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## BEING AND TIME IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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### Abstract

The author uses Martin Heidegger's approach to study temporal and existential changes in human's life. In addition, he also expands this approach to virtual existence offered by digital media. The author claims that online communication introduces new temporal and existential changes. Firstly, it is the change from linear time to current time – which is also transformed to virtual existence. Secondly, it is speeding the time up in combination of online and offline life; this acceleration manifests itself in cumulating information, things and events. Thirdly, it is a changeover from linear spreading and storing information in culture to dimensional and hypertext form. All of these three temporal and existential changes carry positive but also negative aspects. It is for this reason that the author believes that it is important to reflect especially negative changes and then to learn how to eliminate them. This should become a part of daily information hygiene and consequently also media education.

*Keywords:* time, existence, Internet, information hygiene

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### 1. Introduction

Martin Heidegger [1] in his most existential work *Being and Time* (1928) states that time, or more precisely “being in time” exists to distinguish individual regions of “being.” He argues that being and time correlate, so by assessing temporal changes we can also determine changes in human existence. M. Heidegger in his book sets two basic kinds of experiencing time. The first one relates to everyday actions to earn a living and therefore represents a linear fragmentation of actions, which is in fact the original, non-authentic state of being. The second one relates to being conscious of mortality of being, which introduces separation and holistic understanding of existence and consecutively beginning of an authentic way of life.

The change in existence could also be signalled by different temporal changes, such as cumulating events and acute feeling of lack of time, communication online with sensation of permanent current time and so forth. Basically every single change of life rhythm is a testimony of creation of a new existential mode of human. M. Heidegger lived in the period of no digital media and virtual reality. However, virtual reality is now becoming a part of our life,

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extending it, adding to it and even enriching it. For this reason, time analysis needs to be extended to cover also this new, digitally created dimension of man. In this contribution, we would like to study changes that occur in online communication (cyberspace) and find out what risks or possibilities they bring to human's life. We will use the phenomenological method, through which we can study the basic structure (*eidos*) of the media, especially the Internet in our case. When we know the basic structure of media, we can identify changes in experiencing time and existence. Additionally, we will use one more, complementary method – comparison. By comparing, we will study how time is understood in the case of old media and new media.

## **2. What is time?**

Aurelius Augustinus [2] answers the question “*What is time?*” with humour yet still correctly “*If nobody asked me, I would know. However, when they want me to explain, I stumble.*” Augustinus basically speaks for us all, because even though we all have experience of time, we are unable to explain it rationally enough. This weird state was probably best elaborated by Henri Bergson [3] in the form of disagreement between intuition and logics, time and space, freedom and inevitability. According to him, we instinctively understand time because our life is measured by it. A problem arises when we imagine time, we then place duration into the homogeneous space of our thinking and this duration becomes standstill.

This conflict, which goes as far in the history as to the time of Zen's aporias (Achilles for example cannot overtake a tortoise), warns us that it is meaningful to speak of time only when there is a relation to life happenings that our mind can process and calculate. Awareness and life movement, or physical movement are thus two inseparable elements needed to understand time. In Aristotle's definition of time [4] “a number of motion with respect to the before and after”, there also are two inseparable aspects: awareness (the “before” and “after”) and sequence of movements. On one hand, in awareness, our brain fuses individual movements into a stream and on the other hand it is variety of movements that distinguishes the nature of time. Therefore, we could speak of various kinds of movement – astronomical, geological, or biological movements and consequently about various kinds of time as well. We could use this approach also for human's experiencing of time, shaped by culture and, within culture, especially by modern communication technologies. History of European culture tells us that media, such as speech, writing and printing, had a great impact on the way we experienced time [5]. Through its auditory setting, the medium of speech, which is based on phonemes as the elementary phonetic unit of a language, drags those who communicate into a state of unity, this unity favours closed, cyclic time. Speech's influence on cyclic ideas of time can best be demonstrated in present-day tribe societies, for example in those remote parts of New Guinea, where they do not have written language or similar technologies. Similarly to the old archaic societies, everything goes in circles

here (names, souls), with no definite gap between the past and present. Written language, especially phonetic, which is an external and visual medium, strengthens the idea of linear time. The influence of phonetic writing on construction of linear time is caused by sequencing of visual characters that, after being read, are put 'aside' into the past and those coming next then create the idea of future. Then everything that lies between the past and future (counting of movement) represents current time. Printing press will then, by its standardised form of characters, emphasize abstractness of linear time. In the time of manuscripts – for example in the Middle Ages, time showed its importance for example in the form of church bells that chimed at certain time, but in the Modern Age, it became an abstract system, also supported by the invention of watch. If then speech, written language and printing posed a great influence on understanding and perceiving of time, then we have to expect that there will be a similar effect coming with the modern super-medium, called the Internet.

### **3. On the basic structure of the Internet**

How does the Internet influence changes in understanding and perceiving of time? These changes, similarly to changes brought by the previous kinds of media, are designed by the technological nature of the medium, since in communication through the Internet, our perception, imagination and thinking need to adopt to this nature [6]. Therefore, if we understand the basic structure of the Internet, then we will be able to understand its influence on perceiving and understanding time.

There are more authors trying to grasp the nature of the Internet. László Ropolyi, one of such authors [*Philosophy of the Internet. A Discourse on the Nature of the Internet*, 2006, accessed 2015-1-6, [http://elte.prompt.hu/sites/default/files/tananyagok/philosophy\\_of\\_internet/book.pdf](http://elte.prompt.hu/sites/default/files/tananyagok/philosophy_of_internet/book.pdf)], understands the Internet as a complicated, multi-layer system. There are 4 levels in it: technological, communicational, cultural and organismal. The first level, according to him, is the world of computers that are able to send and receive information within the worldwide web really fast and safely. Being a technological tool, the Internet is also connected to further technological tools that satisfy various human and social needs, from shopping to international money transfers. The second layer of the Internet is a place dedicated to various kinds of communication, such as text, voice or music. The third layer is the cultural layer and requires as broad understanding as possible because it may be comprised of all possible cultural values and activities of the real world. And finally, Ropolyi sees the Internet as an independent organism that can be understood totally independently of the internal technologies that create its structure.

Ropolyi's classification of the Internet is quite complex, his outlined hierarchy-like or pyramid-like levels (technology - communication - culture) idea is supplemented by a dynamic, evolutionary approach that represents a

unique metaphilosophical understanding of the Internet. There are the technologies that rule over such a hierarchy-based, dynamic system called the Internet.

We see a similar, hierarchy-organised system also in David Clark [*Characterizing cyberspace: past, present and future*, 2010, accessed 2015-1-6, <http://web.mit.edu/ecir/pdf/clark-cyberspace.pdf>]. Thought it is true that Clark primarily characterises cyberspace, in a broader sense, similarly to Ropolyi's view (communication, cultural and metaphilosophical layer of the Internet), it is also applicable to the Internet. According to Clark, there are four layers in the cyberspace: physical, logical, informational and human.

The physical layer of the cyberspace is, according to Clark, based on physical devices that are connected to each other. These are computers, servers, sensors, transmitters, networks and communication channels. Communication between individual channels runs through cables, optical fibres or wirelessly, through electromagnetic waves. The physical layer of the Internet is the easiest to see, especially devices, which are easy to locate. According to Clark, cyberspace, as a logical level, is a series of platforms that host new innovations. The lowest level of services is represented by a program to perform basic operations, data transfer and data formatting. These services are then used to build applications, for example databases or web. In the highest level of web, there are services such as Facebook, which serves as platform for further applications.

Creation, getting, saving and sending information is, as Clark notes, the main experience in the cyberspace. Information that is on the Internet takes different forms, for example music, videos, www sites and so on. Data was and is alive statically on hard drives, USB sticks, but is even more frequently created dynamically in networks, where no dimensional localisation of the information is applicable.

According to Clark, the highest level of cyberspace consists of people, who are not merely passive users of the Internet; they also actively create its content. If people contribute to Wikipedia, then Wikipedia exists. If people send tweets, then Tweet exists. Cyberspace is thus designed for people, mutual communication, creating new content; therefore the people are the most important component here.

Clark's model of cyberspace (the Internet) is purely hierarchic and pyramid-like. The lowest part of this pyramid is technologies, followed by further levels – logics, information and people. Taking Clark's model and partially also the one of Ropoly, we can deduce that it is the technological level that is the basic level and that rules over the rest of the levels of the Internet. Through studying technologies that are applied in the Internet, we can – phenomenologically speaking – discover also its *eidos*, i.e. its nature, basic structure. This structure is based on non-linear net-like interconnection of communication technologies and fast-flowing data between them. Communication of information is realised in a digital form, capable of transforming all human symbols, including speech, image and music, into a

binary value system of 0 and 1. Net structure, speed and digitalisation are then the most basic characteristics of the Internet. If we then have the basic structure of the Internet defined, what temporal and existential changes can we expect in communication through the Internet?

#### **4. Being and time in online communication**

In communication on the Internet, or in combination of such communication and communication outside the Internet ('online' and 'offline'), we can notice various temporal and existential changes.

##### ***4.1. Different time flow***

The first interesting thing about communication on the Internet, or online communication, is the different time flow, from its stagnation to the absence of time sensation. The basic, net-like structure of the Internet, actually does not allow time to spread linearly. Then, time in communication online becomes more current [7]. The term of 'current' is perhaps a bit more adequate since the term 'present' would evoke linear time with three stages: past, present and future. The 'current' feature of time, apart from collapse of linearity in net communication of the Internet, is caused also by the high speed of information flow, which is close to the speed of light and, *de facto*, immediate. The feeling of current time is also strengthened by amount of immersion into the cyberspace. It can be in the form of an intense email communication, search for information, listening to music, watching videos, but especially playing video games. In vigorous playing of videogames, a total loss of sense of linear time can occur. This is because we cannot measure time when we do not have any physical firm points to count the time from, so it is more appropriate to speak of absence of time. The time that playing a game takes can be measured by an observer who is not playing the game, but also by the player himself if they 'emerge' from the game and measure the time that has passed. It is similar to dreaming – when we dream, we have no idea of the time. Here, the time period can only be measured by an external observer, by judging changes of the nervous system activity frequency. Every temporal change like this also speaks of existential change, in this case about switching from everyday way of life to the virtual one. The virtual way of existence corresponds to a different form of being, characteristic by visual and auditory presence in the cyberspace. In terms of reality, we cannot say that virtual is not real, since it directly interferes with experiencing and thinking of a person. It would perhaps be adequate to say that virtual reality is a different reality, or reality which is on a lower ontological level.

##### ***4.2. Feeling of speeding the time up***

The second interesting thing about communication on the Internet, or online communication, is the feeling of speeding the time up in all the spheres of

life. This acceleration of time is caused by two global and mutually connected trends in information society: it is firstly very fast, almost instant communication and secondly exponential increase of information volume. Communication online, for example at work, brings us a vast scope of information that needs to be mentally processed in real time [8]. This strengthens the feeling of acceleration both in term of time and pace of life. Fast communication and exponential growth in volume of information have a direct and indirect impact on traffic and shopping facilities, which also favour fast pace of life in contemporary society. Most of people clearly recognize this temporal change and speak of ‘lack of time’ for just about everything. In comparison with the first temporal change, which leads to absence of time sensation, this seems to be a paradox. However, basing on a graphical interpretation, T.H. Eriksen [8, p. 103] notes that with accumulation of information, the rising curve finally goes almost vertical, which means that the linear time drops close to zero. Yet, it can never really reach zero, because we still remain physical and biological beings. It is the time curve that will have to be changed and together with it, also our existence.

### ***4.3. Change in spreading culture***

The third thing that we may find interesting about communication on the Internet, even though in a broader context, is a major change in spreading culture. Traditional cultures, including industrial ones, would always spread linearly, i.e. by traditions – either orally, or in a written form. However, information societies, as Pierre Lévy [9] outlines, change this radically. Information, according to him, does not spread linearly in time, but dimensionally and simultaneously in the cyberspace. Similarly, Pavol Rankov [10] states that a new net-like culture emerges, this culture approaches tradition totally differently – ‘*it does not ruin it, but breaks it into individual elements that are later dissolved, recycled and used in building a net-based structure*’. Traditional communication that would be present in the linear time then becomes instant and net-based.

## **5. Possibilities and risks in online communication**

Every temporal and existential change in online communication, or combination of online and offline communication, brings some possibilities, but also introduces some risks.

### ***5.1. Transition from linear time to instant time***

In the first case, in transition from linear time to instant time, there is a great advantage in immediate communication without any delays. Besides communication, it is also search of information that is very fast and efficient. This is surely handy. If we contemplate also deeper immersion into the world of digital games, bringing attractive visual sceneries, gameplay and interactivity,

then we have to admit that another positive outcome is in entertainment. Here it means experiencing the fantasy world with alternative identity and creation of communities. This can bring a relaxing and liberating effect. Apart from this, digital games can fine-tune some cognitive abilities such as creativity and fast reactions.

Weakening of the sense of past and future is a negative aspect of current time. Along with decreased interest in the past comes also reduction of knowledge of history, civic education, religion, etc. Mark Bauerlein [11], basing on his research among high school students and university students, speaks of decline of knowledge. He explains: *“Young people have never been so absorbed by themselves, they have never been closer to each other, they have never been so active in the adolescent contacts. Because the teenage symbols and songs, hot gossips and games, communication unlimited in time and space penetrate into their bedrooms, they also put them into generation isolation. They pay for their autonomy: the more they are engaged by themselves, the less they think about the past and imagine the future.”* Knowledge consequently influences education and wisdom that helps us make responsible decisions. If there is a lack of knowledge, then the process of responsible, correct and proper [12] decision-making is endangered, because it is not possible to foresee future consequences adequately.

A deep immersion into the cyberspace of video games and total ignorance of time can introduce a negative effect of ‘killing the time’ or addiction in extreme cases. In relation to cognitive abilities of man, the more advanced forms of video games (RPG, MMORPG games) will not favour abstract and logical thinking, because it is the images that dominate over symbols. Decoding images is incomparably easier than decoding symbols. We also more or less understand the message that a picture brings, while we have to think when we see a symbol, or a pattern of symbols. This then means that images (communication via image or picture) will naturally turn towards entertainment [13, 14].

## **5.2. Acceleration of time**

In the second case, in combination of online and offline communication, we witness acceleration of time which consequently leads to faster flow of information that finally speeds up the pace of life in a given society. On one hand, fast flow of information and whole society enables us to not only communicate fast, but also buy products fast and plunge into business fast – this can lift economic growth/social comfort of a man. On the other hand however, fast pace of life causes an acute feeling of lack of time, accompanied with stress. T.H. Eriksen [8, p. 64] names various negative influences caused by fast pace of life. Hastiness, according to him, leads to simplification and inaccuracy. One still has the same amount of time but there is more and more information to process, more and more things to deal with. This means that information must be simplified and processed superficially. Accumulation of information and subsequently also of things brings problems with space, this can be seen for

example in the case of traffic jams and crowded car parks in every bigger town. Another serious problem with fast time is, according to Eriksen [8, p. 127], in compensating a lack of work time with the time that should be spent with family and for relax, this is becoming a serious sociological problem now. As Eriksen outlines fast living through events can grow into a habit and consequently inability to do something slowly [8, p. 62]. It is time that we miss the most, time that goes hand-in-hand with a cognitive ability – attention, Eriksen notes [8, p. 71]. Countless marketing companies fight for our time through advertisements on TV, on radio, in newspapers or on billboards.

### **5.3. A broader cultural context**

In the third case, represented by a broader cultural context, there is a dimensional and hypertextual spreading and storing of information. A positive aspect is in global access to information, openness and link to other cultures. A negative aspect of modern communication can be identified in a loss of the sense of history. This loss can constitute a state of cultural idleness or possibly total disorientation [8, p. 111]. Or, as says J. Lohisse [5, p. 12]: *“Nobody knows where he is going if he doesn’t know where he is coming from”*. This applies especially to the young generation, but with the present overall scope of cultural change, it can be applicable to all generations. Without historical memory (knowledge of history, civic education and similar), the very base of democracy may be in danger, M. Bauerlein notes [11, p. 182].

## **6. Conclusions**

In this paper, we used Heidegger’s approach to outline a very close link between time and being and, basing on temporal changes, identify more precisely also existential changes in human’s life. In contrast with Heidegger, we extended this approach to study being shaped by digital media. We based this on assumption that every media, its technological structure, changes our temporal and existential experience. For example, phonetic symbols with a linear structure of characters supported linear experiencing and understanding of the world. With rise of new and modern form of media, especially the Internet, it was changed. The Internet does not support linear time, but through its fast, net-based communication, it favours current time. Hand in hand with this goes also new experiencing of being, enriched by virtual degrees of reality. In this contribution, we analysed three temporal and existential changes. 1. In the first case, it is changeover from linear time to current time, which means also change to virtual existence. 2. In the second case, in combination of online and offline life, it is acceleration of time, visible in accumulation of information, objects and events. 3. In the third case it is changeover from linear spreading and storing information in culture to dimensional and hypertext spreading and storing. All of the three temporal and existential changes bring positive, but also negatives aspects. The positive aspect is in widely available and fast communication of



information, with increase of quality of education and economic growth. In contrast with this, there is a risk of weakening of our relationship to the past and lower degree of knowledge, disintegration of traditional culture and acceleration of time which leads to accumulation of information to the degree when it is not possible to process it in the real time.

Therefore, it is important to reflect especially the negative changes, in other words – switch from the somewhat pre-reflexive and uncertain feeling that tells us something is not quite right to the state of total awareness of the problem. For example, from being aware of the time that is used idly on the Internet to realising addiction, or becoming conscious of stressful accumulation of information that leads to inability to get off the speedy pace of life and similar. If we identify causes of negative temporal and existential changes, then we will be able to fight back meaningfully, for example by ‘turning off’ the Internet or learning to enjoy the ‘slow time’ on a holiday, spending time with children and similar. In this context, personal and also collective information hygiene will be getting more and more important, for example in the frame of media education [15].

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