

# Making Sense of Lived Experience in a Network Society

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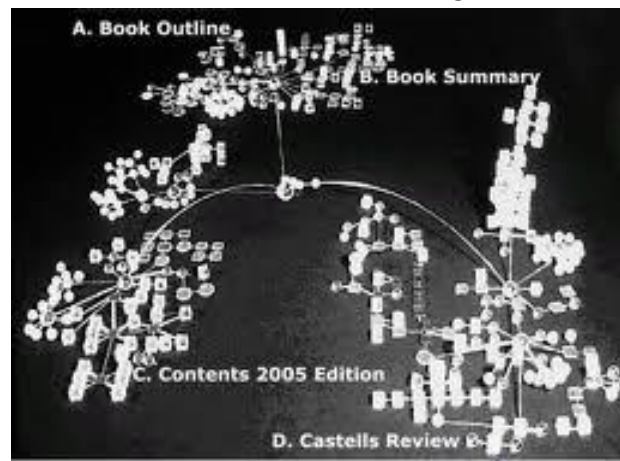
This reflection will focus on Manuel Castells' (2006) idea of a network society that emerged alongside increasingly complex and interconnected marketspace, and its potentially transformative effect on the future development of global community. Castells' ideas will be put in historical context and possible psychological undercurrents of the main characteristics of networking phenomenon will be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finally I will outline some issues that may arise as a consequence of free information exchange for traditional institutions.

Reflexive potential of the society combined with human tendency to structure and organise itself has transformed humanity into a truly ambiguous yet functioning and growing system. Ambiguous in its multiplicity of subjective meanings, functioning in its ability to (temporarily) sustain itself and growing in its exponential complexity upsurge. Never has it been easier to try to make sense of lived experience than it is now.

The global network, which society has become, makes it possible to exchange information on before unimaginable scale and for the first time in human history is this exchange occurring without mediation of the safeguarding institutions or other formal structures set up for that purpose (Castells, 2006). Individuals, as well as communities and other groups can freely engage in 'self-directed mass communication' (Castells, 2006, p.13), participate in

creative way. This new formal structure *is* the network society – the society that is global, flexible, self-transforming and collaborative. It is however, also exclusive. It is exclusive in a sense that it has a capacity to exclude. Because of the information exchange is recognised to be determined by the access to technology, large part of the population is ineligible for its use due to illiteracy, incompetence or lack of access (Cardoso, 2006). Realities that are largely virtual and share propensity to innovation and creativity are also hindered by post-industrial legislation of intellectual property rights and other obsolete social structures that limit access to data and technology. Fear of absolute transparency and loss of power, which stems from the expert status and associated knowledge, (Foucault, 2004) results in a gate keeping system where information is coded and access is granted to the ones with the right key.

The key is capital, whether social, cultural or individual. Not every community is capable or allowed to take advantage of the networks that are available. While



some societies are transitory (Cardoso, 2006); some consider themselves at the core of human potential movement and deliberately exclude the ones at the periphery. While abuse of sensitive information may lead to harm, secrecy as a form of protection reinforces security structures and by its nature excludes parts of social strata from the networks (Guillen, 2001). Participation and inclusion is

redeemed by ubiquitous gaze of surveillance (Lyon, 1994).

Where Baudrillard (2010) speaks of 'end of the panoptic system', knowledge is no longer evaluated and accepted on the basis of accuracy and scientific validity, but on its prospective usefulness (Lyotard, 1984). Autonomy and interconnectedness of the reflexive loop in the cyberspace is defined by the extent to which each unit is allowed to expose or withdraw information about itself on a conscious level – by its transparency.

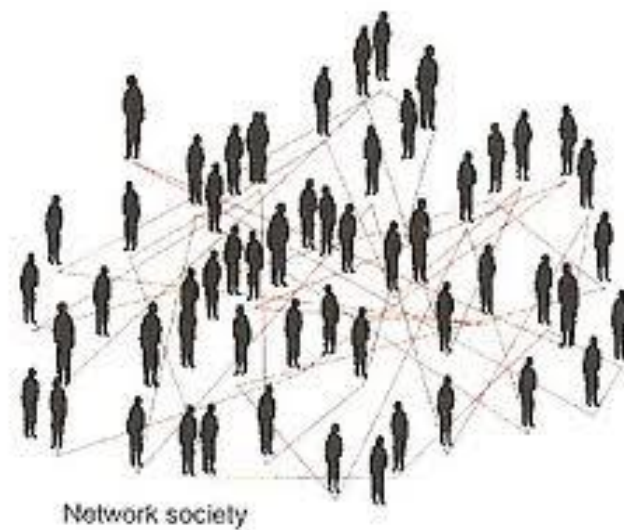
Internet has become a powerful tool of social transformation, which, independently of the formal institutions and organisations, constitutes new autonomous societal structures that are capable of reconstructing meaning of individual and collective identities through a variety of self-defined and self-created schemes and developments (Cardoso, 2006). Take Facebook for example.

Long before Facebook made its first 'share' in the virtual shopping mall, Richard Sennett has identified today society as 'intimate' declaring experiences that are impersonal as meaningless. As a reaction to increasingly rigorous family environment, which was peoples' only model for defining emotional reality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public live has become 'collectively personal' – a place to express, experience and to enquire about ones feelings to compensate for their lack in the domestic sphere (Sennett, 1978). Network society is driven by a desire for emotional interaction.

Equally, 19<sup>th</sup> century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1998) defined ideal community (*Gemeinschaft*) by fullness and openness of emotional communication between its subjects – form of a productive and creative drive, which is socially constructive, a type of 'enlightened interdependence' although such structure was only believed to be true by 'social romantics' (Sennett, 1978). According to Tönnies (1998), however, our culture is better

described not as a community, but as a society (*Gesellschaft*) and is not defined by suspension of the ego interest of a group, but by 'enlightened self-interest' a type of social pseudo altruism where most action is motivated by inherent capacity for subjects' narcissism (Sennett, 1978).

In contrast to Tönnies' (1998) belief, today network societies are characterised by psychological openness, strong social bonds, shared collective identity as well as diversity. (Castells, 2006) Facebook is a good example of that. The value of one's disclosure to others as a moral good in itself and the belief in the open



public intimacy within the virtual cyberspace being equal to humane and authentic relationship marks a departure from rigidity of traditionalist values of the ruling hegemony, which previously dominated both public and private networks. The new status quo can be

also seen as a sign of emergence of what could be compared to Buddhist concept of 'interdependent co-arising' - there is no autonomous self, merely a mutual interdependence between the environment and seemingly individualised subjects (Bloom, 2004).

In the Facebook world, the levels of exposure are in hands of its creators as well as the users of the technology – us. By deciding how public our private life will be in the virtual world we send a powerful message about our preferences, which cannot be ignored. By making ourselves vulnerable to the eyes of the other, we make an offering of trust through sharing our feelings, ideas and personal discoveries publically. The rewards are mainly emotional in form of 'likes'. Everybody is invited to participate, to comment, to encourage, appreciate or to mock. Everybody has a choice of non-participation. All within the limits of privacy settings and on the expense of commercial and state surveillance, this is again - voluntary. Our desire to be seen, known and recognised publicly is arguably at the root of the global popularity of virtual networks.

Facebook also lends itself to the possibility of virtual identity creation and as our lives become more avatar-like and fragmented as we see each other less, we may unconsciously isolate ourselves from the entities to which we originally belong. Instead we identify with our newly developed, self-constructed personality. Emotionally disconnected from the actual family or community, we adopt a new, virtual 'hyper community'. Therein lies the danger.

As we create customised non conflicting environments, they can easily turn into stagnating conservative hubs that will perpetuate social strata as they have ever existed. At the same time, personalised private space can lead to a greater sense of (however illusory) autonomy, enhance self-expression or boost self-esteem. It can also become socially constructive way to vent one's frustrations or anxieties as well as to transform sociability in general. Internet users have shown to be more social, have more friends and contacts, and to be more politically and socially active. The network societies do anything but isolate (Castells, 2006).

Will 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions feel threatened by such emotionally charged virtual environments or will they embrace their potential benefits? Will academia and mass media conglomerates adapt to the changing face of network society or will they try to compete with it while excluding the disadvantaged minorities?

The notion that open access to ideas and their free public exchange could devalue them has been expressed by the leading experts from the field of informatics who also emphasize the importance of the effective distribution (Beynon-Davies, 2009).

If the intellectual property rights were to transform into a form of a 'creative commons license' where contribution will automatically mean attribution, Facebook's idea of 'sharing' could magnify into a transparent educational platform, where ideas and their possible usefulness could no longer be monopolised and patented by entities with most resources, but used by the ones who most appreciate and need them. Supported by adequate moral and ethical judgement, even surveillance can become a useful tool to trace ideas in time. Would such

cooperative learning foster more innovative and hospitable living environment?

Our readiness to live in a world where individual primacy and exclusivity are irrelevant to our collective success is reflected in policies we tolerate and obey. The inclusiveness of networks we choose to support as we go through life is indeed indicative of our willingness to give up structures that no longer serve us.

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Picture 1:

[http://www.utwente.nl/gw/vandijk/research/network\\_society/](http://www.utwente.nl/gw/vandijk/research/network_society/)

Picture 2:

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