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CULTURAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE GLOBAL USAGE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Summary. The article is focused on the consequences of the use of new media on the cultural identity construction of the individual. There will be analyzed not only the implicated phenomena as acceleration and granularization of many spheres of life but also the rapid growth of new digital technologies in collectivistic societies. As an exemple the author gives some facts about the use of new media in the Republic of Benin, West Africa, and the inherent implications on individual and societal self-understanding and identity construction.

Keywords: Global networking, individual, identity construction, culture, media society, acceleration, digital technologies, emerging and developing countries, West Africa, Baudrillard.

KULTUROWE KONSTRUKCJE TOŻSAMOŚCI W KONTEKŚCIE GLOBALNEGO STOSOWANIA CYFROWYCH TECHNOLOGII KOMUNIKACJI

Streszczenie. Artykuł ten naświetla konsekwencje stosowania cyfrowych technologii komunikacji w odniesieniu do konstruowania zarówno subiektywnych, jak i obiektywnych, kulturowych tożsamości współczesnych społeczeństw. Fenomenologicznie postrzegane wpływy globalnego usieciowienia, związane z procesami przyśpieszenia lub też ze zróżnicowaniem i pokawałko-waniem wszystkich przestrzeni życiowych są tu przedmiotem analizy, obok problemów związanych ze wzrastającym znaczeniem stosowania technologii cyfrowych w krajach nowo uprzemysłowionych i rozwijających się, jak np. Republika Beninu (Afryka Zachodnia).

Słowa kluczowe: globalne sieci, epoka, indywiduum, konstrukcje tożsamości, kultura, społeczeństwo medialne, przyśpieszenie, technologia cyfrowa, kraje nowo industrializujące się, kraje rozwijające się, Afryka Zachodnia, Baudrillard.

*Suggested attributes from philosophers
in regard to people's self-understanding
do not define what it means to be humans,
but rather technical standards.
Friedrich Kittler[1]*

1. Introduction

The current discourse on digital communication technologies as well as the potential of global networking and the use of new media is controversial and characterized by key terms like pluralization, participation, individualization, mediatization. The consequences of the use of new media are seen generally positively and under an optimistic perspective especially by political institutions which place their focus on the chances provided by the access to digital communication as those one, for example democratization, participation, access to education for all citizens and expansion of sciences.

Skepticism and even rejection of modern networking dominate current philosophical and sociological analyses and debates regarding the phenomenon of omnipresence of new media and their inherent impact on the subject and society. There is skepticism not only towards the digital divide, but also towards the far-reaching and partially irreversible consequences of digital communication and permanent networking on the individuals and thus on their construction of identity.

To understand the existential and global dimension of new technologies it is worth to take into account not only the industrialized world but also networking societies in other cultures, especially in emerging and developing countries.

2. Identity and society in the age of digital networking

In the era of digital communication the question of the identity of the subject and his/her social position has to be defined and analyzed in a new way. Considering the omnipresence of medial communication and the implications for the human being, for local communities but also for the global society, it will also be necessary to find new answers to this question of identity.

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[1] Kittler, Friedrich (1989/93) Die Welt des Symbolischen – eine Maschine. p. 61. Quoted. According to Probst, Maximilian (2011): Medien sind die Kinder des Krieges, [in:] Die Zeit (Kultur) from 10/20/2011, http://www.zeit.de/2011/43/Nachruf-Kittler (accessed on 11/13/2015).

2.1. New media and digitization: The disappearing subject

The French philosopher and media theorist Jean Baudrillard was one of the most far-sighted, albeit radical diagnosticians of the present age dominated by media and digital networking. Baudrillard predicted the disintegration of things and the "disappearance of reality"[2] within the context of his substantiated interpretation of the world of simulations. However, media simulation and digital rendering of reality were not to be understood as a mirror or model of the same; one rather had to assume that "simulated hyper reality generates itself without reference in reality[3]". Baudrillard developed a new theory of the digital image and criticized the "digitization of thinking" while referencing the principal impossibility of adequately representing reality in digital form.

The scenario, conceived by him in regard to the new media society and its implicit consequences for the subject and its identity construction could and would "make it possible for humans to reach the end of their possibilities on account of the unfurling of a limitless – mental and material – technology and then disappear precisely because of this achievement while making room for an artificial world that dispels him"[4]. Baudrillard elucidates this consequence of "disappearance" in greater detail in regard to the possibilities and forms of digital networking: "Indeed, the subject actually disappears – the subject as the instance of the will, of freedom (...), but leaves behind a ghost, its narcissistic double[5]."

What does the disappearance of the subject mean in the "mental diaspora of networks[6]" or in a world that "is recorded, captured, filmed and photographed over and over again – even before it has been seen[7]"? For the individual this means, in regard to the network culture and the usage of digital communication technologies or social networks, nothing other than the impossibility to authentically affirm the opposite person, the communication partner and become aware of him due to the constant presentation of one's self, or, to paraphrase Goffman[8], to perform as an actor – constructing a "self" – on a stage that has become infinitely large and incalculable.

Using the example of digital photography, Baudrillard demonstrates even more clearly the loss of growth and development, the disappearance of chronology caused by digitization that is characteristic for the analog world: "The image exists concurrently with the scene – a ridiculous promiscuity[9]." According to Baudrillard's theory – the dimension of "emergence" is missing, not only in the depiction of reality, but also in the context of digital or virtual communication in which all spatial distances are eliminated so that the phases of

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[2] Baudrillard, Jean (2008): Warum ist nicht alles schon verschwunden? Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.
[3] Blask, Falko (1995): Jean Baudrillard zur Einführung. Hamburg: Junius-Verlag.
[4] Baudrillard (2008), p. 9.
[5] Ibid., p. 18.
[6] Ibid., p. 46.
[7] Ibid., p. 36.
[8] Cf. Goffman, Erving (1969). Wir alle spielen Theater. Die Selbstdarstellung im Alltag. Munich: Piper Verlag.
[9] Baudrillard (2008), p. 44.

analog face-to-face communication between sender and recipient are not only shortened in the digital context, but the respective coding and decoding processes of the virtually interacting persons forfeit chronological order and logic.

2.2. Acceleration and granularization of society

Paul Virilio, philosopher and media society critic, who had already spoken of the "aesthetics of disappearance[10]" in 1986 and regarded the spatial dimension as abolished in favor of the dimension of time, made a similar assessment of the effects and consequences of digital processes and virtual communication on the individual. The factors of speed and acceleration[11] are central components of this existential paradigm shift brought about by new technologies. According to Virilio, this shift has far-reaching consequences for the individual and his identity construction: "Electronic media does not provide direct sensuousness, according to him, but rather separates the humans from it: Humans not only lose the phenomenal world, but also concurrently the geographic space that – due to new broadcasting technologies – changes into a frantic space of acceleration[12]."

There are, however, not only the identity-modifying factors of the disintegration of reality and acceleration brought about by digital technologies and distinctly experienced as such by the individual as ubiquitous in a very real form as described, among others, by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa: "[…] fast food, speed dating, power naps and drive-through funerals demonstrate our determination to accelerate the tempo of daily activities; computers calculate with increasing speed; transport and communication require merely a fraction of the time that was necessary only a century ago; people seem to sleep less […][13]". Apart from these already described phenomena related to the disappearance of reality and the continuously increasing acceleration of many life processes, a tendency towards "granularization" also exists, i.e. a tendency towards an increasingly finer disintegration and specification of data brought about by digitization: "[…] Digitization above all means: We ourselves and our society are measured in a new way. Our bodies, our social relationships, nature, our politics, our economy […]. We experience: a New Disintegration[14]."

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[10] Virilio, Paul (1986): Ästhetik des Verschwindens. Berlin: Merve Verlag.
[11] Cf. Virilio, Paul (1992): Rasender Stillstand. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag.
[12] Grau, Alexander (2012): The Speed is the Message. Zu der Medientheorie Paul Virilios. In: tv diskurs 60 (2/2012), p. 60-63.
[13] Rosa, Hartmut (2013): Beschleunigung und Entfremdung. Auf dem Weg zu einer kritischen Theorie spätmoderner Zeitlichkeit. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 19.
[14] Kucklick, Christoph (2014): Die granulare Gesellschaft. Wie das Digitale unsere Wirklichkeit auflöst. Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, p. 10.

In further consequence it must be noted that digital communication and actions performed in virtual networks in which the subject moves occur with a whole range of different actors, groups, markets or interest groups, a multitude of entities that can permanently overexert the individual in the sense of disintegrating the self in an increasing number of social networks, apps, chats or blogs in which the individual risks losing himself.

2.3. The "incalculability of consequences"[15]

The cultural and societal changes associated with the usage of digital communication technologies and new media have become multifaceted in nature and virtually incalculable so that the "human question and human subjectivity and identity receive new meaning[16]." It has equally become very difficult – as emphasized by Kiepas[17] – to calculate an assessment of the possibilities of global digital networking, an evaluation of the subject's intentions and the controllability of the consequences "associated with the network structures that are characteristic for the information society and the virtuality of human communication objects[18]."

Chen tentatively summarizes the essential – albeit presently only phenomenologically comprehensible and not individually and globally calculable in the long term – consequences of the global usage of digital communication technologies and the culture of networking based on new media: "The impact of the integration of new media and globalization can be summarized into five precise effects, namely, a shrinking world, the compression of time and space, close interaction in different aspects of society, global connectivity, and accelerated local/global competition/cooperation[19]" (Chen, p. 3).

As apostrophized in the title of the present contribution – it is necessary to also expand the "global dimension" in regard to the relevance of the usage of new media in non-industrialized countries and direct the focus to the implications of digital communication processes for the individual and society as well as to the associated changes of cultural identity constructions in emerging and developing nations in order to satisfy the aspect of the global usage of digital communication technologies.

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[15] Cf. Kiepas, Andrzej (2005): Der Mensch als Subjekt des Handelns und der Verantwortung in der digitalen Welt. In: Petsche, Hans-Joachim/Bartiková, Monika/ Kiepas, Andrzej (ed.): Erdacht, gemacht und in die Welt gestellt: Technik-Konzeptionen zwischen Risiko und Utopie. Festschrift für Gerhard Banse. Berlin: trafo-Verlag, p. 139-148.
[16] Ibid., p. 140.
[17] Cf. ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 140.
[19] Chen (2012), p. 3.

3. The new media society in emerging and developing nations based on the example of West Africa

The tension between specific local and cultural characteristics and global networking is undisputedly one of the greatest challenges associated with the development and usage of digital communication technologies: "Cultural identities are initially understood as something that is locally rooted, historically specified and bound to local contexts as e.g. values, symbols and language. They thus exist in a relationship of tension with the concept of globalism[20]." Globalization – as implied by the term itself – also concerns less developed regions of the world and would be inconceivable without the usage of digital technologies. An attempt is made in the following to analyze phenomenologically the implications associated with global networking for cultural self-understanding and new cultural identity constructions in a collectivistic society based on the example of West Africa.

3.1. Human placing and the construction of cultural identity

Identity construction is never an exclusively internal and individual process and cannot be regarded as wholly isolated from the subject's societal affiliation and embeddedness in the social environment. Even those identity theories that were developed long before the era of digitization and do not yet firmly integrate and include the factors analyzed above, namely acceleration, granularization and identity disintegration, predominantly reference that identity construction occurs respectively in connection with embeddedness in a human social fabric[21]: "Identity is more about creating a fit between the subjective 'internal' and social 'external', thus the production of an individual social placing[22]."

The modified cultural and social framework conditions brought about by global networking and permanent availability of digital means of communication around the world change the nature of local societies and cultural groups in various ways. Relatively little research – compared to the numerous examinations of the implications of new media for the individual in the Western or industrialized world[23] – has been performed on less developed nations as also emphasized by Dickson et al.: "However, culture specific non-Western models are not always presented in international journals[24]". Yet, incredible growth in the usage of

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[20] Hauser (2006), p. 315.

[21] At this point, an exemplary reference is made to the identity theories of Mead (which include the "me" that reflects and integrates the social environment or social control via the "generalized other") and Goffman (identity consctruction on "stage") as well as Eriksons' concept of the "protean human" (author's note).

[22] Keupp (2010), p. 28.

[23] The problem of terminological differentiation between the Western (= first) world cannot be addressed at this time. A substantiated analysis can e.g. be found in Stenger (2006) who writes: "In summary, three world layers can be identified, which – one must clearly emphasize this – are structured hierarchically. The Second and Third World are by no means independent, but regarded as not-yet First Worlds" (p. 948).

[24] Dickson, Den Hartog & Mitchelson (2003), p. 734.

digital technologies has especially occurred in this area in recent years, in particular in regard to cellphone and smartphone usage, but also relating to PC and Internet usage and the affiliation to social networks. The paradigm shift of social life in a digital networking culture has far-reaching consequences for the individual and for society: "On the one hand, intrinsically, the new culture hatched from new media creates a continuity gap between traditions and innovations within a culture. Before the emergence of new media, according to Bagdasaryan (2011), traditions and innovations in human society co-existed in a dynamically synchronized way, but the speed and impact of the new media resulted in the inability of traditional values to keep pace with the new cultural values produced by new media. This cultural gap has caused difficulty in understanding or communication between generations and among people in the same culture[25]."

In the respective culture, the usage of digital communication technologies represents a direct modification of existing cultural norms and values; it especially defines the affiliation within a cultural group and presents a special challenge for retaining traditional values: "The new cultural identity formed by new media may not change the traditional meaning of cultural identity as a unique product through interaction in a specific group context, which gives members a sense of belongings to the group, but it will directly challenge the traditional attributes of cultural identity, namely, temporality, territoriality, constrastivity, interactivity, and multiplicity[26]."

Thus, information and communication technologies change societies and the real lives of people worldwide in manifold ways and thus also the identity constructions of new media users or members of social networks and the society as a whole in which these users live. In 1998, Jürgen Habermas already wrote about the upheaval associated with global networks of all kinds: "The network expansion in regard to goods, monetary, personal and news traffic promotes mobility with an explosive force[27]." The "explosive force" of mobility addressed here not only concerns the developed nations, but in recent years also developing and emerging nations, particularly in Africa – and the speed of change is breathtaking. The respective cultural specifications of individual communities as well as all dimensions of political and social action demonstrate how central the respective cultural identity is for the conception of the self-understanding of individual groups or states: "All terms of cultural identity merely have one thing in common: namely that the respective cultural identity forms the central and determining political integration principle for each ethnic or national community[28]."

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[25] Chen (2012), p. 4.
[26] Ibid., p. 5.
[27] Habermas (1998), p. 126.
[28] Scholz (2008), p. 37.

3.2. Digital communication and networking in a collectivistic society

Individuals in collectivistic cultures are integrated in a large social network within extended families or village communities that significantly influence and shape the solidarity within the group and the cultural and collective identity of these communities, which differs from the individualistic social systems primarily found in Western, industrialized countries. The interests of the individual are not primarily relevant, but the focus is on the common good and the tasks of the group: "In a collectivistic culture, the self is defined by ingroup memberships. A key characteristic of an ingroup is represented by Durkheim's (1933, p. 365) discussion of community versus solidarity. Durkheim argued that contractual relations only regulate predictable exchanges among individuals and they are inadequate to control conflicts that often arise as individuals interact[29]."

This means that, in a collectivistic society, each human being is primarily regarded as part of the whole, integrated in a community that takes the reciprocal interdependencies into account. The philosophical approach of this theory is referred to as "Ubuntu"[30] in African; the responsibility of individual group members for one another is especially significant in this context. The parallel to networking, made possible by digital communication technologies and new media is already revealed in the definition of the collectivistic system and the assignment of attributes for this social construct, effectively as a technologically based depiction of a collectivistic, interlinked society that per se reflects the modern digital networking culture. So-called "beeping" or "flashing" is a small example of the widespread collectivistically shaped and culturally specific usage of mobile phones, especially in Africa; acquaintances or friends briefly ring the other person's cellphone as a kind of gesture of friendship or "sign of life" without waiting for the other person to actually answer the call[31].

3.3. The usage of digital communication technologies in the Republic of Benin

The small country of Benin (HDI ranking 165 of 187) provides a striking example of rapid growth and the usage of new digital technologies, especially in the area of mobile phone usage and Internet-capable smartphones as well as in regard to social network affiliations such as Facebook. Over 10 million cellphone numbers were registered in Benin in 2014, a country with a total population of 11 million[32]. It must be taken into account that some users have more than one SIM card per cellphone and the number of cellphone owners may thus be

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[29] Early (1998), p. 267.
[30] Translations of this term differ, most often translated as "humaneness" or "community spirit". Cf. also: Praeg, Leonhard (2014): A Report on Ubuntu. Thinking Africa Series. University of Kwazulu Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg.
[31] Cf. Chéneau-Loquay, Annie (2010) : Modes d'appropriation innovants du téléphone mobile en Afrique.
[32] Cf. Vieira 2015.

somewhat less than 10 million. Nonetheless, the majority of Benin's residents use mobile phones and smartphones even though many have to fight for survival on a daily basis and can barely or cannot afford to send their children to school; the illiteracy rate for adults remains above 50%. More people in Africa already now have access to mobile phone networks than to the electricity grid[33] and a study revealed that inhabitants of South African slums spend no less than 27.5% of their income on products from the communication sector, even to the exclusion of things that are essential for life[34].

In 2015, the author conducted expert interviews on the prevalence of new technologies and their implications for West African society in the Republic of Benin[35]; essential insights from these interviews are stated in the following:

- A particular affinity for the usage of digital communication technologies, as for example mobile phone usage or participation in social networks, exists within African society. This affinity or the rapid increase in new media usage is based, among other things, on the deep-rooted collectivistic mindset of African societies.

- Political actors, but also opposition groups that do not have access to state media ascribe an above-average importance – compared to European or North American countries – to activities in social networks[36].

- The total percentage of West Africans under the age of 15 is approx. 50% of the population, a demographic group that exhibits a strong interest in new technologies.

- From a scientific point of view, the usage of new technologies offers a range of possibilities that could decidedly improve social and economic conditions in the region, such as the cash-free payment systems *M-Pesa* or *DrumNet*[37] that deliver payments via cellphone, providing a kind of virtual market place for producers in remote rural regions.

4. Outlook

Future developments of digital technologies and the implications of global networking for the cultural identity of the individual and local communities are multifaceted and require a differentiated assessment and evaluation. Apart from the phenomenologically discernable consequences, such as the acceleration of daily and occupationally relevant processes, permanent accessibility, the possibility of limitless, spatially unattached communication, the

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[33] Cf. Rao 2011.
[34] Cf. Wassermann 2011.
[35] The author conducted the interviews from July 09 - 20, 2015 in Cotonou or Djougou (Republic of Benin) with, among others, the person in charge of ICT for the Ministère des Communications et des Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication as well as with a psychologist and a social worker.
[36] Cf. Vieira (2015).
[37] Cf. also Biermann (2013), Brauckmann (2011), Hiller von Gaertringen (2014), Wassermann (2010).

change of the public space or also in light of the technological paradigm shift brought about by the "Internet of things" or "extended reality", to name just a few, it will also be necessary to focus on long-term consequences as well as on individual and societal self-understanding and identity construction. Skepticism and pessimism are prevalent among the majority of those who address this question in their assessments of the future: "The self becomes precarious as it is dispersed and dispossessed of self-assured thinking. […] Such questions reveal the incredible threat posed by thinking machines: They gnaw at ourselves[38]". Ultimately, the quality of developments and changes – as for all technological innovations and accomplishments – will likely depend on realistic expectations and the realization that the "digital narrative will not be able to keep its promise of solving social problems through technology[39]".

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[38] Kucklick (2014), p. 200f.
[39] Engels (2015), p. 275.

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Omówienie

Artykuł ten naświetla konsekwencje stosowania cyfrowych technologii komunikacji w odniesieniu do konstruowania zarówno subiektywnych, jak i obiektywnych, kulturowych tożsamości współczesnych społeczeństw. Fenomenologicznie postrzegane wpływy globalnego usieciowienia, związane z procesami przyśpieszenia lub też ze zróżnicowaniem i pokawałkowaniem wszystkich przestrzeni życiowych są tu przedmiotem analizy, obok problemów związanych ze wzrastającym znaczeniem stosowania technologii cyfrowych w krajach nowo uprzemysłowionych i rozwijających się, jak np. Republika Beninu (Afryka Zachodnia). Rozważania i analizy prowadzone w artykule uwzględniają również implikacje tych procesów, w celu samo-zrozumienia indywidualnych podmiotów w ramach kolektywistycznego społeczeństwa afrykańskiego.