SOCIAL DIVISION AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

'The Digital Revolution' that fundamentally changed the concepts of space, time and groups, leading to the transformation of the traditional society into a modern society, based on information, technology and the Internet – *The digital era* – also caused a profound social division. It was generated by the digital divide, which regards inequalities in terms of the access to information via Internet, the extent of use, knowing the information search strategies, the quality of the technical connections and the social support, the ability to evaluate the quality of the information and the diversity of use. On the one hand, we shall emphasize the need for the global citizen's free access to the new technologies that provide information and generate cultural progress and, on the other hand, we shall highlight some of the risks involved by the digital world that the population has to face in terms of symbolic violence, in the context where the more pronounced are the socio-cultural and educational differences, the more ample become their forms of manifestation.

Keywords: digital divide, social division, symbolic violence, vulnerability, risk of victimization

1. Introduction

This era is based on information and its quick processing by means of technology and Internet. The transition to the digital sphere was made extremely fast, in a relatively short period of time. It is amazing that as rapid has the transformation been so far, as rapid or even more accelerated it is expected to be from now on; this metamorphosis has a strong aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, political, social and, last but not least, economic influence on the human nature and the global society. Kirby argues that "These new technologies can be identified as having a significant impact on four key spheres of today's economy and society – finance, production, trade and communication." [1]

On one hand, it turned out that the possibility of access to the latest scientific and technical innovations has multiple advantages, facilitating both the procurement as well as the assimilation of essential information on labour efficiency in a competitive context at national and global level, involving some

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recognition and valorisation potential, as well as the access to the universal cultural heritage. However, on the other hand, one simple question, which has not been answered yet, is being raised: What are the risks the human entity is facing in the context of this digital and informational explosion, which is extremely difficult to monitor? This question also reflects other questions, such as: Who are the beneficiaries of this trend and who are those who cannot afford or cannot adapt to such *becoming*? What part of the sphere of human relations is eliminated or reduced in order to allow the expansion of this *digitization* on more plans (often automatist and impersonal)? Can we talk about its need for assuring the harmonious individual psycho-socio-professional development in a professional psycho-social individual and strengthening the inter-human relations? But what is the meaning we can attach to *collective balance* in this context? Which type of normative model does the contemporary social actor relate to: the traditional or the modern one? Or one of the digital world? Some people perceive the digital era as being equivalent to the transition from an autocratic system to democracy. Or the periods of transition themselves are the most demanding for the general population, since they require the ongoing learning of new patterns of social cohabitation, new scales of social evaluation and control, they require the understanding and management of the inherent conflicts that arise because the systems of thought and operation change. "Labels such as 'information society', 'knowledge economy', 'network society', or 'new economy' seek to capture this dimension of today's economic and social order. (…) central to these structural features are the gross inequalities of wealth, technological knowledge and political power that characterise today's capitalist order more than ever before." [1, p. 102]

All these lead to the concept of social division, caused by the digital divide. One may notice that there are two distinct segments of the population: a segment that has easy access to comprehensive, timely and diversified information, which develops in parallel with the innovative progress, and another segment of the population that either does not have the possibility to access such opportunities (and ultimately the information), or has limited or even restricted access. People's limited or restricted access to information may be marked, among others, by cultural and educational stagnation, increasing unemployment, labour migration, decreased quality of life, increased social inequalities and the increasingly large differentiation between the social classes, social exclusion and the marginalization of certain social groups (in terms of age, professional training, belonging to an isolated community from the geographical and thus informational point of view, limited access to health services, etc.). These are only some of the factors underlying the problem, which will be difficult to manage for the next 20 years in Europe and beyond. And then, in terms of the collective good and the collective interest, how is this type of development perceived by the different social groups? This is examined in the context where, in order to develop and strengthen a possible society of the *being*, as Fromm argues, first of all it is necessary for everyone to assume their status,

directly carry out their role of citizens and actively take part in the process of economic development [2].

The aim of this article is to highlight some of the digitization elements that lead to the deepening of the social gap in the contemporary society, and to draw a possible evolutionary, reflective model of the future society.

2. The digital era and the contemporary society

Within the perpetual change faced by the society, the information has proven to be primordial, and the era we belong to is characterized by people's ability to diffuse information without restriction and to have access to information in a way that was impossible in the past. This new perspective, which highlights the multiple possibilities of obtaining information and education due to the technology and Internet, is marked by a 'digital revolution', which has fundamentally changed the concepts of space, time, group, individual/collective interest, private/public right and led to the transformation of the traditional society into a modern society based on information, technology and the Internet – *The digital era*. The most controversial of all the elements that have undergone the changes (through inclusion, overlap and confusion) is the problem of the current state of the human consciousness, a problem that we will revert to along the paper. As Kirby argues, the cultural aspect has the quickest impact on the consciousness in the context of globalization [1, p.103].

As a merit of the technology developed by man over the years, the Internet, which nowadays has great influence on humanity, developed in a relatively short but dense and accelerated period of time, made of four phases. *During the first phase* (1960-1980), it was only used by scientists, politicians and academic researchers, and was considered a state secret. *During the second phase* (1987-1992), the Internet was opened to the general public. *The third phase* (1992-1996), "began with the creation of the *http* protocol, based on which appeared the Word Wide Web and the search engines, which allowed users to search for documents that were connected within networks via hyperlinks" [3]. In this phase, a powerful and easy to use global information system was built, and the general public, as well as the public and private sectors joined the system as part of the social and occupational reality. Thus, communication and the collection and transmission of information and documents became extremely easy by means of Internet. *During the fourth phase* (called the development phase), which characterizes the contemporary world, the Internet helps organize virtual communities, which cooperate and compete in various structures, such as social websites, web services, file sharing between users, etc. The most important rule in this phase launches the following goal: "to build applications that use the network effect in order to attract more people to use them" [3].

The Internet can be viewed from two distinct perspectives, that of communicational and informational support and that of means for social manifestation. The computerization of everyday life does not only regard the

communication processes, but also the involvement of information and communication technology in more and more activities, in all the areas of the society: professional, domestic, public and private. From the perspective of the informational paradigm, Breton says that one can understand the Internet and the society in which it develops by including the real into the relational and the relational into the informational. Consequently, a cult of the Internet is developed, deriving from the cult of information, "which is based on a number of beliefs (...) into a single factor. The starting point and the centre of irradiation of this belief is the vision of a world whose only reality, only truth would be the information." [4]

The Internet and other information technologies can be important resources for the development and social mobilization, as opposed to injustice (and the violent forms of power over the individual), and the expression of diversity and creativity. It is a tool that eases the laborious work in the all areas of activity and facilitates information diffusion; on the other hand, it can have a direct impact on humanity and morality. In essence, the aim of developing these technologies and the Internet is to support the people of the world in having quick and easy access, at acceptable costs, which would help to create egalitarian societies. Among other things, the easier access to educational and health services development, the local businesses and the public participation to information were intended to contribute to better governance and poverty eradication. However, the number of those excluded from the area of the services offered by the Internet is fairly high. Internet access does not occur with equal results; as a consequence, there are social and economic differentiations, and the civil society organizations, the governments, as well as the regulatory agencies must take into account the possibility that these inequalities social differentiations might deepen from the perspective involved by the digital universe. In addition to the social differences, this age brings an indirect change; it changes the individuals' roles and social statuses, their ways of action and reporting to the concrete, of reporting to the other/others, changes their way of communicating their experiences, feelings and desires. „We 'identify' (provide identities) to each other, and this is a crucial (although not the only) variable in the complex game of the construction of personal identities, especially when the opportunities to socialise are multiplied and modified by new information technologies." [5]

3. Social division in the Digital age

This new concept of 'digital divide' has emerged, as we have mentioned earlier, along with the spread of the new technologies and the Internet as means of mass communication, identifying the inequalities regarding these means of mass communication, at individual and collective level.

Some authors consider that the digital divide is the "underutilization of computers and the Internet by those that have a disadvantaged socio-economic background and who are disconnected from the technological resources for

various reasons. These digital divides can be noticed in terms of educational level, race and ethnicity, gender, age and even geography." [6] This first definition of the digital divide concept marks a differentiation between the social categories in terms of their educational, social, ethnic, and geographical status, and so on. It does not highlight the notion of social inequality, which develops a much larger set of differentiations between individuals. Moreover, other researchers believe that the Internet is the determining factor of this form of social difference. "*Digital divide* represents the inequalities in terms of the access to the Internet, the extent of use, knowing the information search strategies, the quality of the technical connections and the social support, the ability to assess the quality of information and, last but not least, the diversity of use" [7], namely „the unequal access to *knowledge in the information society*…There are at least three senses of knowledge: *to know with what* (access to tools), *to know what* (access to information) and *to know how* (how to use this tools)…the *geography* of the digital divide approaches the way the relationship between knowledge and space proves to be uneven across multiple scales." [8]

Social inequality brings the attention on two social classes, by comparing them: the ones with poor access to information and Internet, and, by contrast, the ones with large access to information and Internet. Thus, this term of social inequality practically emphasizes the differences that arise between regions and individuals, between social groups and individuals and between individuals in terms of the access to technology and the Internet on the one hand and, on the other hand, in terms of its use, gradually leading to a sub-concept called 'social digital divide' or simply 'social division'.

This sub-concept is particularly relevant as we analyze the typology of the digital divide. Such a typology is brought to our attention by Norris, who suggests three types of digital divide: "global digital divide – the gap in terms of Internet access between the developed countries and the developing countries; social digital divide – takes into consideration the difference in terms of information and Internet access between the poor and the rich in every country; democratic digital divide - highlights the difference between those who use and those who do not use the digital resources in order to participate in the public life" [9].

Referring only to the social division, it suggests a clear division between two groups characterized by a significant distance, which is difficult to reduce since it occurs along with the development of technology. It refers to essential inequalities between those who are included and those who are excluded, and suggests that this distance is constantly changing in reality, promoting technological determinism.

We cannot say that this distance was only created by technology and the Internet; actually it was always there because a simple segment of the population, marked by poverty, lack of education and cultural deficiencies brought along both adaptive inability and reduced integrative possibility, as well as ignorance, indifference or simply distrust (in the context of low self-esteem). For example, certain categories "doubt their ability to master the complexity of

computers and the Internet" [10]; on the other hand, financial well-being, education and specific culture brought along involvement, the desire for self-fulfilment, for continuous improvement, development, etc. Moreover, when technology was marked by an upward curve, this social distance became greater because a segment of the population, marked by poverty, lack of education, and cultural deficiencies and so on, either did not have any possibilities to access such opportunities and ultimately to access information or had limited or even restricted access, or they did not have the ability to understand their importance in the context where their basic needs were not fully met. The vulnerability and marginalization of this segment of the population is enhanced by the social distance created by the limited access to information in the new conditions and in an ever-changing society where "culture is the site of struggle between meaning and power, as existing power elites seek to legitimise the social order over which they preside by presenting it as embodying perennial and superior values while those marginalised by that order contest its legitimacy through the use of alternative values and social imaginaries" [1, p. 102]. The category which is subject to the risk of victimization and exclusion includes "the people from poor neighbourhoods, unskilled workers and rural suburban communities. Also, elderly people with low educational levels outside the labour market and the educational institutions, as well as women and ethnic minorities are more likely to have less access, physically and materially, to computers and the Internet." [11]

A substantial part of the population segment represented by those who had easy access to technology and Internet, and proved ability to understand, analyze and synthesize information, used the information obtained for personal and social development and, last but not least, for the development of the society as a whole. As a consequence, the polarization occurred in a natural and fast way, increasing the difference between the social classes. "Inequality regarding the access to and use of the Internet reproduces other types of already existing inequalities, the 'privileged' social categories. (...) Moreover, Internet usage growth is higher in the case of those social categories that already have high utilization skills, thus indicating the potential of deepening these inequalities in time, if there is no appropriate intervention of the programs that facilitate the access and the development of usage abilities." [12]

Moreover, the social division is much more pronounced in the countries with lower levels of economic development than in the developed countries. In developing or poor countries, the social distance is greater; in this context, there is the likelihood of greater polarization. Thus, according to the e-inclusion level, there are several features designed to distinguish between countries: "the availability and cost of digital technology in each country, the global level of literacy and education, the language skills of the population, English language knowledge in particular, the level of democracy (freedom of expression), the power to promote the policies of the information society in general, and the access to information technology in particular" [13]. Europe 2020 Strategy, for example, includes, among the seven major initiatives, the 'Digital Agenda for

Europe', which stipulates the (universal) access to fast internet until the year 2020 (at least 30 Mbps), and that in over 50% of the European households the internet speed should exceed 100 Mbps in order to stimulate smart growth [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_ro.htm].

4. The growth of symbolic violence in the context of social division

This social division, which implicitly brings along social differences, also marks changes for both segments of the population at personal, identity and social level. Thus, various categories of persons from both segments show a high degree of vulnerability to symbolic violence and the risk of being easily manipulated either as a consequence of informational deficit or because of the ingestion of distorted representations of the reality in a short period of time without having sufficient abilities to process the information. Moreover, as Floridi argues, the nature of the interactions, memory, space, time and perception undergo distortions: „Now, ICTs are the most powerful technologies to which selves have ever been exposed. They induce radical modifications (a reontologisation) of the contexts (constraints and affordances) and praxes of self-poiesis, by enhancing the corporeal membrane, empowering the cognitive membrane, and extending the consciousness membrane." [5, p. 561]

The perspective on own culture is influenced by receiving a multitude of information, images, signs, codes from all over the world, the social identity acquiring new meanings. Regarding the overlap of the cultural elements, what is important is also the basic matter, the level of education, group affiliation, tradition, religion, social, economic and political context and, last but not least, the designed direction for personal development.

The complexity of contemporary violence increases the vulnerability of the societies in the face of this phenomenon, especially since the growth of the population at global level intensifies both the struggle for resources as well as the desire for power, influence and (political, economic, religious, etc.) control over the masses. "Symbolic violence is thus the occult societal violence, which ensures the domination system and gives legitimacy to the process of self-reproduction of the power relations." [14] The issue of preventing and managing social eruptions that degenerate into widespread violence is one of the global issues of primary interest. "While identity politics has won new recognition and rights for women, indigenous peoples, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and speakers of minority languages around the world, it has also fuelled highly destructive forms of political action such as terrorist and communal violence, and mafia gangs." [1, p.123] Religious fanaticism, postmodern terrorism and the perpetual dehumanization of the individual influenced by media culture are some reference points in analyzing the state of the global society. Among the risks faced by the modern digitized society, we note the fact that the Internet facilitates the creation and development of actual communities that share destructive desires, from human trafficking networks, prostitution, paedophilia, drug trafficking, to extremist ethnic and/or racial and religious networks. The

influence of globalization, namely the outcomes of globalization, are more and more obvious both in the restructuring of the collective mind, especially regarding the new scale of assessing the personal behaviours and actions in the context of the discrepancies, as well as in terms of the access to (material or spiritual) resources. These influences lead to the re-shaping of the social identity and of the consciousness. The consciousness is closely related to the quantity and quality of knowledge accumulated if we take into consideration the fact that "what we call 'reality' is only a reflection of the world, developed by our brains. When our knowledge increases, our acquisitions not only increase, but are also reorganized." [15] The self created during the primary socialization and the introverted reality were built on the educational grounds that were transmitted from generation to generation. However, in this socio-cultural context appear the normative co-generational influences (of the cultures and sub-cultures it interacts with) that shape the psycho-social identity of the human being. On one hand, the unrestricted access to information in the virtual environment provides the opportunity of exceeding the level of training/education/development conferred by the family, the community and the social environment (as role and status). However, on the other hand is the risk of differentiated absorption of the messages and the risk of 'interpreting the reality' communicated by the initiators and producers of signs, causing an overlap between reality and fiction in the symbolic universe [1, p. 109].

In addition to the specific elements related to race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, etc., also appear the inherent risks and vulnerabilities related to the socio-economic, political and institutional environment the individual belongs to. „The diagnosis of vulnerability and violence (…) concluded that they scarcely derive from the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that have been shrinking our world (thereby rejecting a technological determinism), but rather from the conditions created by the public authorities, who have shaped the ways these ICTs impact the society." [1, p. 129] It is known that political decision-makers use the new technologies especially for disseminating ideologies and manipulating the entire social world: "separating conflict and symbolic violence against the social from politics is equivalent to defining politics out of its own essence" [14, p. 101]. And only the transition from a 'spectator democracy' to a 'participatory democracy' would ensure the escape from the authoritarian manipulation, be it industrial or political [2].

5. Thoughts on several risks of digitization and conclusions

The current state of the global society can be characterized by remarkable scientific progress, but equally holds the features of a moral crisis, stagnation and sometimes even a downfall in the development of the individual. Structural violence and instrumental violence give more and more satisfaction to all the forms of symbolic violence. Man no longer seems to raise the issue of becoming a mere tool, or a machine designed to produce goods in the context of the increased demand of the consumer market, or a simple elector (who 'has been

brainwashed') needed by the political system for ensuring its continuity. The transformation of man into a socially passive and consumerist individual is the ideal pattern for the political agent and, why not, in many cases, for the educational agent. Not so much the shaping as the manipulation become increasingly facile; on the one hand, because those who consume excessive media are offered more entertainment, talk shows, etc. and, on the other hand, because they are being held in the 'imaginary/built reality', which lacks real information, as long as possible. The risk is that the individual fails to correctly identify his essential needs, to coherently relate to the others and to the social system that they must define together. He no longer finds himself and, even worse, has all the premises of rapidly turning into an *assisted* person and a victim of the system, in which situation he expects the reaction of the others. He expects to be told *how, where* and *when* to take action without passing the actions through the filter of his conscience because it has already been affected. The more restricted is the access to information, the more increased are the chances of symbolic abuse on the person, who easily becomes the victim of an political ideology which he feels he is found of (out of the desire to build his self-image and his role in the overall social reality).

But who are the others in the virtual environment - the opinion leaders? Increasingly more evidence shows that those who take fast action in the virtual community are those who 'transform' the helping attitude into a self-centred attitude, transforming the vulnerability of others into a way of self development and assertion. Character weakness is even more obvious as he tries to impose supremacy and to manipulate by discovering or learning about his neighbour's needs and weaknesses. The frustration of the abused may subsequently generate aggressive behaviours; thus, the circle of violence is continuously maintained.

However, regarding the activation in the digital world, we believe that any citizen of the world needs unrestricted access to technology and the Internet, but with certain interfaces, selection filters and specific education regarding their use (according to age, level of understanding, intellectual capacity, degree of discernment, emotional maturity, etc.). We believe that an essential part of the responsibility lies with the producers of media and networks, sites, web services, etc., because there are no sanctions in the virtual world, and many of those who seek to violate the social norms successfully develop communities in this parallel space. Last but not least, the adults, as parents or trainers, must be aware that they have the responsibility to keep watch over what the minors – the future social actors - access (and the time they dedicate to the virtual environment) in order to prevent the risk of having them become victims of excessive consumption and of the abusers. They have to encourage the activities that are specific for their age and for a harmonious development: more real and less virtual socialization (because not only do they block their imagination and creativity, but also generate handicaps regarding their interpersonal relations, their way of understanding their own self and the meaning of life), education for tolerance and multiculturalism, education against discrimination and social exclusion.

But the question is whether among those who provide education and training for the new generations of users there are already persons who bare *viruses,* who are isolated, alienated, trained by the media and the entire virtual environment, and who can only provide theoretical explanations, without having sufficient expertise in social practice? Or who, in turn, are instruments in the hands of the system and 'provide education' according to the interests pursued by the dominant political and economic groups? Each grown user should firstly appeal to reflexivity, intrapersonal dialogue and assumed decisions in order to be able to contribute to the development of a society that is '*based on being*'.

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