doing so, I carry forward a responsibility: to ensure

that in the game of media and politics, the human spirit of play, creativity, and responsibility triumphs over the apparatus of domination.

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