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### Materiality, Practices, Problematizations

*What kind of dispositif are media?*

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# Materiality, Practices, Problematizations:

## What Kind of *Dispositif* Are Media?<sup>1</sup>

*Markus Stauff*

*Professionalism is environmental. Amateurism is  
anti-environmental.*

McLUHAN AND FIORE 1967, 93

While all media result from the complex interplay of technologies, aesthetic forms, and practices, the older media—film and television—seem to be more stable and rigid constellations that provide much less room for variation or individual user practices. On the digital side, however, amateurs' idiosyncratic use of technology and the rather ephemeral connections between technologies and practices (which used to be a dynamic on the fringes of established media) seem to have become a key element of all media. To adequately analyze this heightened heterogeneity and the constantly changing interrelations of media's building blocks, new concepts have been suggested in media studies, such as configuration, ecology, assemblage, and platform.

One of the older concepts which are said to be inappropriate to the current situation is the notion of the *dispositif*, which has often been applied to describe how film and television shaped historically specific modes of perception through their specific arrangements of material elements and

practices. As argued by film scholar Thomas Elsaesser, this concept was productive in analyzing the “counterintuitive associations, heterogeneous networks, and non-convergent connections,” which enable media’s cultural function, and also to identify “common denominators between and across media.” Nevertheless, he is one of many voices who consider the concept to be limited to older media since “it fails to fully account for what we think is the complexity of the present situation” (Elsaesser 2016, 105).

In the following I want to counter this common claim and argue that the *dispositif* remains an important tool for critical analysis of the current media transformations, especially their entanglement with power relations. Replacing the concept would be premature for at least three reasons:

(1) Instead of taking for granted the dichotomy between film and television as rigid and restraining constellations (*dispositifs*) on the one hand and new media as dynamic assemblages (*non-dispositifs*) on the other, we need to analyze how both old and new media entangle standardization and transformation, practices, and materialities.

(2) While alternative, allegedly more dynamic, concepts such as ecology and assemblage tend to naturalize heterogeneity and affirm the contemporary ideology of constant transformation, the concept of the *dispositif* systematically directs our attention to the question of power. It thus allows us to analyze how the constant changes to the heterogeneous media constellation are driven by the unequal distribution of agency and visibility.

(3) The *dispositif* concept focuses on the question of power, yet it doesn’t claim that power results from the rigidity and restraining effects of a standardized constellation alone. Just like the concept of the assemblage it maps and formalizes the elements contributing to a medium’s impact without a prior judgment of these elements. Yet it goes beyond the assemblage by focusing on the emergence of internal hierarchies and differentiations.

To develop the analytical potential of the *dispositif* concept for media analysis, I will first briefly discuss the competing and currently more favored concepts of environment, ecology, and assemblage. Aside from highlighting what they share with the concept of *dispositif*, I will show how and why they tend to mask the question of power. Next, I will critically discuss the two most dominant applications of the concept in media studies so far: the cinema as an illusion-producing machinery (similar to Plato’s cave) and media as forms of surveillance (similar to Bentham’s/Foucault’s panopticon). Both approaches highlight important aspects of *dispositif* analysis, yet they also contribute to a restricted understanding of the term. Finally, I will argue that approaching the *dispositif* not as a material constellation but as a problematization allows us to analyze media as complex and heterogeneous ensembles that become powerful not by restraining but by taking advantage of heterogeneity, practices, and constant transformation.

## Environment/Ecology

Over the past decades, concepts like environment, ecology, and assemblage have been used to highlight the heterogeneous and transforming character of media. The common denominator of these concepts (also present in the *dispositif*) is the claim that media, while being heterogeneous and transformational, shape culture (social relations, subjectivities, forms of communication) far beyond the content they transmit, namely through their intense and inseparable entanglement with human perceptions and practices. Most famously, the Canadian literary and media scholar Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s claimed that “the medium is the message.” To start an investigation into these *actual* messages of the media (beyond their content), McLuhan introduced the notion of *environment* to highlight the following four aspects of media’s impact on culture.

First he claimed that media technologies have become an essential, pervasive, and mostly invisible (or naturalized) “man-made social environment” (McLuhan 1994, 98), just like the geology and climate of the places where we live. Second, the term “environment” also implies that media—like an ecology consisting of weather, plants, animals, bacteria, and so on—form a complex set of interrelated dynamics. Our ways of perceiving, communicating, and thinking are thus shaped by a constellation of media and the broader “cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates” (11). Third, the notion of environment allowed McLuhan to describe the dynamic transformation of media. Working from a somewhat simplified and scientifically outdated understanding, he argued that just like the human nervous system and the natural environment would always strive for an equilibrium, man-made organizations would strive for the same (e.g., McLuhan 1994, 43, 98). Each new invention would therefore provoke a reorganization of the entire constellation, establishing “a new balance among our technologically extended faculties” (126). Finally, since we live in a media environment like fish in water, the notion of environment highlights the challenges of gaining insights into the media, but also its urgency: “Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments” (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 26). McLuhan explicitly mentions the amateur, next to the artist, as a figure whose practices deviate from the established ones, which allows them to gain such knowledge of the environment (93).

McLuhan’s arguments were an important reference when Neil Postman established the media-ecology approach in the 1980s to highlight the hidden factors that shape media as a complex set of elements which gets mainly “taken for granted, accepted as natural” (Postman 1986, 79). This focus on the interplay of heterogeneous elements which produce historically specific, yet culturally persistent forms of perception and experience is a shared concern of media ecology and *dispositif* theory.

The appropriation of the terms “environment” and “ecology” in media studies resembles the earlier use of such concepts in sociology. Already in the 1920s the Chicago School described communities and urban life in particular as “ecologies.” By appropriating the term from biology, sociologists sought to raise the scientific authority of their discipline. For the Chicago School, the application of the concept also promised to support the creation of a humane environment by reflecting on the complex interactions between individuals and groups, between artifacts, cultural customs, and natural resources. Media (e.g., newspapers) available to communities played an important part in this approach (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016). Interestingly, and contrary to *dispositif* theory as I will argue, those who adopt environment/ecology approaches conceive of knowledge about the (otherwise “naturalized” or “black-boxed”) environment as emancipatory: understanding media as an environment and thus enabling the intentional (re)arrangement of their elements is considered to be a moment of enlightenment.

There is a certain irony to such use of biological concepts. Although they are used to critically analyze the taken-for-grantedness—the “naturalization”—of the complex, technical, and mediated world we live in, these terms themselves still participate in naturalizing media technologies. At least in the work of McLuhan and Postman, the media ecology concept accounts for social and cultural practices only in a very abstract manner, leaving no room for conflicts and hierarchies. Nowadays, the concept is often used to describe the interrelations between multiple platforms, genres, and institutions shaping the content (especially the news) available to a specific region (e.g., Pew Research Center 2010) or to highlight that new media figure as environments that do not determine behavior but rather allow for the development of new (political) practices (e.g., Shirky 2011, 32). The concept is used in a broad and metaphorical way, for example to replace older notions like news or media *industry*, which are not considered appropriate for covering the complexity of contemporary information distribution (Anderson 2013). While McLuhan’s idea of equilibrium is no longer pursued, his (and Postman’s) take on media as environments in which humans (have to) live is an important reference point in media studies.

So far, scholars have paid little attention to how different groups, practices, and economies have contributed very differently to the emergence and transformation of this environment (Malm 2015). Although there are productive appropriations of this concept that include power (e.g., Stengers 2013), “environment” often appears to suggest that all human beings inside a specific media setting are affected equally. The fact that different media constellations unequally distribute the agency of different groups and individuals is rarely analyzed. In Jane Bennett’s concept of ecology, for example, the entanglement of practices and things is highlighted to sensitize us to its general vulnerability—yet it never appears as internally fractured, hierarchical, and uneven (Bennett 2010). While transformation is

a major characteristic of any ecology, the dominant forces behind this transformation, according to the biological model, are arbitrary variation, selection, reproduction (and “equilibrium”), but not strategies, rationalities, and interventions, which are, as we will see, the major forces of a *dispositif*.

## Assemblages

A more radical approach to media ecology is articulated by authors who take issue with Neil Postman’s human-centered (and often technophobic) perspective. These scholars are interested in how the interconnections between human practices and technical procedures, after having achieved a certain level of consistency, allow for the emergence of all forms of interaction and vitality—human or not (Parikka 2005). These studies no longer focus on media as environments for human beings, but on the unexpected creativity emerging from the materially heterogeneous elements of media systems, especially digital, networked, mobile ones. These authors do not use the term ecology for its biological implications, but rather “to indicate the massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter” (Fuller 2005, 2).

This understanding of ecology comes very close to the concept of “assemblage” (often as a translation of the French *agencement*), which as a fashionable competitor of *dispositif* aims to describe the heterogeneity and transformability of contemporary technologies. As a term, “assemblage” was introduced fundamentally to rethink what the world, and in particular what we call society, consists of, and how both world and society are organized (for an overview, see e.g., Latour 2005; Marcus and Saka 2006; DeLanda 2013; Acuto and Curtis 2014; Bousquet 2014). Instead of taking for granted the existence (and clear identity) of entities like society (or related concepts like the state, the global, capitalism, and organization), the use of the concept of assemblage urges one to detail exactly which elements and procedures (things, natural dynamics, human practices, technologies etc.) are building interrelations with each other and thereby changing each other’s function and agency. Assemblage theory “seeks to replace such abstractions with concrete histories of the processes by which entities are formed and made to endure” (Acuto and Curtis 2014, 7).

Applying the concept to media studies, “assemblage” describes media as transitional constellations which emerge from interrelations between practices, technologies, economies, and organizations that, temporarily, shape (and stabilize) each other and thereby share a common productivity. Their constitutive heterogeneity and their openness to new interconnections necessarily provoke frictions, changes, and transformations. Contrary to McLuhan and Postman’s notion of environments, assemblages are not considered to surround (and shape) practices. Instead they result from the

entanglement of technologies, politics, and practices. Within the assemblage, the practices of amateurs and artists are seen as reorganizations of always open and transitory constellations, rather than as sudden revelations of its otherwise inaccessible structure. This makes the concept of assemblage well adapted to analyze a media landscape in which the smartphone has reshaped the internet, social-media platforms and location systems have reshaped the smartphone and the internet, and streaming services or games consoles constantly re-organize the relevance of the television screen and its domestic setting (e.g., Bousquet 2014; Bucher 2013; Langlois 2012; Rizzo 2015).

Such an approach, however, as is true of approaches based on the concepts of ecology and environment, does not provide a more explicit analysis of the power effects of media. This is not to suggest that this would be impossible using these concepts, but the strategic potential and the hierarchies involved in assemblages' emergence and especially their ongoing transformation often remain a supplementary instead of an integral aspect of media assemblage studies. Furthermore, they fail to analyze how different assemblages are strategically connected with each other and distribute significant building blocks into different contexts. Home movies or computer consoles, for example, take advantage of, and restructure, the dominant gender relationships shaping the domestic sphere. These gender relationships involve a dynamic, which gets spread and re-articulated across a vast number of assemblages that are thereby connected.

There is, however, a great deal of overlap between the concepts of assemblage and *dispositif*. One of the most quoted definitions of *dispositif* (or "apparatus" in this translation) by Michel Foucault could just as well describe an assemblage:

What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality. In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly, I understand by the term "apparatus" a sort of—shall we say—

formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function.

FOUCAULT 1980, 194

Just like an assemblage, a *dispositif* thus consists of heterogeneous elements that are both material and immaterial, and it is mainly defined by the specific relations between the elements. As these relations can change, they can thereby bestow one and the same element with a different quality and a different role from one moment to the next.

It is mainly the third aspect Foucault mentions here, the strategic function, that might distinguish *dispositif* from assemblage. Rabinow therefore suggests to define *dispositifs* as "forms composed of heterogeneous elements that have been stabilized and set to work in multiple domains," and an assemblage as a more "experimental matrix" of elements "comparatively effervescent, disappearing in years or decades rather than centuries" (Rabinow 2003, 55 and 56, quoted by Walters 2012, 87). It has also been argued that a *dispositif* can be conceived as a specific sub-type of assemblage that is more stable, more strictly organized than other assemblages—"more prone to (in the sense of anticipating, provoking, achieving and consolidating) re-territorialisation, striation, scaling and governing" (Legg 2011, 131).

Yet I believe that in particular in media studies the concept of *dispositif* would be more helpful for a systematical analysis of the roles of power and knowledge in heterogeneous media than that of assemblage. The former will allow one to pay special attention to the strategic element in the emergence of media. Some constellations become consistent because they enable some entities (humans, organizations, etc.) to arrange things, to achieve knowledge, and thereby to intervene into reality. Like "milieu" (to replace the environment with a related term used by Foucault), "*dispositif*" is not just geared to the emergence of practices, but it allows for shaping, conducting, and governing them (Foucault 2007, 35f). It focuses on the imbalances within an assemblage that characterize its productivity. While valorizing human and non-human elements in similar ways, the notion of *dispositif* also enables one to ask how human beings are equipped with historically specific subjectivities—ways of conceptualizing and enacting their own being in addition to a general human agency. Adding to the bottom-up analysis made possible by relying on the term "assemblages," the concept of *dispositif* aims at broader cultural diagnosis, making it possible to analyze the more general dynamics that allow some assemblages to become successful over others (Tellmann 2010, 298).

In media studies, however, the *dispositif* has become a synonym for the spatial and material rigidity of a particular assemblage. Before I will introduce an alternative approach (using Foucault's analysis of sexuality), the next two sections will discuss the two main models for such a concept of

the *dispositif* which contributed to such a highly productive yet eventually limiting (and misunderstood) static concept of *dispositif*: Plato's famous cave and Bentham's panopticon.

### *Dispositif* 1: the cinema as cave—positioning the spectator

*Dispositif* (or “apparatus”) was first used in media studies to help describe the impact of media as resulting not from one feature of the medium (e.g., the visual quality of the filmic image) but from the spatial arrangement of its heterogeneous elements. From a McLuhanian (“the medium is the message”) perspective, the so-called apparatus theory<sup>2</sup> of the 1970s turned away from the stories and the styles of individual films and toward the ways cinema organizes perception and creates a coherent ideology—ways of understanding one's own relation toward the world—by placing different elements into a solid set of relations. The technology of the camera guarantees that all representations of space on the screen follow the rule of linear perspective (Stam 2000, 137) and thus address the individual viewer as the original point of view (Baudry 1974, 41). The movie theater positions the spectator in a fixed chair in a darkened room with a fixed line of vision to a screen that shows images emerging from a projector which is hidden behind the audience. The spectators are decidedly addressed as subjects: they experience the images as a consistent world, one that unfolds before their very eyes, a distanced yet absorbing act of observation. It is not the individual film, but the entire cinema constellation that thus creates an “impression of reality” or a “reality effect”: “It is the apparatus that creates the illusion, and not the degree of fidelity with the Real” (Baudry 1976, 110).

This argument was underlined by comparing cinema to other constellations in which visual forms get their effect from spatial arrangements and the “suspension of mobility” (Baudry 1974, 45). Sigmund Freud's analysis of dreaming and Jacques Lacan's analysis of the mirror stage (in which a baby sitting on its mother's arm will recognize itself in the mirror for the first time and elatedly perceive itself as a powerful, individual entity) have both been used as analogies for the cinematic *dispositif*. Another prominent reference point has been Plato's parable of a cave in which chained people confuse the shadows on the wall with reality. Like the cave, the *dispositif* of cinema creates an artificial situation in which we cannot but perceive the images in front of us as reality—one caveat being that no one spends their entire life inside a movie theater.

Theories that center on the notion of apparatus have often been criticized for ignoring the broader context of cinema and audience members' diverse social backgrounds. Bruno Latour more generally criticized the too-simple

distinction between illusion and reality (or, in his case, between social life and pure science) implied in most references to Plato's cave (Latour 2004, 11ff) and also in the original discussion of cinema as *dispositif*. More recent takes on the *dispositif* as a particular arrangement of technologies, bodies, and visualities (or of machinery, spectator, and representations (Albéra and Tortajada 2010)) have therefore downplayed the idea that such a constellation automatically creates a consistent ideological worldview. They still use the *dispositif* to reflect on the different elements that actually constitute and distinguish individual media, equipping each with specific perceptual qualities. The differences between watching a film in a movie theater, as part of a museum installation, or on a TV set can productively be described as resulting from different *dispositifs* which, through their material arrangement, create different temporal and spatial preconditions for the aesthetic experience (e.g., Hanich 2014, 346).

In the case of television, for example, the domestic space is just as much a constitutive feature as the dark movie theater in the case of film. In most Western societies and for the bigger part of its history, people have watched TV in a familiar setting alongside other activities. For this reason, the endless flow of its programming, activated by the flick of a switch, has been interlaced with everyday routines (household chores, relaxation after work, holidays) and with gender hierarchies (male and female genres, who picks the channel, who prepares dinner). Many TV programs were aesthetically adapted to such forms of distracted and domestic viewing (e.g., direct address in news and talk shows, narrative redundancies in soap operas, or commercial breaks with heightened sound volume). While the material ensemble of TV clearly is more heterogeneous and more flexible than that of cinema, its *dispositif* still highlights this entanglement of technology, social setting, and stylistic features. “Emphasis shifts therefore to interdependencies at particular sites and to a site's imbrication in and value for an arrangement (in French, a *dispositif* [. . .])” (Hay 2001, 212).

Moreover, paying attention to how spaces and practices, bodies, and technologies get entangled in different constellations throughout the history of a medium allows one to question its alleged identity across time and across different cultures and practices—which is often taken for granted too easily. With this in mind, amateur cinema or home movies can be studied not as simply less elaborate forms of moviemaking, but as separate *dispositifs*. Early cinema, too, arranged its technical and social elements very differently than the movie theater generally described in apparatus theory: Instead of rows of silent, docile spectators sitting in the dark, an unruly crowd gathered around very visible machinery, viewing short films which, instead of developing a coherent narrative, often displayed a series of visual attractions instead. This “cinema of attraction” can be identified as a cinema *dispositif* that was in place before the now dominant movie experience and that continues to exist alongside of it (Kessler 2006, 61ff).

## *Dispositif* 2: Media as panopticons—uneven distribution of visibility

If Plato's allegory of the cave was a crucial reference for the understanding of cinema as a *dispositif*, the key reference for the wider application of the *dispositif* concept in media studies is the panopticon, or rather Michel Foucault's analysis of this late eighteenth-century architectural structure designed by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham for application in prisons, schools, or factories. In his book on the historical transformation of discipline and punishment (1991), Foucault argues that the panopticon establishes power relations through the arrangement of bodies and the uneven distribution of visibility. People (inmates, workers, pupils) are isolated and positioned around a center from which a person (e.g., the warden) can monitor everyone while remaining invisible. The isolated subjects thus become objects of knowledge (it is easy to compare them and record their development from day to day), yet they also internalize the gaze: because they do not know when exactly they are monitored, they have to behave as though constantly observed.

Like Plato's model of the cave, this analysis shows how the material ordering of space, bodies, and light (or "lines of visibility") automatically (that is, independently from any individual's intentions) creates a specific reality. While Plato's model is very much about illusion (and the apparatus theory about ideology), Foucault's analysis highlights how the arrangement produces an unequal distribution of power which is based on (and reproduces) historically specific forms of knowledge. A *dispositif*, according to Foucault, is an arrangement of heterogeneous elements that distinguishes between positions which allow disposing (to regulate and to arrange objects and behavior by gaining knowledge) and positions which become objects of such disposing (Link 2007).

As the main example for the panopticon is a prison, it is no surprise that the concept has most frantically been applied in the field of surveillance studies, where it serves as "a common theoretical and polemical point of departure" (Elmer 2012, 21). Camera surveillance is regularly described as a new and generalized form of panopticon, since the public installment of CCTV systems signals to everybody that they are watched from some invisible control center. The public museum (Bennett 1995), sports stadium (Eichberg 1995; Bale 1993), slaughterhouse (Thierman 2010), or police mugshots and portrait photography (Sekula 1986) have all been analyzed as such machineries that order practices through the arrangement of bodies and visual forms. Film and television audiences are also constantly classified to adapt content and branding strategies through consumer research (Gandy 1990, 168). As argued by Ien Ang, "its core mechanism, and ultimate ambition, is control through visibility" (1991, 70). The *dispositif* as panopticon thus highlights how all

media (not only the ones specialized in surveillance) establish unequal visibility and allow for monitoring and classification of, but also intervention into, the practices of media users by disposing entities (political, commercial, philanthropic etc.).

The examples presented here might suffice to summarize the potential but also the shortcomings of what one might call the panoptic *dispositif*—a near endless variety of research comparing specific media constellations to the panopticon, either outlining similarities or stressing differences. On the positive side, this approach provoked productive discussions on how different media constellations produce uneven visibility and distribute disposing and disposed positions in complex and specific ways.

From such a perspective, a broad variety of media can be scrutinized for the way they produce knowledge about practices (while simultaneously changing them) through their spatial arrangements, visibilities, and interrelations with other cultural practices. Taking up a classical dichotomy, the question is neither "what do people do with media?" nor "what do media do to people?" but rather "how do media enable certain objects and practices to be known and shaped by certain entities?"

## Misunderstanding the *dispositif*

Still, it can be argued that the panopticon is "unhelpfully overused" (Lyon 2007, 47) as a model to analyze media power, and not only in surveillance studies. William Walters even delivered a diagnosis of what he termed *panopticitis*, "the tendency of researchers to find the practices of surveillance and (self-)discipline lurking in all sorts of unexpected places" (2012, 52). It might be a symptom of this panopticitis, that the notion of *dispositif* was often reduced to a clearly delineated and stable material constellation. Taking the actual prison building (or Plato's cave) as a key reference, the effects of the *dispositif* are ascribed to the immobilization of the body, the architectural division of space, and the asymmetric lines of vision. While these comparisons shone a very helpful light on the material aspects of media *dispositifs*, they also provoked a too-simple causal connection between the spatial characteristics of a medium and its effects (Barnett 1999). In a way, the concept of *dispositif* became a victim of its own success, as analyzing the uneven forms of visibility produced by a material arrangement proved to be such a productive approach that other aspects of the concept were neglected.

Focusing on the topological aspects of the *dispositif* proved to be very helpful with two things: asking what elements have to come together to give a medium cultural and ideological impact, and describing the automated, non-intentional, but uneven distribution of power and agency that results from a material arrangement of technologies, bodies, and visibilities. Yet limiting the concept of the *dispositif* to its topological aspects seems

less suitable for something that is especially important for understanding the current media landscape, namely analyzing flexible and constantly transforming constellations in which creative and surprising practices (instead of docile bodies) contribute to the power effects of the machinery. With only the cave and the panopticon as references to what a *dispositif* should look like, any flexibility immediately looks like a weakening of the constellation's power. As a result, the heterogeneous spatial arrangement of television comes across less as a *dispositif* than the rigid organization of elements in the movie theater. And the dynamic forms of dataveillance and lateral surveillance also seem much less like *dispositifs* than the clearly panoptic CCTV cameras.

Put simply, in media studies the *dispositif* was mostly used to underline the repressive effects of power through which media confine visibility and practices. This is in line with some recent more theoretical elaborations of the concept (e.g., Agamben 2009), in which *dispositifs* “quickly become mechanisms of entrapment” (Legg 2011, 130). No wonder, then, that a number of authors find the *dispositif* concept “overtly restrictive” (Elsaesser 2016, 130f) or too static (Callon 2004), and therefore call for alternative concepts like assemblage or ecology to account for practices and transformability as features of socio-technological constellations.

In Foucault's writings, however, the *dispositif* was actually used to develop a non-repressive, “productive” notion of power analyzing how power produces behavior instead of only prohibiting or limiting it. Already in *Discipline and Punish*, the spatial distribution of material elements in no way serves as the key feature of the *dispositif*. Rather than being limited to one particular building, the panopticon is described as a “diagram of a mechanism of power” (Foucault 1991, 205). Adding to the material disposition of objects, bodies, and lines of sight, Foucault considers the panopticon a *dispositif* not only because (a) it established a rationality of arranging things and people that extended beyond the prison and was adapted for schools, hospitals, barracks and so on, but also because (b) it was constantly reformed, adapted, and criticized, and because (c) it had a productive effect for overall society in a particular historical moment (by “responding to an urgent need,” as Foucault specified in the three-part definition of the *dispositif* quoted at length in the section on assemblage above). A *dispositif* should thus not be understood as a template or a mold that forms everything according to its own spatial and material characteristics; rather it is a diagram that channels, maps, and organizes movements. Thus its effects might just as much consist of a particular transformation of the machinery, or even of resistance against it (Foucault 1975).

I would like to argue, then, that the concept of *dispositif* is still very necessary in media studies because alternative concepts such as assemblage and media ecology do not sufficiently deal with the uneven distribution of practices; both of them consider transformation to be more of a given than

something that is entangled in a power-knowledge relationship. Yet to make the concept of *dispositif* applicable to analyzing the current media landscape, we need to go beyond the very restrictive notion of *dispositif* developed in reference to the cave and the panopticon. Below, I will mainly focus on Foucault's work to outline a concept of *dispositif* that makes it possible for us to analyze practices and transformations.

### *Dispositif* 3: the problematization of media and the power of transformation

Challenging the narrow (and misunderstood) panoptic concept of the *dispositif*, a number of scholars have underlined that the strategic potential of the heterogeneous ensemble is more relevant than its spatial features. According to some, Foucault's concept of *dispositif* is “characterized by changes in the position of its elements, the multiplying modifications of its functions, and an overall articulated strategic intent, albeit an appropriately flexible one” (Rabinow and Rose 2003). A *dispositif* thus articulates certain problems and connects them to a set of possible solutions (Raffnsøe et al. 2014, 18) through what Foucault especially in his later work called a “problematization” (1997). If material and spatial arrangements are important elements because they render those possible solutions tangible and visible, the problematization goes far beyond that.

Another symptom of media studies' panopticitis is that Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, which elaborates the concept of *dispositif* in greater detail, is referenced far less often than *Discipline and Punish*. Although the aspects discussed earlier—spatial arrangements, lines of visibility, distinction between disposing and disposed positions—are important elements of the *dispositif* of sexuality, *History of Sexuality* makes it much more explicit that the interplay of the heterogeneous elements does not result from one distinct and stable arrangement, but rather from the ongoing dispersion of a number of mechanisms, concerns, modes of classifications and observations—or the broader problematization.

Since the late eighteenth century, sexuality has become an increasingly important topic in schools, hospitals, churches, and families. While becoming object of concerns and regulations, sexuality has rather proliferated than having been narrowly restricted. It is not only sexual practices that are observed, confessed, classified, and thereby intensified and dispersed, but also sexual desires. Moreover, such practices and desires have become part of a system of causal assumptions (e.g., connecting sexual practices with moral or cognitive developments) and therefore of possible (or supposedly necessary) interventions. As a result, people have begun to think of their sexuality (and their hidden and unspoken desires) as inherent to



their individual being. Sexuality has thereby become a field of intervention that connects the shaping of individual behavior with the regulation of the population as a whole; after all, making people reflect on their sexual behavior has consequences for the health and reproduction of the population.

Sexuality, at first sight, seems much less comparable to media than the panopticon and its clear lines of visibility. The analogy's main advantage, however, is precisely reflected in this feature because it allows for de-naturalizing media. Just like Foucault cautioned not to take sexuality as a given, but to analyze where it comes into being and is articulated through forms of knowledge and through different practices, it might be helpful to avoid our own assumptions of what (and where) a medium is and takes place. Media are also dispersed (and thus constituted) through problematizations involving classifications and discourses; medical, psychological, and legal knowledge; and practices claimed to be solutions to behavior that is defined as troubling. To return once more to the example of cinema: it is well possible that neither individual films (and their contents) nor the movie theater's spatial arrangements make up the *dispositif* of "cinema," but rather the way these films and spaces become entangled with strategies to educate the public, to protect children, to research perception, and so on.

It is probably due to the connotations of *dispositif* in film and media studies that present research approaching media in such a way rarely uses this concept, even though critics may refer to Foucault's later work inspiring the field of governmentality studies.<sup>3</sup> Lee Grieveson, for instance, has shown how, at the start of the twentieth century, cinema was an important site for understanding and shaping individual attention and its relevance for group dynamics (2008). Furthermore, the studies of TV by Anna McCarthy and Laurie Ouellette have shown how different program genres, institutional settings, and forms of audience research opened a field in which elites are equipped with the means to dispose the "masses" or "the public" (McCarthy 2010; Ouellette 2002). In the field of new media, several authors have analyzed how games and social media incite behavior that is supposed to articulate one's own individuality, health, and rationality behind everyday decision making (Sauter 2014; Schrape 2014; Millington 2014, 2016).

Eventually, these approaches describe how media become productive because they get addressed simultaneously as a problem and as an instrument (Stauff 2010). Like sexuality, media are thought to contain hidden influences, desires, etc. Yet they also promise to offer the tools to make these influences and desires knowable and manageable—if only the right modifications are applied and if users can be incited to use the medium in a specific way. Due to their technical setup (and their specific spatial and material arrangements), media not only come with the promise of direct, reliable effects, but also with the promise that they can be changed and improved.

From such a perspective, the difference between media defined by a more materially rigid setting and media that can be used more flexibly does

involve not a fundamental difference but rather a difference in strategies. This is why a *dispositif* is characterized not by the particular stable spatial or temporal arrangement of elements, but rather by the effects that can be achieved (and the effects that are hoped for or were promised) through establishing a specific arrangement of elements and adjusting and modifying these elements according to a historically specific problematization which transforms "the difficulties and obstacles of a practice into a general problem for which one proposes diverse practical solutions" (Foucault 1997, 118). Problematizations thus open up a presumably natural or at least taken-for-granted set of objects and practices, and ask how best to re-arrange them to take advantage of their potentials (Castel 1994; Deacon 2000).

While we often think of media technologies as mysterious black boxes, they are actually characterized by the veritable explosion of discourses and practices around them, questioning what their impact really is, how to avoid any inherent dangers they might present, and how to awaken their dormant potential. I would argue that this can be taken as a defining feature of media *dispositifs*: they come into being through problematizations. What is more, media are characterized by connecting two different levels of problematization: (1) they allow us to problematize new things and new forms of behavior because they promise to make new aspects of reality accessible and manageable (cinema, for instance, enabled new means to understand, research, and address mass psychology); (2) the media's technical development and forms become problematized themselves as something that can and should be improved, changed, or constrained (new media are regularly introduced with the promise of solving the limitations of older media).

Practices of people—be they experts or amateurs—operate on the same level (if not with the same resources) as technologies, institutional regulations, and so on. Although amateur cinema and the user-generated content of current media constellations might be much less coherent and stable constellations than the traditional movie theater, they still get organized around strategies and rationalities which explain their constant reorganization. The problematization thus structures which connections are considered promising, which steps might improve the machinery if it does not deliver the desired results, which entities seem available for being disposed, and who is brought into a position of disposing.

More than the concept of assemblage, the *dispositif* thus underlines that its constellation does result not from the spontaneous accumulation of isolated elements, but from rationalities and problematizations that co-emerge with the constellation. In this process, pre-fabricated elements already established as hinges of power and knowledge (like the confession or a particular genre) are adapted and thereby establish connections between different practices and institutions.

Flexibility and ephemerality, rather than being signs of the dissolution of the supposedly more *dispositif*-like structures of older and more solid media

constellations, precisely indicate the very heterogeneity and transformations that allow a particular constellation to dispose people, things, and practices in unequal and therefore productive ways.

## Conclusion

This chapter argued that the concept of the *dispositif* still has a specific theoretical and methodological value that distinguishes it from similar, more recent concepts like ecology, assemblage, or actor-network. More than these other concepts, the *dispositif* underlines the question of power, and it does so by asking how these heterogeneous constellations emerge and establish particular forms of knowledge-power formations which interrelate disposing and being-disposed positions in structured and unequal ways. While spatial arrangements (and a spatially-fixed positioning of bodies and visibility) *can* play an important role here, they are not necessarily the essential feature of *dispositifs*. Instead, this concept highlights—even more pronouncedly than comparable concepts—the ongoing transformations, structured around specific problematizations of the constellations and their (imagined or realized) interventionist objectives and potentials, which develop around, and in turn foster, the unequal distribution of disposing/being disposed.

On the one hand, this allows for an understanding of individual media as *dispositifs*. Contrary to other assemblages or things, media involve heterogeneous constellations that are explicitly considered as problems for society/culture, while also being simultaneously transformed, reformed, and improved to become instruments to intervene into society/culture. On the other hand, however, the concept of *dispositif* undermines the assumed unity and identity of individual media. Instead of using the notion of *dispositif* to determine the features (or affordances) of distinct entities, the concept can perhaps be better used to analyze the problematizations that incite the ongoing transformations of media and the productive interrelations between them. The practices of audiences and users, of amateurs and professionals, are all constitutive elements of a *dispositif*. The most relevant question, then, is not whether any particular group uses the technology in a surprising, unintended manner or whether they undermine the established disposition of elements, but whether they either propagate an existing problematization adding new answers to established questions by simply rearranging the elements or establish a field of possible answers for completely new questions.

## Notes

1 Abe Geil, Toni Pape, and Jan Teurlings read earlier versions of this chapter and gave essential feedback, including relevant references and core arguments. Johan

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- 2 For key texts of this debate and critical perspectives on it, see Rosen 1986; De Lauretis and Heath 1980; Winkler 1992. Some of the texts explicitly distinguish between apparatus and *dispositif* as two different aspects of cinema's heterogeneous ensemble (e.g., Baudry 1970). In the more general conceptual discussion on *dispositif* in French and Italian texts, *dispositif* also is contrasted with the term "apparatus" as used, for instance, in Marxism (Bussolini 2010).
- 3 Within the space of this article I cannot discuss in detail how Foucault's later work—and governmentality studies more generally—relate to the concept of *dispositif*. Although the concept is used less often, its analytical potential is still very much present, e.g., in Foucault's distinction of technique and technology (2007, 22–5).