IDENTITY DESIGN AND PERSONAL UTILITY OF THE DESIGNERS

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Abstract

Social structure is generally maintained through specifically designed mechanisms controlling the distribution of power and resources in a given society. The most important aspect of any natural system is exchange of information and it is also valid for human societies. The process of communication is governed by specific rules which provide an individual or group with an opportunity to increase or maintain their utility. The human brain and its specific architecture, together with evolutionarily preconditioned thinking dispositions, create a situation in which people allow some members of a society to exercise inadequate power and achieve above-average personal utility. After our analysis, we can conclude with a theoretical assumption that this is an imperfection of the system which needs to be addressed and modified.

Keywords: utility, cognition, evolution, empathy, society

1. Introduction

As we entered 21st century, the world has truly become full of information. Mass media like print, radio and TV, in a comparison with the internet, might be seen as a humble beginning of the present age of information. Digital technologies can create, modify and multiply information at such a rate that no individual can ever process them all, and that is why we have to become selective when deciding which information will occupy our time and choose to process. Experience provides an individual with direct and indirect empirical knowledge and our understanding of the two translates into specific traits of individual and collectively shared identity. Consequently, our decisions and actions are shaped or even determined by this elusive, permanently updated, and easy to influence identity. It seems to us, if all parts of the peripheral and central nervous system work in an alignment, that the reality of one's self is real and quite reliable over time. This overwhelming reality of the self depends completely on the fact that the past cannot be changed. However, we need to admit that the past used to be the present in which many agents expressed their needs and adjusted it to their liking. Is it therefore possible, that our identity can

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be modified or even designed by other agents who exercise more control over the social environment we happen to live in? This is definitely true for the family environment and we think that we can come to a conclusion that it is also true for a society. Socialization is "a process of instilling in a child a set of desired behavioural habits" [1]. This process continues throughout our lives, although research shows that the social interaction in our early personal development is crucial for many aspects of our later emotional and mental life. We need to ask ourselves a few important questions: Who substitutes for the role of parents later in life and do they care about our well-being more than their own? What is the role an adult should play in a society and how much of his/her personal utility can be justifiably exploited by others? Possible answers to these questions were suggested by Immanuel Kant with his definition of enlightenment. He describes it as follows: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed non-age. Non-age is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This non-age is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (Sapere aude) Have the courage to use your own understanding, is therefore the motto of the enlightenment." [I. Kant, *What is enlightenment?*, http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html]

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the contemporary situation in modern societies from the perspective of the theory of social communication. We focus on the possibility of intentional manipulation of social structures which is achieved by controlling the information flow in the 1st stage of cognitive processes (perception). We know that human cognitive capacity is limited and the final representation of natural and social reality is significantly influenced by the quantity and quality of available information and experience. Those who control, change, or modify our experience can do it intentionally while improving their own personal utility.

2. The reality of human cognition - evolutionary perspective

At the beginning of human evolution, every aspect of an individual identity and the elements of collectively shared representations were, as it is in all other species today, determined by inherited genes, their individual expression, and finally by the specific experience of the subject. Today, on the other hand, we overwhelmingly benefit from the collective experience - stored knowledge which we can access through many types of media defined as "means by which something is communicated or expressed" [*Oxford Dictionary: Medium*, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/express# express __4]. Indirect empirical knowledge has become for us the main source of information when forming our understanding of natural and social reality. We claim that the individual ability to process available information lags behind their fast exponential growth and that the natural limits of the human mind cause an over-simplified representation of reality. This representation relies mostly on

affect heuristic which provides an easy shortcut in our information processing and consequent representational stage guiding the specific decision process [2]. We fall into even more complex illusory world and people who live in it can be divided into two basic binary categories in which we feel good or bad about an issue, person, or a group. We need to learn that the truth of a claim about any part of the reality is not exclusively dependant on our feelings although they will always precede the abstract analytical thinking. It is simply because evolution designed our brain in this way and we do not have to fall for so called Descartes' error because it was firmly established that "reduction in emotion may constitute an equally important source of irrational behaviour" [3]. There are certain mental faculties available to us and all we have to do is to use them with a single main objective of reaching an accurate interpretation of reality. The old and fixed ways of intuitive thinking might have been more useful in early stages of human evolution but they do not match the modern society and the world of new technologies which changes so rapidly as today. In fact, by application of simplified intuitive thinking, the general public puts itself into above mentioned Kant's self-imposed non-age in which it can be exploited by other members of a society. People's desires and emotions have been the primary target in marketing, public relations, and politics throughout history. Edward Bernays openly argued for implementation of these tools in a democratic society [4] and since his time they have been advanced almost to perfection. The reason is quite simple, because by alterations of emotional states it is much easier to influence the thinking and behaviour of individual members of the general public and to achieve desired outcomes in the process of designing a specific social system. The society then becomes more like a Pavlovian experiment as opposed to a society with reasoning and responsible individuals.

Evolution also caused an uneven development of concrete brain structures which relates to threats and that is why even a small amount of fear affects our behaviour more than any product of rational thought. This condition of the human mind has been exploited throughout history many times and it is unlikely that this natural condition is not or will not be exploited again. We would suggest that as far as people's behaviour will operate on the affective (intuitive) level the manipulation and control of the masses is inevitable. Global promotion of critical thinking concepts in education (e.g. Partnership for 21st century [*P21 and Pearson Foundation Launch 21st Century Learning Exemplar Program*, 2013, http://www.p21.org/exemplar-program-case-studies]) or their implementation into media literacy projects aims to achieve necessary change in this area but the results are so far quite disappointing. Dana Petranová claims that the most important function of media education is development of critical thinking skills [5]. Unfortunately, the concept of media literacy is so broad that the part which relates to information processing in human minds is generally overwhelmed by a focus on hardware and IT skills.

In our work, we try to avoid terminology which generates an undesirable emotional charge. We are convinced that the rules of social communication are generally valid in every culture thus explaining specific research phenomena

objectively and in every social structure. Of course, we do not argue for no social structure at all, but we try to set an axiomatic value of every member of human species which would define him/her as a subject with equal rights. These rights should not be confused with individual skills (such as physical or mental capacity) which might differ significantly among individuals, but these differences do not justify a transformation of a subject into a tool or object to be used by other members of local or global society. We identified four crucial evolutionary stages in the process of socialization which we mean to define as an adjustment to social structure and development of empathy. They can be described as follows: I do it 1) for me, 2) for us, 3) for you, 4) for them. The first stage includes an individual whose priority in life is to cover his own needs only. If the socialization process progresses and the subject's character evolves correctly, the individual recognizes that the family members should be granted with the same respect and rights as he/she requires for himself/herself. Later in life, we extend this abstract empathy circle over our friends and intimate partners. Finally, as a consequence of life experience or abstract rational thought we can realize that the empathy circle has to include community, nation, race, and if fully developed all members of humanity. We also understand that no other living being should be exposed to needless suffering. Ideally, any society should be governed by people who have achieved the final fourth stage of this development process and matured in empathy accordingly.

Frans de Waal tries to reconcile human morality with our animal nature in the discussion with other authors in the book Primates and Philosophers where he states that "no human moral society could be imagined without reciprocal exchange and an emotional interest in others" [6]. Exactly this emotional interest in others is the cornerstone of empathy which we were describing above, although it is far from being fully developed in the majority of human population globally.

3. Theory of social communication - implications of changes in the perception stage

The basic theoretical assumption of the theory of social communication is that '$\Delta pS + \Delta cS = \Delta rS \rightarrow \Delta Sb$ and ΔScm' where 'pS' represents the 1st stage of cognitive processes - perception (experience - direct and indirect empirical knowledge). Together with computation 'cS' (processing capacity) we get a representation of natural and social reality by a subject 'rS' which determines the subject's identity. It is in every sense a dependant variable of these two stages of cognitive processes. From the basis of our individual identity and its collectively shared elements, the individual behaviour 'Sb' or communication 'Scm' is performed. As such, it is always a part of a specific utility loop which covers individual psychological or physical needs, i.e., goals oriented behaviour [7].

There is no doubt that the socialization process forms so called 'desired behavioural patterns' and they are achieved mainly by limiting or modifying an individual's experience (1st stage of cognitive processes). Some guidance or even suppression is provided in the computational stage and this is also used later in life with adults when some states tries to control how people think, what they think about and what the result of their reflections are. Even in democracies, the freedom of thinking and speech do not apply to so-called whistle-blowers although history testifies again and again that the public needs to be provided with access to crucial information about the misconduct of government officials [*Brave New Films: War on whistleblowers*, 2013, http://www.amazon.com/War-Whistleblowers-Press-National-Security/dp/B00C RWXGW8]. Parents or people responsible for the process of socialization want to influence the identity of the subject so his future behaviour and communication will fall within the boundaries of their generally accepted range of behaviours [8]. Children cannot choose the family, nation, culture, or economic conditions they are born into and in early childhood they do not doubt the authority established in such conditions [9]. The reason for this is simple and also strongly evolutionarily preconditioned. The upbringing process relates to the key process of passing out parent's skills and experience to the offspring where survival is the main agenda on the table. We would probably all agree that individual parenting skills differ significantly but unfortunately this is the way how things work. Later in life, some of us get a chance to repair the damage and substitute the imperfections of our early development. Much of the content of our individual life is determined or strongly influenced by the social environment and personal interactions we experience with our family members and friends [10]. Naive perspective on this issue might result in an acceptance of a supernatural being deciding what happens where, how and when; this, in turn, makes people believe in destiny and it develops an element of natural subordination in a given social structure. In the proposed theory of social communication, we argue that the individual identity is a dependant variable of the first two stages of cognitive processes and those can and need to be wilfully altered as soon as possible through education and social design. Any social structure is a temporary concept designed in favour of those more fortunate, more skilful, or those with a better connection to individuals with access to power and resources. Any justification of the existing social structure falls into the well-known category of Naturalistic fallacy ('is - ought problem') addressed by D. Hume [D. Hume, *Hume's Moral Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/ entries/hume-moral/#io]. There is a logical problem when moving from the descriptive level of how things are, to the normative level of how things ought to be. For normative claims, we have to find different arguments when we try to define the character of an appropriate social structure.

The theory of social communication assumes that any individual or a group will behave and communicate in a way which either creates new utility loops or maintains or improves the old utility loops. This is possible for example by execution of goal oriented changes in the first stage of human cognition:

perception. Those who can control existing sources of information (mass media, government's classified information, etc.), or substitute the computational stage for individuals or groups by formulating generally accepted representations of reality will consequently affect, in some cases even control, their behaviour and communication. In the real world, if we overload the cognitive capacity of specific segments of society with entertainment and marketing, they will not be able to question the social structure they actually live in. They need to be educated just enough to perform their function in the society and avoid any additional thinking, because they could cause unwanted disruptions in the existing social and economic order. Sufficient example and proof of similar concepts applied in today's society can be found in the work and analysis of Noam Chomsky who quotes one of the conclusions of the Trilateral commission founded at the initiative of David Rockefeller in 1973 in the United States: "Higher education should be related to economic and political goals, and if it is offered to the masses, a program is then necessary to lower the job expectations of those who receive a college education" [N. Chomsky, *Radical priorities*, 1981, http://www.chomsky.info/books/priorities01.htm]. We understand that any social system needs to function without significant disruptions, but on the other hand we do not think that the majority of the global population should serve the few while struggling in debt.

The role of marketing and its erosive impact on human values in societies has been sufficiently addressed for example by Jean Kilbourne with her extensive analysis of marketing practices applied in the modern society. She focuses on the exploitation of women, linking products to sexual behaviour and all of it just for more profit [11]. There is still little or no regulation in this area and as far as corporations can contribute to the revenue of the media channel, it can expose our minds to whatever nonsense their marketing agencies are able to generate. Most of these ads are targeting children and youth because they are the most susceptible target groups. If the US general Smedley Butler once said that the war is a racket in terms of profits for those who own and control the supply of arms and other military equipment [S. Butler, *War is a racket*, 1935, https://archive.org/details/WarIsARacket], then other rackets are businesses that sell mild drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, sugary drinks and other products with high levels of carbohydrates. It is understandable that the individual investors are attracted by businesses where the maximal potential for future profits lies, but the general public needs to establish social structures and institutions which would protect their health and well-being against this one dimensional, short term and profit oriented philosophy. The change of the system or the behaviour of certain individuals or corporations will not be initiated by those who take the profits [12], but needs to be suggested and fought for by those who carry the costs in terms of health or social values degradations.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, we provided an evolutionary perspective on the human mind because we think that its natural design determines the reality of social structures people create globally. Social structures tend to be maintained through deliberate actions of some individuals or groups which promote, limit or modify specific kinds of information available to the public. Furthermore, educational system fails to develop independent computational mental capacity of individual members of a society. This consequently keeps the majority in easier to influence and controlled affective state of mind which allows certain people to maintain their own and inadequate personal utility (access to/control of resources). We think that the examples provided in this paper support our conclusion that social structures, together with generally accepted paradigms and followed discourse, are created by an intentional design. Theory of social communication proposed and applied in this paper is supported by the findings in Cognitive psychology and Neuroscience and we argue for an application of this framework when researching or explaining social phenomena. People's behaviour and communication is always determined by the possible changes in their personal utility, a missing variable in recent theories of communication, and therefore as such must be identified and disclosed before stating conclusions about information streams (media content) available to or directed towards the public.

We tried to show that individual or collectively shared elements of personal identity depends on the 1ˢᵗ stage of cognitive processes (experience - direct and indirect empirical knowledge) and on the available processing capacity (computational stage) determined by genes and modified by further education and experience. Identity is in every sense a dependant variable of these two stages of human cognitive processes and stems from the representational stage (interpretation of natural and social reality). Our identities as agents behind our actual behaviour and communication are, on a regular basis, wilfully changed or modified by people who have an opportunity to alter the content of our experience in terms of its quantity and quality and specific examples in today's society can be found in the domains of public relations, marketing, and news production. Our model of social communication predicts that any individual or group in a specific society will adjust their behaviour and communication in ways which will create new, maintain, or improve old forms of personal utility. It is therefore a natural process when people who have concentrated power and resources in their hands make decisions and take actions which help them to secure their position in the societal structure. However, this structure, although it might appear to some people initially natural, cannot be seen as natural at all because it is designed, agreed upon or forced upon us by specific people with individual or collectively shared interests. The most important aspect of maintaining such a structure is the process of socialization. People are brought up in a social environment which supports their subordination since parenting and schooling is mainly about following the rules

set up by authorities. These authorities many times demote the nurturing process to physical or psychological abuse which produces individuals who convince themselves that they do not deserve any better. Such individuals are the ideal members of society for those who control the resources and are at the top of the symbolic pyramid, because they will most likely NOT question the social reality in which they live as adults.

To conclude our theoretical reflection, we would like to state that the crucial factor for any just societal structure is the actual empathy level of its individuals who either care mostly about their own or also about other people's needs and emotional experiences. It is necessary to develop an ability to see other people as equal subjects, but unfortunately the ideology applied in today's society promotes individual profit and exploitation of other people, nations and environment more than mutual international cooperation. We still respond to artificially generated and abstract threats with fear which anchor us to the affective level where we become a guinea-pig in a Pavlovian experiment. In human history tribes, nations and civilizations have treated each other through distorted optics which could be described as 'us or them'. This led to situations in which 'they' could be killed, robbed, raped, exploited by 'us' and we were still able to see ourselves as civilized people. There are many things that make us different, but we need to realize that behind all those artificial human concepts (such as traditions, ideologies, and religious beliefs) we go through the same developmental stages of empathy which defines all the rest.

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