

IDENTITY RESHAPING AND MANIPULATION IN CYBERSPACE**DOI: <http://doi.org/10.26758/10.1.18>**

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Abstract

Objectives. This article draws attention to some important considerations in the study of an online identity. Becoming a part of the virtual reality, sets the stage for the opportunity of reconstructing one's self, of reshaping the identity and furthermore to explore the identity of others who are more or less familiar to us in the real world.

Material and methods. The use of ethnographic method through interviews and participant observation remains actual even when dealing with the aspects of cyberspace study. An in-depth discussion of the epistemological and methodological challenges of studying the online activity, especially the *social media* becomes necessary.

Results. Participants to virtual reality forge their own *persona* -s. It is a complex construct of objective technological requirements and subjective semantic preferences. These features are to be taken into consideration before and after carrying out a research of the online activity.

Conclusions. Online environments provide new challenges for reconsidering the *intersubjectivity* in its most phenomenological sense. It is difficult to say whether virtual reality is facilitating the creation of new *persona* -s or just the surfacing of the inner most uninhibited ones. Nevertheless, it provides social scientists with the opportunity to grasp and intellectually digest new the fruits of most novel forms of *sociabilities* facilitated by the digital interaction.

Keywords: social media, digital identity, manipulation, cyber-anthropology.

Introduction

Ontology of human being placed the identity topic at the origin of many research fields. Both the self-defining act and the relationship *ego-alter* underline the fact that the identity search cannot be separated from the differentiation endeavour. These two tendencies lean towards the same existential objective: the removal of any form of uncertainty a person could encounter uncertainty which might represent a potential threat.

These universal coordinates are valid for both personal and collective identity, be that the community of a village, of a religion, a professional one or even a nation. Nowadays the advance of communication technology made possible a phenomenon through which the world is more and more interconnected – becoming a genuine "global village" (McLuhan, 1962).

"Through culture, humans are always already virtual ethnography has always been a kind of virtual investigation of the human, and can therefore play an important role in understanding cybersociality" (Boellstorff, 2008).

More than the geographical space, which tends to shrink - as matter of perception - due to faster means of transportation, the cyberspace created by more and more powerful computers linked through a global ominous network brings people closer than ever.

The internet had so far three ages:

Web 1.0 – it marked the basic attempt to gather and organize raw data in a form accessible all over the world and, in the same time, it also covered a basic need to instantly exchange extended messages. The end of the 2nd millennium saw the growth of online forums, chat-rooms, e-mail services, blogs and wiki-s.

Web 2.0 – encompasses the diversification of communication platforms culminating in ubiquitous *Social Media*. Messenger services which soon enabled voice and video calls started a trend of continuous interpersonal awareness through the possibility of ongoing emotional sharing accompanying the already existing exchange of information. Social networking "by the grace" of new media brought an enormous commercial opportunity, revolutionizing all marketing techniques and savvy. This age marked also a serious preoccupation regarding the protection of personal data available online. The anonymity provided by the fundamental philosophy which forged the creation of internet can also present an opportunity for criminal behaviour.

Web 3.0 represents the semantic web. It is the most recent development of internet starting in the second decade of 21st century. It was anticipated by simulated society platforms like *IMVU* or *Second Life* which allowed individuals to create and experience their own ideal world. Web 3.0 represent the apogee of internet customization, facilitating a so-called total control over every feed a user can receive. Whether this control is authentic and the feed corresponds to a person's actual needs is an important matter of debate for civil society representatives and social scientists.

Trick or treat - identity reshaping

The world of connected individuals and groups, continuously expanding, relying on myriads of simultaneous information exchanges via internet is generally called cyberspace or virtual reality. To be a part of it someone needs to obtain a virtual / digital identity and, according to one's needs to become a member of a virtual community.

"Users must deal with this materiality, both in what its technical characteristics will allow (screen size, image resolution, keyboard, etc.) and in what they impose. We therefore have to question the role(s) of digital objects, particularly screen-based ones, in human activity. Some digital tools seem to have become extensions of the human being" (Baldauf, Develotte and Ollagnier-Beldame, 2017).

From a technical standpoint, virtual identity encompasses a complex digital marker given by:

- the computer which is used with its unique physical address (MAC)
- the local internet connection facilitated by a service provider which grants to each subscriber its own protocol address (IP)
- a virtual private network (VPN) – an optional additional internet security service
- username and a password assumed or assigned, requested once online in order to access certain websites

- an avatar - online character which can be created in order to participate to different communication platforms or multi-player internet games

Creating a digital *persona* represents the perfect opportunity to reshape an identity. An internet user can forge a profile of hero or villain changing every aspect of his or her particular features: age, gender, race or nationality, background, religion, occupation, marital status and even physical appearance (through posting fake photos or home movies). It is the quintessence of the postmodern view on identity and personality. Due to the fact that virtual reality represents a world with no boundaries of time and space an anthropologist who immerses in its environment while studying it must adopt a vision similar to the one of Foucault, taking into account that "heterotopia is fully manifested only when those that find themselves within it are separated from their representation of time" (Burlacu 2019, p. 118). In the virtual worlds of *IMVU* or *Second Life* a player can look however he or she likes, can have the house and the job of his / her dreams and even create its own life partner. The historical perspective provided by these *metaverses* is no less fluid, ranging from an ancient past to a distant future.

However, there is no need for a virtual world game to create a completely different online persona. As long as there is no voice or video calls involved the communication or profile on social media platforms can be managed at somebody's own leisure.

"The influence of cyberspace on identity is not a change of the content, but a change in the form, evidence, or procedure. So, in terms of the law dealing with the issue of identity in cyberspace, there is no difference between the virtual and the real world, therefore general rules and controls, applied to the identity in the real world, can be applied in cyberspace as well" (Vesali-Naseh, 2016).

Furthermore, in order to accurately insinuate as a participant observer in cyberspace, a researcher needs also to create a *persona*. This endeavour brings up an ethical conflict which constitutes a subject of an ongoing debate in social sciences while studying virtual reality: how far a social scientist can go in assuming a fictitious profile? Does allowing some tribesmen from Papua to believe that the anthropologist they just encountered is the white spirit of an ancestor is more acceptable than participating in *Second Life* as a former Olympic medallist presently active member in Doctors without Borders? Most of all, can there be made any correlation between the answers provided by a subject and the actual personal features he or she assumes? Are these features relevant anymore for ethnography in such a particular environment?

"The traditional methods for data collection in ethnographic studies (primarily participant observation and interviewing) are used differently in online research. Thus, ethnographers must learn how to translate observational, interviewing, ethical, and rapport-building skills to a largely text-based and visual virtual research environment" (Garcia et al., 2009).

Each way of doing interviews or observation online has its own pros and cons. For example, a text-messaging interview and posting observation technique are deprived of the data gathered from facial and vocal emotional expressions. Behavioural observations inside a *metaverse* are even more difficult to grasp in terms of validity. A video-call interview has the advantage of placing the interviewee in his or her environment of choice, giving a feeling of comfort and the liberty to end it abruptly.

Virtual communities

"Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough

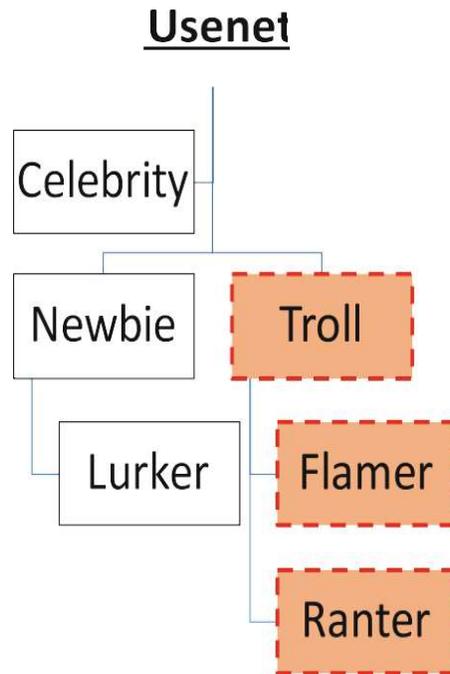
people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993).

Virtual community is not inherently associated with objective coordinates like ASL (age, sex and location), social status (occupation, wealth, standing, etc.) or physical interaction. Therefore, in most cases, its members are not required to meet face to face and they usually don't. However, there is a universal ethics code and a specific one which applies to every form of human regrouping. As such, the virtual communities make no exception. There is always etiquette, a protocol of communicating information and relating to other members. Those who are trespassing the *netiquette* are signalled to others and may withstand an impervious label ascription process.

Golder and Donath (2004) analyzing the newsgroups on Usenet (a World Wide Web predecessor) identified different roles which can be adopted by members of virtual communities according to their particular behaviour towards different topics in debate:

- Celebrities – they are key members of communities (group founders or just significant content producers)
- Newbies – they are new users who can produce misinformation due either to their lack of mastering the topic or the communication technique (lingo)
- Lurkers – passive member who receive the information but do not participate to any debate or common project
- Flamers – they are agitators, they use extreme speech (insults, profanities) in order to stir up reactions from other members
- Ranters – they are antisocial individuals which thrive in promoting hate speech among various groups and group members
- Trolls – they are wreckers, aiming to sabotage the coagulation of a group attitude or action emerging in a virtual community
- Spammers – they become of a virtual community with the purpose of promoting some commercial interests in more or less subtle fashion through interaction with other members

All these roles were assembled by Derek Doran (2017) in a schema which offers in addition the hierarchical relation image of a virtual community (figure 1).

Figure 1. The hierarchical relation image of a virtual community

In this particular model flammers and *ranters* are two particular type of trolls and *lurker* is just a veteran or eternal newbie. The red dashed outline orange boxes mark the adversarial roles of individuals who "try to intentionally disrupt a Usenet community" (Doran, 2017).

Authorities' representatives (intelligence agents) can pose as trolls or flammers in order to prevent, defuse or discredit potential inconvenient or dangerous social actions emerging from virtual communities.

Bringing a knife to a gunfight - resisting online manipulation

Could it be that cyberspace represents an anarchist's dreamworld? A world without physical boundaries is a world with no rulers and possibly with no rules. Even if it sounds plausible, this statement cannot be further from the truth concerning virtual reality. There is control and monitoring in cyberspace. Otherwise, *Anonymous* feed and *Wikileaks* would have been mainstream media and the "dark web" would have been pointless. Internet offers the possibility to overcome the obstacle of physical distance when people want to meet and create new forms of solidarity or to push forward common projects. That is why "...states are presented with a plethora of novel challenges to their authority and narratives. Challenges of distance and politics that might have once prevented physically dispersed nations from communicating across state borders have almost completely evaporated as new virtual relationships develop which are uninhibited by conventional notions of political territory and national sovereignty" (Saunders, 2011).

New media technologies for social networking such as Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp are continuously transforming the public practices of individuals and institutions. Web 2.0 technologies evolved specifically to facilitate the collaborative production of World Wide Web content through the potential of social networking. It made possible to relate in a more clear way

the online activity with the social everyday life bringing the anonymity to a lower level than it was initially intended by the promoters of internet. Alternatively, it created the opportunity, as Robert Putnam conceived it, for an enforced social capital among community members. This applies for human individuals regardless their age. Kids are more and more computer savvy at younger ages. They prefer the ludic and entertaining feature of computer use. On the other hand, for adolescents smartphones and tablets (their primal tools for social networking) are becoming as basic needs as food and water. However, these "benefits" can bring also various threats. Social networking services are used as a means for young people to connect with their friends and provide them with a wide range of information and leisure opportunities that is constantly available and enriched. Young people experience both positive (e.g., opportunities for social contact) and negative (e.g., cyber-bullying) effects when using social media.

Recently, in the eve of web 3.0, virtual communities are turning more and more into smart mobs. "Smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other. The people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities" (Rheingold, 2002).

Although these transformations provide new possibilities for construction of public or personal rhetoric and ideologies, and, therefore, new rationalities for actions and attitudes, they can also be targeted by new forms of manipulation. These occurrences are natural as new territories are discovered and our animal instinct demands us to be conquerors and rulers. In world built on information and communication power is drawn from *captatio benevolentiae*. Ultimately the power players strive to modulate their audience ideas and opinions and thus its decisional act and behaviour. So, as long as someone believes having a total control of the information received and choices made, the scene for "the grand tour" of manipulation and social control is set. This is the key idea a person should remember as he or she enters the simulated reality, be that a social media platform or a *metaverse*. "But immersed in simulation, we are also vulnerable. [...] An older generation fears that younger scientists, engineers, and designers are 'drunk with code'. A younger generation scrambles to capture their mentors' tacit knowledge of buildings, bodies, and bombs. From both sides of a generational divide, there is anxiety that in simulation, something important slips away" (Turkle, 1999).

A particular case of social media influence over political stands is its the ability to turn into civic movements incubator. This space provides the perfect framework for spontaneous cyber-solidarities. Several public actions like *Occupy*, *Indignados*, *Arab Spring* and more recently *Gilets Jaunes* started from coagulations of ideas and opinions expressed over different social media platforms. The author had the opportunity to study first hand, through interviews and participant observation, the #REZIST movement in Romania for several months. The observations and interviews took place online and *in situ* (i.e. Victoria Square, Bucharest). During this period several manipulation forms aimed both the Facebook platforms and the participants in the street. Every classic technique was employed: from inviting to a more violent action to warnings of potentially dangerous events and proposing a change of venue... Fortunately, through a thorough checking of every bit of unusual information most participants to the movement managed not to let themselves into believing the "trolls".

Conclusions

The use of social media, particularly social networking platforms such as Facebook, has

steadily increased over the years and becomes the prevalent source of information, entertainment, and interpersonal exchanges regardless age, social status or, more importantly, cultural background. It is the only location where you can actually find some places where people are not biased by their race, ethnicity, religion or any ideology.

Online environments provide new challenges for reconsidering the *intersubjectivity* in its most phenomenological sense. It is difficult to say whether virtual reality is facilitating the creation of new *persona* -s or just the surfacing of the inner most uninhibited ones. Nevertheless, it provides social scientists with the opportunity to grasp and intellectually digest new the fruits of most novel forms of *sociabilities* facilitated by the digital interaction.

"Networked and remixed *sociabilities* emerge and are practiced over multiplied place and audiences that do not necessarily collapse one's sense of place, but afford sense of place reflexively. [...] This presents the modus operandi for the networked self and the context of newer patterns of sociability and routes to sociality that emerge" (Papacharissi, 2011).

This article draws attention to some important considerations in the study of an online identity. Becoming a part of the virtual reality, sets the stage for the opportunity of reconstructing one's self, of reshaping the identity and furthermore to explore the identity of others who are more or less familiar to us in the real world.

"Digital anthropology, which can include the study of both use and consequence, is thereby as much a study of what people are becoming as what technologies are becoming. We now face an extreme contrast between anthropology's initial interest in custom and tradition, compared to the speed of contemporary developments. At the same time, these may be just as expressive of persistent anthropological concerns, such as the nature of normativity" (Miller, 2018).

As participant observers, researchers are not spared by the emergence of one's emic metamorphosis while accessing virtual reality. This is an essential part of the methodological specificity of digital anthropology. Therefore, a virtual *imago* of an anthropologist must encompass an honest, unbiased socially opened individual, who should not add a share to the potential manipulative endeavours perpetrated in cyberspace.

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