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## Living as a Zombie in Media is the Only Way to Survive

Mark Deuze

PEOPLE USE MULTIPLE MEDIA MORE OR LESS SIMULTANEOUSLY A LOT OF THE time—most of the time unaware of the concurrent exposure (Deuze, *Media Life*).<sup>1</sup> This multiplication of mediated experiences not only contributes to a lack of awareness of media in our lives, but it also amplifies and accelerates an ongoing fusion of all domains of life (such as home, work, school, love, and play) with media. This intense and immersive media use can be seen as turning us into helpless addicts, slaves to machines—*zombies*. We are zombies in that we mindlessly succumb to the drive of our devices; we are zombies because we use media in ways that erase our distinctiveness as individuals as we record and remix ourselves and each other into media. Our society zombifies as we navigate it—willingly or involuntarily—augmented by virtualizing technologies. The zombie concept can be deployed in understanding a society after media, in that when we live in media, we become less aware of our surroundings, less tuned in to our senses, and thus more like lifeless automatons. Yet at the same time, living in media extends our senses and enhances our abilities to connect with others, to see ourselves and each other, and to manage the growing social complexity of our world. In this regard, the zombie concept helps us to appreciate the boundaryless and viral nature of human bonds. Additionally, because the zombie concept recognizes the indivisibility of the living and the dead, it can be used to articulate the increasing integration of our lives (and bodies) with technology and media.

In this paper, I first aim to show that we already live in a zombie society, in symbiosis with technologies that have fused with lived experience to the extent that distinctions between organic and technological life have disappeared (or become meaningless). Second, I argue that living in media as zombies—in a media life—can in fact be beneficial to our chances for survival, providing opportunities for more or less new types of social engagement. Cases

such as the global Occupy movement and the Arab Spring are used to support this thesis, as is recent scholarship on the significance of zombies as the “monster of the moment” at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Media (R)evolution

Research on media use runs throughout both the industry and the academy, crossing numerous sectors and disciplines, all contributing to an overwhelming array of stories, studies, reports, journal articles, and books breathlessly documenting how people around the world use more and more media all the time. Anthropologist Keith Hart proposes a “revolutionary” take on our lives in media:

We are living through the first stages of a world revolution...It is a machine revolution, of course: the convergence of telephones, television and computers in a digital system whose most visible symbol is the internet. It is a social revolution, the formation of a world society with means of communication adequate at last to expressing universal ideas...It is an existential revolution, transforming what it means to be human and how each of us relates to the rest of humanity (24).

The rapid global uptake of broadband internet and mobile communication in general and online social media in particular is part of a larger trend towards a predominance of always-on, interconnected artifacts and activities that become the foundation for the arrangement of human sociality.

### “We’re All Fucking Zombies”

In this claim by Gawker-blogger Hamilton Nolan about what becomes of us as each year people spend more time with media than ever before, zombification is introduced as a direct consequence and as a distinct social problem. This assertion seems not without merit. In August 2010 the British Automobile Association (AA) issued a formal warning to the general public about the dangers of road zombies: people sharing the road while listening to music on headphones or using a mobile phone. Inspired by a similar metaphorical concern about zombies, Assistant Surgeon General Ali Khan of the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2011 posted a “Zombie Apocalypse Preparedness Guide” on its website, drily informing people about what services it offers in case of these (and other) emergencies:

If zombies did start roaming the streets, CDC would conduct an investigation much like any other disease outbreak. CDC would provide technical assistance to cities, states, or international partners dealing with a zombie

infestation. This assistance might include consultation, lab testing and analysis, patient management and care, tracking of contacts, and infection control (including isolation and quarantine).

This tongue-in-cheek reference to a potential zombie apocalypse made waves in media as word of the announcement spread virally across social networking sites and got picked up by major news organizations. Banking on this success, the CDC's newly formed Zombie Task Force followed up by announcing an online user-generated video contest. Although media use was not blamed for people becoming zombies, the CDC zombie warning went viral (like the apocalyptic storyline associated with zombies in much of popular culture) through social media.

The range of associations between media and zombies is not new, and can be linked with recurring moral panics on the influence of media throughout history—be it maps, books, newspapers, advertisements, television, or today's internet and mobile telecommunications. However, one could argue that today's level of media immersion is unprecedented. As Manuel Castells documents, a rather dramatic global shift from mass communication to mass self-communication is taking place, vastly increasing our engagement and involvement in media, and through media with each other (246). It is hardly surprising that we, when trying to grasp this shift, mesh organic terms (such as viruses, swarm intelligence, and hive minds) with inanimate objects (computers, hardware and software, wired and wireless connections). The common cyborg metaphor is hardly sufficient to represent the change. Conceptually fusing the (a)live and dead seems appropriate for a critical understanding of media life. We are all zombies, in that the boundaries between us and our media—between humans and machines—have blurred, our lives run concurrent with technologies, and the metaphors we live by complicate categorical distinctions between living and dead matter.

### Media Are Zombies, Too

It is not just the human users of media that can be seen as living dead. Jussi Parikka notes one of the more unsettling consequences of a media life: living with “the return of dangerous toxins and other residue from supposedly immaterial information technologies—hundreds of millions of electronic devices discarded annually, most of which are still working” (Parikka). A media life comes with endless graveyards of often still-working mobile phones, personal computers, chips and circuits, wires, and controllers. Recognizing the severity of this (un)dead media issue, in 2008 the United Nations, together with a host of other organizations (including the US Environmental Protection Agency), started the Solving The E-waste Problem (STEP) initiative. This program considers e-waste (any kind of electronic equipment, including TVs,

computers, mobile phones, home entertainment and stereo systems) to be a global problem growing more rapidly every year because of the relentless pace of product innovations and replacement in electronics, in conjunction with ever-increasing worldwide demand for media. It is furthermore a global (and not a municipal or otherwise local) problem because of the complexity and cost involved with safely disposing the many hazardous materials that make up media. The value of e-waste is partly determined by the fact that many of the parts are still working or can be made to work. Our devices, the ways we use them, and the organization of everyday life such activities engender are, by virtue of the technologies and techniques involved, intrinsically temporary and short-lived. At the same time, our life in media forever summons a past that can never be regained as well as a past that never goes away—our media are always already *zombie media*.

On the level of praxeology—what people *do* when living their lives in media—scholarship tends to separate media and users. A challenge to this paradigm comes from Sonia Livingstone and Leah Lievrouw, who define media as “information and communication technologies and their associated social contexts, incorporating: the artifacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate; the communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices; and the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices” (7). The strength of this definition is that it includes existing approaches that externalize media while recognizing how media have become an integral part of everyday life.

As devices with distinct genealogies, media meet the criteria of evolutionary design—every year there are more, not fewer media at our disposal—and the artifacts of media become increasingly diverse and complex. Media converge and diverge at a rapid pace, not necessarily progressing along neat linear trajectories. As articulated by Derek Powazek in his 2011 network manifesto (2011): “People are messy. The technology we invent is messy, too. Deal with it.” Such an appreciation of the unmoored, messy, complex, fluid, and hybrid nature of tech is vital when thinking through the practical realities of our lives as lived immersed in digital media. Graham Thomas and Sally Wyatt show how the messiness of media developments features prominently in the history of internet, which “is not an instance of historical inevitability...At different moments during the history of the Internet, closure has been variously made and undone, with the involvement of new actors, the connection of networks using different protocols, and the development of new interfaces and applications” (696). If anything, argue Thomas and Wyatt, contestation—uncertainty and messiness about design, development, and use—is built into the evolution of media.

Within the contemporary media-centered household, media can best be considered as comprehensively fused with the domestic ecosystem, both in

terms of their artifactual existence and in the way media get used to construct and maintain relationships among the people involved. In this context Thorsten Quandt and Thilo von Pape take a biophilosophical route through the home, considering this common everyday living arrangement as a *mediatope*: the social, physical and technological living environment of media (332). For more than a year Quandt and Von Pape followed one hundred German households (through interviews, observations, and surveys), showing how media move through the household in flocks, how the identities of various devices change over time, how younger and older media fight for survival in the home environment, and therefore how all have distinct and dynamic life cycles “connected to the life of the users themselves” (339). The intimate interrelationship between the lives of people and their media “paints a picture of an evolving, *living* media world within the domestic environment of the household” (343; italics added). Once seen as inseparable from the domestic sphere, media have clearly become part of the day-to-day coordination of both family and personal life. In research done in the US by UCLA’s Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf), and across Europe by the scholars involved in the European Media and Technology in Everyday Life (EMTEL) and the EU Kids Online networks, media feature prominently as sites of struggle and negotiation of power and authority in the family home. In doing so, media add a certain dynamism and mobility to the daily rhythm of life, while at the same time extending and amplifying existing networks and ways of doing things.

I contend that the evolution of media as artifacts, their everyday uses, and their role in the arrangements of people’s lives (as individuals and as part of extended community, family and peer networks) together suggest an increasingly seamless and altogether ambient lived experience. The inseparability of media and the social world benefits from a zombie perspective that respects the obsolescence of the alive-dead (or man-machine) binary.

### Toward Zombie Sociality

Writing in 2010, *Wired* magazine’s contributing editor Gary Wolf considers what media theorist Marshall McLuhan would have made of our time of living with ubiquitous portable and networked communication technologies, suggesting that “The Medium Is Life”:

Humanism temporarily survived the era of electronic media only through the act of turning on a device...But when a medium is coincident with life, the last refuge for humanism is gone....The long story of humanism—by which I mean the emergence of individual consciousness as a byproduct of our language and literature—comes to an end when we return, futuristically, to doing everything by hand.

In his piece, Wolf indirectly deploys a zombie argument by suggesting that media life outsources our consciousness to computers and computing—while erasing our sense of individuality in favor of “just doing” things. Beyond the feverishness of such predictions, it can safely be said that the omnipresence of media in general and mobile media in particular does produce and reflect new forms of sociability. Across the field, studies support the conclusion that immersive mediated connections produce cultural diversity and particularity as much as they foster allegiance and traditionalism. Likewise, the evidence suggests that living in a comprehensively mediated social environment can produce both states of social isolation and increased connectivity. In the 2010 overview of the World Internet Project (documenting computer and internet use in close to twenty countries), researchers come to the conclusion that in what they label “a new digital media ecology” people do not just spend much more time communicating than consuming, but that their communicative behavior takes place primarily within the context of “peer-to-peer sociality” (Cardoso, Cheong, and Cole 7-8). Andreas Wittel theorizes this as a “network sociality” (51) that is, in contrast with perhaps a more stable and coherent notion like community, a force of more or less immediate social integration because it is inherently ephemeral. Claims about a wholesale reordering of society and the social through people’s immersion in media run throughout the literature. Generally speaking, our mediated lives undermine institutional hierarchies and introduce a pervasive mobility in social relationships, orienting us toward ourselves and our peers rather than institutions or traditional hierarchies.

At the same time, one could question whether our global connectivity and increased orientation toward each other indeed leads to more engaged or empathic forms of sociality. In this context Shaka Paul McGlotten invokes zombies to articulate a concept of ‘impersonal sociality’: “That is, [zombies] are frequently imagined together as a mass, a crowd, or a swarm, yet they remain alone even among others” (187). It is this challenge to the false dichotomy of being either together or alone in media that is both useful and significant, as such either/or debates run amok across the literature on media and society. The supposedly anti-social outcome of the lonely togetherness of mediated interpersonal relationships is expressed quite forcefully by Sherry Turkle, who in her aptly titled book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* introduces what she considers the less-than-ideal consequences of a life completely immersed in media:

Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion



of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. (1)

In this ever-increasing intimacy between people and machines, Turkle argues, we use media to defend against (13) or even defeat (3) loneliness—which she considers “failed solitude” (288) if it means that without constant connectivity people cannot be meaningfully alone with themselves any more. The point, however, is not so much that our lives in media make us either more alone or together, but to find ways to effectively theorize the various ways in which we are “together alone” simultaneously. It has become impossible not to witness the lives and worlds of others (in media), while at the same time it has become easier to withdraw within one’s own personal information space. This reinforces what McGlotten sees as the distinctly inhuman features of the zombie: a lack or impossibility of empathetic identification with everything we witness and experience in media, and a boundary-crossing re-animatedness as exemplified in our media (as outlined in the previous sections). Wittels’s network sociality and McGlotten’s impersonal sociality inspire a thinking through of ways to be together alone that are more forgiving than normative and are distinctly zombie.

### Zombie Society

At the heart of understanding people’s immersive engagement in media is the reconstruction of the “self as source,” as Shyam Sundar codifies the mediation between technology and psychology at work in media life (2008; 58). Based on his experimental work on people’s media use, Sundar highlights the importance of our own selves in the co-evolution of technology and psychology. This trend prompted *Time* magazine to make all of us—“YOU”—its “Person of the Year” in 2006, featuring a front cover with a YouTube screen functioning as a mirror. As numerous observers note, while people using media are at once and instantaneously connected with large and multiple dynamic groups and networks, they are also increasingly ascribed with a deeply individualized and seemingly self-centered value system. Thomas de Zengotita offers the model of a universal “mediated self” (7) that lives in a “little MeWorld” (75), automatically attuned to the solipsistic idea that everyone has her/his own reality. Australian media researchers Yangzi Sima and Peter Pugsley signal in this context the rise of a distinct *Me Culture* in China, engendered by an increased emphasis on self-expression and identity exhibition in media. According to De Zengotita, this mediated self is a flattered self (7), endlessly stimulated by at least the possibility of being incessantly addressed in media. Interpellation in media, for example, happens by being liked, poked, and tagged on Facebook, or by being singled out in advertisements geared towards you. Manuel Castells terms our behavior in media an emerging form of “mass self-communication,”

which he conceptualizes thus:

It is mass communication because it reaches potentially a global audience through the p2p networks and Internet connection. It is multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source that can be downloaded free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. *And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many.* (Castells 248; emphasis in original)

It certainly seems that the media that connect people also stimulate us to look more or less exclusively at ourselves. David Downing argues how “such ostensible connectedness is, in actuality, with a machine that is, in circular fashion, a projected externalization of our own desires and phantasies with which we are in narcissistic relation” (991-992). In a series of studies on the various combinations of self-focus and other-focus in everyday media life, Sarah Konrath shows how people who feel their online identities—as, for example, expressed in a game avatar or a social network profile—are central to their sense of self are indeed chronically influenced by these mediated versions of themselves. Konrath documents rising levels of self-centeredness, assertiveness, agency, self-esteem, and extraversion among young people in particular, suggesting that “media activities may have promoted an increase in narcissism” (892).

Coupling mass self-communication with the impersonal sociality as explicated earlier, it could be argued that people’s over-investment in an idealized, objectified version (or versions) of themselves in media is indeed a form of digital narcissism. If so, such narcissism is not self-love but a form of maintenance of an idealized self in order to mask, hide, or repress a true self that is an object of shame or pain. Instead of an act of individuation, mass self-communication thus becomes a performance of self-erasure in order to be seen as everyone else.

Comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert—host of the popular TV show *The Colbert Report* on the Comedy Central cable television channel—uses the examples of Bliippy.com (where people list all their credit card purchases) and IJustMadeLove.com (where people can publicly register every time they have sex) to propose a new service integrating all the online places where “ordinary people...publicize their lives in minute detail” (Colbert). In a segment aired on February 2, 2010, Colbert christens such a site as Knowny: “which records every interaction, every movement of every person on earth and posts them online like a storm of random data points that shouts out to the blind, indifferently universe: ‘we exist! we exist! please, please, let this mean something!’” His explanation for our seemingly insatiable appetite to mediate almost every-

thing about our lives is the human desire to be known: “cognoscor ergo sum” (translation: I am known, therefore I am). Albeit indirectly, Colbert seems to refer to the Platonic assumption that at the heart of human being lies the desire to be recognized (in Greek: *thumos* or *thymos*). Francis Fukuyama uses this concept of “thymotic self-assertion” (173) to articulate how, historically, increasing freedom of expression can be coupled with people’s rising expectations regarding their sense of identity and self. Zygmunt Bauman adds that a media life is not just about being known but perhaps more importantly about being seen—suggesting that René Descartes’ famous proof of existence, “I think therefore I am,” in a fully mediated mode of being has been elbowed out by “I am seen, therefore I am” (20).

I would therefore hesitate to label digital culture as (predominantly) narcissistic, because the fundamental anxiety or uncertainty driving mass self-communication is not an absence of self-love, but rather a need to be seen and to fit in. It can be compared with the popularity of the fake reality of reality television and the way people get mainstreamed in makeover shows. People’s attempts to perform and promote themselves online (and particularly in social media) are much less about a celebration of self than about a form of collective and collaborative self-censorship, a mass self-disciplining effort similar to the one predicted by Gilles Deleuze in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control”: “We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become ‘dividuals,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’...The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network” (6). When the self becomes source it does not necessarily reduce the world to a solipsistic experience—it in fact stretches the self across multiple media beyond the control of anyone as individual. In other words: it could be argued that through our mass self-communication in media a meaningful distinction between self and society—between the individual and the mass—has become pervasively problematic. Thus the collapse of boundaries between self and other is a particular feature of a zombie society. From this point of departure, life lived as a zombie among zombies, we can look at contemporary developments of social change and transformation of public life differently.

Zygmunt Bauman notes in the context of mediated witnessing of self and others that “we are presently moving from the era of pre-allocated ‘reference groups’ into the epoch of ‘universal comparison,’ in which the destination of individual self-constructing labours is endemically and incurably underdetermined” (7). Mark Poster suggests that it is exactly such “underdetermination” that is a typical feature of today’s media (1999; 12). Our identities and experiences in an increasingly interconnected and networked media space are always open to intervention, to redaction, to all kinds of alteration.

Life after the zombie apocalypse can further be wielded as an explanatory

tool when we relate zombies to new social movements such as the Occupy Together protests across the United States (and elsewhere) of 2011, the riots in the UK earlier that year, and ongoing protests in Arab countries. News reporters and technology pundits have baptized such major upheavals at the start of the 21st century as the “Twitter Revolution” (referring to Iran in *The Atlantic* on June 18, 2010), “Facebook Revolution” (referring to Egypt in *Time* magazine on January 24, 2011), “YouTube Revolutions” (in a headline about the entire Arab world in *Foreign Policy* magazine on March 30, 2011), or most comprehensively yet: “Facebook-Twitter-YouTube Revolution” (referring to the entire region in the *Huffington Post* on February 1, 2011). This in turn prompted numerous commentators to dispute social media’s role in causing the widespread protests in the Arab world. Yet the protests and riots around the world do have certain features that remind one of zombies:

First, they tend to be based on social movements without leaders, lacking clear hierarchical structures, and generally communicating no clear goals. If anything, the sheer diversity of goals seem to cancel each other out.

Second, they involve people from all walks of life: East and West, North and South, black and white, men and women, old and young—again negating distinct classifications.

Finally, not only do these protests rely heavily on the use of media (which in turn enables the active involvement of people not physically present), but they also seem as viral as media can be. As Steve Anderson, director of non-profit organization OpenMedia, writes in a column for the Canadian weblog *Rabble*: “[the Occupy movement] feels like an ongoing space infused with web values and practices. Their structure of participation mirrors that of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia...Will it last? I have no idea, but I think these social practices are addictive and contagious.”

Combining observations about a zombification of society with the way people around the world not only live their lives *in* media, but behave *as* media in public (which, given media life, also means: in private), the zombie metaphor edges toward the literal. Theoretically, the possibility of a zombie society in media forces us to rethink the kind of traditional categorizations in media studies as well as in popular discourse about media. What if we can, through the idea of (media) zombies, move beyond physicalist readings of (media) life that emphasize an immutable thingness of media and disempower us to do anything about our lives and the world we live in and instead deliberately opt for a vitalist position? This would bring media to life, and make the boundaries between media and life permanently porous.

## Everything (And Everyone) Zombie

The possibility of zombies makes for endless debates among philosophers, who find in what American philosopher Daniel Dennett (36) calls “the *Zombic Hunch*” fertile ground to question whether there is more to mankind than the sum of its parts. Dennett in particular regularly revisits this debate in an attempt to show that his competitor-colleagues, who hold to some kind of distinction between mind and matter, have no empirical evidence for their claims. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, the key to the ongoing *zombic* debate is our investment in separating the phenomenal and the physical.

The centrality of consciousness as a feature of humanity implicated in media use is delicately noted by David Buckingham in his assessment of the vast literature on media and society: “[i]f these writers do not see all *technologies* as determining consciousness, they nevertheless seem to believe that *media* do” (42; italics in original). Michael Newman similarly outlines a long history of scholarship and lay theorizing on the perceived dangers of television, internet, and mobile telephony—all media that were and still are seen as suppressing active attention and turning media users into zombies (589). Such equating of media with moral and intellectual decline serves to maintain the social order, especially when it comes to the expert elite and anyone who may come to challenge their position in society. As Newman points out, there is little evidence to suggest a causal connection between a culture’s media and social devolution. Similarly, Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh argue in a review of the implications of the internet for social psychology that “the internet does not, contrary to current popular opinion, have by itself the power or ability to control people, to turn them into addicted zombies, or make them dispositionally sad or lonely (or, for that matter, happy or popular), and neither does the telephone, or television, or movies” (72).

One generally assumes that the human part determining consciousness is the brain. It is perhaps no surprise that Max Brooks’s *The Zombie Survival Guide* promises that, in order to commit suicide as a zombie or to efficiently remove a zombie threat, all one has to do is eliminate the brain. As Seth Grahame-Smith states in the opening of his remix of Jane Austen and zombies (titled *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*): “[i]t is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains” (7). Decapitation seems the preferred method for zombie disposal if one follows the films by specialist George A. Romero (creator of a series of instructional fare starting with *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 and leading via his most successful *Dawn of the Dead* in 1978 to *Survival of the Dead* in 2009). Yet, as many would argue, there is more to the living brain than information processing. And if that is true, whatever extra piece of the puzzle is provided by life, it apparently makes the difference between being a zombie and not being a zombie. More to the

point: you are a zombie when no one is home inside your head. This distinction puts a premium on individual experience and ability to make sense of the world as the determining quality of existence.

If our entire understanding of the world is unique to our own experience, we can never know whether we are the only real human being on a planet otherwise populated by zombies. On the other hand, such a philosophical stance makes each and every one of us special. As Dennett writes about his fellow philosophers’ often-stated reverence for the mysterious pathways and processes in the individual brain as the ultimate “Medium” producing consciousness: “the message is: there is no medium.” Here, Dennett invokes Marshall McLuhan’s 1964 expression “the medium is the message” to question whether the brain is extraordinary and, more ominously, to challenge whether each of us is indeed really so special.

## You Are Not Special

Pertinent to my concerns about zombification and media life is the paradigmatic potential of the zombie to provide a point of view that moves beyond all-too-easy categorizations (such as that between media and life). Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry explore a theory of zombies as the harbingers of a truly posthuman condition in their *Zombie Manifesto*. The zombie embodies an immanent state not governed by traditional dichotomies of subject and object generally, or media and life more particularly, because the zombie’s “irreconcilable body” (87) is neither living nor dead but can only be understood as inseparable into distinct terms (95). In this respect, their embrace of the zombie to break through widespread ways of classifying social reality is reminiscent of Ulrich Beck’s challenge to “zombie sociology” (originally voiced in the early 1990s), using as examples the categories of the nation and the local:

If it is true that the meaning of the national and the local is changing through internalized globalization, then the most important methodological implication for all social sciences is that normal social sciences categories are becoming zombie categories...Zombie categories are living dead categories, which blind the social sciences to the rapidly changing realities inside the nation-state containers, and outside as well (24).

It is in this spirit that Lauro and Embry zombify categories such as mind and matter, reducing them to zombie concepts that live on in name but have died in terms of their usefulness. As a life form the zombie is not some kind of remix between the empty containers of dead and (a)live life: as it is both, it is neither. For Lauro and Embry, thinking through the zombie idea reveals how it disrupts, unsettles, and ultimately destroys the models people have carefully built to maintain the status quo.



The *Zombie Manifesto* highlights global capitalism's reliance on people seeing themselves as unique individuals who, through conspicuous consumption, need to express that individuality in perpetuity. The zombie erases such a sense of personality and thus calls into question "which is more terrifying: our ultimate separation from our fellow humans, or the dystopic fantasy of a swarm organism" (Lauro and Embry 101). This provocation is picked up in Jussi Parikka's *Insect Media*, in which he discusses the widespread use of entomological concepts to describe and analyze people's behaviors in media life. Parikka invokes zombies to propose a more inclusive way to understand forms of life:

the biophilosophy of the twenty-first century should contextualize itself on such forms of the headless animality of insect societies or the new intensive meaning in states bordering life—the lifelike death of zombies. This biophilosophical moment...is characterized by a logic alternative to that of the prior approaches to thinking of life, namely the three modes of soul, meat, and pattern. Hence, such a biophilosophy also suggests a new way of understanding materiality not based on a substance or a form but as a temporal variation of affective assemblages. (47)

From a relatively benign and sometimes ironic use of zombies, one can move to an emerging field of zombie studies attempting to go beyond previously partitioned paradigms: dividing the world into nature, humanity, and technology; parsing people into body and soul; and dichotomizing development into nature and nurture, structure and agency, product and process. It is safe (and uncannily inspiring) to say that the social order of our lives lived in media has all the hallmarks of a zombie society. The emerging human condition is fused with the material conditions of its immediate environment, both biological and technological. The question is what this altogether human yet zombified society in media life would look like, and how it would feel.

I cannot help but question what kind of society is produced by the ability of everyone to know each other primarily through mediated connections, data storage and transfer, and the sharing of private lives in public archives. This is not necessarily another way of restating the famous 1993 cartoon by Peter Steiner in *The New Yorker*, captioned "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." It is also the exact opposite: the lack of anonymity means that we are continuously captured by our digital shadows: everyone can know you're a dog. In people's endeavors to position themselves uniquely online—most visibly via social media like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter—the zombie society in media seems one where lives are lived in public, where everything and everyone can be (and often is) monitored, where we are all alone yet intricately connected. Such a networked and peer-based sociality in media

produces a society that needs to find out about itself on an ongoing basis in order to function. Our tendency to overshare is perhaps best understood as a vital adaptation to a rapidly evolving social mediaspace, rather than as a regrettable or generation-specific social problem or a symptom of digital narcissism. In the process of adapting to our co-creative mediated social reality, it becomes crucial to identify and develop skills needed to survive and thrive in a world society benchmarked by permanently recorded, overshared, instantly archived, publicly accessible and redactable computer-mediated communicational bonds.

## Discussion

Earlier celebration of or apprehension about increasingly intimate human-machine relationships perhaps should give way to a more subtle appreciation of inseparable media. In this perspective, media (have) become us in that we overwhelmingly ignore them, take them for granted, and that their design—personal, networked, mobile—makes them an increasingly intimate and inseparable part of our lives. In other words: media are essential to the survival of human societies and do not necessarily reduce the social to the technological but rather blend such categories to a zombified state. Hacking seems to be the ultimate survival skill, albeit not the sort of hacking premised on mastering computer code. Programming and hacking can also be seen as discursive devices: ways of making sense differently from what is expected or predicted. Similar survival tactics would include, as Mimi Ito notes (31), the practice of media mixing as a technical form of hypersociality and what Lev Manovich advocates as "people's tactics of bricolage, reassembly, and remix" (324) in media life.

Although people may not realize it, many of their activities in media have a similar creative quality, from the cutting and pasting of texts, customization of wallpapers and ringtones, cropping and editing of images, and building of music playlists, to more advanced forms of mixing, editing, and otherwise repurposing media. Advocating a mindful approach to such often-mundane practices, numerous authors and educators enthusiastically embrace a convergence culture as the appropriate ethos of a society in media. Henry Jenkins advocates for people's right to freely sample and remix media. British media sociologist David Gauntlett takes an additional step by arguing that with open access to tools and platforms, "people are happier, more engaged with the world, and more likely to develop and learn" (226). Basing his argument on the works of Austrian philosopher-priest Ivan Illich, Gauntlett passionately advocates a convivial engagement with society in media—not exclusively through the planned process of multimedia conglomerates and commercial software, but through the making, appropriating and, in effect, hacking of tools in order to care for and about others. It seems Gauntlett and Jenkins



have already become key intellectuals of our zombie existence.

People's timeless tendency to make the environment their own by tweaking and adapting it blends with contemporary media's qualities of opening up their own infrastructures, contents, and services to intra-action. In this context people's programming, hacking, remixing, and other essential media practices can be considered to be media life manifestations of Jean Baudrillard's prescient call to action in a media-saturated world: "The more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals. The challenge, even infinitesimal, is the image of a chain failure.... Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us" (177). Co-creating and remixing are not just ontological moves, as in making the world your own. These are also epistemological acts, in that they necessarily involve the anti-catharsis of zombie ways of knowing and doing things: our media mixing potentially destroys the reigning model without offering a replacement (Lauro and Embry 91 and 96). Society in media life is grounded in a post-media condition: there is no outside to media. Perhaps in the movies there is; in Romero's films all we need to do is barricade ourselves in shopping malls (or on islands) and fight off the zombie hordes by shooting them or chopping their heads off. This escape is, however, an illusion, just as the Delete key on a computer offers only an illusion of impermanence. We live in media forever—and in that eternity, it is up to us to find a way to hack the system by committing theoretical violence upon contemporary interpretations of capitalism, on the corporate takeover of the internet, and on interfaces that make us censor and delete parts of ourselves. In other words: we need to become zombies.

### Note

1. Some book selections were reprinted as a Portuguese translation in the article, "Vida Midiática," by Mark Deuze, Laura Speers, and Peter Blank, *Revista USP* 86 (2010): 139-45.

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### Abstract

Writing about yet another among countless polls, surveys, and reviews of people's media use, Hamilton Nolan of the US-based Gawker blog expresses exasperation that all the breathless rhetoric in such reports boils down to one conclusion: "we're all fucking zombies" (posted on March 27, 2009). References to people turning into zombies because of excessive media use tend to have negative normative connotations. I argue that living *in*, rather than *with*, media not only turns us into zombies, but that such zombification provides us with adaptive advantages for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As (media) zombies, we are better equipped to embrace collectivism over individualism; to be anti-hierarchical rather than organized top-down; and to engage our mutual (media) worlds with passion and fervor without necessarily having a specific plan or goal in mind. In the end, the future of humanity as media zombies comes down to the question: if this indeed is a zombie society, what would be the mediated equivalent be of chopping people's heads off? The answer can be found in practices such as hacking (the skillset of fandom) and in the morality of the collective.

## Zombie Republic: Property and the Propertyless Multitude in Romero's Dead Films and Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*

Dawn Keetley

POSTHUMANISM TAKES MANY FORMS. ONE IS ORIENTED PRIMARILY TO THE future, imagining a hybrid cyborg body—a human augmented by technology, transcending the limitations of the organic human. "Human enhancement," as Rosi Braidotti puts it, is at its "core" (2). Another form looks to the past as well as the future, interrogating a history of exclusions constitutive of the "human," suggesting that we have always been posthuman. The impetus of this strand of posthumanism is to uncover that which has always persisted in (as well as beyond) the human—or, as Cary Wolfe puts it, to explore how "the human" is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (xv).<sup>1</sup> Pramod K. Nayar neatly articulates the double movement of posthumanism both backwards and forwards, claiming that it demonstrates "how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (2). While the biological, animal, and even vegetative have, then, as numerous theorists have noted, been barred from dominant conceptions of the "human," certain attributes have also been added. Property, in particular, has long been bound with the organic human to make that particular form of the "human" to which rights accrue.

Several theorists engaged in re-thinking and decentering the "human" have described the imbrication of human and property. In their 2009 book *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that while property indubitably undergirds modern states, which together compose a vast "republic of property," it also more profoundly constitutes the modern individual: "the absolute rights of people to appropriate things becomes the basis and substantive end of the legally defined free individual" (39, 15, and 13). As Judith Butler puts it, in *Dispossession*, the desire to possess property on an individual basis "was produced over time as a natural, if not essential, characteristic of