

The future of identity in the information society

A view of sociologist

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Abstract. The concept of identity is a domain of sociological theory. Though there is a continuous frequently criticized polyphony in this field, it proposes a huge variety of tools and scenarios of surveying this issue. In the following abstract we will briefly deduce the main ideas of what sociology has to say about the phenomenon of identity in the contemporary information society. The main thesis we claim in the paper is that the technology is inseparable from the society and the use and development of informational technologies make sense as long as they are enrolled in social patterns and go parallel with all social processes. So, the identity's main features in postmodern information society are amorphous, instability, and availability of wide range of techniques of juggling which are needed to be researched.

1 The future of identity in the information society

“I constantly talk with my computer, who answers back; I am sure you swear at your old car; we are constantly granting mysterious faculties to gremlins inside every conceivable home appliance, not to mention cracks in the concrete belt of our nuclear plants” (*Bruno Latour*).

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Sociological approach in determination of identity allows us to grasp the immutable essence of what stands behind the identity management. At the same time

in our considerations we should combine both narratives of the theory of identity and the realm of information society.

What new does the age of information bring people? Here, we should apply to Daniel Bell [1], a theoretic of the information society, who articulated the main traits of the post-industrial society such as reorientation to innovative science-based industries and the information as new kind of capital. The latter signifies that the structure of power changes: one who possesses knowledge and information, in terms of Bourdieu [2], correspondingly gains the access to the power and administrative spaces. Thus, the primarily shift in technologies gives impact to further changes in social structures. It reveals the ground to assert tellingly the informational society changes, the identities of its subjects in many different ways we are going to unveil.

Before addressing the topic of the abstract, let us get back to the long-lasting discussion about the adequacy of using the term of 'identity'. According to some authors the term doesn't have enough methodological explanatory capacity [4], moreover identity represents frozen stable form of individual self-realization which doesn't correspond to social reality. In this work all the ongoing conclusions are based on the thesis of dynamism of identity, so we admit the possibility of use the term identity as well as process-emphasizing identification as the result of alteration of identity according to the social context.

New conditions of life conditions indubitably influence the person [13]. Informational society by Castles constitutes new networks of power. Together with his idea about network global enterprises, by new authority the author implies information codes and representative images basing the social institutions. Authorities don't fight for material benefits, they fight for the symbols of power in so far as the centres of power are people's minds [6].

Innovative high tech introduces the individual to a new form of interaction widening the opportunities of presenting selves [7]. Individuals are no longer interested in presenting themselves on default mode, but resort to tools available. Once driven by the rules of communities and referent groups, individuals now strive to find diversity and differentiation within the confines of social acceptability. Since social structures are not so stable as they were in traditional societies, the balance between individuality and collectivism is crucial. In other words, not only does individual manage his identity but also designs it choosing from certain alternatives.

To put it simply, what single out the informational society is the growth of technology and its pervasiveness in everyday lives. Digital telecommunications, the Internet, electronic houses, robotics change structures on macro and micro levels. One can get onto personal computer and find information required. Another more knowledgeable will insert the secret password and break into Pentagon or World Bank data bases. Here it is, the diversity of knowledge but retained dependence on the technology.

The key is that the number of alternatives that technology provides us is limited. The individual has illusion he designs the interface, creates and manages the groups of people to communicate with, but still it is restricted by the technological idea initially laid by producers of software, forum moderators or providers. For all mentioned above the ideal typical dichotomy can be derived on the criteria of identity management. In roughly saying it can have rational professional and social prerequisites. The first one, mostly related with hacking and IT crimes, we will farm

out for the professionals of the field. One thing to mention here is that knowledge as main value in the information society is also the main tool for professional identity management. To distinguish member from nonmember you don't need to know him in person. The interaction between individuals is reduced to the knowledge of common information. These are for instance access passwords, in the most sophisticated cases – DNA test or scanning of fingertips and crystalline lens. It reflects the changes of the concept of trust. Trust between individuals now can be technologically proved.

The issue of the trust is essential in this sense, because the concept of trust transforms under the influence of technology: trust between two individuals is mediated by the high-tech object be that a computer or a lie detector. Karin Knorr-Cetina goes further and says in modern society the interaction changes from subject-centered into object-centered [10]. As soon as individuals don't trust each other they are more likely to trust the inanimate object such as computer, and behave via this object, which won't betray, misinform or act irrationally, which display is predictable. That leads to a new form of attachment: person is attached to an object which guarantees his social invulnerability and reduces the losses of social interaction.

Individual in late modern society operates as anonymous actor. In the conditions of anonymity, it is easy for the individual to juggle identities for gaining certain goals. Geographical, social, cultural and virtual mobility let diverse masks be put on and taken off. The phenomenon of transnationalism indicates how people operate their national identities being in different lands. Sex change operations now are possible to be carried out in a second with the help of the Internet. So every man can experience what it is like to be a woman in a chatroom.

The issue of anonymity is closely linked with a matter of authenticity. Since the individual acts as anonymous, he can redefine his authenticity. There can be a contradiction between multiple identities of one individual and his genuine self, which can be only one. "Because identity-claims are not subject to a common measure, they cannot be negotiated away in the same way as interests; only I can shape and re-shape who I am" [8]. This point takes us back to Goffman with his front scene and background theatre performance. Authenticity of the individual hides nowhere but on the background of his social interactions while he can perform great variety of social roles in front of the public.

Nowadays there is a great mass culture industry of entertainment built on the idea of false identity. Starting from travesty shows to erotic video conferences in real time: everything is to amuse, to catch someone's eyes, to fascinate of non-banality and, finally, to be paid.

In many cases the presentation of one or another identity is managed by the mechanism of social inclusion-exclusion. In other words, aspiring to become a member of social group individual is supposed to 'switch on' the identity inherent for all other members the group. For successful interaction one should have information about features of the identity supposed to be representing and apply it in practice. As the specific of information society, fluctuation and instability of social structures, it's quite easy for the individual to join or come out of some social spaces. It is also relevant to the virtual communities which tend to be a substitute for face-to-

face communication. So, information society establishes the mechanism of inclusion-exclusion per se.

Besides managing his own identity the individual is enabled to define his communication and the flows of information he is engaged in. The most suitable metaphor to outline the jest of the matter is 'Caller ID', borrowed from the work of Sherry Turkle [14]. The individual is up to decide simply whether to answer the phone call or not, to join group or social club or not, merely to watch the evening news or not. So he controls the flows of information and, on the other hand, becomes dependable on that flows.

Choosing to put on a new identity, what to conceal and what to reveal, individual stays under a delusion he rules it. But getting deeper in the interaction he could never stop wearing his make-believe identity and is manipulated by it. We are labeling ourselves for many different reasons, either to feel ourselves a part of some other social organism or to be special and individual. Denying overstated thesis of Brzezinski about technotronic society [5] we still should stress that sometimes our identification serves us wrong and instead of some freedom we get tied up with our labeled self.

Information society has born the idea of a world as global village [12], thus the distances between its inhabitants relatively shrink. Remote job, freelance, virtual stock exchange operations, electronic purses, online purchasing, possibility of listening to Greek local news being in Lima et cetera; all these redefine people's attitude to distance and relativity of private and public spaces.

Balance between privacy and public space has shifted. Privacy is not understood now as only physical presence within touching distance as well as not fencing off the social world outside by some mental or material barriers. The tough division between man's publicity and woman's privacy as it used to be typical for traditional societies [3] is floating to non-existence. The paradox of late modernity is that individual can stay private in public, and be public in his privacy. The borders of intimacy are expanding through the networks which are initially technologically compounded and, then, socially. Intimacy is mediated by objects, devices which are to let people feel cohesiveness being far away from their significant others.

As mentioned above, the possibilities of managing the identity which the technology allows us can be seen in many different ways. But modern social processes shouldn't be seen as determined by the technology because the technology is the product of the society. And as we claim in this paper, technology is embedded in social context. On a microlevel it is a tool which is used by an individual to remodel his vision of self. On the one hand, individual designs his identity via the alternatives given by technology. But while he does so consciously he won't turn into a cyborg in terms of Donna Harraway [9] since he is able to control it and separates self from the technology. On the other hand, how one of my informants mentioned, how less we can without it! Technology becomes enrooted in everyday life and humans can hardly say no to it. As Daniel Ust wrote the one of the feature of nowadays life was techno-transcendence [15] which in practical sense is used to overcome, our limits. This can be interpreted according to many cases, geographical, linguistic, epistemic, biological, cultural limits which can be exceeded due to the certain technological mechanisms. They are supposed to widen our horizons and to make our communication nonproblematic. But there is a reverse of this medal: as we

have those technological tools, we are getting attached to them. We define ourselves in the light of technology as far as it gives us supplementary social spaces for identification of self we could never have without it.

The identity in the information society is also unstable as we tried to reveal in the first part of the paper. Technology gives individual a lot of opportunities to display his identity in many variable forms. The flexibility, amorphous and instability of identity, its multiple dimension is the state of things in contemporary information society. While individual plays with different identity, he gets into the routine of dependency of his choice. Thus we affirm that identification of such nature is the product of the information society itself. The changes in structure of interaction between individuals by the impact of the informational revolution lead to the reconsiderations of social spaces and intimacy conceptions, the redefinition of authenticity and self.

Getting back to a very beginning of the paper, the quotation of Bruno Latour [11] we are to highlight that wherever individual is he tries to “install” social relationships even with an inanimate object. Thus the technology will be always saturated with sociality and will serve the social and cultural needs of individuals.

Ultimately, the understanding of the identity in technological era derives from the mechanisms of social identification itself. The use of all inventions in the information society makes sense as long they are enrolled in the patterns of social interaction. Thus, the research on technology should be most of all connected with the research of the society which will apply the technology in its field. And this is where both IT engineers and researchers on social sciences have a lot to say to each other

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