

COMMUNICATION MEDIA – THE WILL TO VIRTUALITY

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The submitted paper presents an outline of moral-philosophical reflection on “multiplication of differences” by means of new communication and information technologies and media participating in “flow of communication”. This area involves but is not limited to the following discourses that were selected as the subject matter of the present paper: 1. Discourses emphasizing the contemporary emergent situation designated for the purposes of the present paper by the term *information ecology*; 2. Discourses dealing with various forms of imaginary escapes associated with virtual reality of communication and information technologies; 3. Discourses focusing on new evaluation and a new hierarchy of moral significance of communication and information technologies that is necessary even in so-called “clean” technological environment of engineers and technical scientists.

Key words: communication technologies, organoprojection, virtual reality, information ecology.

Mediji komunikacije – Volja za virtualnost. Rad predstavlja nacrt moralno-filozofske refleksije „multiplikacije razlika“ do kojih dolazi posredstvom novih komunikacijskih i informacijskih tehnologija i medija koji sudjeluju u „bujici komunikacije“. To područje uključuje sljedeće diskurse koji su odabrani kao predmet ovoga rada: 1. diskurse koji naglašavaju današnju situaciju imenovanu za svrhe rada terminom *informacijska ekologija*, 2. diskurse koji se bave različitim oblicima imaginarnog bijega povezanim s virtualnom stvarnošću komunikacijskih i informacijskih tehnologija, 3. diskurse koji se usredotočuju na novo vrednovanje i na novu hijerarhiju moralnog smisla komunikacijskih i informacijskih tehnologija, što je nužno čak i u tzv. čistom okruženju inženjera i tehničkih znanstvenika (ali se ne ograničava isključivo na njih).

Ključne riječi: komunikacijske tehnologije, organoproyekcija, virtualna realnost, informacijska ekologija.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning there was broadcasting; the world happens for it'. Günther Anders Nowadays, one of the most powerful seeming imperatives in the field of education is the prosperity of *edutainment* which facilitates various applications of communication technologies, multimedia and hypertexts. In this connection, the thrust of the competence in humanities and social sciences (more specifically in their educational transformation) is shifted from “the mode of having” (e.g. information, data)

to ‘the mode of being able to participate in distribution’. This introductory statement forms the basis from which the following ideas about the impact of communication and information media will be derived. These ideas will be presented in form of reflection on this issue in the field of humanities, mainly in moral philosophy and applied ethics.

The concept of man as an *imperfect being*, or in other words as an *insufficient being*, is well-known (This concept

originated in the field of philosophical anthropology and was devised by such influential thinkers as H. Plessner, M. Scheler and A. Gehlen). The manifestation of this insufficiency is so-called organo-projection, i.e. the substitution of specialized organs and instincts by technology due to *imperfection of human organs*. That means that human existence based on *excentric positionality* and “*homelessness*” makes man as an imperfect being create *his own world*, representing a deviation (through artificial objects, such as communication media and the Internet) from his immediate natural environment. Human beings, improving their natural conditions of existence, create *another nature*, as a positional field of *self-differentiation* from the world of natural conditions and at the same time as a positional field of *mediation with the world*.

The spiritual is digital, asserts T. Leary, the Messiah of the psychedelic epoch of contestation, who was dreaming his digital dreams about virtual nirvana not so long ago. T. Leary believed that the quantum-electronic universe of information, characterizing our new spiritual state, would solve the oldest philosophical problem that introduced the dilemma: the soul or the body? The answer is at hand: “spiritual” with attributes – mythical, magical, ungraspable, ideal - can indeed be defined as “digital”.

If thus defined, spiritual spheres, which were according to the ancient polymath Posidonius based on the mathematical principle, can be perceived as a prehistory of new “positivistic mythology” - of a new cult of *intelligent machines* of A. Turing, the father of artificial intelligence. Intelligent machines, or the universal Turing machine, as a theoretical computing machine that was invented to serve as an idealized model for mathematical calculation, represent the abstract background (in the form of an abstract-mathematical system) for all computers. That means that spiritual

spheres, existing in our dreams and visions, can possibly be realized.

Another metaphor that attracts our attention in this connection is *collective cerebralization* (a term introduced by P. Teilhard de Chardin) in a convergent world brought about by “socialization of compression”, which offers a new opportunity for the development of life on Earth. *Collective cerebralization* was a prophetic thesis in relation to the rise of a new universe – *cyberculture*. “...and yet, all around us, and right under our eyes, a process of great importance is going on. It is favoured by the sudden multiplication of ultra-rapid means of travel and transmission of thought and consists in the formation of more and more psychic zones or groups. In these, the human nuclei are converging their powers of reflection upon one common problem with one common enthusiasm, and so organizing themselves into stable functional complexes. In these, surely, it is perfectly legitimate, as a matter of sound biology, to recognize “a great matter” of mankind. And it is then that a revolutionary possibility becomes apparent, made feasible precisely by the operation of this social innervations: the possibility of a new concerted way of research into the very intelligence from which it emanates: collective cerebralisation (in a convergent milieu) using the sharp spear-head of its vast power to complete and anatomically improve the brain of each individual” [1].

If the teleology of “improving the nervous system” leads to *Cyberia – an electronic paradise* (W. Welsch) where we are eating from the tree of the knowledge again (H. von Kleist), then the new universe (cyberculture including communication technologies and media) becomes “the ocean of information” that saturates new forms of consciousness, rationality, practical attitudes and values arising within the context of its complexity. However the problem is more complicated (we know how we ended up

after eating from the tree of the knowledge in paradise for the first time) and the discovery that “the isles of the human psyche” are equally *ambivalent* as their products (ambivalence of hi-technology as a cultural component) is not surprising. Modern technology as a subsystem of culture, due to its specific inventory of information (level of knowledge, education, science) and their global impact brings negative entropy into the relation culture - man - natural world (a very simplified definition of entropy is a measure of randomness or disorder in systems). This type of entropy is associated with inferences in organization - managing activity. Man plays a “dual role” in this respect: by generating negative entropy, he compensates the increase of positive entropy. He endeavours to neutralize his own share in positive entropy with catalytic effects, such as accelerated pressure of purposeful instrumental activities and unwanted or unexpected consequences of his increasing inability or even impossibility to interpret and manage various technologies (e.g. possible uncertainty and randomness of fluctuation of cybersystems).

Contemporary communication media can be characterized by their multiple meanings, i.e. they cannot be assigned a single unambiguous meaning. This leads to the effect of “overlapping” and merging together of various meanings. The act of covering up the truth or the act of its merging with something else means victory of the communication media, victory of the electronic worlds and transformation of reality in the fields of science, communication and technology. It even means “the blurring” of Popper’s three worlds or the questioning of our traditional view of the relation between man and reality (i.e. natural world and the world of culture), or in other words, it means derealization of our understanding of what is real and what *de facto* concerns the virtual world.

One of the most serious problems uncovered by this derealization process is so-called *fuzzy* (i.e. uncertain, blurred) perception of the past. It leads to reevaluation of the meaning of the past, or to atrophy of emotional memory. People tend to interrupt their connection with their roots and to dispense with the burden represented by the past dimension because they live “*here and now*”.

Evidently, this past dimension does not disappear completely – what remains is its negation, it remains as *déjà vu*. This could be possibly one of the reasons of “sterility of western culture, of its so-called inability to realize, in times of global communication milieu (cyberspace) that such terms as *the good, truth, justice, language, speech, communication* cannot be understood without taking into account “root metaphors” of cultural groups because, in the words of Petříček: “...globalizace je, na rozdíl od univerzalizace, především globalizací lokálních kódu. (globalization, unlike universalization, represents globalization of “*local*” codes.”) [2].

The state of being present in the “here and now” leads to hyperactivity, to the symptom of impatience without any anchoring. Traditional conception of the mysteriousness of nature and art melts away and what remains is “the disappearing reality” of zapping (Zero-Consciousness). The result is “*destruction of the past*” (E. Hobsbawm) which represents one of the most characteristic and appalling phenomena of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

It is of crucial importance to correlate the development of new technologies and the role of media with information ecology. Roy Ascott introduces the metaphor of *a second flood, the flood of information*, thus referring to a specific way of *pollution* of the living world by inflation and subsequent devaluation of the flood of information brought about by production and accumulation of words, information and

information codes. The production of words in “mass communication” is a way of unification of “pre-processed” reality (as hyperreality) which naturally brings about a change (in the form of passive reception of imputed manuals) of our behavior, values, moral preferences and actions: they increasingly tend to acquire simulating or interchangeable (and ever-changing) character.

The one-sided reflection of the boom of technologies and multi-media communication that, according to Leary, “enables us to gain an easy access to a wide range of knowledge according to our individual choice” [3] seems to be unproductive. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to articulate unequivocal predictions about the future of this phenomenon. Strictly speaking, three important factors come into play in the assessment of the possible effects of media: state of society, development of the media and development of the knowledge of society. H.D. Lasswell was probably the first one who defined media effects as early as in 1948 as follows: conveying information, creating interrelations among parts of society in conformity with the environment (correlative function) and securing cultural heritage (the function of establishing continuity). C.R. Wright expanded this list of functions by adding the *entertainment* function and D. McQuail pointed to the mobilization function of media for the purposes of propaganda, both political and commercial. From this delimitation of media functions it follows that it is possible that this type of communication could offer a chance for the planet-wide effort to solve pressing problems relevant for all the communities, prospectively unified into the global village (M. McLuhan) of the information age. There is also the possibility of *colonization of the public space*, mainly in situation when “the ocean of words” is poured out as a unidirectional communication in which the

recipient is perceived as a reified object of the influence of communication media. McLuhan himself warned against such development where “mental breakdown of various intensity is a relatively common result of uprooting and inundation with new information...” [4], entering the human brain at the speed of light, collectively metamorphosing and changing again what had been changed a couple of minutes ago.

New communication media offer a phenomenon that could be designated by the term hyper-hectic flow associated with digital revolution and *electronic expansion of mind*. “The turning point” sets in when *the will tends towards virtuality*, transmitted not only into the fields of science and electronic media but also into the sphere of art and living world. The result is a qualitatively new kind of communication in the flow of information. Life moves from the real world into the imaginary (electronic) world where the main motto is “*information wants to be free*”.

We are living in a unique historical era, the era of technological means of communication. A synthetic view of P. Virilio, a French analyst of virtual reality, as presented in his conception of *dromology*, points to demarcations of the possibilities of technological means of communication and to their culturally destructive consequences. The increasing influence of virtual reality means “mortification” of communication processes – by suppression of authentic communication as well as by introduction of competitive (unproductively conflicting) tenseness into communication (as exemplified by various kinds of internet chats). Paradoxically, it is the result of the glorified and highly appreciated *omnipresence of the media*. Virilio’s critical reasoning represents one of the relevant voices in moral-philosophical reflection (in so-called *techno-discourses* of ethics of perception). His voice further motivated discourses aimed at normative evaluation of new technologies and provided

heuristic impulses in the context of pro-natural reflection of applied ethics. This reflection was a reaction to the myths based on rationalist science, connected with the illusion of a final victory of man over nature and over his own naturalness as a result of his entry into virtual nirvana. In many cases, the access to virtual reality is an analogy to the path “from the individual and imperfect world to the unified and idealized world of cyberspace” [5].

It is a way of introducing a new form of eudaemonism: *virtual eudaemonism* (which represents, according to many theorists, a transition to a new *technological mythology*). Marshall McLuhan, one of the prophets of the beginning of “communication revolution” and an important theorist of electronic media dreams about a unique

perspective for the humankind in a *myth of return* accomplished via new media that could lead us towards a unified community. “We live in the global village... We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions ...” [6].

Constructions of return and reunification of community in the global village, in the space occupied by mass media, in almost “saint Virtuality” – construing the primordial feeling and the tribal emotions via electronic communication and information media – are the products of technoromanism, stimulating the necessity of new assessment and a new hierarchy of their moral importance which is needed even in the so-called “clean“ technological environment of engineers and technical scientists.

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