

# To Dumbfound<sup>1</sup>

## *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*

If we merely consider the action of dumbfounding (“to stun in the extreme through a great noise”), we are vaguely staggered by the large numbers of broadcasters who contribute to the current dizziness,<sup>2</sup> to this epoch’s *loss of consciousness*, through “news”<sup>3</sup> of all types. Thus we choose to use a single term to categorize a large number of them, tranquilly affirming that the entirety of existing information must be considered, in its most general function, as a socially harmful din.

Though the usage of language itself is being lost, people have never spoken so much of “communication.” Of course, it is always a question of unilateral communication, of *information* – for example, when a specialist in authoritarian monologue proudly defines himself as an “enthusiast of communication.” But the corresponding reality is so rarified at this point that the meeting of the words “passion” and “communication” in the mouth of a publicist appears rather banal, while it has become virtually impossible [*fantastique*] to recall the antagonism that exists between information and communication, or that the former develops to the detriment of the latter, to the point of being able to dress itself up in its name with impunity, which is the last tribute that the lie renders to the truth. This is incongruent in any case – as if the idea of “communication” that isn’t perfectly satisfied with the accelerated circulation of news can only evoke some kind of bestial need; as if it’s appropriate to keep quiet when in good company. Nevertheless, no thesis of modern revolutionary critique can be verified with such awkwardness.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, this is why this critique’s truth is, today, almost impossible to communicate: what confirms it is, at the same time, what renders it literally *unheard of* in the mediatic<sup>5</sup> din that daily dumbfounds our contemporaries. Like other elementary truths, it seems – amidst the general resignation – to only serve some people, to only be a particular fantasy, because it could serve everyone all too well and because no one wants to serve it. There are epochs in which lying

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous [Jaime Semprun in collaboration with Guy Debord], “Abasourdir,” *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* #5 (November 1985). Translated by NOT BORED! 26 September 2015. All footnotes by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> The word used here, *étourdissement*, can also mean intoxication or euphoria.

<sup>3</sup> The word used here, *bruits*, can also mean noise or rumors.

<sup>4</sup> The word used here, *lourdeur*, can also mean heaviness or dullness.

<sup>5</sup> Not just media-related, but spectacular, as well.

runs almost no risks because the truth no longer has friends: it remains a simple hypothesis, one that can't be too serious because people neither want nor are able to verify it. Almost no one lives with the truth. As if, in this world in which so many easy pleasures are offered to us, there is only useless fatigue. But these pleasures, which aren't easy, are no longer pleasures. And so, in a vicious circle from which few manage to escape, the reality of unhappiness sends us back to the necessity of faking it.

When you don't want to communicate anything truthful, you need to be regularly supplied with lies and nonsense. And when you've also been informed that modern citizens have the opportunity to be informed, you assuredly have no need to communicate anything: you own plenty of means by which you can speak about all the things with which you have no experience, so as to never speak of the thing with which you have had disastrous experience – your own life. Intellectual blundering in the manner of Bouvard and Pécuchet<sup>6</sup> are the two breasts of informed ignorance from whence flows in plentiful waves the polluted milk of modern stupidity (see the article titled *Abêtissement*).<sup>7</sup> To be able to speak about real life, we must begin – a bit of good hygiene – by *not* being informed citizens, by cleansing our minds of what these authorized sources (mediatic sewers) discharge into it. Failing that, the simplest thing becomes the most difficult to say, because there hardly exists any agreement on the language that could name it. The reason that information can renew itself every day and can transmit an infinite variety of garbage is itself very simple: there's an infinity of ways of *not* calling these things by their [proper] names. Many more ways than those that apply the exact term. But once the exact term is found, it is useless to repeat it every day, and this is why those whose recognized – that is to say, paid – social utility is to speak every day must never use the exact term. When people are in agreement on a precise definition of something, they have no need of being informed of it every single day. When people know what a State is, for example, there's nothing to reveal to them about its secret services. Do they repeat to us every moment that the earth is round? On the contrary, it is urgent to pummel us as often as possible with the idea that the commodity is fundamentally honest, that our leaders are competent and that, if you know how to do it, you can “indulge yourself” and even “have fun” at work. If there was the least competition, news of this quality wouldn't be able to sustain itself for a day, not even an hour. We can thus understand that the only strength of information's lies and intentional confusions [*confusionnisme*] is that they are present every day and all by themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> The French here is “*Bouvardage et pécuchétisation*,” an allusion to the two main characters in Flaubert's novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1880).

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* #7 (May 1986).

If you are concerned with exactitude, you can, for example, discuss the respective advantages of the words “scoundrel” and “crook” when it comes to a French Socialist. “Criminal” is sometimes too strong; “boor” is often too weak. But, finally, when you stick to the will to describe such a person accurately, all this remains very limited with respect to the innumerable descriptions that can be applied to him when you distance yourself from his reality. All kinds of relations can then be established between the most disparate realities, while the violently necessary connection between Findus’ food and Fabius’ thinking<sup>8</sup> doesn’t appear, and no one will say how incongruous, illogical and intellectually odious it is to endure two things that are so close to each other and yet not unit them in a harmonious whole by rejecting them together.

In information as elsewhere, quantity claims to compensate for quality, with the inevitable results that arbitrariness and ineptitude proliferate and necessity and usefulness become ghostly and ungraspable. It is true that, in a system that tends, strictly speaking, to no longer be *anyone’s* (although some people, of course, have an interest in fomenting this loss of control), each person still has many things to learn – for example, about the composition of a synthetic foodstuff or the P2 Lodge,<sup>9</sup> or about the public actions of hidden powers and the hidden actions of public powers. When lived realities and problems aren’t managed by the individuals concerned but by others over whom those individuals have no control, we must ceaselessly inform ourselves in order to know what the world is becoming in its autonomous course towards its downfall. Since such a task is immediately exhausting, enthusiastic computer specialists propose to give us their consoles in the guise of consolation.

“It’s been calculated that on average, during his lifespan, a human being will process a billion useful bits of information. Eighty billion people have come before us. Thus 80 billion billion bits of information have been processed over the course of human history. And yet, thanks to computers, 30 billion bits of information will be processed in 1985 and twice that number in 1986. More information will be processed in those two years than has been processed since the beginnings of mankind. Today, a single person’s life, as a capacity to process information, corresponds to 100,000 lives in the past.” (Thierry Breton, *les Echos*, supplement of 28 June 1985).

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<sup>8</sup> Laurent Fabius was a French Socialist; Findus a manufacturer of food products that contain genetically modified organisms. Cf. Anonymous [Guy Debord], “Abat-Faim,” *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* #5 (November 1985): <http://www.notbored.org/abat-faim.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Propaganda Due” was a secret Masonic lodge that had been used as deep cover for a NATO-sponsored “stay-behind” network in Italy. It was exposed in March 1981.

This vaguely anthropoid terminal seems to entangle microprocessors in its calculations, but this hardly matters because it has no need to process billions of bits of information, not even a single one, to feel what it's like to live a "human life" dedicated to the processing of information, a life that is so "connected," "hard-wired," and "fiber-optic" that it can, in two years, take in a richer history than the entirety of past history. In that past, the people who lived 100,000 times less than what is allowed us thanks to computers – such people would have easily found a word to describe such a life. "Ignominy [*abjection*]," for example. But today the act of formulating such a judgment can only appear to informed people as an indication of the formulator's desperate sourness, worthy of the most deafening failures of the past. The epoch that produces an abundance of intellectual triumphs of the caliber of those of Thierry Breton will discover, quite logically or through its software [*logiciellement*], that Machiavelli was in fact a mediocre talent, a wretch and a failure.

The publication in which this non-thinking multiplied by 100,000 expresses itself bears a delicately polysemous title, *les Dynasteurs*.<sup>10</sup> An editorial statement informs us that it is "the product of a construction elaborated on the basis of several words that evoke dynamism, creativity, the faith that life gives, consecrating the reality and utility of the entrepreneur at the center of our modern industrial society." Without further considering all the qualities that this highly elaborated neologism claims to evoke, we must note that the one that it evokes irresistibly is the only one about which they haven't thought it necessary to inform us. If this repugnant term has a meaning, it is indeed the one that expresses the ambitions of these dynastic entrepreneurs and their new feudalism. These are ambitions that appear most clearly – that is to say, with a perfect buffoonery – when these dynamic creators speak to us of the symbols through which they hope to spread their faith in the utility of the entrepreneur and to evangelize the masses of consumer-nonbelievers.

"We have entered the information society. Companies, both the biggest and the smallest, know the role and importance of their logos in their communication with their various publics (...) The blazons of the knights in the Middle Ages were and remain synonymous with moral values and physical attributes. There's much more than analogies between the blazon and the logo. They share the same will for overtaking<sup>11</sup>." (*Ibid.*)

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<sup>10</sup> Not a proper word in French, *dynasteurs* refers to those who create or are part of a dynasty.

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, perhaps, the word used here, *dépassement*, can also mean "overcharging."

No less than that. In fact, we can dream about a new heraldry that seeks to faithfully transcribe the “moral values” and the “physical attributes” of the entrepreneurs and their commodities. And in the Kingdom of Frozen Foods we will see the clash of barons carrying escutcheons on which *croquettes have been woven into a field of vomit*. . . .

And yet sometimes we must confess that words fail us, not because the realities to be named are too varied, but because, in the redundant crudity of a world that has no other project than the consecration of everything that exists, they are too similar. With respect to the blazon and the blazer, to the creation of words and pertinent descriptions, perhaps we must speak of argot, of which one can say that, born out of hatred, it no longer exists.<sup>12</sup> Since detestable realities have, meanwhile, not ceased to exist, it must be the capacity for hate that has disappeared. Impassioned people, capable of loving enough to feel hatred, are like dinosaurs in an epoch of amorphous indifference in which cowardice and a lack of heart present themselves as cynicism and disillusionment. Like all the passions, hatred demands an energy that cannot mobilize those who process billions of bits of information and that no machine can furnish them. But even simple, insulting language seems to be beyond the strength of the slave who is chained to his or her informatic ball. A man from yesterday, truthful and poorly informed, Chesterton had already drawn attention “to the words that are like weapons rusting on a wall, to the most choice terms of abuse becoming obsolete in the face of rich and even bewildering opportunities in the way of public persons to apply them” (*William Cobbett*).<sup>13</sup> His remarks merit being quoted at length, because, unfortunately, they are more relevant than ever.

“It is indeed strange that when public life presents so wide and promising a field for the use of these terms, they should be suffered to drop into desuetude. It seems singular that when the careers of our public men, the character of our commercial triumphs, and the general

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Alice Becker-Ho, *The Princes of Jargon* (1990): “It is with the disappearance of argot as a secret language that Gypsy words get through as is, without transformation, into the speech that today takes the place of argot and that one calls ‘plugged in’: the same with imitation-English and the other sub-languages that have currency and are widely diffused by the media and as quickly become antiquated. The very words ‘plugged-in’ proves the degree to which one is far from argot, which was precisely the opposite, that is to say, an elitist language. By the usage of argot, one used to get one’s belonging to a certain milieu recognized. Today, one gives oneself the illusion of calling upon different milieus – publicity, spectacle, audio-visual, psy[chological], sport, drug, political, intellectual, gangster, carceral, etc.”

<sup>13</sup> C.K. Chesterton, *William Cobbett* (1925), quoted from the original English.

culture and ethic of the modern world seem so specially to invite and, as it were, to cry aloud for the use of such language, the secret of such language should be in danger of being lost.” (*Ibid.*)

*There's* a simple and concrete truth that, in just a few words, judges those who are supposed to be the attentive custodians of the secrets of language: the intellectuals, those ancient specialists in public expression whose handicraft only survives in symbiosis with the great industry of mediatic dumbfounding. The attendants of vague lies and arbitrary discoveries, without scruples, awareness or honor, disgusting, inevitably disgusting, they are so corrupted by the habits of the spectacular monologue that they can't even perpetuate the appearance of what one previously used to call the “debate of ideas.” As a result, everything fails them: ideas as well as the ability to discuss them. Satisfied that people still want to allow them a little prestige and the salaries that usually go to the interchangeable puppets of massified stupidity, their positive adhesion to what exists distances them even more from what had been the methods and atmosphere of an intellectual activity worthy of the name. It will be understood that we aren't concerned with details when we speak about the cultural conformism in which the most audacious people respect way too many [contemptible] things for them to not to be thought of as contemptible in their turn. When such people express themselves about the general conditions of non-communication, within which they have the power to speak (a power that has won them a proven powerlessness to make the least critical usage of it), they do so in order to show that they are grateful for the good information that sometimes and very briefly raises the veil that protects several State secrets and to congratulate themselves on the fact that their capacity for indignation has been furnished with nourishment precisely calibrated for its weak development. For someone who hasn't renounced all ambitions to communicate authentically, for someone who isn't a powerless intellectual, the real scandal isn't the fact that the technicians of information lie to us more or less frequently, but that *our separation from the practical means of the truth* – a separation that, more than the hazards of the media's politics and their [economic] interests, is obviously at the basis of their impostures and all of their particular lies – is thereby reinforced by both their falsifications and their revelations.

And no one can speak to us of extremism when the lived realities at issue are massive enough to be evoked, ever since the beginnings of modern dumbfounding, by all kinds of people who aren't preoccupied by social critique, not in the sense of revolutionary activity, in any case. As Charles Nodier wrote in *Le Pays des Rêves*,<sup>14</sup> “the peasants of our villages who, a hundred years ago, read legends and

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Nodier (1780-1844) was a French Romantic author.

fairytale and believed in them, today read the gossip sheets and the announcements and believe in them. They were foolish; they've become stupid – that's progress." And in the aforementioned little book, Chesterton wrote, "the chief mark of the modern man has been that he has gone through a landscape with his eyes glued to a guidebook, and could actually deny in the one anything that he could not find in the other."<sup>15</sup> This ability obviously must show itself to be more and more useful and, as a result, develop as soon as the landscape deteriorates with the progress of civilization. In the same sense, 50 years ago, Musil also noted that in this society "we have many more opportunities to learn about an extraordinary event in the newspapers than to experience it; in other words, it is in the abstract that the essential aspects of our lives take place, and reality is merely an accessory."

Abundant information is precisely the invasion of abstraction that confines the part of concrete reality that each person could experience to the [sphere of the] accessory. For isolated individuals, that part of reality must still subjectively perish due to the absence of the communication that could verify it. Thus we've become ignoramuses who are taught by other ignoramuses; our mediatic educators have themselves been educated in accordance with the needs of the dominant non-communication, in which every problem must be posed in the terms such that its solution belongs exclusively to those who possess the means of *not* solving it. The over-development of information, it quasi-total hold upon [all] social expression, has demonstrated dialectically that, in order to obliterate what's possible, it must falsify the real.

We have seen since the days of Musil how the very reality of this "accessory," of which each person could have direct experience and knowledge of his or her own life, has evaporated. The most banal foodstuffs have become extremely mysterious, and it is almost impossible to have the least certainty about them. There's no doubt that we *qua* consumers are still officially *informed* of certain monstrous distortions inflicted upon things that, previously (when we didn't have to process so much information), quite precisely didn't require the acquisition of anything on their account and quite honestly responded to their apparent function. For example, we can consult the *Dictionnaire des polluants alimentaires*<sup>16</sup> in order to try to decipher the hieroglyphs that are displayed on the commodities that are disguised as foodstuffs like stigmata of the extinction of their use-value. In the same way, no one is supposed to be ignorant of the law; each

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<sup>15</sup> Once again quoted from the original English.

<sup>16</sup> A. Roig and J. Keilling, *Dictionnaire des polluants alimentaires avec références des textes réglementaires autorisant leur emploi* (Périgny-sur-Yerres, Mandres-les Roses, Ed. CEVIC, 1973).

person must know chemistry; and the one who is poisoned objects to his [own] ignorance – he wasn't informed, he was a man of the past.

We certainly don't have the naïveté to believe that someone could generally give us an exact description of the many incongruities that make up our environment. We will only say that this episodic “honesty,” which is so noisy when it wants to show itself, always postulates the same resignation to the *fait accompli*, an acceptance that it has in fact already obtained through its manner of appearing without responses and disappearing without consequences. The bombardment of information to which the vast majority of artificial unintelligence – synthetic stupidity – is devoted doesn't want to end in anything other than itself, that is to say, in the [continuous] barrage against the formation of critical judgment that is capable of reaching conclusions based on the facts. “It isn't so simple!” Such must always be the final words of wisdom for and from the informed spectator. And when the facts too obviously point towards a few conclusions, to a simple truth, they are processed so well by the vegetable mill of confusionism that the least hint of proof is immediately contradicted, watered-down, completed and deformed by 10, 100 or 1,000 other bits of information – with the sum of all this never managing to form something like a coherent explanation, even when one still has the courage to give one, but instead crudely establishing the impossibility of ever reaching the truth when one must rely on facts and deeds whose memory tends to dissolve in the ambient cacophony.

We have seen this way of clouding the issue<sup>17</sup> utilized perfectly in the assassination of Moro,<sup>18</sup> about which people have said all kinds of contradictory things, to the point that the fundamental truth – namely, the utilization of the Red Brigades by a faction of the Italian State – can itself be tolerated as one possible interpretation among many others, one that has no consequences whatsoever. And so, people speculate indefinitely about [the role of] Mossad, the CIA, the KGB and all the rest. Likewise, when forests in the northern hemisphere are dying, and when “ignorant” populations begin to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between “acid rain” and those disappearances, their leaders don't fail to produce experts who blame some new virus, which is itself perfectly independent and disengaged from any relation with this pollution “that is accused of being the cause of all evil.” As for us, contrary to the dissuasive blackmail of all the various specialists who say that one never possesses enough information to come to any conclusions, we think that, first and foremost, we must know how to judge this world in its

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<sup>17</sup> The French here, *noyer le poisson*, contains a typo (“poisson” not “poison”). When corrected, it literally means “drowning the fish.”

<sup>18</sup> The Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped and murdered, allegedly by the Red Brigades, in 1978. Cf. Guy Debord's letter to Gianfranco Sanguinetti dated 21 April 1978: <http://www.notbored.org/cavalcanti.html>.



oppressive unity, which each and every person must endure so that, starting from there, power can divide information into intentionally confusing jamming, propaganda, falsification and lies, through which the essential realities of the Economy and the State are revealed.

We willingly admit that it is possible to make a certain usage of the information dispensed by the media – a usage that we do not prohibit, no matter what this or that reader has claimed. Quite simply, usable information can only become legible, can only be tied together, in order to help produce a more exact map of the social terrain, by a point of view that is radically hostile to everything that constitutes our dependence upon the media's information. Where the monolithic lie that characterizes the bureaucratic countries doesn't reign, the truth is rendered even more evanescent by not being able to recognize itself *a contrario*. The Western system of the lie has, over the course of time, shown itself to be even more *disconcerting*<sup>19</sup> than its unsophisticated Eastern precursor through its way of informing people about everything so that nothing is really known.

Nevertheless, with this *Encyclopedia*, we have the assurance of being able to offer to our contemporaries a means to begin *to work together* [*se concerter*] to put in check the immense means of modern dumbfounding. Given the obvious coherence of our remarks, there are only two solutions: either they are perfectly over-the-top or extremely real. Each reader can choose between these two interpretations in accordance with his or her experiences, tastes and interests. But if the reader adopts the second possibility, he or she must also admit that we are seriously endangering all the managers and profiteers of dumbfounding. Because no one anywhere is saying what we are saying. Thus there must be a vital interest in hiding such important self-evident facts. We manage to say them; that is their misfortune. And this has only begun.

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<sup>19</sup> An allusion to Anton Ciliga's *Ten Years in the Country of the Disconcerting Lie* (1940).