

Young People in Digital Environments: A Theoretical Review of Disinformation, Online Communication, and Media Literacy

Młodzi ludzie w środowisku cyfrowym: teoretyczna analiza dezinformacji, komunikacji internetowej i kompetencji medialnych

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Abstract: This article provides a theoretical reflection on the impact of digitalization, disinformation, and contemporary forms of communication on the functioning of the younger generation who live at the fluid boundary between the real and digital worlds. It demonstrates that digitalization is not merely a technological process but a multidimensional social transformation, which affects how we think, communicate, and construct reality. The objective of this study is to present selected processes characteristic of the information society and their consequences for the ways in which young people process information, communicate, and build social relationships. The analysis was conducted on the basis of the review of the relevant literature. The first part of the article discusses the development of the concept of the information society, highlighting the importance of information and communication technologies as well as networkedness as the fundamental framework of contemporary social relations. Subsequently, the study presents the phenomena of information overload and the development of Big Data as factors influencing individuals' functioning in the digital environment. The subsequent part focuses on the issue of disinformation, fake news, and mechanisms of information manipulation, including phenomena such as echo chambers, information bubbles, and the algorithmization of content. It is indicated that the contemporary digital environment fosters the fragmentation of communication and hinders the verification of information. The analysis also addresses the specificity of online communication, including its hybrid and interactive nature, as well as the consequences of the reduction of communication cues characteristic of the offline world. In the part devoted to the younger generation, attention is drawn to the significance of the Internet as an environment of social life and a space for identity formation. The results of the analysis indicate that young people function in an information environment characterized by high dynamics and complexity, which requires the development of media literacy, critical thinking, and conscious digital education aimed at fostering responsible participation in online communication.

Keywords: youth, Internet, manipulation, disinformation, communication

Abstrakt: Artykuł podejmuje teoretyczną refleksję na temat wpływu cyfryzacji, dezinformacji oraz współczesnych form komunikacji na funkcjonowanie młodego pokolenia, które żyje w obszarze płynnego pogranicza świata realnego i cyfrowego. Wskazuje, że cyfryzacja to nie tylko proces technologiczny, lecz także wielowymiarowa transformacja społeczna, wpływająca na sposób myślenia, komunikowania się i konstruowania rzeczywistości. Założeniem opracowania jest przedstawienie wybranych procesów charakterystycznych dla społeczeństwa informacyjnego oraz ich konsekwencji dla sposobów, w jakie młodzież przetwarza informacje, komunikuje się i buduje relacje społeczne. Analiza została przeprowadzona na podstawie przeglądu literatury przedmiotu. W pierwszej części artykułu omówiono rozwój koncepcji społeczeństwa informacyjnego, wskazując na znaczenie technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych oraz sieciowości jako podstawowej struktury współczesnych relacji społecznych. Następnie przedstawiono zjawisko nadmiaru informacji oraz rozwój Big Data jako czynniki wpływające na funkcjonowanie jednostek w środowisku cyfrowym. Kolejna część pracy koncentruje się na problematyce dezinformacji, fake newsów oraz mechanizmów manipulacji informacyjnej, w tym zjawiskach takich jak echo chambers, bańki informacyjne czy algorytmizacja treści. Wskazano, że współczesne środowisko cyfrowe sprzyja fragmentaryzacji przekazu i utrudnia weryfikację informacji. Analizie poddano także



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specyfikę komunikacji internetowej, obejmującą jej hybrydowy i interaktywny charakter oraz konsekwencje redukcji sygnałów komunikacji w świecie offline. W części dotyczącej młodego pokolenia zwrócono uwagę na znaczenie Internetu jako środowiska życia społecznego i przestrzeni kształtowania tożsamości. Wyniki analizy wskazują, że młodzież funkcjonuje w środowisku informacyjnym o wysokiej dynamice i złożoności, co wymaga rozwijania kompetencji medialnych, krytycznego myślenia oraz świadomej edukacji cyfrowej ukierunkowanej na odpowiedzialne uczestnictwo w komunikacji online.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, Internet, manipulacja, dezinformacja, komunikacja

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies function in the conditions of dynamic transformation in which the key role is played by information and the technologies of its processing and distribution. This process leads to fundamental changes in the organization of social life, the ways interpersonal relationships are formed and communication is conducted. These changes have been extensively described in the relevant literature. With the development of information and communication technologies, the intensification of data flow can be observed. This leads to phenomena such as information overload, fragmentation of communication, and the growing dependence of individuals on digital systems. Consequently, the contemporary information environment is becoming increasingly complex and more difficult to interpret.

The functioning of the younger generation, which grow up and form their identity under the constant presence of digital technologies, becomes particularly important. The phenomenon of overlapping offline and online spaces is also significant. Young Internet users become participants in a communicative environment which, while providing access to knowledge, also fosters the emergence of disinformation and disruptions in the flow of information.

The objective of this article is to provide a theoretical analysis of selected phenomena of digitalization, disinformation, and contemporary forms of communication in the context of the functioning of the younger generation in the digital environment. The article is a review in nature, based on a literature analysis, and attempts to present selected theoretical approaches and identify key issues related to individuals' functioning in the information space.

1. DIGITALIZATION

The contemporary process of digitalization has its conceptual roots in earlier debates on the emergence of the information society. The concept of the information society was developed to describe a new paradigm of social organization in which information, knowledge, and communication technologies increasingly replaced industrial production as the principal factors shaping social and economic structures.

Over the following decades, this transformation has developed into a condition in which digital networks permeate an increasing number of areas of everyday life, contributing to the coexistence and mutual interpenetration of offline and online modes of functioning. Modern societies have thus undergone a fundamental shift from predominantly industrial structures towards information- and network-based forms of social organization.

This complex and multidimensional process has been widely described in the literature as a transition towards the information society (Webster 2006). At its core lies the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT), which has transformed not only the production and distribution of knowledge but also fundamental social, economic, and cultural relations. As a consequence, it has also significantly affected how individuals function within society.

Manuel Castells, one of the leading theoreticians of the phenomenon, claims that a key feature of the new social formation is the emergence of a networked social structure in which the flow of information becomes the dominant factor in organizing social life (Castells 2007, 44). However, the information society is not merely a technological consequence of progress but also entails profound axiological and institutional transformations. Frank Webster points out that the information society is characterized not so much by the presence of information as by its central role in economics, politics, education, and everyday social practices (Webster 2006, 45–56).

These changes necessitate a renewed analysis of concepts such as power, identity, work, and citizenship, which undergo significant reevaluation in the information context. The transition to a post-industrial society is accompanied by the growing importance of the service sector and knowledge-based production, which lays the foundation for further transformation

towards the information society. This transformation is not homogeneous; it proceeds unevenly and is shaped by local cultural, economic, and political conditions. At the same time, its pace is exceptionally rapid.

These transformations raise important questions about how information and technology shape new models of social functioning, influence groups and communities, and ultimately affect individuals. These questions acquire particular significance in relation to the younger generation, which operates at the intersection of offline and online environments, where communication, digitalization, and disinformation increasingly intersect in everyday experience.

The literature repeatedly emphasizes that digitalization is not solely a technological phenomenon but a multidimensional transformation of social structures that affects ways of thinking, communicating, and constructing reality (Latour 2011, 102–109).

A fundamental characteristic of the contemporary digital world is its high degree of variability and the unprecedented dynamics of change, unmatched in any previous historical period. At this point, it is worth referring to the findings by Łukasz Tomczyk, which describe the development of information competencies. “According to data from LocaliQ, within a single minute on the Internet more than 231 million emails are sent, 6 million people make online purchases, the Google search engine processes 6 million user queries, 44 million Facebook users participate in live broadcasts, 350,000 posts are created on the X platform, 66,000 photos are uploaded to Instagram, and 625 million videos are viewed on TikTok” (Tomczyk 2024, 142). Information, which constitutes the basic building block of the Internet, is constantly transmitted, modified, and replicated, making the contemporary Internet evolve at a pace significantly faster than that of humans can adapt to. The development of information and communication technologies outpaces the adaptive capacities of individuals and social institutions, leading to tension between the pace of technological change and society’s ability to critically understand and regulate it (Webster 2006, 8). Although the Internet has transformed the world, it is itself subject to continuous change, and the dynamics of these changes make it hybrid and unpredictable. As a society, we are unable to keep pace with these changes—not only in intergenerational terms, but often also within a single generation.

With the rapid increase of information, the concept of Big Data emerges—referring to massive datasets, the scale, variety, and velocity of which exceed the capabilities of traditional processing methods. These data are characterized by the so-called three “Vs” (volume, variety, velocity), and their sources include the Internet, social media, IoT devices, location systems, smartphones, and transaction records (Kwietniewski 2022). In the context of an information society, Big Data becomes a new raw material—an analytical resource that enables more accurate decision-making, trend prediction, and modeling of complex social, economic, and cultural phenomena. Paradoxically, although massive datasets constitute a potential source of knowledge and a foundation for rational decisions, their abundance can also lead to information chaos. When information flows continuously, often inconsistently, and is difficult to verify, the risk of disinformation increases—both unintentional, arising from misinterpretation of data, and deliberate, used as a tool of manipulation.

In the era of *Big Data*, information loses its former status as an assumed objective truth and increasingly becomes an element in the struggle for influence—subjected to selection, transformation, and contextualization, and often used to reinforce specific narratives. In this sense, information—although seemingly accessible and ubiquitous—does not necessarily contribute to a better understanding of the world. On the contrary, it can lead to a disinformation noise in which it is difficult to distinguish knowledge from opinion, and fact from manipulation. In the absence of appropriate critical thinking tools and media education, individuals are exposed to conflicting messages, which fosters social polarization and undermines trust in institutions and experts. In the digital world, even the role of experts is difficult to define, as their authority transcends the traditional frameworks known in the virtual realm. Thus, authors become readers, readers become authors, and anyone can assume the role of an expert, becoming part of an online kaleidoscope that is dynamic, ambiguous, and difficult to organize (Jenkins 2006, 208–210).

2. COMMUNICATION

When discussing the digital world, we deal with a reality that is largely grounded in communication. In its initial forms, online communication was predominantly textual and embedded in the conventions of traditional written correspondence. However, over time it has

undergone a dynamic transformation. Today, it functions as a hybrid phenomenon that integrates multiple communicative modalities (text, image, sound, and video) which significantly reshapes both the structure of messages and the nature of interpersonal relationships in which it is employed.

Online communication has a distinctive nature, and within its framework a number of features that aim to capture its specificity can be identified. Unlike traditional forms of communication, where communication was most often unidirectional—from the sender to the receiver—the Internet enables dynamic, interactive, and often synchronous exchange of information, as well as interchangeability of these functions. Users cease to be merely passive consumers of content and instead become active co-creators, commentators, and participants in the dialogue. At times, however, they remain observers for extended periods, which is associated with the asynchronicity of communication and, in a broader context, also with the nonlinearity that is common on the Internet. This non-linearity concerns many issues related to functioning in the Internet environment: it refers both to time, which often loses its three-temporal features in the perception of users, and to relationships which, more often than in the offline world, tend to be interrupted, renewed, and treated as incidental yet profound (Wojtkowiak 2021).

Despite the multiplicity of analyses of the Internet as an environment of co-functioning and communication, the literature on the subject indicates that online communication possesses a number of constitutive features that together constitute its unique profile.

Above all, communication on the Internet is negotiable and uncontrolled, which means that the sender does not retain full control over the interpretation and subsequent circulation of content, while the message itself is subject to constant transformation and reinterpretation by recipients.

Secondly, this form of communication is free from time and space constraints, which makes interaction possible between users located anywhere in the world and at any time. Online communication is sometimes interpreted as the one conducted in real time and as asynchronous; however, it should be noted that such an interpretation constitutes a significant narrowing of the concept which, given the diversity of its characteristics, may be regarded as an analytical overreach. Reducing the description of online communication to issues of temporality alone

overlooks a number of other dimensions: mediality, hybridity, scalability, its social nature, and, above all, its embeddedness in networks of relationships and algorithmic filtering mechanisms.

Another characteristic of online communication is hypertextuality, which allows messages to be enriched with links, multimedia, and additional contexts, which, in turn, affects the way information is perceived and processed. Navigating this network of links often presents a dilemma, particularly when considering issues such as data reliability and user security.

Online communication is also hyper-public, meaning that the boundaries between what is private and what is public become blurred, and content posted online can potentially reach an unlimited audience. Importantly, information in the digital space not only reaches a wide audience but is also subject to immediate response—it can be commented on, shared, rated, and even modified. Recipients thus become active participants in the communicative process, co-creating messages and influencing their further dissemination. Such interactivity and responsiveness establish a new quality of relationships between the sender and the receiver, based on feedback, engagement, and the dynamic exchange of content. As a result, we encounter a phenomenon known as two-way mass communication, which constitutes one of the key distinguishing features of communication in the era of the information society (Loglia and Bowers 2016).

Differences between communication and information transmission in the offline and online worlds have been repeatedly examined in the literature on psychology and media. Communication in the digital environment is characterized by specific properties that distinguish it from traditional face-to-face interaction. First and foremost, there is a reduction in nonverbal cues. As previously noted, online communication is often asynchronous, allowing for delayed responses and content editing, which contrasts with the natural pace of direct conversation. Anonymity and interpersonal distance also play a significant role, contributing to the phenomenon of disinhibition in the digital environment. Internet users often take advantage of controlled self-presentation, selectively disclosing information about themselves, which carries the risk of intensifying interpersonal relationships (Walther and Whitty 2020). Another difference is the altered pace and dynamics of interaction, as well as the impact of technology on the perception of intimacy. Finally, attention should be paid to changes in emotional

responses and other forms of message reception due to the absence of nonverbal cues and immediate social regulation.

In the context of this topic, it should be recognized that young Internet users occupy a particular position. The characteristics of young people's emotional communication, such as the need for authenticity, self-expression, intense emotional experiences, and high emotional availability, mean that, on the one hand, they navigate the digital communication space with ease and proficiency (for them, this environment is largely more natural than for previous generations), but on the other hand, they are exposed to the risk of emotional overload, misunderstanding, or hurt. What is more, they often become the authors of content that harms others.

3. DISINFORMATION

The intensity of the digital circulation of information, while on the one hand opening new spaces for knowledge, dialogue, and innovation, on the other, provides fertile ground for the phenomenon of disinformation. It should be remembered, however, that disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Basically, it has accompanied humanity since the emergence of the public sphere. What is unprecedented today, however, is its scale and reach. In the past, false information spread relatively slowly, constrained by traditional media channels and editorial oversight mechanisms. The digital revolution, the Internet, and especially the rise of social media have completely transformed this landscape: today, any Internet user can become a content broadcaster, regardless of the quality, intention, or reliability of the source. Disinformation, therefore, is not solely the result of deliberate action, but also a consequence of the very logic of the digital space—its abundance, fragmentation, emotionalization of messages, and lack of time for reflection. In this context, false or manipulated content can spread virally, often faster than truthful information, shaping users' opinions, attitudes, and decisions.

The process of disinformation has been present since information transmission—a process for which the Internet was created—through the expansion of the digital universe, up to the present times, in which the digital universe occupies a substantial portion of reality experienced offline. The very fact that we use the term “offline” highlights how much of human

activity is now situated within digitality. Janusz Morbitzer, discussing this phenomenon, refers to a “spectacular expansion for various forms of activity” (Morbitzer 2016, 68). It is widely recognized that the Internet can serve as an environment conducive to disinformation due to the sheer abundance of information, which itself becomes problematic. The process of collecting, sorting, processing, and summarizing information has been radically shortened and simplified by the digital world (Furman 2018, 206). The selectivity of information choice, and the related need for verification, takes a back seat in the face of the deluge of news—including fake news—that floods the Internet. Sławomir Rębisz writes: “It must also be remembered that the information environment carries serious risks associated with disinformation, fake news, and information manipulation. Disinformation, that is, the deliberate dissemination of false information with the aim of misleading, creates a distorted view of the world, leading to erroneous decisions and false beliefs. Fake news, in turn, influences public opinion, political decisions, and social moods, destabilizing democratic processes” (Rębisz 2024, 30). It should also be remembered that navigating the digital environment itself is not only about using information, but also about leaving information about oneself. Allegorically speaking, this is where the bipolar nature of the world we create and inhabit comes into play. Creating this world is not merely the fluid transition between the roles of the author and the receiver, with the boundaries of both still unsettled, but also the constant presence in the field of digital observation. As Piotr Łuczuk writes: “We live in the era of the Internet, and every piece of information we leave online, every word, every movement is tracked by millions of algorithms that construct our digital profile and, in turn, determine what we see, who we communicate with, what we read, and what decisions we make” (Łuczuk 2024, 58-59).

In the face of the increasing dynamics of information circulation and the proliferation of content of varying reliability, it becomes essential to systematically develop competencies in terms of critical analysis and verification of information sources. Unfortunately, proficiency in using the Internet does not necessarily coincide with greater awareness of the need for education in this area.

At this point, it is worth mentioning two phenomena: the *echo chamber* effect and filter bubbles. While these phenomena may appear quite similar in everyday understanding, they are

slightly different. In the context of the risk of disinformation implied by the nature of the Internet, they warrant closer examination.

Echo chambers (called “echo chambers” or isolated information environments in Polish) are characterized by a situation in which individuals primarily communicate with those sharing similar views, which leads to the reinforcement and consolidation of specific beliefs. This mechanism relies on selective exposure to information sources and the confirmation of one’s own judgments, resulting in reduced exposure to counterfactual arguments and alternative perspectives. Consequently, *echo chambers* foster social polarization and hinder rational public debate. They also have a secondary effect, namely a decline in the practice of genuine dialogue, listening to opponents, and openness to opposing views.

Filter bubbles, on the other hand, refer to the algorithmic filtering of content employed by digital platforms and social media. These algorithms personalize the content based on users’ prior behavior, preferences, and browsing history, resulting in the selective exposure of information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs. In contrast to *echo chambers*, where isolation arises from active social selection, filter bubbles are generated by automated technological processes that may not be consciously controlled by users.

Obviously, when discussing forms of manipulation on the Internet, it is impossible to omit those that are used intentionally—for example, to expand reach or implement marketing strategies. It is worth mentioning *clickbait*, which operates on the principle of baiting, with the primary goal of generating increased traffic in specific online locations. This phenomenon indirectly fosters the popularity of not only specific products but also certain behavior, and, in the longer term, can influence individuals’ opinions and judgments. An almost prevalent phenomenon in the digital space is so-called *malinformation*—deliberately disseminated harmful or malicious content intended to cause damage or harm to specific individuals or groups. Another example is *deepfake* technology, based on advanced image processing (including video material), used to generate false content. Like other forms of manipulation mentioned above, it can lead to disinformation, reputational damage, and direct harm to individuals.

Iwona Zielińska, while categorizing forms of manipulation present on the Internet, identifies two principal areas of this phenomenon. First, she distinguishes the forms of

manipulation arising from information disorder, understood as the deliberate and organized use of diverse communication strategies and tools aimed at influencing users' behavior, opinions, decisions, or emotions. Such actions often take subtle forms, operating at the intersection of disinformation, persuasion, and social engineering. They are therefore relatively difficult to detect and pose a significant challenge to preventive measures for functioning safely online.

The other category consists of *fake news* (previously mentioned), which represent one of the most conspicuous tools of informational manipulation. Within this category, Zielińska identifies, among others, automated bots, Internet trolls, and the phenomenon of deepfake—digitally generated or manipulated images and video recordings designed to mislead recipients through suggestive and realistically appearing visual forgeries (Zielińska 2024, 73–74).

Both groups—manipulations arising from information chaos as well as actions based on the dissemination of false content—fit within the broader context of disinformation in the digital space, which constitutes one of the greatest challenges for contemporary online communication and the information society.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that manipulation on the Internet encompasses two constitutive features of this environment. The first is the fact that the Internet constitutes a powerful technological tool which, due to its dynamic nature, often makes it difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. The other is the intentionality of human action, which utilizes this technology. The line of indirect influence on the individual is communication, serving as the binding element of the Internet and forming the basis of the existence of the digital environment.

4. YOUTH

When speaking about online communication in the context of young people, it is necessary (assuming the perspective that, for them, it is a largely appropriated and natural form of communication) to note that it possesses distinctive features as a specific field for perceiving relationality and the other person. As early as twenty years ago, Patricia Wallace (2001) wrote about the specificity of communication and bonds on the Internet, emphasizing that the lack of physical contact with another person often results in a distorted image of both the individual themselves and the relationship. The author also referred to the specificity of intimacy online,

pointing to anonymity, tolerance, openness, variability, and the possibility of escapist behavior. It should be emphasized, however, that with the avalanche-like growth in the popularity of various forms of online communication, today (unlike in 2001, when Wallace published her study) it has become a permanent part of the canon of interpersonal and social contact, of variously understood forms of “being together.” At the beginning of the 21st century, online communication had a somewhat peripheral nature; it was treated as a type of supplement and had an operational nature. Nowadays, to a large extent (especially for young people), it is an integral part of everyday life and even, which may seem disturbing, a form of communication that is more popular and more desired than relationships accompanied by physical presence.

It is worth emphasizing that, in the context of the subject matter under consideration, the Internet can be treated as both a tool and environment of communication. On the one hand, young people use digital technologies efficiently, demonstrating proficiency in operating applications, communication platforms, and social media—often in contrast to the competencies of adults (including parents, caregivers, and teachers), who frequently struggle to keep up with the dynamic changes of the digital world. On the other hand, the Internet serves young people as a social environment of life, in which they build relationships, shape their identities, engage in peer interactions, and participate in a variety of cultural practices. It is a highly diverse environment and, notably, a non-physical one, which is difficult for adults to fully grasp or understand.

From a psychological perspective, the online space is becoming an important area for the construction of the “self” and for exploring social roles—especially during adolescence, when the need for affiliation, self-definition, and social recognition becomes particularly significant. On the other hand, pedagogy perceives it as both as a source of educational and socializing potential and an area requiring critical reflection and the conscious development of digital and relational competencies. The Internet is therefore not merely a channel for the transmission of information, but also an active educational and developmental context in which young people learn to function as participants in social life—often detached from, or even independent of, traditional institutions and structures.

In recent years, we have been witnessing an extremely dynamic phenomenon of shifting activities into e-reality, with all the consequences this entails. The theory that the Internet is a

world of communication that is more intense than communication in the real world is confirmed by the research. An example can be a study by Nelli Lyyra and her team, which showed, among others, that adolescents consider online communication about sensitive topics to be more comfortable. The preference for sharing personal content online and for communicating with online friends (and strangers) about issues that are difficult and personal for young people is fairly common. What is disturbing is that the preferential factor for using the Internet as a communication tool and environment is that the higher the level of activity and the search for communication with others the higher the feeling of loneliness. (Lyyra et al. 2022) This phenomenon seems quite disturbing considering the risk of abuse.

When discussing communication on the Internet, it is impossible not to mention lying, which takes on a particular form in this context and is often normalized. Lying constitutes an integral element of communication in the online environment; it is not a marginal phenomenon, but rather a widespread and socially acceptable in many contexts. The specific nature of the digital medium—particularly the lack of physical presence, the possibility of anonymizing the sender, asynchronicity of communication, multiplicity of identities, and ease of manipulating messages—creates conditions conducive to both intentional deception and subtle forms of reality distortion (such as selective self-presentation).

From the user's perspective, the features of the online environment seemingly reduce the psychological costs of lying, weakening norms of interpersonal responsibility and decreasing the immediate availability of feedback, which in face-to-face communication serves a regulatory function and often carries ethical implications. Moreover, in many digital spaces—particularly on social media—lying, or deviating from the truth, becomes not only tolerated but even functional, serving purposes such as self-promotion, building influence, or manipulating the opinions of others.

Consequently, lying on the Internet ceases to be unambiguously deviant behavior—it gains the status of a normalized element of communicative practice, raising significant questions about the boundaries of authenticity, trust, and responsibility in the digital space. Moreover, disinformation and deliberate deviations from the truth undergo a process of normalization, often accompanied by social permissiveness and a lack of reaction. Deviating from the truth, or even intentionally misleading others—a phenomenon increasingly extending

not only to the external world but also to ourselves—becomes a form of creating an alternative reality. This, in turn, provides the illusion of control and greater influence over the surrounding reality. The virtual world—vivid, limitless, accessible at the touch of a button, and dismissible with a single click—is a good environment for fulfilling the need for escapist egoism. It is worth emphasizing that for young people, it is a world of entertainment, where the boundless realms of games and colorful imagery are directed as much toward satisfying needs as well as the people who are present there.

Therefore, this raises the question: was life in the real world so difficult for young people? Do they escape into virtuality because it is simpler? Or perhaps because it is malleable—because they can create it with extraordinary boldness? (Boldly, because they are not burdened by the consequences that, in the real world, could potentially prove troublesome.) Because they can see the effects of the changes they make, and in the case of difficulties, have a fallback to retreat to. Only... that fallback becomes the real world, and then we can speak of a rather obvious reversal and polarization of priorities. At this point, we touch the area of axiology and recognize the necessity of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with young people about values.

When referring to the classics, one could say that the disintegration of personality described by McLuhan (2004) and the simulacra of Baudrillard intersect at a common point: lying. McLuhan, when writing about the disintegration of personality, claimed that the medium affects society more than the content it conveys (which is especially disturbing considering that the author applies the concept of extensions referring to a situation in which contemporary humans change and use tools that, figuratively speaking, also change them). It may be worth asking whether the modern human can live without such an extension.

The Internet and virtual reality are extensions of consciousness, senses, and presence — they allow us to be “somewhere else” without physically moving. This is a tempting offer, but also an illusion, since objectively it does not change an individual’s position in the real world. We are still here and now, physically present; our situation, location, and position remain objectively unchanged. We do not relocate our bodies, but our attention, allegorically speaking: our mind. In the context of the virtual world, this means that, for example, social media or virtual reality change the way we think, act, and build relationships—regardless of what exactly

we communicate through them and irrespective of how much we use deception. Initially, this may be small—a subtle omission, a slight filtering of the messages we convey—but gradually it can become bolder. Considering that we are not only receivers but also creators of content, the filter of online irresponsibility allows us to partially sidestep responsibility for our words.

On the other hand, users seem to push to the margins of their memory the fact that “what’s on the Internet never disappears.” It could have been an online troll or a “malicious” instance of ChatGPT. Meanwhile, online hate is flourishing, but fueled by people through mockery and insults, for which there is no cure, only an “explanation.”

The possibility of defending oneself is limited. Obviously, it is possible to expose what is unjustified. One can engage in discussions and even win with a well-chosen argument. But: if the Internet is a place for communication, should it also be a stage for dramas that are often their consequence? In the face of these phenomena, it becomes essential to educate young people in the spirit of responsibility for their own words and actions, as well as to counteract the tendency to retreat into rationalizations, which often serve to justify inappropriate behavior in the digital space.

Education for online communication is actually preparation for social life in a form that provides an opportunity to uphold the basic principles of functioning within a group. Essentially, it is largely based on cultivating respect. Young people should be systematically taught to take responsibility for their words, including in the online space, where the apparent lack of direct contact can encourage underestimating the power and impact of a message. It is necessary to raise awareness of the potential consequences of one’s statements—both for other recipients and for themselves—because the phenomenon of emotional numbness to the effects of online communication can lead to unintended harm, loss of trust, or deterioration of interpersonal relationships. However, it seems equally important to strengthen the foundational values of education: distinguishing truth from falsehoods, refusing to propagate the latter, and moving away from treating participants in online communication as objects. A conscious and reflective approach to digital communication forms the foundation for building a responsible culture of dialogue, which the younger generation must learn in order to participate effectively and ethically in society—not only in the informational dimension.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The analysis presented leads to the conclusion that the functioning of the younger generation in the digital environment requires not only technological adaptation but, above all, in-depth pedagogical reflection. Digital reality shapes the ways of learning about the world, building social relationships, constructing identity, and making decisions; however, it does not constitute a neutral developmental context. In this sense, education cannot be limited to the transmission of instrumental knowledge but should include the systematic preparation of young people for critical, responsible, and reflective participation in the digital environment, as well as in the world beyond it.

The first significant pedagogical implication is the need for the consistent development of media and information competences, understood not merely as technical proficiency but as the ability to critically analyze content, assess the credibility of sources, recognize mechanisms of manipulation, and consciously manage information overload. In the conditions of the information society, the ability to select, verify, and interpret data becomes one of the key civic competencies, determining an individual's cognitive autonomy and (consequently) their resilience to disinformation.

Another area of pedagogical implications concerns the need to incorporate reflection on the algorithmic nature of contemporary digital media into educational practice. Raising young people's awareness of the existence of filter bubbles, content personalization mechanisms, and the logic of social media platform operation enables a type of demystification of the apparent neutrality of technology. Education in this area should foster the development of cognitive openness, the ability to confront one's own beliefs with alternative perspectives, and the conscious pursuit of diverse sources of information, thereby providing a counterbalance to both echo chambers and algorithmic information isolation.

An important task of pedagogy in the context of digital communication is also the development of social and emotional competencies. The specificity of online communication—its hyper-public nature, reduction of nonverbal cues, asynchronicity, and the possibility of anonymous self-presentation—fosters both the intensification of relationships and their superficiality, and at times also the escalation of conflicts and harmful behavior. For this reason,

it becomes essential to systematically support young people in developing empathy, responsibility for one's words, the ability to anticipate the consequences of one's communicative actions, and the skills necessary to conduct dialogue grounded in respect and attentiveness to others. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that this endeavor remains traditional and universal in its significance.

Another pedagogical premise is the need to redefine the role of the teacher and educator in the digital environment. In conditions in which access to information is nearly unlimited, the role of the educator no longer consists solely in the transmission of knowledge but increasingly involves acting as a guide, moderator, and mentor. The task of the educator becomes the creation of spaces for reflection, posing problem-based questions, initiating discussion, and supporting students in constructing meanings independently. Such a perspective fosters the strengthening of young people's cognitive autonomy.

The significance of pedagogical prevention with regard to digital safety and psychosocial well-being must also not be overlooked. Constant presence in the digital space, permanent visibility, and communicative pressure may lead to emotional overload, a reduced sense of agency, or difficulties in emotional regulation. Education should therefore address issues related to digital hygiene, the boundaries of online presence, as well as reflection on the relationship between the virtual world and offline experience.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the pedagogical implications of disinformation, manipulation, and the specific nature of online communication constitute challenges that cannot be addressed in a fragmented manner. They require long-term educational efforts that integrate the development of cognitive, social, and ethical competencies, while also taking into account the dynamic and ambiguous nature of the contemporary digital world.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary civilization, shaped by the dynamic development of technology and globalization, is in a constant process of transformation, the essential foundation of which is communication and the flow of information. Communication, as a fundamental mechanism enabling the exchange of thoughts, ideas, and knowledge, constitutes the central axis of societal

functioning and simultaneously serves as a catalyst for its evolution. In the era of digitalization and ubiquitous information, these concepts acquire a new dimension, becoming key factors that determine the structure and dynamics of contemporary social, economic, and cultural systems. It should not be forgotten that this phenomenon also has an individual dimension; its influence extends beyond the macroscale of social mechanisms, penetrating deeply into the sphere of human existence. Information, digitalization, and the related phenomenon of globalization shape individuals' perception, identity, and capacity for action, redefining their role in the global order and establishing new frameworks for functioning in a complex environment. It must also be noted that this environment is saturated with information of varying degrees of accuracy, significance, and form, which in contemporary society blurs the distinction between the sender and the receiver, moves away from axiological polarization, and diffuses responsibility. The labyrinth it creates, through which we must navigate, is an environment in which we operate, half-real and half-constructed.

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