

Media ethics versus user motivation – A discussion about the Social Networks on the Internet

Andrea ZSIGMOND,

Department of Communication and Public Relations,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Email: andlea_zs@yahoo.fr

Keywords: *media ethics, new media, communication networks*

Abstract: *The text is a reflection upon the motivation and the ethical principles of social network users on the internet. It advances the point of view that these networks are a medium which supports identity-building. The text tries to provide some sociological and philosophical explanations, using the habitus and social capital theory of Pierre Bourdieu and theatricality theories from the cultural studies, in order to excuse the media (in some causes) from the reproach of being unethical.*

Accusing the media of pornographisation

In autumn 2007 the German political magazine EMMA started a campaign against the growing pornographisation of the media. Numerous articles have been oriented against the sexualization of advertising, sexism in the media and other misogynistic themes. The editors distributed stickers with the message “PorNO!” and urged readers to stand up and to no longer look away from sex discrimination and misogyny. Graphic pornographic advertising can be reported to the Advertising Council. Internet users can filter pornography through filtering software. The general public should take a stand against the tendency of the media, which uses women’s sexuality. (Emma – political magazine for women n.d.)

A writer was also involved in this campaign who fought against the exposure of female sexuality for the purposes of entertainment and promotion. Meredith Haaf expressed her criticism in an article entitled “Look! At! Me!” on the use of so-called virtual social networks on behalf of the beautiful sex. It is young girls who show daring attitudes and a lot of skin for the sake of attention. (Haaf 2007)

This approach makes us review the problem of media ethics. Media ethics deals, first of all, with the ethics of media producers and the content of media products. But what about the users? What about the ethics of media use? What is the reaction of the media consumers towards the products they are offered?

Consequently we must be aware that the private media landscape has the same success principle as the free market: the offer must meet the demands. The question whether the services offered by the media are moral remains open.

On the other hand, the motivation of media use should be also taken into consideration. In an optimistic interpretation, each user’s option for a specific medium (here medium is understood as - quality of content, type of news coverage, reports, percentage of entertainment and education, respectively information, etc.) is based on a more or less conscious choice, which has to fulfill one’s needs.

Motivation of media use and capital acquisition

The Munich communications scholar Michael Meyen has developed a study titled: “We, media slaves – Why the Germans spend half of their lives receiving” starting from the points of view expressed by two other scholars: the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the Swedish communications scholar Karl Erik Rosengren. Rosengren explains the activity patterns of the individual through the following:

1. social structure (industrialization, urbanization, religion, tradition, media, environment, politics/law),
2. the individual position (gender, age, education, income, time budget) and
3. individual characteristics (primary needs, life history, Mental Health, Family Network, media experience, taste, values, temperament).

Because, according to Meyen, the media ultimately becomes a concrete act, these determinants will be transferred into the media use. (Meyen 2006).

Pierre Bourdieu defines very similar determinants through the concept of habit. The habit is initially characterized by the fact that it generates perceptions, assessments, and actions. (Bohn and Hahn 2000).

Bourdieu, however, still believes that acts (in this case once again - media use) are a way of capital acquisition. Capital is:

1. economic: material wealth,
2. cultural: abilities, skills, knowledge, education, skills,
3. social: networks in which the reproduction of economic and cultural capital can be used
4. symbolic: recognition of the environment for the other three types of capital.

In terms of media usage, people are working very hard in order to reach this kind of capital. In a free interpretation, according to Bourdieu, people are influenced by their careers, the environment, living conditions and are therefore not free to choose towards which capital they want to aspire, and to what extent. They aspire towards only one type of capital (even if influenced by many factors). People are doing this deliberately, targeted, decidedly. Michael Meyen starts from the ideas of sociologists, but he underlines the fact that the media user is able to choose for themselves: „ People who have media competence - people who know where the «button» is, and those who are using the media in order to fulfill their different needs.”(Meyen 2006)

The Social Networks of Web 2.0

The question of the user motivation of the media offer is mainly interesting in view of the Web 2.0. The medium of the World Wide Web and its 2.0 version, offers users the possibility to shape a major part of its contents. These give users the option to network amongst themselves, through wikis, video and photo portals, blogs or virtual social networks (Wikipedia n.d.). The user has not just the role of a recipient, but they are a creative user, where each user can fully show themselves, imagine things and play.

In what this aspect is concerned, we would like to speak about community portals or online contact networks. These are Web sites (mostly multilingual), which are mostly financed through advertising and allow the users to post own free profiles, blogs, photos, videos, etc (myspace.com n.d.).

Facebook, Myspace, Hi5 and in the german-speaking area, the student index of Holtzbrinck – the StudiVZ: (short list of students) – are some examples of popular platforms for social networking.

The number of users is impressive. If one joins such a virtual social room, one learns fast that there is hardly a friend or acquaintance who still doesn't have a profile.

But why do so many people choose to use this communication and information medium, why is there such a hype? Maybe because of classic motivations: education (thanks to wikis), information and exchange of points of views, for some also opinion making (blogs), entertainment (photos and videos).

We would like to talk here about a different function of online networks.

Most portals provide users with a wide range of contact possibilities. One can create a friends list (“buddy list”) and can also see the friends of ones friends. Sometimes we can encounter people with whom we've been out of touch, and we can add them to our own friends list. Then, the software offers the possibility of sending private messages, or public messages, which can be read by all visitors of that profile. On some platforms you can also join thematic groups and forums. The social software adds additional contacts, based on the interests, studies, musical taste, hobbies, college, etc. of the registered user. This is how one can get in touch with a very diverse amount of people and still have an overview thanks to the profile features. For individuals

this is useful software. Modern psychology would call this relationship – or contact management.

Relationship management is one of the social skills of modern psychology, such as the ability of self-awareness and self-assessment. (Bastian and Kluge 1998) Self-perception and self-assessment are in virtual relationships almost unnecessary. In the virtual space many communication conventions are abolished and this is why the users are less concentrated on themselves, their behaviour and on the impact or the impression of others. There is great freedom of doing whatever one likes, a “staging area” (Meckel 2007). The user can here, once again, define the basis of his personal musical tastes, favourite quotations, books, films, opinion groups. The users think about their hobbies, interests, strengths, skills and while filling in a few categories, they consider this: What do I want to reveal about myself? How shall I present myself? What would be attractive, funny, unusual, interesting? The users make their self-portraits for the public.

Therefore they make use of another medium (The term “medium” is a term used for the abstract understanding of the media philosophy, for example by Dieter Mersch): Theatricality.

The medium theatricality and its benefit

Theatricality is a complex concept, but we will focus on aspects concerning the flat screen and the networking service of the modern Web 2.0.

Theatricality is a concept belonging to cultural science and it is based on the idea of contrast between appearance and reality, authenticity and ‘act-as-if’, genuineness and falsehood, seriousness and play, life and theatre (Lehnert 2007). Today’s language usage of this concept is less related to the theatre as an artistic institution. Originally the concept of theatricality was “a complex interplay of production, materiality/physicalness and perception” (Fischer-Lichte 2001). This is valid for any cultural process, of any kind, whether in art, in theory or in everyday life.

In our everyday life theatricality is an indispensable component, for example, in a lecture, when a professor is talking in front of a student audience, or on the bus, if someone is talking on the phone and is aware that everyone is looking at him.

The notion of staging is an inseparable term of theatricality. Erika Fischer-Lichte summarizes the process of self-representation as follows:

1. Production, staging (use of characters)
2. Corporality (presentation, materiality)
3. Reception (perception).

She calls the interplay of these three levels, or even their presentation – performance. (Fischer-Lichte 2001)

The concept of staging refers to design, creativeness, creative emergence that is materialized through corporality. Self-presentation is very much calculated. But falsehood is not necessarily a component of staging. Especially in everyday scenes,

a selection takes place, many things are being sorted out and this is why we speak about a construction.

The performance is the next element of theatricality. The show exists as such only in the presence of an audience that is able to perceive. This is the enforcement, the act or projection of the plan.

Identity formation

In the 18th century people were wondering how one can distinguish between the true personality, authentic feelings and false feelings. Today, trained by Gender Studies, we find it questionable whether there is another, true identity behind the mask of theatricality, or whether the ongoing theatricality generates our identity (Lehnert 2007). In this way the staging and performance would get an identity-creation function – because the latter generates feedback, which either confirms or criticizes. Or it is certainly at least one image, which reflects through consent and confirmation on the identity.

On Myspace, Facebook, Hi5 and StudiVZ young people between 15 and 25 are logged in. Here they are using, for self-staging purposes, the available media text, but also image and video. Hoping for attention and responses that contribute to personal fulfilment – in a broad sense to the basic need for recognition or self-realization (accumulation of social or symbolic capital in terms of Bourdieu) – the users are displaying themselves. They reveal many personal details, privacy is being extended.

Example 1

On a student portal, such as the German student portal, the interaction between users happens at another level. Inappropriate pictures or low level are more the exception. Here the students can select some elements, which represent them, e.g. the groups, lectures for the personal description of the category of interests or favourite quotes. An incredible range of (language) art: irony, sarcasm, arrogance, drought, are being used to establish their own profile basis of the above elements. The impressions they transmit are actually less diverse: I am funny, I am smart, I am interesting. These together with the long friends lists, with links to photo albums, show their popularity.

According to Pierre Bourdieu – through the staging and performance for the public social platform, actually consciously or unconsciously they are always searching for the acquisition of recognition, status, admiration, for a symbolic Capital. The attitude of such a profile is suitable in this case, because a user can demonstrate his knowledge and status, in order to gain even more recognition, confirmation, etc. This attempt to assess their own value and situation is connected to identity formation. (Meyen 2006)

Example 2

With the removal of the communication standards, we witness in contact exchanges, such as Myspace or Hi5, a “shift of the boundaries of shame” (Soboczynski 2007) and some profiles become “vulgar scenes” (Soboczynski 2007). As the young journalist Meredith Haaf regretfully mentioned in her article, especially young girls are exposing themselves too much, in order to get reactions and compliments. They are posing nearly half naked and with make-up for photos and videos, which are to be put online (Haaf 2007). The answers from male users are accordingly. The author sums up:

“«Hey, you’re so hot, «Rrrrrrrr, kitty» or «Is there still room for me in your tight jeans» these are the usual slogans, which other network users are posting under the images. Such rates are in real life actually disgusting. But the MySpace girls collect these comments as other people stamps.”

Whatever the case, the reasons or the motivation for staging, staging is an indispensable part of individualization (Meckel 2007) (htt3) and can be interpreted identically, as a particularly effective medium in which one can draw attention and reflect oneself in the answers and reactions of other users.

The authorization of an allegation

Nevertheless, such a display is pornographic to some extent, because there is a lot of play with sexuality and physicality is used as a tool for gaining attention. These practices that are provided by the software operators will not or will only partially be restricted. Why should they be, since they are based on the voluntary nature of the performers? And the favour and the applause is rather encouraging.

The sexualisation in the media is not worthy to be supported. But before we criticize this kind of sexualisation or start a campaign against it, perhaps we should hold the candle elsewhere.

References

- Bastian, Frauke, and Sandra Kluge (1998). *Diagnose sozialer Kompetenzen. Entwicklung eines multimedialen. Diagnosesystems zur Erfassung sozialer Kompetenzen.*
- Bohn, Cornelia, and Alois Hahn (2000). *Pierre Bourdieu, in Kaesler (Hrsg.): Klassiker der Soziologie.* Munchen: Verlag C.H.Beck.
- Diagnose sozialer Kompetenzen.* <http://www.psychos.uniosnabrueck.de/~unde/dsp/sk.htm>
- Emma das politische Magazin von Frauen*
http://www.emma.de/dossier_por_no_5_2007.html?&0/7.10.2007
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika (2001). *Asthetische Erfahrung – Das Semiotische und das Performative Tubingen.* Francke Verlag.
- Haaf, Meredith (2007). *Sieh! Mich! An! in Emma.*

- Lehnert, Gertrud (2007). *Theatralität - Vorlesungsskript in Medienkulturwissenschaften*.
- Meckel, Miriam (2007). *Das Glück der Unerreichbarkeit – Wege aus der Kommunikationsfalle*. Hamburg: Murmann Verlag.
- Meyen, Michael (2006). *Wir Mediensklaven – Warum die deutschen ihr halbes Leben auf Empfang sind*. Hamburg: Merus Verlag.
- myspace.com*. <http://www.myspace.com> 10.10.2007.
- Soboczynski, Adam. „Das Ende der Geheimnisse.“ *Die Zeit*,/ 08 03, 2007.
- Studi Vz das studiverzeichnis*. http://www.studivz.net/1/about_us/1 10.2007.
- wikipedia*. <http://wikipedia.com> 10.10.2007.