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Civilizing the Network or De-Civilizing
through the Network?
Some Theoretical Reflection on Sociofluena¹

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¹ The author asks for the understanding that such an unfinished version of the on-going research should not be cited or read outside the session. The author would present an up-dated version in his oral presentation in the session.

Abstract:

Following a previous investigation of the newly developed digital “mediatedness” and the related practical and well-found theoretical framework, the author would like go further to widen and deepen the research by illustrating the so-called “sociofluenza”. This paper connects the double impacts of over-socialization and over-individualization supported by the social media to the basic postulation of social, society and community and also to the old and new networking in the phenomenal sociofluenza. At last, the author would introduce the Civilizing Process Theory to analyze the processual and normative implication of the sociofluenza.

Keywords: sociofluenza, network, civilizing and de-civilizing, Civilizing Process Theory, mediatedness

1. Introduction

Following a previous investigation of the newly developed digital “mediatedness” and the related practical and well-found theoretical framework, the author would like go further to widen and deepen the research by illustrating the so-called “sociofluenza”. This paper connects the double impacts of over-socialization and over-individualization supported by the social media to the basic postulation of social, society and community and also to the old and new networking in the phenomenal sociofluenza. At last, the author would introduce the Civilizing Process Theory to analyze the processual and normative implication of the sociofluenza.

2. The Problematic of Sociofluenza

The so-called “sociofluenza” indicates the rapid diffusion of data and the communication on them via internet, esp. the social media, and the emotionalized reactions stimulated by these diffusion lead to the phenomenal mass trend in the social relationships. It is named as a new kind of influenza, namely the social one. The conception shows clearly how the double impacts of over-socialization and over-individualization supported by the social media have emerged and developed in the deep digitalization processes on both the social and individual levels.

The author would introduce the Civilizing Process Theory to analyze the processual and normative implication of the sociofluenza. Based on a previous investigation of the digital “mediatedness” and the related practical and well-found theoretical framework, the author would like go further to widen and deepen the

research by illustrating the so-called “sociofluenza”.

It would be argued that the naming itself expresses the anxiety in the society, which is no doubt a theme to be investigated. But simply praise it or slam it makes no progress in realizing what happened.

The author would indicate that the sociofluenza would produce a thematic circulation of web-textualities and its escalation on the emotion of the concerned persons, no matter concerned by themselves or by others. It sometimes leads to the de-civilizing effect in the society because of the anonymity or at least the absence in posting text. It could also leads to civilizing when the conditions changes in a direction to urge respect, tolerance, rationality and civility in the internet.

3. mediatedness

The digital age brings enormous changes for the humankind. The ways we sense the world, the ways we conceive the world, the ways we consume the world, in a word, the ways we live alongside with the vision we have for the future are all changed in/through the digitalized framework. The ways we communicate and associate with each other are also changed and even seen as one of the most typical and fundamental changes of all.²

The net, internet, or the web is the keyword to the ongoing transforming

² The most important forerunner to be read is McLuhan (1964). The extension of his ideas in the digital age can be seen in, e.g. Levinson (1999) and Logan (2010).

phenomenon. The first question to it is why we need a theory for the net. The answer could be twofold:

At first, the development needs to be sociologically explained. It is the task of sociologists to explore and explain the social reality and certainly this development of internet and all its functions on the communication and connection invites us to analyze the meanings of the usage of technology and more than that, the meanings of the new societalization and association.

Secondly, the sociological theory needs to be reconsidered and revised. It is necessary not only because every new social formation is a challenge and an opportunity for the theory in ever-revising, but also this formation touches the center question of the sociology, namely the way we form a “society”.

The main concern of this preparatory work is to develop a framework of research for the study on the societalization. The author would inquire into the core concerns and review the theoretical works which can provide key points for the building of such a framework. Also, the paper would suggest the possible research methods and offer some preliminary data for the further official investigation

The needed data would be collected by “field” (a cyber-field?) observation, questionnaire, interviews and statistics as well as the information which are about the issue and circulated in the internet.

In a pilot study of the social-software-based network, the researcher tried to seek the patterns of media use in facebook and found that most of the users involve in the

network mainly in order to make new friends or “maintain” the friendship in the ever-renewing happenings. Facebook offers and at the same time urges a specific way for the social life. Many of them praise the convenience of the software for doing something to maintain the friendship. The obligation to check the news is to offer one’s own presence (see below, I name it the “*digital presence*”) for the connection/friendship building. And the choice between face-to-face, one-to-one mediated and facebook-broadcasted communication would be made in favor of the physical presence when one values the co-presence in the nearness in physical space much. Facebook is taken in many cases for the use to

4. Development of the Net

The development of the net shows itself as the multiplicity around some central lines. The earlier forms like BBS would followed by WWW, blog, and the so-called Web 2.0, even Web 3.0 in the line.³ From generation to generation, we observe the clear direction of the complexity formation and the “*intensity- inclusion*” principle. On one side, the complexity indicates the character of all the usages in their technical improvements and the changing scope and limit they offer to the users. On the other side, the more intense net use and the broader inclusion of everyday practices into the net world signify the principle of what I call the “*intensity- inclusion*” principle.

Facebook & Co. are the newly quickly developed and widely spread net experience around the world. The so-called social software attracts the user to indulge

³ Cf. Allen (2004) about the development of the social software.

in a space of the new media with its specific diverse character. The immediate protocol of all the “*digital presences*”⁴ -- I would like to name it in this manner -- changes the earlier internet communication. The presence in websites and blog towards the unknown public would be redirected to a private saloon or club to ensure the more intense belongingness among friends and the privacy of each individual. But we heard that the privacy is not as safe as people being told and we see the belongingness is to be designed not only to intensify the friendship but also to connect and stimulate the desire of consumption on the solid base of friendship. After all, the platforms operate on the platform of capitalism.

Another point to be concerned is the new media⁵ and the new *mediatedness*. The divide of the public media and individual media was diagnosed to be improper before the emergence of social software, but the new development sharply shows how difficult it would be to clarify the essentials of various communications. The main concern is not whether the transgression of the traditional boundary should be praised or mourned, but how the mixture character in new media/mediatedness is to be coped, coordinated, and transformed with the communication.

So the main line in the survey would be how the inclusion of everyday life into the networkedness via social software and digital community operates and how the social relations have new formations such as in the effort of the on-going established system to achieve the purpose of maximalizing the amount of user and the profit direct or indirect from the use.

⁴ Cf. the “social presence” in Sheizaf and Noy (2005) and the discussion about presence in the works of Anthony Giddens, e.g. Giddens (1984).

⁵ Cf. Logan (2010) on the new media. This paper suggests also another concept “mediatedness” in order to signify the human condition in the media age.

For a better understanding of the social-software-based network, it is necessary to return to the basic postulation of social, society and community and formulate a framework to include the old and new networking. So the terminology like socialization or societalization would be the suitable keywords.⁶

Why is this return necessary? Because the development of the social-software-based network indicates some basic lines of the “returns”:

- a. return to “mass” society, a new “mass”, a temporal and strong small mass beyond the old undifferentiated mass.⁷
- b. return to person-to-person, interpersonal communication
- c. return to hierarchy formation alongside the line of celebrity, stars, layman/-woman, in their glorified media performance
- d. return to the community-association duality/scala

These developments need to be explored in a unified framework with clearance in the problematic of the social.

5. Theory of the Social

This paper suggests that we need to examine the new connections such as Facebook

⁶ Cf. Holmes (2005) on the changes of the community.

⁷ One further related argument is to investigate the media in the context of modernity, e.g. Thompson (1995). One may suggest a context of postmodernity or global-digital modernity is to be applied in the discussion on new media.

in the complex double impacts of both *over-socialization* and at the same time *over-individualization*. The following related concepts are to be examined:

- a. network society⁸: the most useful tool till now because it handles both the infrastructures and experiences
- b. media and mediatedness
- c. hyper-modern, anonym, celebrity and stranger...

In this framework the implication of the network model of society should be useful in a work to position the discussion on net in the development of the sociology and in the study of the digital media and the mediatedness we are in.

The twin terms *over-socialization* and *over-individualization* mean: in the new social formation the individual is urged to be spend her/his time in the community building and maintenance and to do that in a much more individualized way than earlier. We are told and modeled to be rather a sole knot in a web busy in the flows of information than a part of the presence of an aggregate of human beings.

The results from the pilot study shows that the main purpose of facebook use lies at the need to keep an always-present-contact with the friends in the network. This need for friendship is transformed, or more precisely, “re-configured” into a standardized procedure and daily practice.

⁸ One of the brilliant efforts to link the premise of the society conceptualization and the new information infrastructure is to be read in Castells (1996). The term network serves to be the model of conceptualization of the social and of the society.

6. the ongoing investigation...

To investigate the newly developed digital “mediatedness”, e.g. the social-software-based communication and community, we need develop practical and well-found theoretical framework for the task. This paper aims to clarify the construction of such a framework should focus on the sociological imagination of the society à la “network” as well as on the socializing/societalizing of the digital net of this age.

The author would like to formulate some points for the further study:

1. The meaning of the net in the socializing function (re)searched in the personal use and experience of the media.
2. A media map expressing the lines of the reflections.
3. Problematic of social formation / social institution / social interaction
4. How the above mentioned conception and experience bring the socio-psychological impacts

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