
WSCHODNI ROCZNIK HUMANISTYCZNY
TOM XVI (2019), №1
s. 159-166
doi: 10.36121/bguzowska.16.2019.1.159

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Individuals in a network society – opportunities and threats

Annotation: Contemporary network society combined with accompanying new technologies lead to a radical change in the perception of places, time and dimensions of human existence. A specific kind of a visual collage contributes to spaces of places being replaced by the spaces of flows. Many of the current categories are redefined and the postmodern man needs new vectors that will allow him to move around the surrounding ‘infostrada’ freely and also find his place in the „wired” reality.

Keywords: network society, privacy, network, virtuality, information, new technologies.

Jednostka w społeczeństwie sieciowym – szanse i zagrożenia

Streszczenie: Współczesne społeczeństwo sieciowe wraz z towarzyszącymi mu nowymi technologiami prowadzi do radykalnej zmiany w postrzeganiu miejsc, czasu czy też wymiarów ludzkiej egzystencji. Swoistego rodzaju wizualne *collage* sprawiają, że przestrzenie miejsc zastępowane są przestrzeniami przepływów. Wiele dotychczasowych kategorii ulega przedefiniowaniu, a ponowoczesny człowiek potrzebuje nowych wektorów pozwalających swobodnie poruszać się po otaczającej go infostradzie, a także odnaleźć swoje miejsce w „okablowanej” rzeczywistości.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczeństwo sieciowe, prywatność, sieć, wirtualność, informacja, nowe technologie.

Человек в сетевом обществе - возможности и угрозы

Аннотация: Современное сетевое общество вместе с сопровождающими его новыми технологиями приводит к радикальным изменениям в восприятии мест, времени или измерения человеческого существования. Вид визуального коллажа означает, что пространства мест заменены пространствами потоков. Многие предыдущие категории переопределены, и постмодернистским людям нужны новые векторы, которые позволяют им свободно передвигаться по окружающему их инфостраде, а также находить свое место в «проводной» реальности.

Ключевые слова: сетевое общество, конфиденциальность, сеть, виртуальность, информация, новые технологии.

Many contemporary researches of culture highlight that the development of new communication technologies as well as the omnipresence of socio-cultural connection networks constitute a real revolution which is a beginning of a civilisation's change. The revolution in the domain of the information and communication features a progress of a digital language whereas „the convergence in the system of the codes, the information and communication technology is *par excellence* a cultural phenomenon of the end of the 20th century. [...] If the society focuses on its own representation than the material substance, if it mainly develops symbols rather than forms the content – this society works in a cultural sphere – while using industrial means to accomplish this goal.”¹

All aspects of the present-day and yesterday cultures make use of the digital technology as a medium. It allows us to present new areas, broaden our horizons through sharing spaces unattainable before and accelerating the communication. It also leads however to a re-interpretation of reality, altering the parameters of human existence while making our environment more dynamic, yet unstable, and it influences the creation of a new type of society.

Nowadays, in the social studies, we encounter an overwhelmingly vast range of terms for different societies such as: a postmodern society, a consumerist society, as well as a risk society, a society of media, a network society and information society. In this array of terminological options, we could observe a discernible factor determining the essence of each of them. We could divide them into different categories defining them such as: the risk, consumption, media, information, acceleration etc. On the one hand, focusing only on a one specific detail and deconstructing them like this makes it more difficult to make a holistic analysis. On the other hand, it allows us to describe or study a particular cultural era more easily. While writing about a society of networks, we need to highlight the risk of oversimplifications which are inevitable when attempting to describe such a multi-aspect and complex issue.

The most highly referenced is the concept of the society of networks by Manuel Castells, the most notable aspect of which is using advanced communication technologies in global networks of socio-cultural connections. Castells while describing the phenomenon of network society begins from defining the network itself: „A network is a set of interconnected nodes. [...] What a node is, concretely speaking, depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak. They are stock exchange markets and their ancillary advanced services centers, the network of global financial flows [...]. They are television systems, entertainment studios, computer graphics milieux, news teams, and mobile devices generating, transmitting and receiving signals in the global new media at the roots of cultural expression and public opinion in the Information Age”².

A network is, among others, a system related to today's overlapping transformation processes concerning communication and transmission of symbolic goods which are the essence of a new branch of capitalism. A network is also „a means of communication, a platform to exchange information, a new agora where important events take place, not only political but also economic and – maybe even most of all – social. [...].

¹ F. Mayor, *The World Ahead: Our Future in the Making* accessed as translated by J. Wolf, A. Janik, W. Rabczuk, Fundacja Studiów i Badań Edukacyjnych Publishing House, Warsaw 2001, p. 302.

² M. Castells, *Network Society*, accessed by the author as translated by M. Marody, K. Pawluś, & J. Sławiński, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2011, p. 492.

The internet and its role and functioning are becoming a fundamental metaphor of today's civilisation"³. Networks are undoubtedly open systems which could expand in any direction and absorbing new elements to their structures.

The global range of networks significantly influences most of the current socio-cultural processes. The culture has a *meta* nature because, as highlighted by Wojciech Burszta „it creates a parallel world of imagination, a possibility of total expression, simultaneity of texts in tens of different media forms, multiple languages and opposite social situations”⁴. New media more and more prominently take part in the processes of communication while using advanced digital technologies indispensable to function in the modern, wired world. In a broad sense, the access to the culture, contacting people and business activities could all be managed largely by the products of the digital revolution and networks of social connections. Despite the fact that „while cyberspace may not be a place in a traditional sense, it is a social arena in which millions of people are beginning to engage one another in human discourse. Much of the human civilization is going to occur in electronic worlds”⁵.

Among many aspects in the sphere of networks activity, we could indicate multiple controversial and unwarranted phenomena influencing human life and leading to an identity loss, infantilisations as well as a loss of privacy and blurring the lines between reality and the virtual world to list a few. The development of networks undoubtedly resulted in a deepening dissonance between the global and local matters or between a network and an individual. This particular gap between an individual and a network is also an effect of that „the new social order, the network society, increasingly appears to most people as a meta-social disorder. Namely, as an automated, random sequence of events, derived from the uncontrollable logic of markets, technology, geopolitical order, or biological determination”⁶. It seems that the current presence of new technologies networks is explained by the total concept of culture combining a communication perspective with the awareness of how inevitable is thoroughly considering the scalability and various dependencies of social phenomena.

A definite downside of the society is blindly following technological advancements which often forces an individual to be in a sort of a technological enslavement, losing creativity and becoming dangerously dependent on the consumerist world. While noticing the effect of the ICT revolution on the humankind and the culture, Castells indicates that „all kinds of messages are included in the medium since it has become so omnipresent, diverse and yet susceptible that in a one multimedia text it could absorb the totality of human experiences, the past, the presence and the future”⁷.

³ M. Muraszkievicz, *Esej: Nowy paradygmat, czyli od systemu do sieci*, p.2, www.bbc.uw.edu.pl. Many of today's phenomena such as management, sales, finance, alliances, diplomacy are analysed in the context of processes taking place and their dependencies. As highlighted by the author „In this way we can better understand the dynamics of these phenomena as well as their complexity while at the same time it makes it easier to propose improvements. The network approach certainly shows some holistic ambitions, it is after all about a possibly total perception of this phenomenon with all of its advantages and disadvantages” Ibid.

⁴ W.J. Burszta, *Świat jako więzienie kultury. Pomyślenia*, PIW, Warsaw 2008, p. 120.

⁵ J. Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism*, accessed by the author as translated by E. Kania, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 2003, p. 248.

⁶ M. Castells, *Network society*, p. 498.

⁷ Idem. *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, „The Rise of the Network Society 1996,

The excess of information that we could observe in today's world Jean Baudrillard called an ecstasy of information which is a result of the pace and volatility of messages being sent. „The media multiply events, 'pushing' the meaning – events no longer have their own space-time; they are immediately captured in universal diffusions, and there they lose their meanings, they lose their references and their space-time [...]. And, from this point on, all that is left is a kind of 'neutered' passion, a stupefaction in front of the sequences, the events, the messages etc., which can no longer have any meaning because there is no time.”⁸

Media being an intermediary introduces a state of limbo of sorts for the meaning of events, it forces each media message to be considered as the most important, practically taken out from reality and put in the world of hyperreality. This hyperreality is accompanied by a process of implosion for what is social to form a mass, the predominant means of which are the new technologies. The plethora of information combined with the pace and volatility of the messages sent causes for people to be disorientated in the reality they find themselves in. The overwhelming amount of informational stimuli is leading to individuals becoming indifferent, passive and apathetic and not being able to complete a task surpassing their abilities.

Another disadvantage of a network society and the subsequent dominance of new technologies is blurring the line between the private and the public, internal and external – the edges were removed making our personal lives public and compressing all our images, spaces as well as our daily scenes into one dimension of information.

The modern aspect of privacy is a topic raised innumerable times in both academic discourse as well as the public. We are dealing with sort of a paradox where on the one side, we are accentuating the need for anonymity and privacy while on the other hand, the access to the Internet makes us vulnerable against losing both. Many of current phenomena related the development of network society demands a deepened reflection regarding the aspect of privacy, its boundaries and protection⁹.

The right to privacy is a universal right in Polish, international and European law. Although in the beginning of the previous century, it was reserved only to certain privileged social circles. It was only at the close of the 19th century when researchers began to speak of the right to privacy to every individual. Discussions on this topic were undoubtedly provoked by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis who, in their article

vol. 1, Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers, p. 339.

⁸ *Game with Vestiges*, Jean's Baudrillard interview by Salvatore Mele and Mark Titmarsh, accessed by the author as translated [in]: *Postmodernizm a filozofia. Wybór tekstów*, S. Czerniak, & A. Szahaj (Eds.), Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warsaw 1996, p. 209. The indulgence of images and symbols surrounding us forms in fact a new, hyperreality since „Today everyday political, social, historical, economic is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism; we already live out the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality. (...) There is no longer a fiction that life can confront, even in order to surpass it; reality has passed over into the play of reality, radically disenchanted, the 'cool' cybernetic phase supplanting the 'hot' and phantasmatic... (...) Today, the real and the imaginary, are confounded in the same operational totality, and aesthetic fascination is simply everywhere.” J. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, p. 146.

⁹ See M. Popiołek, *Indywidualne zarządzanie prywatnością w serwisach społecznościowych – zarys problemu w kontekście rozważań dotyczących społeczeństwa informacyjnego*, „Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy” 2018, issue 53, p. 217 <https://depot.ceon.pl> (accessed 01-05-2019)

titled *The Right to Privacy*, defined privacy as a „right to be left alone”¹⁰. Privacy is a notion full of contradictions, difficult to clarify and allowing for multiple ways of interpretation. This aspect concerning is both every individual’s right and a space for autonomic activity. Marek Safjan highlights that „privacy needs to be protected precisely because each individual has a right to have exclusive control over the part of life which does not concern other people and where the freedom from curiosity of others is a *conditio sine qua non* for a unencumbered development of that individual”¹¹.

Modern threats to privacy concern mostly new technologies being developed, especially the Internet, and so the possibility to gather information about an individual increases. On the Internet, it is becoming progressively more difficult to keep private since the afore-mentioned network was not created with an aim of protecting the privacy or anonymity of its users. It needs to be highlighted that tracking our activity and using our data is nothing unusual for the internet applications and „when we start protesting, we hear it is too late: there will be no other Internet.”¹² Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, hit the nail on the head when he said that the rise of social media usage means that people no longer expect privacy. Additionally, it is worth noting that in the society of information and network „the basic measure for the ability to influence one’s life is the information relating to it. This power of information is the biggest threat to privacy”¹³. We can safely say that in the 21st century, privacy is a kind of a luxury available to a handful of individuals (who share with the network only a virtual interpretation of their identity).

Jan von Dijk highlights that currently we mention personal data protection more frequently than the actual privacy protection which undoubtedly leads to a narrowing of the idea of privacy. Differences in the perception of privacy do not simply boil down to a different understandings of the same term but different definitions and scope of the issue etc. some of them concern family life, various personal preferences, beliefs and so on. This diversity is perfectly illustrated by the vast array of rules, practices, mechanisms as well as strategies regarding creating the sphere of personal privacy and attempting to protect it. Especially now, when we can observe so much ignorance in the area of privacy protection for both ourselves and other users. While analysing the process of fading or crossing the boundaries of privacy, we should take note of the possible dangerous consequences of that, such as: political repressions, weakening of democracy, increase in the social inequality, as well as the decline in quality of life for certain people and lowering their self-esteem etc.

The network society creates a new forms of vulnerabilities, starting with computer viruses ending with weapons and destructive ideologies flowing uncontrollably to an unprecedented level. It creates a new reality where „relationship between local and global forces, [...] between traditional culture and a multi-ethnic reality set an agenda

¹⁰ See. S. D. Warren, L. D. Brandeis, *The Right to Privacy*, „Harvard Law Review” December 1890, vol. IV, pp. 193-220.

¹¹ M. Safjan, *Prawo do ochrony życia prywatnego*, in: *Szkola Praw Człowieka*, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Warsaw 2006, p. 211.

¹² F. Brunton, H. Nissenbaum, *Obsfucation: A User’s Guide for Privacy and Protest*, accessed by the author as translated by J. Konieczny, PWN, Warsaw 2016, p. 7.

¹³ M. Pryciak, *Prawo do prywatności*, p. 228. www.bibliotekacyfrowa.pl/content/37379/011.pdf (accessed 24-06-2019)

[...] It also creates a new *existential situation* for many people, who may (or have to) re-define themselves from day to day, in a context which lacks stability and predictability, where people are both free to choose and unfree not to choose."¹⁴ Electronical revolution as well as the phenomenon of multinationalism with all of its tensions, conflicts and hybrid forms find their counterpart in a fragmentary, multi-coloured, messy and wired world where new technologies „sever culture from place, people from ready-made stories about who they are and what they can become, work from the working place, consumption from routine, education from standard templates, knowledge from established models about what counts as knowledge.”¹⁵

The current culture is described in the context of networks, new technologies, and axiological pluralism as well as being defined through the prism of continuous translation and reediting of previous meanings. This type of transformation occurs usually through graphical illustrations, topical variations as well as through parody and quoting in a supporting or uplifting the initial context etc. In this sense strategies popularised through new technologies „could be read as ‘a partial transformation’ and treated as a translation strategy in the broadest possible understanding. From this point of view, a culture stimulated by the new media could be called a culture of an unfinished translation. Unfinished because it is realising only part of its potential leaving an opportunity for new types of transformation.”¹⁶

New information and communication technologies consist of new production, distribution and culture consumption techniques. It is very often that the scope and way of expressing new possibilities available to users, especially since „we did not refine the rules of rendering which would allow our sensitivity to fluently adapt to the multi-level hybrid reality created by the new media.”¹⁷ The aspect of hybrid reality as a descriptive category is a mix of various criteria, fictional as well as musical or related to images. Moreover, the so-called light entertainment enters the area of serious art, and advertisements permeating into film narrations. Technical basis for this hybrid of media messages (especially television) causes, as indicated by Ewa Rewers, a departure from a „concept of subsequent complete divided programs in order to keep an uninterrupted flow of information consisting of segments similar to information units in a mechanical transmission rather than a traditional narration and their genres.”¹⁸ The tendency to abbreviate forms, matching television times with the everyday life as well as the inevitable fragmentation lead to an unlimited hybridisation, the effects of which could be e.g. pastiche or irony. Hence new media are often considered as a means of communication able to anticipate new perspectives on solutions for issues concerning a socio-cultural reality or the virtual world. A continuous excess and stacking of news leads to a creation of a schematic framework and many abbreviations. In a situation when the recipients of various information have less and less time, journalists need to edit out and abbreviate.

In the surrounding us information network, we start to miss a sort of a filtering option, a set of criteria which would allow us to differentiate useful information

¹⁴ T.H. Eriksen, *Tyranny of the moment: Fast and slow time in the information age* p. 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 49.

¹⁶ E. Rewers, *Nowe media – kultura niedokończonych translacji*, „Kultura Współczesna” 1998, issue 1, p. 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.46.

from unnecessary, knowledge from noise. In other words, as written by Eriksen: „when growing amounts of information are distributed a growing speed, it becomes increasingly difficult to create narratives, orders, developmental sequences. The fragments threaten to become hegemonic. This has consequences for the ways we relate to knowledge, work and lifestyle in a wide sense. Cause and effect, internal organic growth, maturity and experience are all under heavy pressure in this situation”¹⁹.

Nowadays, the culture due to quick changes and the development of networks became a true *lingua franca*. Hence cultural policies of the future should lead to revitalisation of cultural, individual and collective activity. Cyberspace as well as network societies and virtual cultures which we form do not exist outside our reality. Their existence in everyday life forces us to make efforts to develop appropriate mechanisms allowing us to benefit from the opportunities as well as to deal with the risks the modern man is facing. It is necessary to ensure that the access to new technologies, new infrastructures of information was both local and a global enterprise integrating cultures and societies. Since the cultural exclusion constitutes „one of the biggest epidemics which will need to be battled against during the next several dozens of years since this kind of phenomenon cannot, due to our indifference, lead to a cultural deprivation and a tragic surge in a culture of violence and aggression.”²⁰

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¹⁹ T.H. Eriksen, *Tyranny of the Moment* p 160.

²⁰ F. Mayor, *The world ahead*, p. 313

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