Homo sapiens 2.0[1]

Some social and cultural aspects of the new media

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The new communication media are now ubiquitous in the modern world. During the past decade Internet, PC, and mobile phone have become common elements in our daily life. The development and spreading of these technologies has created a situation where a major part of our social structure is formed by the new convergent technology. We live an online existence, where PC, Internet, and mobile phone are becoming inescapable in workplace, education, and leisure. The spread of broadband technology in society, at home and work, eradicates time and space as limiting factors for interaction with others, for information access, and for participation in new self – formation and identity processes.

Based on my contribution in the book *The Role of Language in Human Life* (forthcoming), I will use my time here to focus on two topics:

- The debate about the social consequences of the new media
- How can one interpret the mediated interactions of agents in a sociological perspective?

Dealing with these topics, I will focus on some social and cultural aspects of the new media and, based on the sociologist Anthony Giddens' theory of modernity, discuss some of the characteristics of the debate.

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[1] The title refers to the transition to the Web 2.0, whose combination of Internet and broadband has made uploading as easy as downloading and thus permits to publish anything on the net.

The debate about the social consequences of the new media

The new media and ICT are topics that engage researchers and politicians all over the world. At the same time there are different views of how we can understand the new media and what they mean.[2] Even if there is a common understanding that digital communication technologies are the driving force behind deep transformations affecting many areas and aspects of our life, it is far from clear how this happens. Some of the positions in the debate are diametrically opposed, and the new technology raises hope as well as skepticism and resistance.

According to Mark Bauerlein, the net generation, i.e. those between 10 and 30 years of age, is the most stupid generation of our times.[3] They do not read books, are unable to store information, and they do not understand complicated contexts and questions. All this is a result of their growing involvement in various networks and in various forms of mediated interactions.

It is often argued that while the Internet provides a new form of competency for the younger generation, it has affected their ability for deepening and concentration. Pessimists claim that the Internet has lead to an increase of depth but to a loss of depth.[4] The technology does not support breadth and context, which weakens the ability to think in causal chains. The main purpose of social networks such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter, as well as text messaging, is to remind each other of one's existence. To be part of a network has become more important for individuals, and web 2-technology such as Facebook creates an outer façade for one's friends, and the number of friends defines social capital.

Many critics are skeptical towards the online communities that grow on the Internet and worry about their influence and meaning for society and politics. The criticism is complex, mainly focused on the negative aspects in the wake of increased possibilities. Relations that are established online are compared with face to face-relations in common localities, and it is argued that the Internet promotes secondary relations,[5] which are too limited for creating a meaningful community. Others argue that the Internet can cause social isolation and have psychologically depressive effects.[6]

There is a particular concern linked to young people's "experimentation" with identities. Compared with face to face-interaction, mediated interaction is marked by a reduced exchange of symbolical signals (cues), a fact that makes it possible to play with

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[2] Lievrouw & Livingstone: 2006
[3] Bauerlein: 2008
[4] Thomas Hylland Eriksen in Morgenbladet, March 13-19, 2009
[5] Bollier 1995
[6] Kraut et al. 1998

identities. Mediated interactions occur without physical presence, are independent of time and space, and allow that we present ourselves in many roles and identities. This condition can form the basis for new and creative forms of identity formation, but also entails anonymity and social risks. The main criticism is that pictures and other materials are posted on the Internet without permission, that sexual harassment and mobbing are common, and that there is access to pornography and violent material. This view has resulted in a moral panic, often supported by studies that show growing abuse and harassment, in particular of children and young adults, on the Internet.[7] In Norway this topic has received growing attention, and there are many Internet sites offering safety guidelines for parents and children.[8]

According to this pessimistic perspective, mediated interactions on the net stimulate manipulation, false self-images, and fake identities, and this makes it difficult to create a good relational community. According to this argumentation, the Internet community must primarily be understood as a secondary relational community, where people only know each other in a single or in a limited number of dimensions. While face to face-interactions in physical communities are enacted in homogenous groups with many common interests, these groups are heterogeneous in virtual communities since their members are bound only by a limited number of dimensions. This lack of primary community could lead to "careless, irresponsible and even anti-social behavior."[9] Since virtual communities are limited and foster negative behavior, it is argued that they cannot replace physical communities; in the best of cases they can only be a supplement for them.

Some researchers argue that the Internet has clearly negative effects on individuals and on local communities. The more time we use online, the less time there is for interaction with friends, family, and other members of the local community.[10] It is assumed that Internet users spend less time with others in the local community, and it is pointed out, that the Internet, in contrast to older media, focuses on users as individuals and provides only a very limited arena for shared experiences.[11] There are concerns, that the use of the Internet will have clearly negative effects on the face to face-relations in local communities.

Even if Internet and ICT can increase human capital and resources, and can improve people's opportunities at work and in school, pessimists claim that this picture neglects the limitations and negative aspects of the new media. Furthermore it is argued that unequal

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[7] MMI Synovate: 2006
[8] www.reddbarna.no/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=4435, www.barnevakten.no
[9] Bollier 1995: 12
[10] Shapiro & Leone 1999
[11] Nie & Erbing 2000

access to the new media and the Internet increases social differences in society,[12] and that the new media create a "digital divide" in society.[13] It is assumed that access to and use of the new media increase social differences, with regard to gender, income, age, race, or region. US-American studies show that minorities such as African Americans and non-white Spanish speakers have much less access to computer and Internet than whites and Asians.[14] In 2005 the number of Internet users in the world passed one billion, and since then the number of Internet users has increased rapidly, and in 2012 almost half of the world's population is expected to be online.[15] Nevertheless these studies show that both access to and use of the Internet is unevenly distributed. US-American studies show that groups with a low level of education and income, women, and the elderly are reluctant to use the Internet, even if they have access to it.[16]

The optimists point at the spread of the new media and argue that this technology opens up new possibilities for individuals and society. According to Manuel Castells we live in a network society, where the spread of network logic has profound consequences for contemporary production processes, experience, power, and culture.[17] The networks must therefore be seen as components constituting modern society.

It is assumed that involvement in cyberspace can create alternative communities that are highly relevant for individuals situated in a local community.[18] These communities exceed the daily face to face-interaction, opening up new possibilities for communication, relations, roles, and identity development. Cyberspace is a place where social bonds, status, and class mean less, and where the ability to communicate is the decisive factor for creating a society.[19] Mediated interaction is seen as providing opportunities for the development of new forms of human interaction: "Instead of being a medium for shut-ins and introverts, the digital computer turns out to be the first major technology of the twentieth century that bring strangers closer to together, rather than pushing them farther apart."[20]

In the optimistic perspective the Internet is primarily seen as a medium for user-controlled mediated social interaction, a medium with a social dimension. The increased access to the Internet has created a great variety of mediated interactions that find their

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[12] Schon et al.: 1999
[13] Strover: 2003. Frønes 2002
[14] Neu et al. 1999
[15] Internet World States: 2006, Coiro et al. 2008: 3
[16] UCLA 2000
[17] Castells 1996
[18] Rheingold 1993
[19] Jones 1999, in particular p. 224-5
[20] Johnson 1997: 69

expression in web communities, chat rooms, online services, instant messaging, etc. Mediated interaction shows a high degree of variation; there is a considerable growth of groups that discuss topics such as health, sex-related issues, sport, games, and data equipment. The participants seek advice and information and thus receive access to symbolic material that is used in their everyday life and creation of identity. The Internet creates new types of online communities that affect the local physical community. It is argued that the new communicative spaces create networks that provide support for groups, their development and actions and build bridges between different cultures, both locally and globally.[21]

In his book *Grown Up Digital*,[22] Tapscott claims that today's Internet generation is the smartest generation of all times. It is the first generation that has grown up with data and Internet as part of their everyday-experience. The Internet generation has developed a unique digital competency, a fact that provides them with an advantage in education and workplace. Their participation in the Internet community, blogging, text messaging and illegal downloading has left traces. It is assumed that this not only affects their actions but also helps to create a type of e-smartness, an ability to cope with processes and incoherent information in a shorter time. The fact that young people prefer cooperation, interactivity, and network occupations means a break with old hierarchical structures and forces to change workplaces, schools, and the media.

Identity is a main topic in this debate, and a number of contributions argue that the Internet as an interactive medium fosters the growth of new types of reflexive identities. The emergence of the *network society*[23] raises a number of questions about the process of identity construction. In late modern society the self has become reflexive, and, according to Giddens, this project must be understood in terms of one's biography.[24] To be human means to know both what one does and why one does it. The Internet aids the reflexive project, providing a variety of mediated interactions that weaken the connection between one's self-formation and physical local context. The digital revolution is responsible for the fact that communication between human beings is less and less bound by presence in the same physical locality, it exceeds temporal and geographical limits, and it creates new forms of human action and interaction.

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[21] Hartcourt, 1999, provides an evaluation of these aspects in his study of feminist networks.
[22] Tapscott 1998
[23] Castell 1996
[24] Giddens 1991

It is not easy to take a stance in this debate, but I think that the optimists come closer to the truth than the pessimists. The Internet spreads with a speed that few had predicted, and this development is accompanied by important technological changes. The digital revolution has changed society in most areas, and we witness the creation of what Castells calls network society.[25] There is no doubt that the network society has negative aspects, but much of the criticism is based on old established standards of face to face-communication in a common locality. Basing an argument on an old and established understanding of society and the media makes it difficult to detect the implications and possibilities created by the development of ICT and the new media. Seen from a sociological perspective, the digital revolution raises a number of new questions that challenge established understandings of media, society, and the process of self-formation. In the next part I will discuss the practice and self-formation of the agents in light of the concept *post-traditional society*.[26]

Local context, mediated interaction, and post-traditional society

The transition to the network society means that the dialectical interaction between the agents' local life and their online-practice becomes the main element of the analysis. However, as the debate has shown, the online life of the agents can be interpreted in widely different ways, and there is a common skepticism towards several aspects of children and young adults' online existence. At the same time a number of studies show that the social media have become the most important medium for young people.[27] Despite of the warnings, these media are more popular than ever, and the online-existence of these "screenagers" challenges and modifies traditional concepts, values, and norms, as well as established notions about how knowledge is constructed and identity created.

Although the digital revolution implies enormous changes, we continue to talk about traditions, institutions, and our daily life as if they were the same as in the past. The insight that traditions dissolve and society changes is not new, but these changes today are amplified by Internet based technology, and what Ziehe calls the parallel life world that young people in particular create.[28] This development hints at the contours of a society that has not existed earlier. The network society is driven by split and often contradictory forces. The pessimists are right when they say that some aspects of online existence are worrying, and there is little

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[25] Castells 1996
[26] Giddens 1994
[27] See e.g. MMI Synovate: 2006
[28] Ziehe: 2001

doubt that there are dangers, swindlers, and doubtful Internet sites, and neither is there doubt about the fact that Internet communities, relations, and mediated interaction are different from face to face-interaction in daily life. The problem here is that if we solely focus on the negative aspects, it will be difficult to understand the social changes that the new communication and information technologies advance, and to see the possibilities that open up with the digital revolution.

The development of Internet-based technology increases people's possibilities to participate in mediated interaction, and this development does not just imply the creation of new networks for transferring information between people, but also the development of new types of social relations and actions different from traditional forms of interaction. An important question is therefore how mediated online interaction is understood, and how it affects the participants' physical and local contexts of life. As the debate has shown there are a number of answers to these questions. Based on Anthony Giddens' *theory of modernity*, [29] I will here argue for an approach focused on the self-formation of the individual as well as the contemporary post-traditional social order.

The tendency that mediated forms of interaction increasingly replace human face to face-interactions implies considerable changes for institutions, relations, and identities. This development does not originate in Internet-based technology but must be seen as part of the process of modernity.[30] The old media provided various forms of mediated interaction spanning time and space, but it can be argued that the success of the increasingly user-controlled Internet represents a qualitatively new level of mediated interaction.[31]

Much of the social interaction that marks our daily life does not happen at the same time or in the same space. While earlier the home was a central place, families today are spread in time and space. Mother and father may work at different places, their children may be engaged in school or spare-time activities, study in different cities, or work in other countries. Nevertheless family members are easily able to communicate with each other and their environment through the new media. The development of Internet-based technology changes the concept of space. At the workplace we may be in the same room, but not necessarily in the same place. This is the driving force behind modern organizations that have found a way to connect the local and the global. Companies today take advantage of the fact that is has been possible to break away from the limitations of time and space. The

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[29] Giddens' analysis of modernity is developed in Giddens 1990, 1991, 1994, 1999
[30] Giddens 1990
[31] Baym 2006: 39

prerequisite for the perfect functioning of a modern organization is the coordination of many individuals who are separated by time and space.

This development, which sociologists have called reflexive modernization and de-traditionalization,[32] has important consequences for the local contexts of people's everyday-life. People who become increasingly incorporated in communication networks gain access to symbolic materials and various online experiences, which create distance from both face to face-communication and local forms of authority. People who depend less and less on symbolic materials transmitted through face to face-interaction and local forms of authority create a new basis for self-formation as well as an understanding of the available individual options. Under such circumstances self-formation processes become more reflexive,[33] less pre-determined, and imply that the creation of a coherent identity relies on experiences and symbolic materials created or acquired in various networks.

Changes of tradition are fundamentally connected to the digital media and the development of the network society. There is a double connection between the new media and the change of traditions. On the one hand digital media weaken traditional authority and the justification for our actions through tradition; on the other hand, people who experience that traditions and local forms of knowledge wither away increasingly depend on the new media and mediated forms of interaction in order to choose and to make decisions.[34] Through the withering away of traditions people are thrown into a world where individuals are no longer directed by binding rules, traditions, or religion. We are left to ourselves, while our choices depend more and more on the flow of information and on the experiences we gain thorough our mediated interactions. This does not mean, however, that the local community does not influence our life and our choices, but because of de-traditionalization and the growth of the network society, we depend increasingly on a variety of experts and mediated relations in order to make and justifies these choices.

In today's modern society we live our life crossing time and space, in a world where place has lost its dominance. Our daily activities are increasingly marked by mutual interactions through activities and events that happen in spaces other than our own physical and local context. A globalized and de-traditionalized world has a number of consequences: when traditional bonds dissolve, possibilities for the individual increase, but so does the number of necessary decisions. Traditions provide the individual with a social foundation in

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[32] Giddens 1994, Beck 1992
[33] Giddens 1991
[34] Thompson (2001: 215- 223) argues that the media do not just undermine but also renew traditions.

existence. Following certain rules and norms provides a feeling of security and creates the foundation for trust. When traditions are undermined and modern society is globalized, people are exposed to new forms of risks, and security and trust become central dimensions of existence. The framework for these trust relations is often provided by friends, family, and the local community. According to Giddens these personal trust relations have not disappeared but are decreasing, while forms of "faceless" trust relations to persons and systems, marked by varying degrees of trust, are on the rise. We cannot be entirely sure about the identity of our Internet friend, nor whether we should trust the information we receive through digital networks. In order to make decisions we depend increasingly on different forms of information and knowledge, often available through the media and the Internet. There are a number of system representatives and experts who appear in the media, guiding our choices in terms of health problems, diet, lifestyle, etc, and if we rely on them we must have a minimum of trust. Without such trust we may take things in our own hands or look for alternative systems and authorities.

To live in modern society is associated with risk; living in what Ulrich Beck calls a risk society[35] implies that our attitude towards life has become more calculating. We must continuously assess to which degree our actions imply a risk as well as the probability of the expected result. In order to act we often have to acquire or construct knowledge that is not available in a local context. Through the media and the Internet we are continuously informed about new research results, and we receive advice of how to live our life from various experts and authorities. In order to choose we need the advice from experts, but these experts say different things, focus on different aspects, and often do not agree.[36] In this situation we cannot blindly trust the experts, and since there are no super-experts replacing traditional authorities, we have to balance scepticism and trust when we make a choice.

Balancing skepticism and trust is demanding, and it is not easier if social practice crosses time and space. When this form of modernity invades modern institutions and everyday-life, it means that there is a new form of radical doubt witch enters into everyday-life. The form of doubt that Nietzsche expressed more than 100 years ago has now become common. The post-traditional order forces people into a situation where "all that is solid melts into air", to use Marx' famous phrase. People need security and safety, and while we try to make decisions and choices in our everyday-life, we are increasingly aware of the risks

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[35] Beck 1992

[36] The reason for this is the specialized nature of expert knowledge, a development that directly influences the "erratic runaway character of modernity" (Giddens 1996: 44).

implied in these choices. We have become dependent on expert knowledge, but at the same time we cannot simply follow the advice of the experts; we have to be more active ourselves and construct the knowledge and self-understanding that are the foundation for our actions.

The post-traditional order is a social context, and the term helps to understand the various forms of mediated interaction that we see in today's network society. In order to make choices and to act in a society where traditions wither and where social practice is independent from temporal and spatial boundaries, we depend on information and experience that can be acquired through various forms of mediated interaction. With the development of the network society' phase of modernity we are all caught in everyday experiments marked by new patterns of social interaction and by the development of a mediated community and network society. This practice affects the individual's life as well as it has a global effect on humanity as a whole. This process drives globalization and de-traditionalization; it is a process changing local communities, institutions, as well as people's everyday life.

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