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***NEW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES OF CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE  
IMPACT OF CYBERSPACE ON SELF IMAGE***

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*Abstract: This article reviews the research done on digital technologies and the impact they have on the self image from a cognitive perspective. The new information and communication technologies have now become a reference structure of the social space. Generically called Internet, the computer network extended worldwide is a reliable support for a new form of social event: cyber-society. Beyond all the optimistic projections that associates it with an ideal direction of the contemporary society evolution or of the negative approaches that mainly refuse the idea of virtual, cybersociety exists and develops rapidly leading to a new hybrid self.*

*Keywords: self, virtual communication, social space, on-line media, cybersociety.*

### **1. Mediating Virtual Social Space**

This paper tackles the changes of the self within the extensive range of social components or processes such as virtual society or cyber-society, virtual community, social networking on virtual groups (*Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, My Space, Tumblr* etc.), virtual interactions, and how many of these are currently available and functional, as the temptation of self “virtualization” is quite high.

Even if these terms are relative to the activity of a growing number of users (covering more and more social areas), their validity and internal consistency still remains – in some cases – for now questionable. A virtual world will remain undeniably a fictional subject, impossible to become reality.

However, can we speak today of a virtual social space or just a new size of the virtual social networking space? This virtual space only brings development or extension of real space by allowing employment of discipleship remote area beyond the physical senses. But we must not overlook the fact that spatial proximity overcoming interpersonal individuals is offered as real as possible. It is therefore a social space in which they are engaged in virtualized processes and similar expression patterns (at least in intent) of the actual reality.

The central element common to all forms of virtual social event is the idea of message “mediation” sent on purpose (and mostly conscious) and still relied heavily on text.

At this level you can find a first essential characteristic of virtual forms of social expression namely volitional. The issuance of messages within the network – which is equivalent to the existence in cyberspace – is undeniably an action consciously assumed by the users and which is, at least theoretically, under their full control. Complementary, the individual existence in cyberspace or rather the continued presence of an individual is reduced to a few hours at a time. Although they hold relatively equal importance, they do not enjoy the same attention but a number of fundamental issues of social ontology of virtual, such as computer-mediated interactions and networking and virtual organizations or groups.

## **2. The Self within Virtual Social Space**

If within social reality we cannot interact only with individuals who enter into spatial proximity, we can overcome this limitation within a computer network by employing “remote” mediated links by electronic media, independent of geographic location.

Most of the objections relating to the validity and consistency of the virtual space precisely designed this trait (virtuality), seen as an objective of simulation processes. At this level seems to be a relative ethical action simulation, its purpose being explicit and deliberate difference with reality. And if it is real and true can be other than unreal and false? In terms of valuable plans, it obviously cannot. But we are dealing with two levels of value - true / false and real / unreal - interfering. And the antagonist is basically between a real and a really unreal fake. Can it, however, speak an unreal truth or a real fake? This depends on the plans of referential reality. The question remains as valid on the false intention. For producing a false track (real or unreal) is without question an injury to the truth.

Applying these ideas to human behavior we obtain explicit conduct through disturbed, distorted and in some way deviant value; but only if the simulation is an end in itself, which is not the case for scientific research. To simulate the process, some phenomenon or entity (regardless of scientific discipline) just to create the appearance of reality in a situation well known has absolutely no epistemic significance.

In the scientific area simulation is used for testing, verification, measurement of the effects induced by the emergence of new factors, experimental handling by researchers. And here we already have to do something else, because the situation is not achieved by a semblance of reality but it is actually a reality of its own, known as virtual reality or

cyberspace. By developed simulations to reproduce the spectrum of the real structure of high-risk factor, virtual reality quickly emerged as a distinct alternative to the great possibilities of self-deepening. The two levels of reality while retaining a number of direct interactions cannot overlap. What is real to some extent can become virtual, what is virtual is a starting point somewhere (however remote) of the real nature and in some cases can be implemented at a real level and the two sections become thus actually complementary. Virtual reality is a distinctive form of manifestation of the existence of virtual self that cannot be ignored.

Applying this existential global social system we naturally obtain a virtual social space type, complementary to the real, similar to some extent but with some specific features and components. It is a space obtained by simulation (as a means and not the end) and based essentially on the support of computer technology. And because it is an area of human interaction we deal basically with a new manifestation of the self. Thus, from the simulation of individual proximity with computer connections that can cover any geographical distance between individuals, it generates a series of social interactions similar to those of the actual reality. Agents involved in bringing the action a common area through information technology can engage in social networking itself. Moreover, defining their identity remains in the spectrum of personal options, each with the possibility of its control. It is noted as two fundamental elements specific to virtual society: media and computer mediated interactions forms only the real self.

The linguistic distinction of real, at a virtual level rightly induces an equivalence of non-virtual reality (something that is not real) but this is a false problem or just a terminological problem because essentially we're dealing with a real effect with a virtual reality (both real as possible!). In relation to substantiate virtual social space was raised validity of forms of social organization based solely on unique form of communication that virtual interaction. Apparently we are dealing with a perfectly valid dilemma. In terms of communication we are dealing with a significant decrease in both qualitative and quantitative interaction compared with the actual reality. Subjects do not see each other, not hear and do not speak, do not change the nonverbal messages such as gestures and mimic. Their existence and participation is practically reduced to display a text (usually overlaps) on display. The question that may rise here is: Are we dealing with social interaction? Can this lead to a community form? The answer is 'yes'.

Cyberspace, however, was gradually assimilated to the Internet phenomenon to which social new dimensions were attached. However, there is only the virtual space on the basis of

the real. Virtual interactions are possible only in the context of a specific real existence based on a normative accepted and promoted real community in which we live. Cybersociety is a definition of self that remains a personal decision of each user. The self-consistency of Virtual Reality is decomposed into fragments.

The self-definition of identity and the absence of any external control over it really led the development of interaction in which no one can be sure of the identity of others. In this context, the virtual relationship between the utopian roles often assumed and played on their own initiative, with permanent uncertainty over others is ultimately a form of self-degradation. Another problem concerns the communication process. Communication took place between a numbers of users interacting with each other only through computers on the network can effectively generate a community. As stable as the conduct and no matter how well they might know each computer-mediation can achieve social community characteristics: generalized normative value system, some forms of identity, common behavior, a structure of power relations etc.

Interaction is reduced to the text displayed on the monitor screen, an interaction between self and defined self, an interaction in which one can not be sure of the content of other's reality. The communities formed through computer-mediated communication are called virtual communities and social spaces defined as people who continue to meet face-to-face but with a new definition of the notion of meeting and doing. Cybersociety as a form of relational self in a virtual space is therefore a trend that remains to be fully included in the spectrum of theoretical research in the field.

### **3. Growing up Self-Digital**

Virtual communities are one of the first topics outlined in relation to computer networks, while being the subject of numerous controversies (more or less theoretical). Whatever the scientific perspective the community fundamentally contains a certain number of people. In their absence we are dealing with a theoretical concept with no connection or relation to actual reality. The self is fundamental to the creation and preservation of community, but not a sufficient condition (it correlates directly with several other fundamental benchmarks). People belonging to a community which carries virtually certain conditions set the difference between individuals in general and certain individuals, members of a community.

Although the concept of virtual community is challenging<sup>www</sup> first the theoretical level, we are basically dealing with a social community which also owns its virtual attribute. A virtual community exists only in a virtual environment and it is directly dependent functional and ontological. Once the interruption or cancellation of the virtual environment, the community structure effectively disappears. This statement, though seemingly trivial, reflects a fundamental conclusion: there is a superordinated individual in relation to community existence, because the plan is based on virtual ontological and succeeds most effectively. Before manifesting in the cyberspace the individual self has a well defined global social space (rooted in material reality). Virtual office space is just an addition to the owner, is directly dependent on it. The members of virtual communities can to some extent control more precisely the existence and its configuration (which is not true for the actual communities that makes individual plans).

#### 4. Cyberspace Self-(R)evolution

The first major feature of computer-mediated social interaction is the alteration of power relations (implied by any interaction from the actual reality). Although particular forms can identify elements of social power in cyberspace, based solely on cognitive resources, they do not cover the whole spectrum of interactions mediated by at least two reasons. First there are situations where virtual interaction between two individuals can not be controlled by any of them, for example the non-simultaneous interaction by a “mailing list” where participants can control the expression of others. Secondly, there are many situations in which there are no outstanding (basic) between the knowledge and skills of users (basically they do not know how to condition the other to act in one way or another). In other words, cognitive power resources are relatively accessible, assuming a certain experience, a range of skills and vast knowledge assimilation. The complementary control over a user is only relative, determining its behavior is strictly related to a specific milestone (a web page, an e-mail, social networking) and for a specific time. In other words, unlike actual reality, the manifestation of social power in cyberspace is contextual and limited, the users can counteract (generally) quite easily due to other fundamental features specific identity represented self-control.

In computer-mediated social interactions the identity of those involved is (almost) controlled by them. Due to changes occurring in the content of emerging spatial proximity the

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<sup>www</sup> Erickson, T., *Social Interaction on the Net: Virtual Community as Participatory Genre*, Ca, Computer Society Press, 1997.

new elements (computer-connection) exclude communication of identifying elements present in any effective social interaction (sex, age, race, aesthetic features and other aspects of body). Within cyberspace the presence and manifestation of an individual under its control, is practically reducible to formula 'I am who I want', or for the text-based interactions (chats) 'I am what I write'. Self own identity has already attracted the attention of authors in the field (much more than the issue of power), the primarily risks being engaged on personality disturbance (favoring schizophrenia and duplicity of identity). Without denying them, it should be noted, however, that a normal individual development and a balanced social life makes no alteration trends of their self in cyberspace. Besides this, the feature contributes to the specificity of virtual social interactions primarily through self-control display of their identity (in general Internet users) rather than by promoting bogus identities based on personal projections (here the premise cannot be accepted that they can control identity while most users will seek alternatives such non-self identity).

Another key feature is the volitional nature of computer mediated interaction. Internet access and employment of such events is not random and much less against the wishes of the user. In other words, the arbitrary (randomness) can be found only in the contacting other participants (selected "at random" from a list) and not by the actual realization of connecting to the Internet, accessing chat programs or web addresses. On the other hand, the explicitly volitional nature of computer-mediated social interactions involves a high degree of awareness of the user, and can thus be considered both an end and a means of virtual events.

Moreover, in terms of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's theory of self<sup>xxxxxxxxxxxx</sup> he divides the self into one true and one false and another turned outwards and located in relation to the world. The False Self can be classified as: falsely impersonating true self and be one that observers will tend to take it as a real person. This true self is kept hidden and searched if false self organization type fails. The recognized potential and true self is allowed a secret life. This false self defends the real one abnormal environmental condition. The False Self concerns the conditions that make possible the emergence of true Self. It is built on identifications with people around. In other words, the alliance between intellectual approaches contains "in nuce" potentially dangerous false self. He believed that when a person with high intellectual potential false self occurs there will be a strong tendency for the mind to become his home. Such intellectual activity will be separated from the existence of

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<sup>xxxxxxxxxxxx</sup> Donald Winnicott, *Ego Distortion in terms of True and False Self*, 1960, pp. 139-152, [http://danbhai.com/rnpsa/rnpsa\\_archive/winnicott\\_ego\\_distortion.pdf](http://danbhai.com/rnpsa/rnpsa_archive/winnicott_ego_distortion.pdf), accessed on August 12, 2014.

psychosomatic, causing unhappiness. In the earliest stage of true self the individual choice and generating spontaneous gesture come into discussion. The latter is even a true self in action. The True Self appears as a virtual space as soon as the crudest form of organization means adding individual mental qualities of being alive. When producing highly authentic self, there is a poor capacity to create and use symbols with important situation in the theory of transitional objects and phenomena.

### **5. The Social Construction of the Digital Self in Cyberspace**

Nowadays, virtual technologies provide people opportunities to enter virtual spaces where people can interact with each other. The digital self in cyberspace claims customary notions of the self and requests the evidence of the self when developed into cyberspace. People come across unreal/unusual situations as they construct their selves. People in cyberspace tend to forget about the (corpo)r(e)ality. The technological construction of the self in cyberspace can be understood as adding a new dimension to one's self-concept. The social investigation of cyberspace led to a proliferation of virtual communities. The "new border" of cyberspace put up people with means for recent and particular kinds of social interaction. Cyberspace offers the self a vision of freedom being free of restrictions, laws or survey. Today's criticism of cyberspace is that it separates people from society or turns them away from face-to-face interaction. The unreal qualities of these kinds of digital selves created by people may become the sources of alienation for computer-users, particularly in how human behavior is settled in cyberspace and in how the digital self impacts upon people's behavior in the real world. These technologies attempt to absorb the user in the perceptual experience of the self in the virtual world. Having an avatar challenges people's self-concepts and their expression in the real world.

Bolter Jay acknowledges cyberspace as symbolic space (Bolter, 1996: 106). The two and three-dimensional graphics of digital technologies become valuable together with the possibility that culture may change from written, narrative communication to the graphic environment of virtual reality thus changing cultural definitions of the self. The text is requires new graphic techniques in the unfolding of iconic writing (e.g. the smiling face or the invention/usage of the emoticons) and of the perceptual self.

Although there are many differences between the constructed virtual self and the written self, the main difference is that the virtual self does not have rhetorical voice. Thus, cyberspace is a distinct way in which the image is replaced by sound and the visual perception prevails over language. It does not enable a linguistic construction of the virtual self. In this

case, the traditional self is disrupted by the construction of the virtual self which, as Bolter showed, is placed in the virtual world. The digital written self is also weak as in the hypertext. Although the E-mail and socializing websites are the most popular and widely used virtual applications, the digital technologies have destabilized linear text to the point that cultural definitions of the digital self in cyberspace become more attractive when visually perceived.

The author supports the idea that the presence in cyberspace shows the wish to use media as a means of physical transcendence. The users mentally vacillate between the physical, virtual and unreal space. Self-presence is the user's mental image or pattern of the self in the cyberspace. The new cyberspace technologies change the roles played by people in relating to others and change their sense of identity, their selves in general.

## 6. Alienation of the Self

Alan Aycock re-enforced Foucault's idea of the self to a qualitative analysis in *Technologies of the Self: Foucault and Internet Discourse*<sup>yyyyyyyyyyyy</sup>. He thought that identity is relevant to a current debate about computing, whether it provides a "vision of freedom" or whether it will become a means of "global surveillance and personal alienation" (Aycock, 1995: 89). The performing analysis contains a pattern of four aspects of on-line identity spreaded into cyberspace. The first state of the on-line self is the inner substance of the self which Aycock legitimized as images of inner force and innovation. The second state of the self involves an alienating manner in relating to others. In circumstances such as on-line checking, one's privacy is compromised which may result in the experience of alienation.

## 7. From (My)Self to My Self(ie): Towards a new Hybrid Self

Today, social networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, My Space, Tumblr are more than just virtual technologies, becoming an extension of post-postmodern man's self. The self rebranding / revolution arises as the effect of the evolution of self-image, of self hyperbolization, the self, however, losing contact with reality, others, and corporeity. In this sense, the selfie or self-photography/ self portrait becomes the new model in virtual reality. Imagination and representation become the variables that determine the self-(r)evolution, thus satisfying its need to self-exposure. This imaginary revolution implies the existence of a virtual self, a replica of the self in a variety of poses, of egos having the same identity (fractal self) that comes into being by simultaneously determining, experimenting and

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<sup>yyyyyyyyyyyy</sup> Alan Aycock, "Technologies of the Self:" Foucault and Internet Discourse, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, [Volume 1, Issue 2](#), September 1995, DOI: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.1995.tb00328.x, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1995.tb00328.x/full>, accessed on August 12, 2014.

exploring the individual's existential needs. In this regard, does the 'self-ie' become the future model?

In my opinion, between self-esteem and excessive exposure, self-portrait boomed in recent years with the rise of smartphone and social networking. Beyond narcissism the self-ie is the proof of "oversharing" culture through a kind of mimicry that already become traditional. In these circumstances, the selfie becomes a hybrid self that involves hybrid methodological approaches (Fig.1 and Fig. 2).



Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/11/michelle-obama-bo-obama\\_n\\_3740754.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/11/michelle-obama-bo-obama_n_3740754.html),  
accessed on August 14, 2014

Fig. 1. Michele Obama and her dog Bo, in a "presidential selfie" posted on Twitter and Instagram



Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/30/pope-selfie-twitter-vatican\\_n\\_3844061.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/30/pope-selfie-twitter-vatican_n_3844061.html),  
accessed on August 14, 2014

Fig. 2. Pope Francis' "papal selfie" with some young people in August 2013

From the cognitive perspective, selfies lead to the growth, self exaggeration and mock modesty that highlights self-idolization/veneration. However, most of the exposed selfies are seen more as self-rebranding, the best "sold" version of the self: positive, happy, accomplished, proud, well-dressed (sometimes partly or completely undressed) or seductive. Several psychologists believe that the 'selfie' does not show pride, but it makes it dependent

on people's reaction; an immediate reaction, an exposure to rating and self-esteem. My question is: "Did the world fall in love by itself or it simply seeks the approval of the self by others?" The answer is that this so-called "another" self is in its turn a social construction.

### Conclusions

The self is thought to be shared in social media, (for example, the notion of 'selfie' in this research is applied only to the generally so-called 'self-portraits' shared via social media). By sharing a self(ie) the individual self ('me') finally turns into 'usie' (us).

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