

Press Information  
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## How the media move history:

### “From Luther to Twitter. Media and the Public Sphere” in the Deutsches Historisches Museum

10 September 2020 – 11 April 2021

The political public sphere has been undergoing a profound, open-ended change since the triumphant advance of smartphones and social media: Presidents twitter, virtual mobs smear their enemies, elections are manipulated. At the same time these media hold the promise of great expectations, in particular regarding the criticism of authoritarian regimes. In the face of the current debate about the significance of this transformation, the Deutsches Historisches Museum is now exploring the connection between media, politics and the public sphere in past and present in **the exhibition “From Luther to Twitter. Media and the Public Sphere”, opening on 10 September 2020.**

The exhibition examines how the enlightened ideal of a democratic public and free expression of opinion came about. Starting with the invention of the printing press and its importance for the Reformation, curators Harald Welzer and Melanie Lyon then throw light on the rise of the bourgeois public in the course of the pluralisation of the press landscape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the invention of radio and its importance for the totalitarian National Socialist system and finally the flood of images brought on by television in the post-war period. The exhibition carries this historical review into the present with a look at the continuities and breaches of a **media-driven structural transformation of the public sphere**. As the exhibition demonstrates, this transformation follows in the wake of the respective technological development, normally after a certain interval of time. To take place it needs people and groups that are particularly attuned to medial developments and can recognise the political potential of a new medium and utilise it for their own political purposes.

Around 200 cultural-historical and contemporary objects from Germany, Austria, Spain, Great Britain and China illustrate how new medial spheres have developed out of the charged relationship between public and counter-public, censorship and protest, surveillance and emancipation. Key moments in the German, but also international, media revolutions help to show how the democratic public sphere as we know it came to be formed and how it is now perhaps in the process of disintegration. On a surface area of around 1000 square metres, original objects such as Martin Luther’s pamphlets, a document of Prussian censorship, a large-scale outdoor loudspeaker from the Nazi period, or the meanwhile destroyed main

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motherboard with Edward Snowden's leaked documents reveal the peculiarities and ambivalences of the respective medial innovations.

**Prof. Dr. Raphael Gross, President of the Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum:** "The exhibition is also an attempt to find a new way of dealing with historical objects: it focuses on media that are not only 'leftovers' of historical events – rather, they have ignited or even first enabled social upheavals by political means. At the same time central workings of the medial transformation have often remained strangely unrecognised. The close interconnection of material prerequisites and immaterial processes reveals itself particularly in the area of digitalisation. It was therefore very important to me not to present a history of technology in the exhibition, but rather to look directly at the relationship between medial development and the transformation of the political public sphere."

**The curators Prof. Dr. Harald Welzer and Melanie Lyon:** "New media not only change communication, but also create new spheres of life in which the day-to-day political life of the public can unfold. Through our staging of the individual sections of media history we want visitors to be able to feel and experience this."

### **Five epochs of medial history**

The exhibition architecture stages the epochs of medial history in a way that allows the remodelled medial environments to be sensually experienced. The Reformation is perceived as a medial occurrence, and the following epoch of pamphlets, newspapers and manifestos is seen as a phase of an embattled public opinion between new awakening and censorship. Alongside the opportunities the press offered to such emancipatory causes as the labour movement and the women's movement, people already recognised at the time that the media could also be exploited to steer public opinion in the interests of an authoritarian state.

Radio and television, on the other hand, are real-time media and provide entirely new means of political communication that can unfold in such charged relationships as entertainment and propaganda or enlightenment and alignment. The exhibition presents events in radio history, in particular the formative power of the medium radio that Joseph Goebbels exploited, but also the key political moment of the first televised election campaign in history, from which John F. Kennedy emerged as victor because he was better able to deal with the new medium than his opponent Richard Nixon. Artworks like Harry Walter's "Eichmann, Fleischmann, Neckermann" reflect the impact of television on the subjective remembrance of the West German past.

Finally, the exhibition takes a look at the present and future of a digitally driven, once more pluralising, but also polarising public. Before the backdrop of the rise of

authoritarian and populist currents in society and the concern about the potential of the digital media for surveillance and manipulation, it raises the question of what ever happened to the promise of a democratic, interlinked world community. The exhibition makers present three different scenarios next to one another: According to a random principle, visitors can start off along one of three paths that will take them, firstly, into a highly dynamic present time, or to utopian hopes and promises offered by the Internet, or to the dangers associated with a digitally backed political totalitarianism. Artistic positions like Florian Mehnert's photo project "Smartphone Stacks" reveal the flipside of digital participation: the people here are reduced to accessible data material. In a final display, the exhibition offers visitors the prospect of 30 concrete utopias for the digital future that give top priority to transparency and civic participation.

The exhibition is inclusive and barrier-free. So-called Inclusive Communication Stations, which address at least two of the senses, are centrally located in the exhibition rooms. In addition, there is a tactile floor guide system and a number of sign language videos, as well as exhibition texts in Braille, high-contrast large print and Easy Language.

A German-language anthology accompanies the exhibition (320 pages, 18 illustrations, 18 €, S. Fischer Verlag).