

## The Significance of Virtual Social Networks For The Construction of Public Perception

Horia MIHĂLCESCU

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, [horia.mihalcescu@mk.ase.ro](mailto:horia.mihalcescu@mk.ase.ro)

David-Florin CIOCODEICĂ

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, [david.ciocodeica@mk.ase.ro](mailto:david.ciocodeica@mk.ase.ro)

Correspondence should be addressed to: Horia MIHĂLCESCU; [horia.mihalcescu@mk.ase.ro](mailto:horia.mihalcescu@mk.ase.ro)

\* Presented at the 38th IBIMA International Conference, 23-24 November 2021, Seville, Spain

Copyright © 2021. Horia MIHĂLCESCU and David-Florin CIOCODEICĂ

### Abstract

The development of mass communication technology, the emergence of satellite communications led to the emergence of Marshall McLuhan's theory of the "global village". The advent of the Internet has strengthened researchers' belief in the imminence of this "global village" and led to the development of the "network society" theory. From the perspective of the "network society", the Internet was seen primarily as a means of interpersonal communication and only then as one of the components of creating public perception.

Election campaigns in recent years, starting with Barak Obama's, Brexit campaign and Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, have shown that the power of the Internet as a means of communication and creating public perception is greater than originally thought.

The Internet tends to become an autonomous environment, able to build images, themes and characters by evading classic media that, most of the time, are forced to take over themes and characters that gain notoriety in the virtual environment.

Classical media, by not adapting to postmodernity and what is called the "network society", in the sense that they have not transformed from mere transmitters of information and message into nodes of social networks, have offered an empty place, which virtual environments have occupied, making possible the construction of autonomous public perception, only through them.

The Internet, as an autonomous environment for building public perception, has been consolidated both by the inadequacy of classical media and by the development of social networks as a pattern of sociability in the postmodern era.

**Keywords:** Network Society, Global Village, Internet, Social Networks, Virtual Networks, Media, Weak Tie.

### Introduction

The development of social network analysis has led to the creation of an explanatory link between the micro and macro social levels. Mark Granovetter explains this connection by "elaborating the macro-scale implications of an aspect of small-

---

**Cite this Article as:** Horia MIHĂLCESCU and David-Florin CIOCODEICĂ, Vol. 2021 (36) "The Significance of Virtual Social Networks for The Construction of Public Perception", Communications of International Proceedings, Vol. 2021 (36), ISBN: 978-0-9998551-7-1, ISSN: 2767-9640. Article ID 38153721

scale interactions: the power of dyadic connections” (Granovetter, 1973, pp. 1360-1380). It is argued that the degree of overlap of social networks of two friends is dependent on the "strength" of the connection between the two.

The central element of Granovetter's theory, however, is the "weak link", which has the explanatory value for the relationship between micro and macro social level.

In short, there are three possibilities of connection between two nodes of any social network: absent link, strong link and weak link. The weak connection between two people is that connection which is not based on emotional involvement or high frequency of information exchange.

Strong connections, due to the high degree of overlap between the networks of the two nodes, have a low probability of becoming bridges between different networks. So, argues Granovetter, only weak links can be bridged between social networks. For this reason, through weak links, the information is most often broadcast in networks. In other words, weak links are the gateways of information to networks.

The weak connection becomes the engine of communication of the novelty and through it the perceptions are propagated inside the network.

The Internet is the environment most prone to generate such "weak links" both for technical reasons (easy access to peers online and willing to communicate) and for psychological reasons (identity in the virtual environment is protected). Thus, in the virtual environment the weak connections, so the bridges between the networks are much more frequent. For this reason, the circulation of information becomes more efficient and able to build more perception for extended networks, so public perception.

The two-step flow model developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld - a forerunner of the "network society"

The conception according to which the media are seen as the place from where the ideological directions that the masses follow unconditionally is given was dynamited by the two-step flow model developed by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). Thus, the stimulus-response model by which it was assumed that the immediate impact of the media is to change behavior through psychological processes triggered by media exposure has been radically criticized.

The new model, the two-step flow, starts from the observation that "often ideas come from radio and the print media to opinion leaders and from them to less active segments of the population" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944).

### Weak connection - a connection between networks and the world

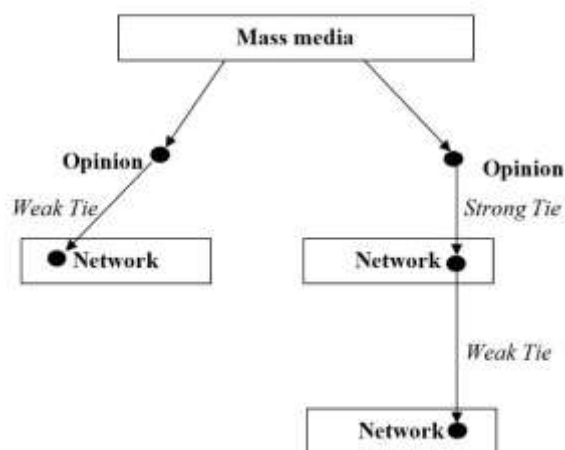


Fig. 1 - Lazarsfeld's model improved by appealing to Granovetter's theory

The improved model may further explain how the media comes to influence the individual, especially in the unintentional hypothesis Lazarsfeld refers to because lesser-known characters tend to be perceived as more credible providers of information in certain cultures.

In other words, for Lazarsfeld's model, opinion leaders become central to the mass communication process, and they are the ones that the model claims to be the true custodians of influence. The basic premise is that the message is more credible when delivered in person than when it is delivered "in bulk".

The legitimate question that arises is where do these opinion leaders form their opinions? The answer can be: from the opinion leaders of opinion leaders and so on.

The model adapted in several communication steps can become the premise for the network society that Castells theorizes. In other words, accepting a media message requires strengthening the personal messages of network members.

## **The "network society" - an explanatory model of today's world**

Communities and life itself have always been based on network-type structures. But the explanatory utility of the network as a form of human organization has become necessary against the background of the evolution towards globalization, understood as "a general term for increasing the interdependence of the world society" (Giddens, 2000, 75). What is defining for the new social structure is the interdependence, or mutual dependence, between countries, markets, communities, people, etc.

The increase of global interdependence, as a consequence of technological development, has led to the need to rethink the social structure capable of providing explanatory models for this interdependence.

The new world of the "global village" is the world in which "our specialized and fragmented society in the center-periphery structure has rapidly experienced an instantaneous reassembly of all mechanized bits into an organic whole" (McLuhan, 1994, 106). The "global village" prefaces global interdependence through this "organic whole."

"Global village", globalization are effects of technology and the superstructure of postmodern capitalism understood as "the development of global markets, the growth of transnational corporations and their growing dominance over national economies" (Soros, 2002, 23). The rearrangement of the global world changes the importance of nations as participants in the game of global interdependencies.

A network society becomes a society whose structure is made up of networks supported by information and communication technology (Castells, 2004, 3). The network society is based on technology.

In this new way of looking at society, the network becomes the basic element of the network society. The structure of such a core network consists of nodes and connections between nodes. But what becomes essential for this basic structure is that the network organization has no leader and any node can detach from the network. In fact, networks do not have leaders or representatives, precisely because of the high degree of interdependence, they represent themselves.

Networks, as a form of social organization, become in the space of global interdependence, the most efficient forms of organization mainly due to the advantages that new technologies offer. They benefit from flexibility, scalability and increased survival capacity (Castells, 2004, 5).

The network society, the "planetary village" are other names of the global society. It is obvious that they are unconnected or poorly connected entities to networks, but the significance of the concept of the network society is that even these unconnected entities are affected by "processes that take place in the global networks of this dominant social structure."

(Castells, 2004, 22). Dominant social networks have a global impact.

Even if there are no leaders in the networks, they exercise their power by exclusion or inclusion in the network (Castells, 2004, 31). In the new structure, the storage of power is precisely the networks. And power is exercised either by "reprogramming the network in terms of its objectives, or by the ability to connect different networks in order to cooperate for a common goal and increase the level of resources" (Castells, 2004, 32).

The new "network society" changes the rules for exercising power and control over what are called the masses. The masses themselves are structured as networks. Communication and power become networks that decide or communicate to networks.

## **Mass media in the new society**

Political institutions are having a hard time adapting to this new society. They generally remain captive to industrial forms of organization (Castells, 2004, 375), in the sense that they refuse to become active in the space of networks through the flow of information received, processed and retransmitted. The organization of political power in a network society must take into account the principles of the network. Instead, political institutions continue to view society as vertically and stratified, leading to their inability to respond convincingly to the demands of democracy.

But not only political institutions behave as if society remained structured according to the principles of the industrial age. The classic media remained dependent on this way of seeing society, their own consumer and its new expectations and demands.

The permanent decreases in circulation and ratings are not only due to the emergence of the great competitor which is the Internet and, even less so, to the emergence of niche media.

"The television-dominated system can be characterized as a mass media. A similar message is broadcast by a few broadcasters to an audience of millions of receivers. Thus, the content and format of the messages is built for the mediocre receiver" (Castells, 2001, 331). The requirements of the new receiver are starting to change significantly primarily due to the availability of interactive channels, which respect the principles of society and the "consumernetwork". Classical media, like political institutions, refuse to adapt interdependence and interactivity to the new society.

The principles of success of the media adapted to the network society - new media - are no longer necessarily related to credibility, but to the ability to connect their media agenda to the public agenda (McQuail et al., 2001, 94). The success of postmodern media therefore depends, first of all, on the ability to create the public sphere in the sense that Habermas defines it as the place where opinions change and criticism is brought without any political control (Habermas, 1998).

New media and, in particular, the Internet tend to become not only autonomous but also self-sufficient. Respecting the rules of the network society, the new media take the place of the classic media in terms of capacity for political and social influence and, consequently, the origin of public perceptions.

## **Barack Obama - President of the Internet or when postmodernity defeats modernity**

Like John F. Kennedy, Barack Obama won the presidential election based on a new medium. For Kennedy it was television, for Obama it was the Internet (Miller, 2008).

Obama won because in a networked society he was the only one who respected and applied its principles.

Barack Obama's election campaign has a high significance relative to the new media and their ability to promote public perception and more. Through the way his campaign used the interactive communication tools of the new media, he managed to change the way politicians organize their supporters, communicate directly with the electorate, defend themselves from opponents' attacks and manage to finance their campaign efforts.

Obama's online campaign has garnered unprecedented funding from ordinary people. For the first time, an election campaign is based on small donations from many, not the other way around ([www.e-strategyblog.com](http://www.e-strategyblog.com)). And this is all the more important as the funding of politicians becomes a topic of public debate, and the need for transparency in this area is increasing.

The principle of transparency, proper to the network society, was respected.

Obama's campaign managed to communicate with social networks, not with "target audiences", it was the most extensive communication campaign carried out for social networks with a message adapted to their logic. Obama did not present himself as a leader, but as a representative, taking into account the principles of network power.

Here are some examples of the effectiveness of this type of campaign:

- The official campaign spots were watched on YouTube for 14.5 million hours in the context in which to buy this TV show US visions need \$ 47 million (Miller, 2008).
- Candidate Obama's 37-minute speech during the election campaign was watched by 6.7 million people (Miller, 2008).

The fact that Obama has won demonstrates that in a networked society the way to promote messages must respect its principles and, above all, that it is necessary to review political marketing methodologies and adapt them to the world of networks.

Kennedy, Obama, Trump - technological and discursive innovation, a two-way relationship

The "environment is the message" in the "global village" structured as a "network society". Technology imposes discourse, and discourse has technology to be applied and heard where it is received with the expected effect. Social and political innovation involves a combination of technology and action (discursive for example).

The winning innovations in Kenedy's campaigns (television and discourse), Obama (the Internet and targeting communities), Trump (social networks, the mathematics of targeting, and the divisive discourse of social networks) are successful examples that reflect the evolution of organized social structures. increasingly evident by the size of the technology.

## Conclusions

Lazarsfeld's model of communication, improved by appealing to Granovetter's theory of safe connections, shows the importance of social networks in constructing the perception transmitted through classical means of communication. In other words, the media have been permanently dependent on social networks.

Classical environments do not take into account the need to adapt to the new social evolution in which their success is given by the ability to rebuild the public space. The interactivity and the overlap of the media agenda with the public agenda become success criteria of the new media. And the premise is that they behave as nodes of the social network and as chain ends, as starting points. And the premise of this evolution is their freedom to communicate directly with the networks they belong to.

Barack Obama's campaign demonstrated the power of the Internet and highlighted a new methodology of political marketing, specific to the network society, and Trump's campaign demonstrated the nature of strong mobilization of social networks.

In the absence of adapting the classical environments to the new society, the Internet, the only one that respects and applies its principles, becomes autonomous, becoming a vehicle for creating public perception, of public space.

## References

- Castells, M., 2001. *The Internet Galaxy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Castells, M., 2004. *The Network Society*. Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Erickson, D., 2009. Barack Obama's Online Fundraising Machine, E-StrategyBlog.com, online. Available online at <http://e-strategyblog.com/2009/01/barack-obamas-online-fundraising-machine/>, Accessed November 15, 2021.
- Giddens, A., 2000. *Sociology*. Bucharest: ALL.
- Granovetter, M.S., 1973. *The strenght of weak ties*. The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 78, No. 6. (May, 1973), pp. 1360-1380. Available online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776392> Accessed Novemvber 15,202.
- Habermas, J., 1998. *The public sphere and its structural transformation*. Bucharest: Univers.
- Lazarsfeld, P.F., Berelson B. & Gaudet, H., 2004. *The voting mechanism, How voters decide in a presidential campaign*. Bucharest: Comunicare.ro Publishing House.
- McLuhan, M., 1994. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London and New York: MIT Press.
- McQuail, D. & Windahl, S., 2001. *Communication models for the study of mass communication*. Bucharest: SNSPA Publishing House.
- Miller, C. C., 2008. How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics. *The New York Times*, November 7. 2021. Available online at <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/> Accessed November 15, 2021.
- Soros, G., 2002. *About globalization*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.