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VIRTUAL CULTURE - A NEW TYPE OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Theoretical
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Abstract

The paper that we propose is an analysis on some of the fundamental issues that involve the idea of virtual community. The central idea is that such a community implies a specific vision of reality, a virtual culture that reflects upon any possibility of understanding and interpretation. It is based on a re-signification of the ways of action and interaction that determines a new kind of reality, namely augmented reality. In this context, the individual identifies more and more with their digital projections, sharing information, experience and influence in the virtual environment. The communication in the virtual community leaves the impression of total freedom, a seductive freedom that its members do not meet in the actual physical community.

The issue of identity in virtual communities

The development of technology has revolutionized the way we communicate and thus the way we perceive and construct a society. In the electronic environment truth forms virtual communities based on a particular type of social relation, which determines various types of social aggregation. We assist to what M. McLuhan announced in the early 60s, with the phrase *the medium is the message*, in relation to the impact of electronic technologies on society and on the individual. Thus, M. McLuhan believes that electronic media transforms the world into a global village, whereas it enables connectivity between any point on the globe (McLuhan, 1962).

If a geographic community is determined by proximity, the community of cyberspace is determined by a certain congruence of interests in relation to certain types of information. Virtual communities also called digital or cyber communities are spaces of information flows. This kind of community center is the maximum level of interest in the information flows involved. Thus, a virtual community center will be composed of the most interested people who will become the most informed persons in certain types of information. In a study of 2006, S. Proulx and P. Breton distinguish between virtual community and networking community. Virtual Community was considered to be the community founded on sharing a personal interest, while networking community means that the community is founded on civic interests, such as to develop local democracy (Proulx & Breton, 2006).

Virtual Community brings together users with a real or fictitious identity, using technological resources to share virtually real experiences of everyday life. What unites the members of a virtual community can be interest or passion for something. Virtual communities have a structure and dynamics similar of real communities. Moreover, they directly affect the physical existence and contribute to the transformation of individual perception and redefine social norms.

A virtual community assumes the existence of some characteristics which define its essence interlacing, namely: information (we can't talk about a virtual community in the absence of information), exchange of information (which is the *raison d'être* of a virtual community), there is a group of persons (beneficiaries of information exchanges are always men) and technical substrate (represented by technical means necessary to achieve information interaction between people). The virtual community is the one in which human information interaction occurs through the use of interconnected networks.

Membership of a virtual community can generate two important effects to the human consciousness, namely: standardization and

individualization. Individualization, as a result of individual belonging to a virtual community may be seen both in the virtual community and real community. In other words, individualization acquired by a person through his membership in a virtual community can be the transfer of the person and in the real community in which he lives. In the virtual community, individualization requires on the one hand the existence of a barrier interposed between a virtual community member and other members, barrier that determined the mask which each individual feels the need to check at any time communication, which leads actually to the isolation of the individual, a virtual isolation which is the fundamental characteristic of being-together-with-other, but not-share-with-other authentic. This aspect of individualization, taken to the extreme, can lead to alienation of the individual in relation to others or even in relation to himself: "the virtual may constitute an alienating reality" (Beciu, 2011). On the other hand, the individualization brings the individual skills training that are part of such community, manifested in the ability to create new content (web pages, avatars, various online games). Translated in terms of physical community, the individualization requires that the individual member of a virtual community, become better informed, be able to acquire their own cultural elements other than the community members.

Regarding the process of standardization, it involves the acquisition of common standards by all members of a community: from the specific language to common behaviors.

Virtual freedom and the guarantee of the right to speech

An essential aspect of the communication in the virtual community is related to the freedom of its members or any user that relate to it. Unlike natural communities in which a person is born into local relationships - "co-present", membership of a virtual community is the result of individual choice. Then a user's freedom to modify the system, to contribute in the virtual community has the advantage of offering everyone the opportunity to be heard, which in technical terms was appointed by the phrase *guarantee the right to speech*. This advantage, however, can also be seen as a major drawback because behind the rights at guaranteed speech there can be hidden antisocial interests or the virtual community can become "a potential location of radical politics" (St nciugelu, 2009).

Virtual freedom was seen in some interpretations as a resource that plays the sense of "genuine" freedom and the role of belonging to a community. The so-called *declaration of the independence of cyberspace* was an assuming project in this respect, but a project that remained marked by utopian. *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (Barlow, 1996) was

written by John Perry Barlow, a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and published online February 8, 1996 from Davos, Switzerland. It was written primarily in response to the passing into law of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 in the United States and states that the United States did not have the consent of the government to apply the law to the Internet. In sixteen short paragraphs in an evocative language of the Declaration of Independence of the United States it brings to attention the idea that although the Internet was and is outside any country, it develops their social contracts to determine reporting frameworks on most important problems arising in cyberspace. As a result of the vision of an autonomous Internet developed by J. P. Barlow, a Virtual Magistrate was set up by the Cyberspace Law Institute, now hosted by the Chicago-Kent College of Law. Magistrates would be appointed by the Institute and other legal groups to solve online disputes.

Considered an important constitutional value, individual freedom, together with the freedom of expression, right to information and freedom of association, it is reconsidered and revalidated in the virtual community. However, regardless of the developments in communication technologies and hence their associated social interaction environments, the essential question remains that of the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, even if he is a member of a virtual community, thus a user of the Internet.

Re-signification of the idea of socialization

In virtual communities, that develop virtual worlds the concepts of *individual* and *community* acquire new meanings. It produces in terms of M. McLuhan, a kind of re-socialization of the world where we are witnessing a sort of "retribalization" of society (Beciu, 2011). The structural characteristics of such a community organization based on cultural, social and technological development and on specific constructs network determines a dialectic of ego-self axis and a specific type of relationship with others: alter the quasi-defined, pseudonym and malleable in virtual. In this context the question arises to what extent such a space can foster the interactivity of individuals that contribute to the formation of an active citizenship, or in terms of Castells, to the so-called *online sociality* (Beciu, 2011). For reporting to each other in the virtual community is actually a way of expressing one's own subjectivity: "self-talk and personal reflections are no longer considered intimate experiences, for strictly private sphere. Expression of subjectivity gets shaped by the dialogue with 'the other'; those interested in the same topics, ideas or artistic genres" (Beciu, 2011). In this regard, users dialogues with each other, generating the "social aggregation" of subjective

experiences and various forms of "socio-technical solidarity" (Maigret & Macé, 2005).

The concept of private in the virtual community no longer opposes to the notion of public. We are witnessing an evolution and a permeability of borders between private and public, the very concept of public space changed: "Border issue opens reflection on the techniques of information and communication technologies (ICT) in so far as they are blurred distinction between public and private, by determining places and activities, a typical example being publishing of the absolutely personal aspects by audiovisual media or by electronic means. This shows that once the dimensions of the public space are dissociated technique appears as mediator" (St nciugelu, 2009).

The conception of public space, understood as physical space changes, the idea of public space being understood in an immaterial sense. Some specialists consider that this phenomenon can be associated with the declining sense of community, a phenomenon that seems to us growing more (Stevenson, 1999). In another interpretation, this phenomenon is associated with a new type of relationship that leads to a re-signification of ideas of freedom and solidarity, so that is what appears for some to be declining the sense of community must be understood as accepting a new paradigm. Networks created in the virtual community coverage not only carried interaction, but they also serve to facilitate integration types or levels which correspond to specific qualities of attachment, association, solidarity: "They are new media technologies responsible for the decline of the sense of community, depriving people of the right to be a participating public or species in which we can find the germ of new relations of solidarity?" (St nciugelu, 2009).

J. Thompson, for example, considers that a virtual community involves the creation of new forms of action and interaction in the social world, new types of social relations and new ways of being in relation with others and with himself: "So in a fundamental way, using media transforms the spatial and temporal organization of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction and new ways of exercising of power, which are not related to sharing a common space" (Thompson, 2000). The interaction that we encounter in the real physical community, in the virtual community turns into quasi-interaction that causes a specific type of networking in the virtual community "The quasi-interaction mediated creates a type of social situation in which individuals are employed primarily in the production of symbolic forms for those who are not physically present, while others are involved primarily in receipt of symbolic forms produced by those who can't answer, but that can

form groups of friendship, affection or loyalty" (Thompson, 2000).

For J. Thompson virtual community space is a space created by the reception of new technology products, which are eminently symbolic forms, which imply a contextualized interpretation and creative process in which individuals approach resources at their disposal to make sense to messages they receive. The activity of "ownership" is, however, part of a process of self-training, by which people in virtual community develop a sense of self and others, of the place in social groups to which they belong, of the place in the world and even of the history (Thompson, 2000).

Social communication and augmented reality

In the case of a virtual community we can't talk about the existence of a form of geographic location or spatial organization, the environment in which individuals communicate is the most important factor. There is a wide range of types of communication platforms that support a real social dynamics through the *social networking* component provided. Among the catalysts of virtual socialization we can identify: blogs, various electronic media, mobile communication devices, social networks such as Facebook or MySpace to, they help creating *the augmented reality*. Augmented reality involves altering our perception of the tangible environment, of the immediate physical reality. We are talking about a social media development, that individuals constantly change and that, in turn, alters social structures accordingly. The access to the virtual world and the multitude of possibilities for expression of any individual in this type of reality functions as an amplifier of human nature that can exploit both sides of the positive and negative aspects of the human individual.

Individual identity projected in the virtual community space implies the existence of some norms and behavioral values that determine the complex social structures, resembling the structures from real social system. Only, unlike real social communities in the case of virtual community the interactions take place between avatars, behind which an individual can express the many facets of their personality.

Through avatars an individual can try to project in multiple ways as enabling virtual space. Projection of a real person, the avatar is his second *self*, whose reputation, in the virtual community is as important as the individual's real life. In the virtual space, the same individual has several iterations of the self, which is why some experts in the field believe that online identity is just an artificial construct that in virtual contexts identity is not consistent.

Joining avatar of a well-defined social group does not imply de-individualization of the real user,

but on the contrary, it motivates him to express his personality traits as well so as to be accepted in the community. Thus, users get behind avatars to form social bonds that can modify both concepts and perspectives in relation to tangible reality, but also at the conceptual level, by exchange of values, ideas, beliefs and vision of existence.

Regarding the involvement of unconstrained geographic and cultural diversity, virtual communities far outweigh what happens in real life. Thus, we can talk about new ways of simultaneous communication, of the geolocation and *geotagging* for every bit of information that an individual passes on to others.

However, communication processes decline steadily as the amount of information available increases and interests thereof. The expansion of information may involve increasing the degree of manipulation: "Communication in real time mediated by new technologies, beyond the inherent advantages, not necessarily develop civic participation, given that with the expansion of digital information the risk of manipulation increases" (Beciu, 2011).

Conclusion

The evolution of information and communication technologies has determined the birth of virtual communities and, therefore, the development of virtual worlds. They develop an augmented reality in which we witness an idea of social re-signification. Virtual communication space implies the existence of behavioral norms and values that determine the complex social structures. They contribute to the projection of a certain type of identity and of generating certain types of interactions. The way to perceive and construct reality changes, the individual developing a new way of understanding the self, and the other.

We assist to a transfer of social structures of the real life in the virtual communities, social structures are metamorphosed, identity is lost increasingly more and the boundaries between public and private are becoming increasingly blurred. The birth of what we call *social web* and *social media* brings crucial implications in terms of a new vision of sociology and anthropology.

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