MEDIATED INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This article is set out to draw a theoretical framework regarding mediated interpersonal communication. The new patterns in communication have transformed modern society, in a network like fabric. The emergence of social media has caused some significant changes in the way people interact and the reasons why they communicate. The changes reflect on the way they see themselves and construct their identities. Social media is also used to become part of an online (multicultural) community, formed by individuals all over the world. There are, of course, some unwelcomed side effects to this new media frenzy. However, the possibilities offered by the usage of the Internet are practically endless. The scale of the phenomenon is precisely the reason behind this paper and it fully justifies it. The Internet and social media have become parts of our lives – from individuals to companies - and it would be reckless to underestimate its power.

Keywords: new media, social media, interpersonal communication, online communities, virtual identity, avatars, network society.

Any life form implies a network; nothing can exist if it's isolated: from microorganisms that depend on others to survive to people who depend on the relationships with their peers in order to live: "no organism can develop on the long term if kept isolated from the others, therefore, a network of good relationships, established from childhood seem to be the *sine qua non* condition of our lives" (Bougnoux, 2000, p. 27). After all, human beings are social animals. Manuel Castells transfers this need to belong to a global level. The author argues that globalization – such a well known phenomenon – was possible due to global networks created by the means of communication (Castells, 2009). Networks not only facilitate the process of globalization

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but, in fact, they begin to shape the lives of individuals, because all the activities that influence our lives, in one way or another, take place through these networks: financial market decisions, transaction of goods, progress in science and technology. But what are these networks we are discussing? The same author, Manuel Castells, defines them as „complex structures of communication constructed around a set of goals that simultaneously ensure unity of purpose and flexibility of execution by their adaptability to the operating environment (Castells, 2009, p. 21). Unlike other patterns of communication, the network has the advantage of being flexible, adaptable and reconfigurable.

The change in paradigm is not limited to the macro-context, instead it touches the personal lives of individuals, and it shapes the way people interact with each other. Gradually, interpersonal communication shifts towards virtual space, replacing a significant part of face to face interaction. Precisely due to this global network, interactions don't take place only with people nearby. The world is flattening, as Friedman called this process, which means we have the possibility to speak and collaborate with people from all around the world. The purpose of these interactions is, in Horea Mihai Bădău's opinion, "to create new relationships, personal or business. People talk, recommend, create information, the monologue is transformed in dialogue (…), information becomes accessible, and users change from consumers in content makers, in a context where knowledge becomes democratic (Bădău, 2011, p. 17).

This study has the objective of outlining a theoretical framework that contains the main concepts pertaining to mediated interpersonal communication: virtual communities, virtual identity, and social media. The aspects regarding the internet and network society are so complex, and cannot be explored from only one point of view; therefore this paper will only reach some parts of this phenomenon.

1. Communication patterns

The telephone and the telegraph have opened Pandora's Box and have facilitated, *avant la lettre*, the appearance of McLuhan's global village. Technical innovations at the time, almost obsolete now (especially if we consider the telegraph), they were the first devices that allowed humans to communicate, in real time, without being face to face. In real time, because obviously there were long distance contacts before these inventions, but in the case of a letter, for instance, some time would pass until the message reached the recipient. In the case of the telephone, especially, the message travels from the transmitter to the recipient almost instantaneously and the recipient can, at any time, interfere or give feedback.

A second stage in the paradigm shift was reached with the invention of radio and television. Similar to the telephone and the telegraph, these devices instantaneously send information; the major difference is that the recipient is not a specific individual. The recipient is made up of a mass on individuals who can offer limited or no feedback and who cannot react to the messages they are given. Thus, this is the case on a one-way communication flow. There are, of course, some exceptions,

almost insignificant. There are some television shows that allow on air phone calls from viewers, but these cases are very few compared to mass communication acts. For now, we will settle to say that in the case of broadcast media the feedback is limited.

The diffusion and ascension of the Internet have caused, as some authors say, a digital revolution; a revolution, because it brought significant and sudden changes in the contemporary society's fabric. The scale of this change led some to compare the changes caused by social media to the industrial revolution. One thing is for certain: the definitive shift has been made, from broadcast media to interactive digital systems. Interaction is the key concept that unites the vast range of communication acts that take place online. The internet is multidirectional (interactive) and it includes inter-personal communication, mass communication and organizational communication (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008). Hence, „the reader becomes a manufacturer of information, in a new public area, where our perceptions on reality are entirely modified, where inter-human relationships enter a new phase, of multidimensional communication, and where social interactions take place in a virtual world" (Bădău, 2011, p. 12).

It would be premature to say that all human interaction takes place in the virtual world. However, we cannot ignore the emerging public space, as Horea Mihai Bădău suggests; a new agora where everything is allowed, taking in consideration the lack of legislation regarding this area. Internet users come from a variety of social catego-ries and cultural environments, so we can say, without a doubt that "the Internet is quickly developing its own culture, determined by a diverse group of people of dif-ferent religion, nationality, sex and experience" (Taylor, 2010, p. 19). Information technology is so deeply rooted in our daily routines, that talking to friends and family on the (cell)phone or via email, working in a virtual team, playing online games or seeking a partner online have become aspects of our everyday lives (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008).

User generated content together with the potential of reaching a global audience transform the virtual environment in a synthesis between two fundamental communication forms: interpersonal and mass communication. Castells (2009) comes up with the concept of mass self-communication to define this new type of process. A video on *Youtube* can be visualized by users all around the world, fulfilling the criteria of mass communication. At the same time the video was created by a single individual, but the recipient has the possibility of choosing what to watch. The three forms of communication, interpersonal, mass and mass self-communication coexist and complete each other. A complementary relationship is established, not an exclusion one.

However, the borderlines between the digital and the real world are becoming increasingly diffused. For a teenager nowadays it is perfectly normal to listen to music on *Youtube*, while posting photos on *Facebook*, and afterwards reading an e-book on a *Kindle*. All these activities have one thing in common: they do not require a real life support. There is no music disc, no picture and no book. Consequently, in

some cases, the virtual environment offers a more fulfilling and satisfying experience (Greengard, 2012). Moreover, because it allows real life updating, the Internet can offer a more authentic experience.

In contrast with traditional media, as Cornelia Maxim observes, the Internet is different in three aspects: it is a global way of communicating, it is interactive and it offers access to a large quantity of information, in a short time and at a low cost (Maxim, 2009). We have already spoken about the first two aspects, we will briefly comment on the third dimension the author mentioned. The costs of accessing the Internet are relatively small – all you need is a computer and a connection. On-line resources are numerous. There is information about anything-from the online free encyclopedia, Wikipedia, to paid databases. We should insist on the differences caused by the unequal distribution of Internet access. At this point, only about 10% of the world's population has Internet access. Ultimately, the phenomena studied in this paper affect only a small percentage of the world's population. The inequalities that already exist at a global level are deepened not only by the access to financial resources, but by the possibility to have available informational resources.

2. Mediated interpersonal communication

From the perspective of communication, the emergence of new media caused, as we have previously seen, a series of radical changes in people's lives. A first debate was trigger by the rightfulness of the concept of mediated interpersonal communication. Some specialists have argued that, being a mediated act, with the help of devices and graphic interfaces, there can be no interpersonal communication; in its most authentic meaning interpersonal communication requires face to face interaction.

Some experiments (Radu, Iluţ, & Matei, 2004) have shown that there is a series of factors that facilitate interpersonal dynamics. Among these factors are "the degree of closeness or spatial proximity, the limits and the duration of physical contacts, the warm or authoritative style of communication, the exchange of eye contact as a form of communication, the volume and the rhythm of interactions, the dynamic of reciprocal disclosures" (Radu, Iluţ, & Matei, 2004, p. 192). Let us imagine the following hypothetical situation: two individuals, from different countries start talking on a forum. They later observe they share common interest, similar hobbies, and they begin to trust each other, sufficiently to share personal experiences, and interact more and more. It is a form of interpersonal and implicitly interpersonal communication? Or are we dealing with a totally new form of communication?

Firstly, the need for physical proximity is redundant on the Internet. There are no real physical contacts, but there can be a visual contact, with the use of webcams. The volume and the rhythm of interactions can be even greater, because there is no need for the two participants to be in the same place. More time spent "together" means an accelerated rhythm of reciprocal confessions. Moreover, it was demonstrated that, in spite of the initial premises, people are friendlier online. Standing in front of a computer, in the privacy of your home, creates the illusion of privacy; therefore,

individuals find it easier to share their most intimate thoughts and feelings (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008). The only concern is that the illusion of privacy is easily shattered. Once posted online, a message becomes public and, as we have previously stated, it can reach a global audience.

Despite these dangers, the Internet became a meeting point for individuals who are searching for a romantic partner. For shy or for busy people, dating sites manage to replace the natural need for affection. Statistics show that online dating is becoming increasingly popular and efficient. In 2007, in the US, one couple in five met online (Qualman, 2007). Online dating is a solid alternative to real life dating. In general, a person will talk to somebody with whom he/she has something in common. The preferences and the personality of each user reflect, more or less, in their personal profile, therefore people can easily choose whom to speak. A second argument supporting this alternative is that unpleasant situations or incompatibilities can he handled better than in real life, especially for a shy person, a refusal can become a difficult situation; while in the virtual the impact is less strong.

Palo Alto researchers have shown that the relationship is primordial in any act of communication. The important thing is not the informational exchange, but the establishment and maintenance of relationships with those around: „the meaning of interpersonal communication is not reduced to its functional aspect, the exchange of messages caused by the solving of a common task. The systematic dialogue between two people A and B may be initiated and maintained on the basis of a profound motivation, meant to speed up or keep the mutual convergence" (Radu, Iluţ, & Matei, 2004, p. 194). The same Palo Alto group explains that any act of communication implies two dimensions: verbal and nonverbal. The ratio between the two is unequal; the nonverbal part dominates communication; the numbers vary (from 60% to 90%), but one thing is for certain: a large part of the information the human brain receives from the people around come from nonverbal indicators. Later on, that same information will contribute to forming an impression about the others.

What happens when the means of communication does not support the transmission of nonverbal cues? In the online world, with little exception, communication takes place with the use of the written word. Except the shades given by the use of punctuation marks or of a certain stylistic register, the text is emptied from the nonverbal load (gestures, posture, mimic) and paraverbal one (the tone and intensity of voice, pauses in speech). Some social platforms have tried to find ways to eliminate this downside. *Yahoo Messenger*, for instance, incorporates in the user interface a system of emoticons that have the purpose of replacing nonverbal cues. Obviously the system is rudimentary; having the capacity to reproduce only a small number of emotions, from what an individual would normally register in a regular conversation.

Transmitting emotion, intentionally or not, is a very important part of interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, mediated communication limits the exchange of emotions and feelings. From this to wrong interpretations of the message is a very

short way. It is in this aspect where mediated communication is weak; new media may facilitate more interpersonal relationships, but their quality might not be the same.

So far, we have discussed interpersonal communication in informal relations. At this point, it would be useful to outline the changes that occurred in more formal environments, such as the business sector. More and more companies are moving their headquarters in the virtual world. There is no longer a need for a strictly drawn physical space, an office. Employees can conduct their tasks and can work together from their homes: „the number of virtual workers has increased. Because of the fact is is so simple to keep in touch, many choose to organize their office at home and to work with people who, in turn, prefer to work from their own office, at home" (Taylor, 2010, p. 20).

E-mail and online communication offer considerable advantages, both in the business environment and in internal communication. Cyberspace allows global communication and speeds up team work, because it facilitates a better communication flow. Team members can meat in the virtual space and can better handle some debates that eventually lead to a better project management.

3. Social media, virtual identity and online communities

The term „social media" had been under a lot of debate in the past few years, because it radically changed the way information spreads in the virtual world: a message becomes somewhat like a virus, it multiplies quickly. More specific: a user uploads a video on a social profile. That video is later shared by other five users, and from each of these users other people share the video further, and so on. This system allows information to diffuse rapidly and to go around the world in a very short time.

The popularity of social platforms is constantly increasing. Recent statistics have shown that a quarter US Internet users spend online is dedicated to this type of sites (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012). The numbers continue to grow, and the growth is sometimes too fast for researchers to keep up. There are still some issues that have yet to be taken in discussion, such as the motives for using social networks, the effects of this use, personal data security and so on.

Social media is an umbrella concept that reunites more meanings. No matter the technological platform or graphic interface, these virtual social environments are united by some common aspects. Users have the possibility to create a profile to reflect their personality. Another common trait is the viral way of spreading information. Of course, these two characteristics represent the simplest sketch for social media. Horea Mihai Bădău's definition is more comprehensive. According to the author, social media is made out of "channels of online communication, social interaction and dissemination, separation or search for accessible information, through which large communities of people can collaborate by writing and exchanging texts, audio and video materials, that are shared from one user to another, as the public wants, like a wireless phone" (Bădău, 2011, p. 16).

Up to this point we have briefly clarified the issue of information diffusion. There is yet to discuss the problem of building or projecting an online identity. From the start, we must say there are two way of (not) assuming an identity. In other words, a person's profile on a social platform can be authentic or not. However, we won't further debate the case where the profile is not real, because the issue would rather fall in the area of research for social psychology.

Whether social networks or online multiplayer games, the need of individuals to create an identity is equally strong, to create a profile based on their own personality traits and that reflects their aspirations and desires. The creation of a profile is a way in which a person uses the technological means at hand in order to project his/her identity in the virtual environment (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008). Adaptable interfaces, especially in online multiplayer games (from *Second Life* to *World of Warcraft*) allow the players to build a customized avatar. This type of games fully illustrate that „virtual worlds give people the possibility to be somebody else or even to have multiple identities at the same time" (Roquilly, 2011).

In any case, identity and the presentation of the self, even in the virtual world must be understood as a constant performance in front of the social audience around us—that we choose our gestures, mannerisms, and actions to give off a desired impression of the self to others (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008, p. 80). In fact, the account on a social platform becomes a deposit space: „people not only view a *Facebook* account as a digital possession, they look at it as a digital storage locker for their lives. It's a place where they are able to put things they want to retain and where they can reflect on their identity" (Greengard, 2012, pg. 15-16).

The definition according to which social networks are "Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections" (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012, p. 188), brings us closer to another focus point of the study: online communities. After creating an identity a person chooses to become part of an online group. Generally, „people choose the virtual community which best fits their current goals and interests" (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008, p. 261)

Groups formed in virtual environment work based on the same principles like groups in the real world. However, there are some significant differences: the individual that are part of the group do not require face to face interaction and may come from distant geographical areas. Even so, despite the distance that separates the members of an online community, because of the rapid access to information; collective actions can be organized more quickly. Online communities are a relatively recent phenomenon, and have been studied very little. A definition would be that they are „groups of people, spontaneously or deliberately formed, that use public and private spaces, interact in the online environment and debate common subjects" (Maxim, 2009, p. 114). Another definition explores the asynchronous characteristic of the Internet; online communities become social aggregations that emerge from

the [internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Konijin, Utz, Tanis, & Barnes, 2008).

All in all, online communities are becoming a more and more important factor in Internet users' lives. No matter the motivation that pushes people towards these communities, there is no denying that they will become significant social forces.

4. Limits

From a meta-communicational perspective, we can argue that the greatest threats of the digital revolution are not in the confidentiality issues, data security or other aspects of this kind. Human beings, today, are fighting an invasion of information; this fact has become common knowledge. In order to protect himself from this aggression, man forged a shield of indifference, he gave away emotion and he has given up on his senses: "the world's media dissolution tends to make a deafening noise, a general equalization of the trivial with the horror that anaesthetizes the senses and protects sensibility" (Le Breton, 2001, p. 17). A moment of silence could become, *in extremis*, the greatest luxury of this civilization. The avalanche of words makes the meanings fade out – we speak more, but we can't manage to understand each other; this is "a society where individuals communicate a lot, but rarely meet" (*Ibid*. p.16).

On the other hand, looking at this phenomenon from a pragmatic point of view, we observe the situation is not as dramatic. The Internet offers limitless possibilities that should be exploited to the maximum. Advertising and public relations are entering, alongside the Internet, in a new era. The way the message is transmitted and the way it reaches the consumer have changed. The design of the message and the communicational matrix has to be adapted to the new environment. Examples in this regard already exist. Interaction and the relationship between a company and its target audience should be tighter. For a company to succeed in the virtual world it must become more human. That is also the case for public institutions. The fundamental idea is that Internet users have the need to communicate more personally; the Internet is not the place for "boring" official communication. Organizational communication is also undergoing some changes. Employees are no longer required to sit at a desk in order to work on common projects; they can very well be from different countries and diverse cultures. For an internal communication specialist, the challenge resides in the creation of a system capable to handle cultural variations, while maintaining a positive internal climate. Another challenge is given by the fragmentation of consumers' habits, (Lewis, 2012), which means organizations have to be present on multiple channels in order to reach their target audience.

The present study, however, has barely reached the surface of this wide phenomenon. There are many research directions available. The only issue is that new media is evolving so fast it is sometimes hard to keep up and study it thoroughly. In any case mediated interpersonal communication will become (if not already) an integrated part of our lives. The only objection against this phenomenon is to not let

the Internet become a cult on nonstop communication. Sometimes, it's good to sober up from the „communication drunkenness" because mediated communication will never fully replace offline interpersonal relations.

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