
CONTEMPORARY INTERNET ITS EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION AND SOCIOCULTURAL EFFECT

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(Received 13 June 2016)

Abstract

In this contribution the author focuses on the nature, position and meaning of the Internet in the life of a modern person, as well as the nature, assessment and regulation of its sociocultural impact. Firstly, we speak about its technological and sociocultural constitution that offers a specific means of 'online' existence for a human subject in the digital 'net-based' world together with specific (cyber) cultural and social practices. In this context, we tackle the issue of the nature of its existence in the structure of Internet mediation and also understanding of existential experience, self-interpretation and self-projection. Further, we speak about ambiguous and extreme approach in evaluation of the sociocultural effect of the Internet and notice the possibility of 'moderate' approach that avoids extremes. We understand this approach, in humanistic intentions, as corresponding with the 'pro-technical' trend in culture – with its evolutionary tendency to adapt technologies with humanising effect. Finally, we speak about the issue of regulation of the sociocultural effect of the Internet and specific means of regulation that could be helpful in this.

Keywords: subject, existence, culture, sociocultural effect, regulation

1. Introduction

We can say we live in a digital era. Digital information and communication technologies, or new types of media, stay in the "centre of our life" [1]. As human beings, we therefore are 'homo medialis', or 'homo informaticus'. The Internet can be taken as a typical digital media or information and communication technology of the present day.

We can understand the Internet as a specific world or sphere of existence for the contemporary human and we can study the form and shape of such existence. It is also possible to see the Internet as the most relevant - if not the most significant - element of our social and cultural development and study its influence on our society and culture. This contribution concentrates on the problem of modern Internet in the above-mentioned intentions. We assume that

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the Internet (digital medium, information and communication technology) and its existential dimension (self-interpretation and self-projection of a subject in its context) shape human society and culture as well as their further development. We also presume that the sociocultural effect brought by the Internet needs to be regulated in the humanistic perspective.

We will firstly speak of the nature, importance and place that the present-date Internet occupies in the life of a contemporary man. We will present it as a new sphere and means of human's existence. Further, we will speak about its effect in the sociocultural aspect, taking special interest in the present evaluation. Finally, we will focus on the question of regulation of this effect. We will identify its basic aspects, possible scenarios and some of the relevant factors.

2. Internet in the life of contemporary man and its existential dimension in the context of mediation

Human being is a 'creator' and 'user' of digital technologies or information and communication media. Thus the Internet – today's typical form of media - is a man-made product too... We can therefore agree with D. Clark that if people contribute to Wikipedia, then Wikipedia exists. If people 'tweet', then Tweet exists and so on [D. Clark, *Characterizing cyberspace: past, present and future* 2010, 4, <http://web.mit.edu/ecir/pdf/clark-cyberspace.pdf>, accessed 16.11.2014]. As an ontic phenomenon, this electronic medium works as a technical system, but strictly speaking it is a system that is a combination of anthropology and technology [2]. As such, it is also a sociocultural phenomenon.

The Internet is an increasingly popular means of communication, and a powerful and influential technology interacting with people and ways they communicate [3]. It is a great source of self-expression and communication; it becomes a living space for individuals and collectives. Within the Internet a man thinks and projects his life, builds his life in the virtual space, his life as well as world experience are transformed [J. Sprondel, T. Breyer and M. Wehrle, *CyberAnthropology – Being human on the internet*, 2011, 4, 6, <http://www.hiig.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/CyberAnthropology-Paper.pdf>, accessed 16.11.2014]. In this context, we may state that the present Internet is a life form and sphere, form of human's existence.

According to L. Ropolyi it is his 'web-life', which is the result of using the Internet. A human is thus a citizen of 3 worlds – the world of Mother Nature, society and online web-life. The Internet is formed as a system of relations, which is also a crucial factor for web-life. The form of web-life is therefore a set of relations that is developed in the social sphere. Social sphere is then a system that is based on nature. According to the above-mentioned author, in the context of the Internet, we are speaking about a sequence of separated schemes of human existence and relations between these, gradually transformed, schemes [L. Ropolyi, *Philosophy of the Internet. A discourse on the Nature of the Internet*, 2006, 147, 150, http://elte.prompt.hu/sites/default/files/tananyagok/philosophy_of_internet/book.pdf, accessed 16.11.2014].

We can state in the context of the above said that the Internet, as a digital media, represents a chance for the subject of the 21st century to transform internal and external relations [R. Cappuro, *Digitalethics*, 2011, 8, <http://www.capurro.de/korea.html>, accessed 16.11.2014]. Transformation is then determined by the trans-media constitution of the Internet. We must state very clearly here that the Internet trans-media constitution is composed of a: 1) technological and 2) a cultural aspect [M. Sandbothe, *Pragmatic Media Philosophy. Foundations of a New Discipline in the Internet Age*, 2005, 125–152, <http://www.sandbothe.net/pmp.pdf>, accessed 16.11.2014].

First thing is that the Internet is a technological system characterised by, for example, digitalisation, virtual reality and generating artificial worlds. These artificial worlds are ‘available’ to humans through computers. ‘Virtual reality’ is therefore a place that is generated and requires human-computer interaction. The Internet is a technological system of interconnected computing devices, where electronic information is stored, used and communicated. Here we can also use the term of Internet cyberspace [<http://web.mit.edu/ecir/pdf/clark-cyberspace.pdf>]. It is co-characterised by interactive communication through two interconnected computers.

On the other hand, we need to add that the Internet cyberspace as such serves people, is constructed by people, and therefore people represent the most crucial component in here. People define and form character of the cyberspace through the means they use it and actively (simultaneously) contribute to the contents [<http://web.mit.edu/ecir/pdf/clark-cyberspace.pdf>, p. 1]. Therefore it is not just aspects of technological and trans-media construction of the Internet, but also means of using it for the culture that are important. As M. Sandbothe points out, it is trans-media configuration of different cultural habits in using the Internet [<http://www.sandbothe.net/pmp.pdf>, p. 152]. We may also say that using of the Internet leads to transformation of traditional communities within societies and cultures (online communities, cybercultures) in the context of new ‘cyberculture based’ practices (or web-life) [http://elte.prompt.hu/sites/default/files/tananyagok/philosophy_of_internet/book.pdf, p. 147].

If the Internet itself is a living world of a man, his new sphere of existence, it means that the very reflection of ‘I am online’ in a modern man is or might be more than a pure reflection or statement of his actual activity on the Internet. This statement features, or may feature, also existential dimension through which it is identified as a human being with specific features of presentation in real life. As such it involves necessarily specific existential experience and human self-understanding in context of this experience.

As was already outlined however, the Internet is closely bound to the nature of human being or existence. That is to say – this nature gets transformed in the structure of Internet mediation. We may point out that the new way of being, or existence of a human subject is characterised for example by system transformation of human’s relations and interactions in the context of Internet mediation. Within it, the basic structure of human being and shared existence with the others, structure in which this human understands himself and the

others, is reconfigured... Intersubjectivity and sociability, which constitute human's (authentic) existence, is then characterised by a 'cellular' separation of the subject in the context of his connection to the others through the Internet.

It is further possible to mention that in the context of Internet mediation we speak of an entirely unique nature of being or existence of a human subject – a 'virtual' nature of 'being online.' Following for example Deleuze, also T. Miczka points out that in the context of electronic media we speak of being in a non-material reality in the means of senses and thinking, non-material reality that is physically absent yet still offering perceptual experience. Some philosophers (for example Chyla) call this new kind of existence a pataphysical or telematic existence [4]. Specific features of this kind of existence come along with a spectrum of subjective experience-based sharing of these features.

Experience itself stays in the cyberspace a phenomenologically subjective, individual and temporal process, but with transformed nature. This transformation affects awareness of time and space, which fundamentally constitute the existence, and are among the main coordinates of our reality, human's existence and experience. The fact is that these are telecommunicatively suppressed and marginalized [5]. The new 'cyber-experience' in the Internet cyberspace brings a new experience of 'freeing' from the flow of (linear, physical) time, including the sensation of relative (non)corporality or 'other body form' of the subject.

We may say here that in the context of the Internet as electronic/digital media, the human has changed – shifted towards the speed of Quantum mechanics, adopted the form of simultaneous world and immediate reactions [6]. This is a world of 'temporary structures' in which the trend of subjectivisation of the world, sensualisation and instrumentalisation is fully applied [7]. In such a world the life form is (re)configured with the process and dynamics of fragmentarization and differentiation.

In the context of the above-mentioned outline regarding some of the moments of transformation of nature of being or existence of a contemporary man, we finally state that the Internet cyberspace brings a new existential experience, new self-interpretations and life self-projections. The way we understand ourselves, the world around us and what it offers for us, is changed in the structure of Internet mediation... Contemporary human's understanding of himself and world in the context of Internet cyberspace is reflected in his cyber-cultural practices and the way he structures his living world. This understanding also shapes sociocultural practices in his life, or his offline existence.

The Internet alone, a digital medium of information and communication technology, along with the already mentioned existential self-understanding of the contemporary man in the context of Internet mediation, influences human society and culture and their future development. However, it seems that the sociocultural effect of the Internet is sometimes seen as controversial.

3. Sociocultural effect of the Internet from sociocultural standpoint and its appraisal

As Rankov points out, the Internet influences the very functioning of the society. Considering the number of people that participate in it, it may well be the greatest work in the history of mankind. It seems it is the most dynamically spreading mass medium with constantly rising new possibilities and very inadequately mapped sociocultural consequences [8]. We may state that its influence and effect on the society is generally seen as problematic. The Internet can still be taken as a relatively new communication form, so bearing in mind its freshness, it is impossible to speak strictly of its positive or negative effect on the society [9].

It is obvious that the Internet brings new positive possibilities. However, as A. Kiepas warns, along with these come also possible dangers and negative consequences in the globalized society. Generally and formally speaking, A. Kiepas believes that the negative impacts of the Internet are caused by a specific way of using (or abusing) the Internet, intentional deeds that introduce negative consequences (they are rooted in certain ways of communication and deeds) but also non-intended acts that come as side-effect of certain intentional acts. This, last category, is especially comprised of effects of social and cultural nature [7, p. 99].

Disregarding positive or negative effect of the Internet in the sociocultural standpoint of a contemporary man, it is a fact that appraisal of this effect is non-consistent. Usually, the difference in appraisal is caused by different value systems. We can state that the results of evaluation of the Internet and its influence in the society and culture vary extremely – some people only find great benefits, while others express warnings and see risks for the social structure, institutions, human relationships and moral standards... There are the functional aspects of the Internet that are usually scrutinised: information, communication, commerce, entertainment or social interaction. In the context of these we see the benefits or harms for humans and society [10].

We need to say that for the appraisal of Internet, its sociocultural effect and influence, the technological aspect is crucial. When we are faced with pessimistic views, even though these can also vary – whether expressed by the ‘net sceptics’ or ‘net enthusiasts’ – there is one thing they have in common – technoscepticism. This technoscepticism predicts the death of the old system (tradition, religion, value, institutions, business models, ...), observes a shock from the new, the new that favours declination of culture, tradition and economy and warns that somebody or something must intervene to steer towards a better course, somebody or something must protect and put everything back to maintain the human and society welfare. We can say that in this pessimistic perspective, the ‘techno-apocalyptic cry’ demands a greater regulation of the newly built or constructed world in the context of the Internet [11].

It seems technopessimism more criticises than suggests solutions for a real change. It concentrates more on failures and discredits digital media without spotting the new technological potential that is hidden in reacting to fragmentarization of modern social life [12]. Technooptimism is an opposite extreme, when we speak about non-critical optimism that describes a beneficial positive influence and effect offered by digital media for the man, society and culture. Yet, there is also this 'intermediate' optimism, which supposes that the progress in digital technologies requires humans, society and culture to adapt.

In this approach the possibility for 'intermediate' hybrid way of look at the Internet and thus avoiding any extremes is mediated for example through a sort of pragmatic optimism. This roots in the assumption that culture tends to assimilate and normalize new technologies and take them as a part of our life and culture. The Internet and generally speaking digital technologies (re)shape our culture, economy and society, but this is unfortunately accompanied by some troubles and obvious difficulties. However, pragmatic optimism also reminds us that the human race is able to learn to live in accord with information era, we are able to adapt. There is a requirement here - our standards and institutions need to be adjusted to the new situation in the society and culture that is introduced by digital technologies or media [11, p. 60, 78, 100].

This approach is compatible with the new humanistic perspective in the way it sees technologies, especially the Internet. This perspective does not understand 'pro-technical' trend in culture, its evolutionary tendency to adapt and assimilate technologies as problematic. It is culture in which "technologies and human beings are in harmony and make each other complete" [1, p. 93]. We need to note that in this view there is a right for a humanising effect of technologies in the society and new digital technologies or media. When assessing these, ethically motivated aspects are applied, especially those aspects which relate to human dignity.

A common and perhaps dominating standpoint used in assessment, in the context of humanising effect of digital media or technologies, is quality of life. Generally, in cultural and social expectations, it is the 'wellbeing' that the Internet should bring to man. Ph. Brey for example points out that that quality of life is influenced by both positive and negative contributions. However for evaluation there are mostly the positive acquisitions, which come along with instrumental role of the new forms of media or the Internet for human, that are taken in account. Relatively low attention is paid to the negative consequences, for example in the public sector [13].

Our ideas vary when we think about attractiveness and usefulness of new digital media, or information and communication technologies for the society and culture. For example, according to R. Beckett, these are the key benefits of the Internet or Internet communication in modern society: 1) it is 'global' – there are no geographical boundaries, 2) it is 'interactive' – offering us a relatively easy interaction between a human and machine, 3) it is 'dialogue based' – thus giving us a way to communicate with each other, 4) it is 'instant' – based on almost immediate involvement, and finally 5) it is 'equalitarian' – characterised

by a low 'value' of individual operation and no barriers for entry. Beckett believes the Internet is the most equalitarian mass media of them all [14].

We may state here that regarding general cultural and social expectations, the potential to bring meaningful experience, experience that is important for human life, experience that brings positive influences, this potential is important also in the case of the Internet as a form of media or technology. We have to say that these are the values and beliefs shared by individuals and collectives [13] that are reflected in such expectations. They constitute a part of perspective, standpoint in the technological development of digital information and communication media. We believe that it is interesting now to map, at least briefly, the sociocultural trends and values that are being built in the new technologies.

Looking at the development trend in information and communication technologies – for example Phillip's trend assessment – we can state briefly that development favours individual and collective human activities. It promotes the value of subjectivity or personality, but also collectivity, and sociability so that these values are attainable by the 'omnipresent' medium. It also encourages the human sense of time and space – focusing on the quality of time (simultaneous actions, multitasking) by eliminating many boundaries that stay in way of people – for example spatial boundaries. Further, it pushes up values that help express personal individuality and create personal identity. It is designed to offer faster and easier individualised usage (use of intuitive, natural interface such as speech, touch, writing...) [13]. We may say that the trend seen in the Internet and web 2.0 steers towards more personalised information experience [11, p. 73], or that it favours personal experience more than shared experience [<http://web.mit.edu/ecir/pdf/clark-cyberspace.pdf>, p. 4].

As the above-mentioned information outlines, it is clear that the present Internet is formed by the post-modern human. It is him who enters the 'net of virtual connections' which is soaked with post-modern values of cyberculture [http://elte.prompt.hu/sites/default/files/tananyagok/philosophy_of_internet/book.pdf, p. 146]. It is consumerism and post-materialism that define what determines quality of life, what values are or should be the most important. They are also important for development of the Internet. They influence its usage and thus co-shape its sociocultural consequences [10].

Finally we state that the contemporary Internet can be taken as a highly relevant, if not directly defining aspect, of our sociocultural trend. We agree with A. Kiepas that the Internet should not be overestimated or demonised [7, p. 99]. However, it is clear that we should regulate its sociocultural effect.

4. Regulation of the sociocultural effect of the Internet

From the humanistic viewpoint there should be a principle within the society saying that development in information technology shall protect and support human values, not destroy or ruin them [15]. As individuals but also as a human society, we should realise today that it is humanity that should steer

development in technology; it should not be the opposite way [1, p. 21, 24–26]. It is neither needed nor desirable, or even possible, to slow down development in the field of technology [16].

Generally speaking, we should stay optimistic regarding the prospect of technology to improve conditions for humans. However, there is an urgent need to think about a strategy to decrease the negative impact that comes with technological changes in the culture and still avoid pessimism [11, p. 87]. It appears it is necessary to regulate the socio-cultural effect of the Internet. This regulation should ensure that humanising influence and effect is efficient enough to bring “technologies and human beings into a harmonic and complementary relation” [1, p. 93]. We can hardly speak of one universal tool or way of regulation, so it seems relevant to look for several possible ways and aspects of such regulation in the cultural and social dynamics. We believe that it is possible to speak of objective and subjective aspects of regulation of socio-cultural influence and effect of the Internet.

We think the three basic means identified by Ph. Brey can be objectively important. He believes with these means the sociocultural impact of information and communication technology (the Internet) can be changed and even different sociocultural consequences can be introduced: the first means is redesigning technology so that it explicitly orientates on values. It means using a value-conscious design. The second means is introduced by a change of the way we use technology, or even change in the social environment and context of using this technology. The third possibility is, according to him, in a change of the way we interpret technology, we understand technology and speak about technology [10].

The objective standpoint reveals that it is currently important to evaluate (social) dangers and risks in the context of digital communication and media, develop preventive measures and mechanism that relate to this, search for solutions to the freshly arising problems, solutions that will be able to preserve what is socially positive and still eliminate the negative impacts of development in the field of digital technology or media [16]. As Ph. Brey points out, sociocultural allocation of the Internet may be useful – it can set strategies for design, regulation and usage of the Internet [10].

When we want to approach concrete aspects in cultural and social dynamics objectively, aspects that could effectively help the above-mentioned regulation, we can mention law and legislative. The Internet also causes problems – for example inequality in information access, censorship, violation of the right to privacy, computer viruses and many more. It is therefore desirable to construct new legislative and standards that could bring a better influence on human’s behaviour in the context of the Internet. However, there is more than just that. There is yet another dimension that determines human’s behaviour on the Internet, more universal than the law – the moral dimension.

We need to say that it is not possible to rely just on the legal system alone, because laws cannot replace and do not replace moral standards [15]. It is ethos that is required in the context of the Internet, also in the light of the above-

mentioned problems that have a moral dimension too. As J. Hurych, states, individual people just as well as whole institutions need some kind of moral system and moral principles that would direct their decisions and actions in the context of new technologies [15].

Today, however, we are confronted with a vacuum of rules, restrictions, rights ... for new situations in the context of information technologies and media [17]. There is a task ahead of us to construct also new ethical laws and standards that deal with information technologies and information as such [15]. We may say that this is a task for the new ethics (or differentiated ethics) in the context of Internet, which also takes technological perspective into account. New technologies bring in also a need to interpret old values using new ways and introduce a demand for building new codes of conduct in new human actions within these new technologies [18].

In the context of the above-mentioned we finally state that, regarding the necessity of regulation of sociocultural impact of the Internet, the challenge now is to work towards reinforcing of the moral standards in scientist and engineers, but not exclusively just in them. The thing is, as D. Fobelová points out, the time has come to create ethics of individual responsibility of people by influencing their individual culture towards cyberspace. It can be shaped today through a thoughtful and adequate system mechanism, but also through safety, organisation, or control measures applied by institutions [19].

One of the mentioned system mechanisms and helping aspect in regulation of sociocultural influence and effect seems to be education. We can agree with A. Kuzior that correct education can protect us against negative influences of development of multimedia or transmedia [16]. This requires humanistic realisation of our technological surroundings [1, p. 24-26]. We think it is necessary to concentrate on media and ethics education. We expect these will be meeting and mixing in the context of a broader cultural education. Their common role then will be to form a cultural capacity of the man in respect to the digital information and communication technologies, especially the Internet.

There is one more aspect that inevitably becomes a part of the problem – subjective aspect in regulation of the sociocultural influence and effect of the Internet. We mean that a man, as an individual person or personal subject, is and should be involved in the process of regulation. His role, in the new situation that comes with new information and communication technologies, therefore also the Internet, is to ‘learn how to live’. This requires his self-formation, self-cultivation [19, p. 57]. In this subjective dimension, regulation requires a self-reflection, reflexive attitude towards ‘me’, my experience and cognisance in the context of the Internet.

We can state that the subjective aspect in regulation is personal and existential. In the humanistic perspective we – cultural beings – call for a meaning of life in the beginning of the 21st century [R. Capurro, *Beyond humanisms*, 2010, <http://www.cappuro.de/humanism.html>, accessed 16.03.2016]. We, too, have a chance to “give a meaning to our lives and create coherence in our experiences” [20] through experience with the Internet.

Specifically it is about our personal self-interpretations and life-projections, understanding of human matters, problems, life situations ..., our world in the context of Internet mediation.

It is about discovering, creating and understanding our new living world in the context of relevant question of values and meaning. Life, or existence, always demands subject's orientation in meaning of matter that is not neutral in terms of value or ethics. In this humanistic, and especially in for example personalistic viewpoint, it is the principle of the truth [21] and ethical imperative of the Good. These create the understructure for not just self-reflection, but also for self-fulfilment that, in the scope of cyberculture practices, requires freedom and responsibility. Yet also requires, as M. Solík and J. Mináriková notice for example, interpersonal and social status in interpersonal and social interactions [22].

Considering everything, the above-mentioned does not solely speak of actual regulation of sociocultural effect of the Internet. It goes further – with its objective moment (elements, ways) in association with the inevitable subjective moment – towards proper, human way of being and acting that is known as ethos in pro-technical emancipation of humankind in the context of a phenomenon called the Internet.

5. Conclusions

As R. Cappuro states, humans are subject to digital imperative. We live in the era of digital constructivism. As it stands nowadays, what cannot be digitalised is not (real). To be means to be digitally: “Esse est computari”. And “esse est informari” [R. Cappuro, *Ethical Challenges of the Information Society in the 21st Century*, 2000, 272, 273, <http://www.arifyldirim.com/ilt508/rafael.cappuro.pdf>, accessed 16.03.2016]. It is more so in the context of the Internet as an exemplary digital medium or information and communication technology.

The Internet has become a new living world of the modern man, a new dimension of his life or existence. This life or existence is thus shaped in the structure of the Internet mediation. In the context of ‘virtual’ existence, or ‘being online’, in the cyberspace, the way a human understands himself and the world around him changes. It now concentrates on his new self-interpretations, and life self-projections, new understanding of human affairs, problems, life situations... We can state here that this is influenced by the unique Internet constitution that features technical and cultural aspects.

The Internet (digital medium, information and communication technology) and especially its existential dimension (existential self-interpretations and self-projections of the subject in its context) offer and form new social and cultural practices for man and, in the long term, shape human society and culture and their development. In this context, the contemporary Internet can be seen as a highly relevant and crucial aspect of our social and cultural development.

It is also necessary to say that the assessment of sociocultural effect of the Internet has so far not been definite, but has proven to be problematic also regarding its – still persistent – ‘novelty’. It is clear that it brings positive but also negative impact and effect, which is variable basing on different viewpoints. Different views can be identified when assessing this impact and effect, with quality of life and functional aspects of the Internet taking a dominant position now. This differentiation is also influenced by values and believes that individuals and collectives share as these also shape perspective in technological development of digital information and communication technologies.

When we speak of the need for humanising character, it currently seems to be necessary to deal with the issue of regulation of the sociocultural influence of the Internet. We can hardly speak of one universal method or way. Our idea is that it is possible to speak about objective and subjective aspect or moment in this regulation.

Among the objective aspects are for example law, moral standards, ethics and also education. Here, the technological aspect introduces the need to interpret old values using new ways. The subjective aspect in regulation is personal and existentially based; it anticipates self-reflection of the subject and his self-forming with ethical imperative. In this context we can see a request for application of the principle of the truth and good, but also freedom and responsibility for example also by showing respect for self-realisation of the subject in the context of cyberculture practices and various interpersonal interactions, etc.

We declare that there is something more than mere actual regulation of the sociocultural effect of the Internet in the above-mentioned regulation. In the long term, it is about not losing the proper (human) way of being and acting known as ‘ethos’ in the pro-technical emancipation of the humankind in the context of Internet.

Acknowledgement

This article is a partial result of VEGA project no. 1/0284/14 titled *Kyberpriestor ako nová existenciálna dimenzia človeka (Cyberspace as a New Existential Dimension of Man)*. Lead researcher (project supervisor): prof. PhDr. Slavomír Gálik, PhD., period: 2014–2016.

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