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## **Masquerade in the blogroom**

### **Effects of anonymity on communication in the new medium**

There can be any doubt of the nature of change that over the past decades has dramatically transformed the way people communicate and interact in the world. In 1990 no people outside the research community in US had accessed to the Internet. According to the latest statistical reports<sup>1</sup> the number of people communicating online by the end of 2008 has risen above 1,4 billion and due to the surge of mobile technology this number is expected to grow exponentially. In Hungary the number of people using the internet in 2008 has risen above 40 % of the population of 10 million. This means that taking into account the Rogers model for the adoption and diffusion of innovations in Hungarian society the innovators and early adopters have been followed by an early majority whose members have decided to use Internet more quickly than the average. Member of the late majority and laggards are still hindered in adopting Internet by scepticism, technological conservatism and traditionalism which make them yet unlikely to adopt this revolutionary way of communication. The critical mass needed for the revolution, however, has emerged.

There are several reasons for the diffusion of Internet in the society including the Hungarian society as well. It allows people to transmit data directly, easily and relatively inexpensively. It creates a network of people which frees communication completely from the constraint of physical circumstances. It makes possible simultaneous production and consumption of diverse contents that are delivered promptly and economically causing profound changes in business, culture, politics and most importantly in interactive human communications.

The popular appeal of Internet in interactive human communication is characterized by its capacity to enlarge the sphere of communication. This sphere is naturally more spacious for those who read and write in languages spoken by hundreds of millions. The chat rooms, newsgroups, electronic mail exchanges, message boards, interactive web 2.0 applications, however, provide members of smaller language communities with ample opportunity to engage in heated political discussions, give and take psychological advices, entertain each

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (as of January 25, 2009).

other or perform simple acts of self-presentation. Moreover, all these communicative transactions take place in a space of anonymity where there is no need to disclose identity. Actors of online social interaction can be completely anonymous, known to one another by pseudonyms or names which are not really identifiable. As opposed to encounters in the usual everyday social environments encounters in the virtual space are characterized by low risks of disclosing identity since no physical cues of identification are accessible. Persons encountering with each other in the virtual sphere are deprived of cues of person perception which give information concerning gender, race, age, occupation, social status last but not least and physical attractiveness. Moreover, authentic identity cannot be communicated by means of web 2.0 communication.

Communication processes in the virtual rooms inhabited by invisible inhabitants can be interpreted in terms of deindividuation or reduced sense of responsibility. Under conditions of invisibility, anonymity and lack of physical contact individuals are deprived of their continuous „me”. This is the opposite which they experience regularly under the conditions of real everyday life where they have to internalize the „me” as the organized set of attitudes of others which controls the forces of their spontaneous „I”<sup>2</sup>. Zimbardo notes that deindividuation weakens people’s ability to restrain their behavior and enhances the tendency to produce antisocial impulsive and disinhibited behavior<sup>3</sup>. Milgram found that in the „remote feedback” condition in which the victim to be punished by electric shock had not been seen and heard, 66 % of the experimental subjects delivered the maximum shock of 440 volts<sup>4</sup>

In a study dealing with attitudes and beliefs concerning social injustice effects of personal questioning and interviewing by phone were compared. The two sets of questions were completely identical. Respondents in both conditions were asked about their attributions of poverty and wealth. Both samples were selected from Budapest representing the population of the capital city. Analysis of the responses has clearly demonstrated difference in style and content of the communication as a function of the method of questioning. People responding in the condition of personal encounter were less intolerant toward the poor and more modest in evaluating the origins of wealth. In contrast, people giving answers by phone were more

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<sup>2</sup> George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934, pp. 173-178.

<sup>3</sup> Philip G. Zimbardo, „The human choice: Individuation, reason, and order versus deindividuation, impulse and chaos”, in W.J. Arnold and Levine, D. (eds.) *1969 Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*, New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

prone to blame the poor themselves and they were keen on looking for causes of that devaluated wealth. As a result of this analysis it was clear that the lack of personal encounter unleashed hostility and aggression among respondents who being hidden in complete anonymity might have felt entitlement to demagoguery.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of the individual self-awareness, and the negative effects of anonymity stemming from Internet based communication are aptly coined by Mc Kenna and Green<sup>6</sup> as „flaming” which is the practice of engaging in an angry, hostile, and often offensive exchange resulting in greater hostility and aggressive responses. According to Grice the success of communication is depending on how messages are delivered in sincere, straightforward fashion leaving no room for redundancy, ambiguity and irrelevance.<sup>7</sup> Curiously enough, in internet-mediated communication anonymous participants violate all rules of communication set by Grice. Paradoxically, actors cannot disclose their identity, even if they would have wanted to unmask themselves since there are no credible cues of identification. Unreliable inferences concerning the identity of the partners can be made based on conversational style but one can never be sure of the reliability of judgment since there is no guarantee of the willingness to be really understood. It is impossible for actors to be certain of their identity.

This study is about texts elicited by a political blog started in the heated days of election campaign of 2006 in Hungary. Only the author of the blog had real name (if anything can be real in cyberspace). The posts have been published daily in a Hungarian blogging platform called „blogter”. The identity of the author was clear from the outset. He was political state secretary taking part in the parliamentary election campaign on behalf of the liberal party in a district where liberals had no chance to win. Moreover there was a scandal which dominated the local campaign. The original candidate was forced to withdraw his candidacy because of being severely inflicted by a slanderous accusation.

My blog initially was set for comments on the events of the campaign. Later, when the campaign had passed the blog was transformed into a place where direct political issues were replaced by public policy problems and intellectual complexities serving as an chamber of

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<sup>5</sup> György Csepli, *Szociálpszichológia* [Social Psychology] Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1997, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> Katelyn Y. A. McKenna and Amie S. Green, „Virtual Group Dynamics”, *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2002, pp. 116-127.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Paul Grice, „Logic and conversation” in Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics* vol. 3, New York: Academic Press, 1975

comments and opinions echoing the blogger's liberal political credo, intellectual leanings and personal knowledge of social psychology.

The term „blogosphere” originates from a joke of Brad L. Graham formulated in September 10 1999.<sup>8</sup> Blogosphere can be considered as an alternative public sphere of unparalleled openness. The circle of participants in the blogosphere is unrestricted and participation is facilitated immensely since blog writing and commenting require minimal technological skill. The many-to-many pattern of communication reminds to the agora in ancient democratic Athens.

The content generated by anonymous users often dominated by negative emotions reflecting criticism. Sadness, anger, distrust and fear are not uncommon.<sup>9</sup> Verbal gangsterism, foolishness, ignorance, superficiality, and egoism are among the accusations. According to Andrew Keen<sup>10</sup> web 2.0 is merely a „vanity press” where the untalented „noble amateurs” go to harvest celebration and fame. Lee Siegel speaks about the „age of the electronic mob” which is in striking contrast with the expectations of digital utopias celebrating wiki knowledge and wikinomics<sup>11</sup>.

The world of political blogs is far from the ideal of deliberative democracy framed by democratic constitutions stressing the importance of freedom of speech. New ethics will be required to regulate the new practices of political communication. Anonymity, inaccountability and irresponsibility breed a special kind of digital natives identified by Sunstein as „polarisation entrepreneurs”.<sup>12</sup>

There is much discussion in the literature whether political blogosphere that is the network encompassed by this term do play or not a significant role in the formation of political

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<sup>8</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogspace#cite\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogspace#cite_note-0) (as of January 25, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Saima Aman and Stan Szpakowicz, „Identifying Expressions of Emotions in Text”, in Vaclav Matousek and Pavel Mautner (eds.) *Text, Speech and Dialogue*, Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today's user-generated media are destroying Our economy, Our culture, and Our values*, USA: Doubleday, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, New York: Penguin Group, 2006. See also: György Csepeli „Wiki Knowledge: Resurgence of the Collective Mind”, in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.) *Towards a Philosophy of Telecommunications Convergence*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

processes<sup>13</sup>. There is no doubt that blogosphere and mediasphere cannot be separated and political blogs have influence on political actors and can shape the content of traditional media following the pattern of one-to-many communication.

As far as my blog concerns contents produced by the „daily me” of the anonymous individuals were ordered along a two by two set of categories. Trying to cope with the contents dimensions of relevance-irrelevance and criticism-affirmation were distinguished. Posts with explicit political messages generally tended to elicit critical-irrelevant responses. Affirmative-relevant responses were infrequent.

The high frequency of critical and irrelevant contents cannot be a surprise since political communication is a means of political struggle. „Polarisation entrepreneurs” creeping into the blogosphere unleashed the passions and hatreds of their „daily me”. Irrelevance was caused most probably by misunderstanding of the intents of the author of the blog. Bloggers expressed critical and irrelevant oppositional views which resisted cognitive complexity. Partisanship and sectarian commitment obscured their cognitive horizons showing a characteristic compulsive character. Right wing political extremist interpretations of political events become self-perpetuating truths demonstrating classic examples of dogmatism and authoritarianism. Verbal vandalism occurred frequently. The borders have vanished between extremist proselytizing and craziness.

„Flaming” in the sphere of political blogs reveals substantial problems connected to the nature of democratic public sphere in general. The extremely low threshold of entry into the web 2.0 communication makes easy to participate in the public sphere reminding the perfect and ideal image of modern democracy elaborated by Rousseau who was convinced that universal participation in discussion of public affairs will serve the interests of the whole political community. According to Rousseau „the constant will of all members of the state is the general will, to which they owe both their citizenship and their freedom. When a law is proposed in the assembly of the people, the individual members are not, by any means, asked whether they approve or disapprove of the proposal, but rather this: Does it or does it not conform to the general will, which is their own? This is the question on which the individual

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<sup>13</sup> Russel Spears, Tom Postmes, Martin Lea and Anka Wolbert, „When Are Net Effects Gross Products? The power of influence and the influence of power in Computer - Mediated Communication”, *The Journal of Social Issues. Special Issue: Social Impact of the Internet*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2002, pp. 91-108.

expresses his opinion when he votes, and it is from the totaling of *such* votes that a declaration of the general will emerges. If then the view contrary my own carries the day, that merely proves that I was mistaken, and that what I took to be the general will was not. Had my private opinion prevailed, I should have accomplished a result different from that which I had willed. And if that had happened I should not have been free.”<sup>14</sup>

The sphere of political blogs can be considered as an experimental laboratory of the birth of the „general will” that demonstrates how savage emotions, negative sentiments, extreme opinions are unleashed in the obscurity of anonymity. Political blogs and comments based on equality of contribution seem to be counterproductive. Equality of expression could be useful provided that all participants are equally competent. This is certainly not the case. Individual members of the political community must be different according to their competence. Differential characteristics causing difference in competence are distributed according to the Gauss-curve. It is generally called the bell curve because the figure of the graph resembles a bell. Machiavelli was probably right observing that „Minds are of three kinds: one is capable of thinking for itself; another is able to understand the thinking of others; and a third can neither think for itself nor understand the thinking of others. The first is of the highest excellence, the second is excellent, and the third is worthless.”<sup>15</sup>

Equality of expression does mean that formation of the general will be dependent of all categories of participants. In case of equality of expression extending to all kind of minds excellent ones will be minority. Members of the cluster identified by Machiavelli as „worthless minds” in the shelter of anonymity might feel entitled to express opinions of low cognitive complexity. Lack of face to face interaction and dissociation of real and virtual identities the likely result will be the emergence of radical extremism and opinion polarisation. As Parsell observed „web 2.0 is tailored to produce polarisation (Parsell, 2008).<sup>16</sup> Rousseau probably was wrong assuming equality of human mind as far as intellectual performance concerns. Inequality determined by nature makes impossible the creation of equality by social means. Cognitive inequality, consequently, makes impossible the equal share of all members of the community in the formation of the general opinion in matters of politics because those who are capable of thinking for itself are in minority against those who

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, newly translated with an introduction by William Kendall, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954, Book Four, Chapter II, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Donno, (editor and translator), *The Prince and Selected Discourses: Machiavelli*, New York: Bantam Books, 1966. p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Mitch Parsell, „Pernicious virtual communities: Identity, polarisation and the Web 2.0”, *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2008.

are able to understand the thinking of others; and can neither think for itself nor understand the thinking of others. Inability to thinking of itself and understained the thinking of others result in the well known polarisation effects in the public sphere including the blogosphere.

Rousseau could not know how wrong is the assumption that in a monarchy mostly blunderers, swindlers, intriguers and generally men with petty talents can get in high offices while in democratic republics voters will elect to important posts enlightened and capable men. Centuries of democracy in countries of the Western world and decades of democracy in countries of Eastern Europe have not produced too much evidence concerning Rousseau's distinction between monarchy and democracy in quality of public choice: „One inherent and unavoidable shortcoming of monarchical government — one because of which it will always stand well below republican government *in the scale of excellence* — we may put as follows: Under republican forms of government, public opinion almost never elevates to important posts any save enlightened and capable men, who subsequently fill them with great distinction. The men who succeed under monarchical forms of government, on the other hand, are usually mischief — makers, cheats intriguers — and petty ones at that: once they are in high office, the meager talents that have won them preferment at court merely enable them to make a public display of their incompetence. Peoples go wrong much less often than princes when it comes to choosing high officials: a man of genuine merit in a *king's* ministry is, indeed, a spectacle almost as rare as a nincompoop at the head of a republican government.”<sup>17</sup>

Politics in Hungary evoke emotions fuelled by frustration stemming from the vicissitudes of transition from state socialism to democracy and market economy.<sup>18</sup> Political blogosphere with its regularly updated post entries and comments in a reverse chronological order makes it possible for people to share endless number of opinions competing for attention of readers. Blogosphere offers a democratic experience that cannot be compared to off line forms of experience. Computer mediated political communication, however, demonstrates the repercussions of the conflict between equality of access and inequality of talents. Communication that has started out between dozen people has the potential to reach large number of readers without having to go through the filtering processes directed and organized by the gate-keepers of the mass media.

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<sup>17</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, Book III, Chap. VI, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> György Csepli, „Transition Blues”, *The Hungarian Quarterly*, vol. XLI, no. 158, 2000.

Thanks to the formal and informal mediating and filtering processes off line patterns of democratic public communication more or less are protected against domination of irrational contents. Anonymous and interactive web 2.0 communication that requires minimal technical skill and has minimal restrictions of entry amplifies the stream of extreme, irrational and cognitively simple views preventing the selection of authoritative and reliable persons and views.

*Demos* communicating in the political blogosphere is disarming itself against the offense of *demagogy* that by wiki means will create a dictatorship over reason and fairness emptying the democratic public sphere.

In order to know more about the nature of political blogosphere including my exposure to the comments produced in my weblog between February 28, 2006 and September 11, 2008<sup>19</sup> more quantitative research will be needed. As a result of such analysis more will be known about the characteristics of audience. Moreover, a thorough analysis will shed light on the nature of reception in communication. Masquerade on the internet makes visible between souls the divide which remains unnoticed in real time real situation encounters.

As times have passed „flaming” tended to occur least frequently in my blog. Vandals, terminators, gangsters disappeared. The question remains to be answered whether the evolution of the new information medium will increase or decrease the quality of the functioning of democracy. Anxiety is, however, not unfounded. I am afraid that the future of anonymous free speech on the net holds out far more risk than promise.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.csepeli.hu/blogarchivum/blog.html> (as of January 25, 2009).