

CULTURE IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

Edited by
Maja Jakimovska-Toshikj
Katarína Gabašová

Institute of Macedonian Literature,
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

Department of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

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© Authors:

Miroslav Ballay

Katarína Gabašová

Loreta Georgievska-Jakovleva

Maja Jakimovska-Toshikj

Kristína Jakubovská

Ana Martinoska

Valentina Mironska-Hristovska

Jasmina Mojsieva-Gusheva

Erika Moravčíková

Veronika Moravčíková

Jozef Puškár

Goce Smilevski

Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser

Lucia Valková

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Reviewed by:

prof. d-r Ilija Velev, PhD.

prof. d-r Natasha Avramovska, PhD.

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BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU: THE METAMORPHOSES OF LIFE AND IDENTITY CRISES IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Erika Moravčíková

Quite a few years have passed since we began living in a world marked by the breakthrough of virtual communities, virtual dialogue – indeed virtual reality. Nevertheless, it was not so long ago that socialization processes represented an essential platform for the successful assimilation of an individual into their social environment, which, in turn, was co-created by the very same individual. With the advent of the new technologies accompanying the information age, however, the social environment has been transformed, involving what seems to be a deforming movement towards human individualism. This process has become ever more intense, featuring increasingly faster changes in society. Meanwhile, first place in the league table of phenomena accelerating what actually appear to represent a covert asocialization has been taken by communication media, which, perhaps ironically, were designed to ensure the flow of information and mutual communication between individual people – to wit social networks. It is not a coincidence that these media bear the word ‘social’ in their name, meaning that they gather a certain number of active users who react to stimuli appearing between individual links of the communication chain.

The online world

The impact of virtual communication on everyday life is proportional to the importance and nature of the transmitted information, to the length of the course it has to take, and to the time and space considered by both entry and exit sources as optimal. The internet works on the basis of a broad network on a demand-supply scheme, and not only that, it also allows users to take part actively in the forming of its content, which thus becomes automatically transformed with respect to individual interest groups and latest trends in various spheres of human activity and knowledge in global terms. Nonetheless, the underlying principle of free access to information of any type and genre prods us into asking some serious questions. How can constantly available, publicly accessible media content influence the human personality? Will the speed of interpersonal communication as required by current demand usher in a decline in its quality, separate from a deterioration in the level of how communication codes are transferred?

“Internetization” is having a truly wide-ranging effect on how society is developing, including spheres such as services, business and people’s privacy. People’s inclinations towards embracing communication on the internet are being reinforced as they discover ever more benefits provided by virtual actions, which require minimum effort in an unrivalled time span. Meanwhile, time as a phenomenon behaves rather ambiguously, principally when it comes to the culture of “leisure” communication, involving such platforms as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *MySpace* and others, used mainly by the internet generations “Y” and “Z”.¹ These two generations consider the internet to be a natural part of

¹ Generation Y (the so-called Millennials) is represented by people born between the mid-1980s and 2000. Meanwhile, Generation Z (Post-Millennials, iGeneration, Plurals and Homeland Generation) is represented by people born after 2000. The rapid development of technologies, particularly the internet, have drawn a very clear dividing line between

the information and communication spheres and as necessary for one's existence in a modern era marked by tough competition. The virtual world has increasingly been witnessing the emergence of social groups and communities expressing their attitudes not only passively but also ever more actively. Due to the mass character of social synthesizing in this space, many experts and public officials have begun considering the prospects of a possible clash involving accumulated emotions and the rather arbitrary will to change the social and political situation (see the Arab Spring).

Internet social networking²

Being part of the so-called social software, which includes discussion panels, post directories, wikis and blogs/vlogs, virtual communication networks have effectively become the core of a critical number of users' activities on the internet.

“Commercials, business, society, politics, sex and love – these are key spheres linked to the concept of social network platforms. These examples, although different from each other in terms of dimension, character and quality, indicate that internet social networks and many

these two generations. While the Millennials were raised on television, with the internet appearing only as a supplementary medium, the latter has been an unquestionable number one for Generation Z since the very beginning (Čupka, 2017).

Members of these online generations are frequently called Digital Natives. On the other hand, Digital Immigrants were not born into the digital world, but in a certain phase of their lives they adopted some aspects of the new technologies. These terms were coined by American scholar and education expert Marc Prensky.

² “Social networks belong to community websites based on profiles – a sort of individual (and less frequently group) websites presenting descriptions of each member. Apart from text, images and videos posted by individual users, profiles also contain comments posted by other members and public lists of people identified as friends” (Anon, 2010).

contents of what is called ‘Web 2.0’ have become significant parts of how the world works, appearing to be a formative element of the economic, political and cultural communication of current world” (Fuchs, 2009, p. 2).

Aimed at online communication, social networking platforms have a powerful capacity to support the creation of virtual communities, which are marked by solidarity, friendship, love and altruism, thereby gaining a dimension of emotional cooperation. One of the world’s most popular and fastest growing online communities at the moment is the social network Facebook,³ currently associating⁴ more than 1.86 billion users.⁵ This social network might well serve as an excellent example for unhampered expansion of virtual social communities. Users in this system can become connected to various other social networks, such as within a school, company and geographical location, send messages, publish holiday images and wait for friends’ reactions and comments, and seek new fans for a music band and civic activities, for example. They can even give presents thanks to Facebook, as the website is careful enough to remind them that someone of their loved ones has their big day. Facebook is an attractive mixture of everything that already had been in the IT sphere, but its goal is somewhat peculiar – seeking to become an indispensable platform for everyone.

³ Facebook is one of the most successful social portals. This extensive web system serves for the creation of social networks, search of new friends according to one’s interests, the setting up of forums and fan clubs and the sharing of multimedia data. Launched in 2004 by then Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg to facilitate connecting his schoolmates and teachers, it was opened up to the general public on 11 August 2006.

⁴ For more see: <https://apoort.net/top-socialne-siete/>

⁵ According to statistics from February 2017. A more detailed analysis is available on: <https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2017/Facebook-Reports-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2016-Results/default.aspx>

Facebook mania is spreading across the world at lightning speed, with some individuals addicted to this form of virtual communication already feeling its negative effects in their everyday lives. For example, the play by contemporary American playwright Carlos Muriel: *Dark Play or Boys' Stories* (2009) is a veritable account of victims of internet addiction. It is a play about individual identity, which a person can easily change in the virtual world, but which can also be projected into the real world. In this sense, Muriel's game is primarily a warning from the sphere of the online/offline world (Ballay, 2011). This poses a question as to how much time is appropriate and indeed healthy to be spent with such form of virtual communication. Another question could pertain to repercussions for the very personality of these individuals. First of all, it is perhaps appropriate to respond to the question of what actually motivates people to engage in such forms of communication. There can be quite a few reasons:

- boredom and/or too much free time
- a lack of “traditional” social relations and links
- inability/unwillingness to engage in face-to-face communication
- escapism
- fear of loneliness as a result of atomization, frustration and individualization of the human individual in the modern information society
- availability of fast internet connections anywhere and everywhere
- scope for the creation of online identities and the possibility of engaging in experiments with such identities
- entertainment and hedonism
- narcissism
- self-presentation

Social networks not only seem to create dependent behaviour but also feature phenomena that have crystallized in the brief time span since their advent. We will attempt to outline and describe them in this article.

Promiscuity of identities

Every human individual creates a self-image, which is significantly influenced by the views of others. People's self-image is in turn reflected in their behaviour – be it self-confident and even arrogant, or silent and shy. Several scholars (for example Goffman and Joinson) note that self-awareness is composed of two parts – a public self and private self. Due to the fact that people engaged in non-physical communication need not particularly care for their public selves (they can neglect their physical appearance, for example), they can give free rein to their private selves (intimate, private). This could well explain the freewheeling attitude displayed by many internet users. Provided that social networks allow them to portray alternate identities of their own selves, they resort to manipulating and even forging their real identities with the use of meticulously selected images and whitewashed profiles.⁶ “They look at their own personalities from an egocentric perspective, effectively seeing themselves better than they really are. This carefully constructed virtual image should serve for introducing one's very best version in the online world – with a new virtual identity” (Kováčová, 2009, p. 251). According to Jakub Macek, “in the environment of online social networks, social players actually continue in what they have always been doing, albeit with the use of different tools, i.e. in governing impressions, and maintaining façades and self-idealisation related to their individual roles” (Macek, 2015, p. 103).

⁶ For more on the challenges of the contemporary individual and collective identities see: Jakubovská, Kristína. 2017. *Od multikultúrnosti a internacionalizácie k revitalizácii tradícií*.

This is probably one of the most sophisticated methods for approximating the way in which people appear to others as their own desired self. People thus gain the opportunity to approximate their desired ideal self by deliberate actions in constructing their social network profiles (Kšīnan, 2011). However, the most important is the fact that when compared to other escapist strategies, such as daydreaming and excursions in imaginary media worlds, these phantasy self-images presented on Facebook are pretty limited, as Facebook is not lacking anything; there is no need to complete anything with the use of one's own imagination – there are specific electronic applications to deal with any need (Ibid., 2011).

People construct their profiles via regular, indeed permanent activities on social network timelines. These showcases of egos are able to fulfil the desires of 21st century people to be able to structure their own identities truly flexibly. Striving to put on public display their lucrative jobs, for example, these people use every opportunity provided by the internet for self-presentation. Private websites, blogs/vlogs⁷ and mainly personal profiles are the most frequently used tools. Several social platforms reveal users' professional experience, while the freedom in sharing individual contributions also allows interaction with professional issues. Users not infrequently publish large amounts of posts on their own success or that of their company, images from teambuilding activities, working trips and conferences, as well as blogs revealing their professional experience and events that make it obvious that they work for a renowned company. Social networks thus gain an opinion-making function, which is used by their users to the full. The public and private selves thereby emerge in totally new dimensions.

According to Peter Mikuláš and Lukasz Wojciechowski, we are witnessing the “creation of entirely different, often even fictitious

⁷ Vlog = videoblog

identities, allowing people to open themselves and expose hitherto hidden desires and instincts. In line with current media trends, many users can thus become – at least for a moment – younger, more beautiful and more socially active” (Wojciechowski – Mikuláš, 2009, p. 4). Social activities must not be disturbed by anything. Renowned social scientist Zygmunt Bauman made an apt observation in an interview: “We preferentially use new technologies for strengthening opinions that we already hold. We talk to people who agree with us, and not with those who argue against us or call for a change. This certainly helps our self-confidence. I sometimes call this zone of comfort an ‘echo chamber’. The only thing you ever hear is the echo of your own voice. Or I also call it a ‘mirror hall’ – wherever you look, you see whatever you want to see, i.e. your own image” (Kasík – Lázňovský, 2015).

People in a hyper-consumerist society not only waste time and money purchasing material goods, but they also waste information about themselves. Meanwhile, a new sophisticated way of sharing information about oneself has been discovered to preserve (false) humility. ‘Humblebrag’⁸, a word coined by American comedian Harris Wittles after he set up a Twitter account, became so popular that it was declared the Most Useful Word of 2011 by the American Dialect Society (Maxwell, 2012).

Humblebrag, having emerged as a by-product of the social media revolution, makes it apparent that people have changed significantly, with virtues such as humility and modesty becoming limited and feigned to a considerable extent. Everything seen on social networks as part of people’s presentation proves sociologists Gilles Lipovetsky’s (2003) claim that the more individuals focus on themselves, the more they lose interest in the whole. Seeking to fill their internal

⁸ A **humblebrag** is a statement, written or spoken, in which a person boasts about something while at the same time managing to couch what they’ve said in a kind of self-deprecating guise (Maxwell, 2012).

emptiness, people stick to material goods as presented and determined by consumerist society. The latter, meanwhile, is quite comfortable with the fact that people's pride and need to boast and create a 'cool' image in others' view stimulates a desire for getting hold of new items, experiences and innovations.

Hypertrophy of narcissism

Excessive time spent on Facebook (and other virtual communities) frequently ushers in existential crises, obsession with the self and pathological narcissism experienced by such users. Founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud was the first to analyse the psychological aspect of narcissism, concluding that narcissist individuals are in love with themselves, thereby embodying both sexual subjects and objects at the same time. Analogically, clinical psychoanalysis presents the following terms with respect to narcissism: self-conceit, self-enamouredness, self-love, smugness, adoration of the self and the quest for admiration. Meanwhile, the desire to be admired and the search for elements of admiration in others' reactions can also be considered as a display of narcissism. Narcissists, according to Freud, would love narcissistically:

- what they themselves are
- what they themselves were
- what they would like to be
- what is part of their personality (Freud, 1999, p. 76)

A study entitled *Narcissism, Extraversion and Adolescents' Self-Presentation on Facebook* (Ong et al., 2011, p. 182) describes narcissists as individuals with an excessively positive, frequently even unrealistic view of themselves, who tend to be indifferent towards fostering strong interpersonal relations, with displays of exhibitionism, intense interest in their own physical appearance and inclinations to draw others' attention to themselves.

Psychologists, most notably Professor of Psychology at the University of Georgia W. Keith Campbell, have demonstrated that excessive time spent on social networks can lead to an obsession with the self and, in extreme cases, even to pathological narcissism, taking into account that social networks provide almost full control of one's self-presentation and allow the maintenance of superficial relations with broad networks of users. According to Campbell, the level of narcissism is proportional to the number of virtual friends and friends' entries on users' timelines. These people tend to evaluate contacts on social networks like any other relations, with quantity being regarded as superior to quality. Displays of narcissism are also clearly to be seen in the style of published images. There can be either "exact" self-presentation, or "false" self-presentation. We will focus on this phenomenon later in more detail.

Apart from that, narcissism also leads to incessant self-observation (one constantly checks the stylized photos and comments of others) and to a compulsive need to look for new "friends", even though these friendships may not have much substance. This is related to the narcissist's view that the number of friends shared on their profile has an immediate effect on their popularity. Such an attitude is fully in line with the narcissistic approach to relations in general, which remain artificial and bring little internal satisfaction: "This lack of quality relations, be it realised or not, is being replaced by quantity. This could be expressed by the number of friends (while the average is 120, many people present 400 and more friends) and by the amount of shared information concerning the user" (Kšišnan, 2011). The internet and social networks in particular have redefined the notion of private information: it is not anymore about whether someone knows something but rather about controlling the number of people who know something.

According to psychologist Branislav Tichý, “whether having a high number of friends is motivated by one’s desire to boast, or by opportunism, like ‘I might need them at some point’, in both cases it primarily concerns one’s quest for satisfaction of their sense of importance and/or superiority to others, i.e. to those who have fewer contacts” (Tichý, cited in Ulej 2007). Heinz-Peter Rohr makes similar observations, stating that “narcissists attempt to compensate for the inability of real self-love with excessive and even extreme quests to attract the interest and chiefly admiration of other people” (Rohr, cited in Kšiňan 2011).

Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that not every Facebook user is automatically narcissistic, as narcissists use the social network like any other relations – with quantity given precedence over quality. This obviously concerns a sort of virtual exhibitionism. “From the viewpoint of new fragmentary audiences (so typical of the new media),⁹ a key role is played by the fact that the social players behave as if they were permanently at the centre of attention of the audience, be it real or imaginary. In other words, they are hardly able to separate their own self from others, more specifically from confirmations of their self as provided by others” (Volek, 2008, p. 226). Members of social communities primarily depend on others and their evaluation.

This is why narcissistic self-love and egotism reach their maximum satisfaction in interactive media. These people are not particularly interested in other people and if they are, it is only because these others somehow support their self-love. However, this narcissistic behaviour closely corresponds to narcissists’ behaviour in real life, a fact that points to quite close links between the online and offline worlds.

⁹ For more see: Macek, Jakub. 2015. *Média v pohybu. K proměně současných českých publik.*

The selfie phenomenon

Physical attractiveness and sex appeal are key elements of the optics that mainly young people want to be seen through on social networks. Modern cameras have democratized the process of capturing reality, with this effect reinforced by the global mass expansion of smartphones, which has definitely ended the era of exclusiveness in photography. The loss of aura in arts (in our case in photography) – forecast by Walter Benjamin (1999), a German theorist associated with the Frankfurt School – is being advanced ever more by people who almost incessantly capture images of elusive moments, significant events and also daily routine. The advent of social networks has allowed the masses to be objects of art and also artists at the same time. Selfies and auto-photographs have thus entered the scene of modern history of photography.

As opposed to users preferring self-presentation with snapshots as the most common feature, people with narcissistic inclinations tend to present poser-like and stylized images aimed at making them appear more attractive. Meanwhile, terms like “MySpace angles” (Sessions, 2009) and “selfie” images have been coined with respect to this phenomenon. While MySpace angles originally appeared on MySpace, they are now to be seen across the world of social networks. This most frequently concerns flattering self-images taken by a camera placed at a specific angle above one’s head. As the camera is only at one’s arm’s length, or is held with the support of a selfie stick, the person in question occupies almost the entire photograph. In addition, the lens creates a distortion of the image, with the face appearing bigger, while the rest of the body seems smaller and thinner.

We find this phenomenon mainly on the Instagram social network, with the authors attempting to demonstrate that they are ‘cool’. Why has the phenomenon of selfies enchanted so many people and how is it

possible that they have become so widely accepted? Even Facebook had not experienced such a boom of self-portraits before the emergence of Instagram. Authors and developers of Instagram had obviously accurately assessed the desires of modern internet users who display significant inclinations towards self-presentation and self-love. The application makes users appear relatively more attractive with the use of the following tools:

1. Small size of pictures – in order to make the contours less clear.
2. Colour filters – changing contrasts, brightness and colour tones, resulting in effects of retouching.
3. Blurred background – a similar reinforcing effect as image sharpness.
4. Picture frames – a higher number of photos in one image to create an event, narrate a story.

The aforementioned functions supply the images with a great deal of ethereal effects. Instagram actually works on similar principles as those of pop-art guru Andy Warhol, who in his works used the method of silk-screen printing, which was pretty similar to filters currently used by Instagram. Dye spilled from cans smoothed out wrinkles and covered up imperfections, highlighted only the main contours of people's faces. It became possible to remain young and beautiful forever at least in pictures. Warhol portrayed mass culture, the cult of celebrity and the American dream in his works. Instagram is also a space that allows such phenomena to appear. Before Instagram, the Photoshop graphics editor canonized the beauty myth; nonetheless, this program still required certain user skills, while Instagram is what can be called its rationalized version, able to create similar retouching effects within a few seconds, creating a mannequin out of anyone.

Poser-like behaviour is another typical feature of narcissist selfies, with the so-called 'duck face' (lips pressed together as in a pout,

resembling a duck beak) having become a particularly frequent occurrence. This photographic pose has become a favourite of both sexes, albeit it has also been a permanent target of criticism, scorn, irony and parodies for its artificialness and mediocrity (mainly in the sphere of social networks, where it emerged). The favourite space for presenting one's physical beauty and gym-honed muscles is a room with mirrors – the bathroom, cloakroom and gym. The beauty myth and cult of the body are presented on social networks mainly by protagonists of selfies. Such photos also serve as evidence that the person genuinely was in the particular place they claimed to have been.

So far, we have discussed a phenomenon involving the activation of certain emotions related to envy, but selfies are also able to produce other diverse emotions. One interesting example is the photo published on Twitter by a certain girl after a plane crash with the comment: I almost just died (Schneider, 2014). Does the mass media incite such dramatization of reality? People become reporters on their own lives on a daily basis, assuming patterns of media messages and dogmas, assisted by social networks. People desire to win the favour of their audience, attract interest, shock, surprise or just make themselves the centre of attention. Meanwhile, respect for one's own life and sense of the private seems to have faded away. A question arises as to whether people caught in (virtual) social nets have perhaps lost their sense of intimacy for good.

Selfblog or from the desire of self-presentation to voyeurism

People's profiles on social networks provide a huge deal of information, which is made available more or less actively and more or less knowingly by the users themselves. By taking the opportunity to express their present mood, feelings and ideas in the form of a so-called status, by releasing personal and contact information (relationship

status, address of one's residence, school and workplace) and by sharing information on their cultural lives (events attended or due to be attended), users allow the service to create an online timeline of their lives. Via this feature, users are simultaneously pushed into permanent self-presentation before a daily online audience. Each user thus becomes a "Big Brother", who can observe others, but at the same time also becomes observed.

According to Macek, the sources of motivation for such self-performance are to be found in the cultural narcissism¹⁰ and spectacularity of a society that has become surfeited with media content: "Performance interactions do not take place primarily before a situationally delineated audience, but before a non-segmented audience, at the same time appearing in a mediated social environment, which is 'socially unfinished', permanent, lasting" (Macek, 2015, p. 102).

What was originally meant to serve as a means of communication has gradually become an ideal environment for voyeurism. A Facebook profile serves as a window to users' lives, as they themselves have allowed others to see them in their natural environment by making public their statuses and photo albums. The social network is so smart that it even notifies the user on activities of interest of other users: "the subscriber becomes the centre of focus as everything is being related to them. Facebook makes everyone feel to be important and unique by giving them – and others – the room to shoot a film of their own [life]" (Kšićan, 2011).

¹⁰ French sociologist and essayist Gilles Lipovetsky in his works developed the ideas of American historian and social scientist Christopher Lasch, who extended the term of narcissism, analysing it as a social and cultural phenomenon. He heavily contributed towards making this term popular mainly with his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). By observing transformations of culture in the USA, he arrived to the conclusion that narcissism is a defence strategy employed by individuals to adapt to modern society.

The traditional voyeuristic corollary “to see and not be seen” has been transformed by social network users to “see and be seen”, thereby creating “reverse voyeurism” (Tedford, 2009). People have ceased to be afraid of furtive looks via spy glasses and of eavesdropping, as they have been placing magnifying glasses on themselves – daily, voluntarily and deliberately, in order to win others’ attention. We can observe that apart from wasting their time, Facebook users en masse have allowed the network to invade their privacy in a truly Orwellian style.

Users’ memories are being objectified and conserved in photographs collected by themselves, while they in turn live the lives of their virtual friends and their friends who put their photo albums on display. The need to pile up images is shared by both creator and viewer. Narcissistic presentation of the self thus walks hand in hand with voyeurism.

Disinhibition

The anonymous nature of the internet can incentivize users to lose restraint, care less about the opinion of others and at the same time be less afraid to express their own views. As Facebook does not work on the principle of anonymity, rather the contrary, users present their opinions, ideas and values openly under their own profiles: via statuses and the joining of individual fan groups. Racism is one negative example of such disinhibited expression. In online reality, quite a few individuals do not find it difficult to join extremist groups, while they in fact do not necessarily openly advocate such attitudes in the real world. It follows that Facebook can nourish, directly or indirectly, ethnic and racial stereotypes and prejudices.

Even though Facebook only celebrated its 13th anniversary in February 2017, psychologists have already named several new disorders related to it. For example, the aforementioned constant compulsion to check one’s status on Facebook has been named “Facebook Status

Syndrome”. According to doctors from the Los Angeles-based Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, this addiction disorder is manifested by the pathological urge of an individual to report to members of their social network each of his or her actions (Ulej, 2009).

At first glance, Facebook seems to be a space for unlimited opportunities in entertainment and communication without any boundaries and restraints. However, this same space also concentrates huge amounts of sensitive data that almost call for misuse. Several studies have discovered that revealing one’s own privacy on Facebook with the aim of boosting social prestige and assumption of control over information published on Facebook are two entirely different psychological processes. Mainly the young in their need to communicate and present themselves forget to censor their personal data and images, exposing them to misuse. Another cause of misuse is represented by the lack of proper protection of minors. Even though only children above 13 are officially allowed to subscribe to Facebook, this is a far cry from the real situation. While Facebook administrators do not care much about children and minors, marketers seeking to sell products to young consumers certainly do.

Identification on social networks

Online identity represents a highly subjective variable set of information published by users on themselves, depending on possible and expected feedback. Nonetheless, by creating an identity in a virtual space, users destroys the sphere of privacy and intimacy, as opinions endorsed or condemned, passively tolerated or actively supported cooperate in the creation of their overall image in this environment. Identifying oneself with these elements means engaging in the process of the relevant virtual socialization models of behaviour associated with norms,

values and acceptance of individual's ethical codes, making it possible for others to discern boundaries in the user's thinking and acting.

The trendy phenomenon of the social network creates catalysing triggers of "surfing" individuals' dependence on their feeling of satisfaction, which is measured by a popularity curve corresponding to the number of Likes, and by the satisfaction of the need to be seen. The urge to share one's privacy with the public leads to the accumulation of particular and often vague posts, which bury any higher aims, while instead bringing to the foreground childish and dilettante items of interest as reflections of one's superficial relations to reality.

The system of social networks allows setting interaction between individual communicating members. Meanwhile, in order to draw and maintain the attention of target groups, it employs the following instruments:

- **approach** via comprehensible expressions and information portfolio
- **frequency of updates** in the virtual environment
- predispositions for **routine user behaviour** displayed by communicating individuals
- **element of playfulness and entertainment** in their own "e-zone"
- **stimuli from the outer environment** (commercials, service offerings, notifications, appeals)
- **internal navigation** by user support

Pejorative and ostensibly vulgar "trademarks" deliberately used by mainly adolescent users of this community represent further identification phenomena related to the distortive effects of social networks. This is a rather simplistic way of winning attention and to appear original and 'cool'. This does not only concern fictitious profiles created by users out of boredom, but also real auto-destruction

vis-à-vis the self as presented on their real profiles. This phenomenon is obviously one of the new features of the virtual era, as nobody in the past used to be happy being called names. Nevertheless, the environment of social networks has introduced a fashion of *self-delusion*, with individual users attempting to overcome boundaries of their own shame and moral restraints at the expense of losing their privacy and, perhaps even worse, their reputation.

A *judging instinct for the sake of preservation of one's prestige* is one of the human traits, so it is easier to call others' behaviour depraved and cowardly, with the aim of preserving one's own positive image before the public. At the same time there occurs an element involving various degrees of filtration for the sake of securing one's privacy from the unknown public. Without succumbing to unnecessary paranoia, it is appropriate to consider whether perhaps such detailed cautious fragmenting of one's behaviour should be the price for releasing information to an excessively broad audience, which includes people who should not have access to too personal items. After more or less successful attempts to misuse images of users from allegedly secure profiles on the pokec.sk/cz community servers belonging to *Azet*, it became apparent that social networks guarantee privacy only to the extent of their users' own readiness and ability to protect it. The positives brought about by this virtual environment – mainly concerning the development of social relations, as is evident from the very term and nature of social network – have thus been shifted to quite extreme dimensions, a situation that needs to be tackled, or else a virtual black hole of socialization will emerge, resulting in further disturbing consequences related to the fact that immediate interpersonal contacts have at least partly been shut down.

Devaluation of friendship in front of everyone's eyes

The primary role of social networks is to connect people throughout the world into communities with friendship and kinship serving as social synapses. The concentration of individual links of the chain representing specific people guarantees the survival of this virtual environment. Meanwhile, number of friends seems to indicate the perceived popularity of a given individual vis-à-vis their environment. Falling into the trap of superficiality is far too easy with such an approach, however. It is obviously impossible to devote the same amount of attention and time to dozens or even hundreds of persons at the same time. These friendships are conserved in the environment of a virtual network, resembling a fruit compote, which has all the attributes of fruit, except for fresh taste and genuine aroma.

According to Peter Mikuláš, “English literature distinguishes between Friend, with a capital F, and friend – with the latter, lower-case, meaning real friend (close person), while the capitalised Friend is another user of a social network, whom we have defined (pre-defined) as a user who would be granted specifically delimited access to our private information” (Mikuláš, 2009).

The emergence of the phenomenon of social networks is primarily related to the nature of our contemporary accelerated times, so it is hardly surprising to find in a product that had been meant to fuse human individualities so strikingly opposite features as social isolation, debasement of feelings and devaluation of their authenticity. A gap between real relations and virtual relations is widening, with experiences, feelings and wishes considered from the viewpoint of posts due to be written on one's Facebook timeline. The present phenomenon quite clearly involves a devaluation of friendship by developing an artificial substitute based on the formula of “look-express-away”, meaning ‘look, express yourself and decamp’. At the

same time this formula serves as an alibi for excusing the absence of real social contacts.

People using social networks can engage in both sound debate and shallow conversation, concur with another's opinion and also have a quarrel, and even break a relationship with the use of written characters enriched with a whole range of emoticons. Meanwhile, the question arises whether the quality of interpersonal relations in the future will outweigh their quantity and whether cultivated speech will experience a renaissance, or, conversely, whether society will perhaps remain stuck in the quagmire of communication nuisance.

Generation identity of digital natives

According to several relevant research projects carried out by the civic association Infoland (2010), members of the online generation do not view activities on the internet and communication via social networks, including online chatting, as secondary activities and a matter of entertainment, but rather as a necessary part of their social existence. "These phenomena in their lives mainly serve for supporting relations from real life, instead of replacing them. For them, online chatting and social networks rather represent an extension and deepening of their real-life relations than a source of their deterioration" (Uyenco – Kingdon, 2009, p. 9). They do not view online communication as an element that would isolate them from the outer world, but more as a different and particularly effective way of meeting friends, learning, collecting information etc. They believe that this attitude does not in any way represent a sort of depersonalization, breakdown of social bonds and revolt against the world of adults. Quite on the contrary, members of the digital generation view themselves not only as very pragmatic individuals, who do not consider entertainment and satisfaction of their own needs as the only worthwhile issues, but

also as people who care about dialogue, debate, solidarity and online participation in things they deem important.

Social networks represent an ambivalent phenomenon in human communication. They can both connect people separated by great distances and at the same time make those who are genuinely close grow further apart. The latter phenomenon leads to a process of ever more intense loneliness, as the warmth of human speech can hardly be replaced by written codes, with facial expressions, gestures and contextual grasp of a situation in the latter case being left merely up to the recipient's own imagination. Social separation from one's immediate environment is created almost imperceptibly; nonetheless, its intensity grows proportionately to positive responses received from the virtual environment.

Lipovetsky believes that a revolution in interpersonal relations has taken place – what matters now is “to be yourself” and the development of the self independently of others. “People crave emotional intensity of relations as strongly as they used to do before, if not even more, but the more they hope to achieve it, the lonelier they feel to be” (Lipovetsky, 2003, p. 67).

This is why we should not resort to condemning Facebook as such. The revolutionary element of social interference in interpersonal relations at the present time lies more in the formal sphere than in its quantitative ratio. Social networks, although not meeting all the criteria of a perfect social activity and perhaps even coincidentally effecting social isolation, in the first place bringing together people by facilitating their communication and providing platforms for expression of their interests in their activities and those of others. The current times indeed seem to require an update in forms of everyday communication – of course, with sober consideration of means that would make it possible for social interactions to flourish.

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AUTHORS

doc. Mgr. Miroslav Ballay, PhD.

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

Mgr. Katarína Gabašová, PhD.

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

prof. Loreta Georgievska-Jakovleva, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Macedonia

prof. Maja Jakimovska-Toshikj, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Macedonia

Mgr. Kristína Jakubovská, PhD.

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

prof. Ana Martinoska, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Macedonia

prof. Valentina Mironska-Hristovska, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
in Skopje, Macedonia

prof. Jasmina Mojsieva-Gusheva, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
in Skopje, Macedonia

Mgr. Erika Moravčíková, PhD.

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine
the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

Mgr. Veronika Moravčíková, PhD.

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine
the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

Mgr. Jozef Puškár

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine
the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

doc. Goce Smilevski, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
in Skopje, Macedonia

prof. Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser, PhD.

Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
in Skopje, Macedonia

Mgr. Lucia Valková

Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the Constantine
the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia

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