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Text Communication and the Alienation Phenomena among Young People

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TEXT COMMUNICATION AND THE ALIENATION PHENOMENA AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Introduction

The technological development, as we have been able to notice in the last years, has generated, in great extent, some transformations in contacts between people. As a result of personal computers popularization, as well as the popularization of the Internet and mobile technologies, contemporary communication becomes more and more mobile. The electronic media change society, contributing to a specific form of speeding up¹. On these grounds one can see the fading of relation of distance and duration. Wireless communication has replaced the traditional letter correspondence or the stationary telephony, enabling immediate information receiving in any place and time. At the same time one can notice change in relations between people. The number of contacts between people has increased, but they have become shorter and more surface-like².

Communication between people in the electronic environment has totally new features, and causes new social phenomena. The main factor occurs to be communication mainly on the text surface with the use of new, in writing, symbol signs, so-called “emoticons” (emotion icon – image, emotion symbol), which describe feelings. Contemporary technologies allow to send multimedia messages, including

¹ T.H. Eriksen, *Tyrania chwili*, Warsaw 2003, pp. 78–106.

² A. Toffler, *Szok przyszłości*, Poznań 1998, p. 104.

sound, images (photos) or video films. However, there are some consequences of communication only on the text and image level.

On the one hand, it enables the direct participants interaction, which in turn may cause danger associated with alienation in the social dimension, limiting the abilities to express feelings and emotions, as well as the reduction of the scope of verbal communication³. Media “filter” a greater part of information available in personal contact, such as non-verbal messages, the accent or speed of conversation⁴. It makes our abilities of listening to the other person poorer. The text information is usually one – dimensional, emphatic, does not make us feel like analyzing and interpreting like a literary text. On the other hand, it opens the possibilities which seem to be unreachable in the traditional interactions. A spoken word, similarly to gesture and mimics, which it is associated with, belongs to the temporal means of communication – *verba volant* – words fly away. Whereas the media communication does not have to take place in the real time, the message received by a text message or e-mail may be stored and read later – at any time.

1. The social dimension of text communication

The modern technologies are an essential social environment element, entering our homes and everyday lives of people, and influencing the change of social activity forms and interactions between people. There is a great possibility of using electronic media which makes everyday human activity more efficient, comfortable and funny.

Million of phones, billion of text messages, thousands of sent electronic letters – these are the signs of keeping contacts with people. It is reflected in the understanding of contemporary young people, for whom the virtual reality has become nearly an alternative world, which generates peculiar relations, quasi-groups and collective. In the Internet, newspapers and literature one can read about e-generation, Y Generation, Millennium Kids, Video Kids⁵, the text messages generation⁶

³ B.M. Nowak, *Nowy wymiar młodości. The virtual communication and education in the pedagogical perspective* [in:] *Edukacja medialna*, edited by M. Sokołowski, Olsztyn 2004, p. 306.

⁴ D. Goleman, *Inteligencja emocjonalna*, Poznań 1997, p. 160.

⁵ W. Cwalina, *Generacja Y – ponury mit czy obiecująca rzeczywistość* [in:] T. Zasępa (Edit.), *The Internet. The phenomena of the informative society*, Częstochowa 2001; C. Thurlow, S. McKay, *Profiling 'new' communication technologies in adolescence*, “Journal of Language and Social Psychology” 2003, 22(1), 94–103.

⁶ T. Goban-Klas, *Cywilizacja medialna*, Warsaw 2005, p. 245.

or Txt-Generation⁷, which names the generation of children and young people born after 1980, brought up in front of the computer screen, for whom a virtual message is simpler and more attractive than a book message.

The electronic media expansion has a profound influence on the behaviour of young users, which initiates numerous and two-poles discussions which are to describe the power and the consequences of the interaction. The problem of social alienation takes a very important place, an alienation resulting from the permanent using of the modern communication technologies. The feeling of alienation is a result of the lack of the needed relations with other people, social norms, values and oneself⁸.

During the time when the personal computer, wireless connectivity, and a mobile phone belong to the technological news in our society, the debate concerning the electronic media interaction influence on the social relations is nothing new. The interest of the researches has been concentrated so far around the influence on the TV and computer games receivers (Gajda 1993; Kirwil 1995; Griffiths 1995; Boroń, Zyss 1996; Braun-Gałkowska, Ulfik 2000; Wawrzak-Chodaczek 2000; Sokołowska 2000; Anderson, Wilkins 2000)⁹. In Poland one can notice the lack of long-term researches in the scope of communication with a use of electronic media messaging, researches that would allow to describe the influence of this kind of communication on the participants' behaviours. Attempts to make a social analysis of the results of the modern technology communication, such as a mobile phone or the Internet, one can encounter in the foreign literature.

The invention of a telephone at the end of the XIX century, as C.S. Fischer¹⁰ noticed, influenced the reduction of social isolation among the agricultural fami-

⁷ C. Thurlow, *Generation Txt? The sociolinguistics of young people's text-messaging*, <http://www.shu.ac.uk/daol/articles/vl/nl/a3/thurlow2002003-paper.html> as of 12.10.2005

⁸ K. Korzeniowski, *Ku pojęciu poczucia alienacji*, "Przegląd Psychologiczny" 1986, No. 29, pp. 345–369.

⁹ J. Gajda, *Dziecko przed telewizorem*. Warsaw 1993; L. Kirwil, *Negatywne skutki oddziaływania telewizyjnych scen przemocy na dzieci*, "Nowiny Psychologiczne" 1995, No. 4; M. Griffiths, *Czy gry komputerowe szkodzą dzieciom?*, "Nowiny Psychologiczne" 1995, No. 4; J. Boroń, T. Zyss, *Świat gier komputerowych II – badania ankietowe nad ich rozpowszechnianiem wśród młodzieży szkół średnich*, "Psychiatria Polska" 1996, 2(30); M. Braun-Gałkowska, I. Ulik, *Zabawa w zabijanie. Oddziaływanie przemocy prezentowanej w mediach na psychikę dzieci*, Warsaw 2000; M. Wawrzak-Chodaczek, *Komputer jako nowe medium kultury domowej* [in:] *Shaping the audio-visual culture of young people*, Wrocław 2000; M. Sokołowski, *Wpływ gier i programów komputerowych na dzieci*. [in:] W. Strykowski (Edit.) *Media a edukacja*, Poznań 2000; J. Anderson, R. Wilkins, *Żegnaj telewizorku. Jak nauczyć swoją rodzinę rozsądnie korzystać z telewizora, gier komputerowych i Internetu*, Warsaw 2000; S. Juszczyk, *Człowiek w świecie elektronicznych mediów – szanse i zagrożenia*, Katowice 2001.

¹⁰ C.S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*. Berkeley 1992, University of California Press.

lies through enabling them to keep in contact with people living far away. Within the last few years the phone cable has been replaced by wireless connectivity and the function of the telephone has changed. A few years ago the mobile phone was perceived as a kind of a prestige and well-being because it was mainly used by businessmen in their affairs. However, nowadays, the situation has changed radically, and digital phones have become more popular, and on these grounds cheaper and generally available. The miniaturization and increasing the technical possibilities of cameras has transformed the way they are used, and made a fashionable accessory out of a phone, which means, it is no longer only a communication tool. This is why for the young generation the communication of dreams is “a mobile phone”, with the first place, as for its functions, reserved for sending text messages (Short Messaging Service) which expresses and shapes perfectly the personality of the contemporary young people.

The results of the research carried out by the Japanese¹¹ say that the unusual popularity of SMSes results from the fact that the contemporary youth has not many places where they could meet or talk. This is why the mobile technologies enable them to create some alternative world that allows them to have an intimate contact without parents interference, and the time, and space limit.

Moreover, a text message is an ideal way of making contacts with the opposite sex because one can still be isolated, and at the same time keep distance. The one who writes text messages does not undergo a risk connected with the lack of sympathy repaying – as it may happen with the “face to face”¹² contact. This is why the SMS was named “*billet doux of the 21st century*”¹³ – the love letter of the XXI century.

The next problem is the Internet influence on the social interactions. Initially one thought that the Internet would damage social relations, lead to alienation and society atomization. Robert Kraut and others¹⁴ came to the conclusion after carrying out the research in 1995–1996¹⁵ on the users-beginners of the Internet. The issue of the social interaction fulfilment with the use of the net was called “the

¹¹ M. Ito, D. Okabe, M. Matsuda (Eds.), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones In Japanese Life*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2005.

¹² T. Goban-Klas, *Cywilizacja medialna...*, pp. 248–249.

¹³ For H. Geser, *Are girls (even) more addicted?* Zurich 2006, p. 5, http://socio.ch/mobile/t_geser3.pdf, as of the day 19.12.2006

¹⁴ R. Kraut, M. Patterson, V. Lundmark, S. Kiesler, T. Mukophadhyay, W. Scherlis, (1998). *Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social environment and psychological well-being?*, “*American Psychologist*” 1998, No. 53(9), pp. 1017–1031.

¹⁵ The research occurred to be a part of research project “HomeNet” carried out by Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

paradox of the Internet”, because the participants in isolation took advantage out of the Internet in order to communicate, which in general seems to bring positive social effects. In the researchers opinion the surface social relations created in the net eliminated essential and strong bonds built in the real world. However, since the Internet makes communication between people easier, it should also contribute to making the contacts. The latest empiric researches confirmed the thesis. The researches carried out by the team of R. Kraut three years later within the framework of the same project proved the weakening influence, the negative one, of the Internet on social relations¹⁶. Manuel Castell also proves in his book that using the Internet does not lead to the social interaction limit and to alienation¹⁷. It is caused by the Internet popularity, the Internet as a communication tool, which allows to continue the social interactions initiated in the real world.

M. Braun-Gałkowska highlights that the text communication causes difficulties in expressing one’s thoughts and disturbances of languages abilities, ones which are very important in contacts between people¹⁸. The young generation, for which a conversation through the Internet or text messages have become the basic form of communication differs because of the poorer vocabulary and problems with the stress and pronunciation. It is connected with the rare conversation with parents and also results from using special slang during the electronic communication. It is a mixture of the traditional native speech with the students’ slang and the skilled computer terminology and vocabulary in English¹⁹.

2. Communication between young people and the social relations in the light of one’s own research

The given text concerns the issue of indirect interactions of youth, after concentrating on the communication by means of the text messages.

In order to collect the empirical material at the turn of 2006 and 2007, there were carried out some researches among the students of the high school in Dąbrowa

¹⁶ R. Kraut, S. Kiesler, B. Boneva, J. Cummings, V. Helgeson, A. Crawford, *Internet Paradox Revisited*, “Journal of Social Issues” 2002, No. 58 (1), pp. 49–74.

¹⁷ Compare M. Castells, *Galaktyka Internetu. Refleksje nad Internetem, biznesem i społeczeństwem*, Poznań 2003.

¹⁸ M. Braun-Gałkowska, *Dziecko w świecie mediów*, “Edukacja i Dialog” 2003, No. 6.

¹⁹ E. Miodek, *Tworzenie się nowych kodów językowych w komunikacji społecznej na przykładzie wypowiedzi internautów* [in:] *A Child in the Knowledge, Information and Communication World*, edited by S. Juszczyk, J. Polewczyk, Toruń 2005, p. 242.

Górnica, there were 153 students of the I and II year. It should be pointed out that Dąbrowa Górnica belongs to the cities in Poland which are highly industrialized and of low level of unemployment. The economical status can be described as medium owing to the answers of responders - 23% of the tested described the family material situation as very good, and 55,7% as good.

The choice of the research sample was made owing to the lottery simple choice, which allows to create such conditions that each element has the same chance to be in the sample²⁰. Owing to this one selected a representative sample, of which the participants attend to the same school but come to the school from different places - 52,8% commute from the suburbs, and 47,2% come from huge city districts.

The empirical data collected with a use of a questionnaire of an interview of one's own construction and the Scale of Alienation Experiencing elaborated by Krystyna Kmiecik-Baran²¹.

The author on the basis of the theory of H. Seeman numerated five dimensions of experiencing the alienation:

1. the feeling of anomie - being convinced that the existing social norms (legal, moral, habitual) are not unique, clear, compulsory, and behaving according to them makes it impossible to achieve one's aims.
2. the feeling of nonsense - being convinced that there is no sense in one's life, losing the value of hierarchy, inability to predict the results of one's behaviour;
3. the feeling of hopelessness - being convinced that our faith depends on the outside and not on our activity, hopelessness, losing the psychological control over the things that surround us, feeling the inability to meet one's own needs;
4. the feeling of self-alienation - being convinced that we do harm if we listen to our ideas, opinions etc., and the difficulties in describing one's own identity, differences from the others, authenticity.
5. the feeling of loneliness - being convinced that entering the accepted interpersonal and social relations is impossible owing to several facts, and is independent on one's behaviours, the feeling of lack of relations with other people that makes us satisfied.

²⁰ S. Jusyczk, *Badania ilościowe w naukach społecznych. Szkice metodologiczne*, Katowice. 2005, pp. 130+131.

²¹ K. Kmiecik-Baran, *Poczucie alienacji - charakterystyka psychometryczna*, "Przegląd Psychologiczny" 1993, No. 4, pp. 461-480

2.1. Young and free, but addicted to ‘a mobile phone’

A mobile phone has become standard tool of communication between young people. Nearly 92,8% of the tested teenagers have their own mobiles phones and can use them any time of day and night. It is made possible owing to the mobility of a phone and possibility of discrete communication by text messages, which eliminates the problem of the ringing phone and voice conversation. It seems to be reflected in the answers of the respondents – each phone user uses this form of communication, but of different intensity. The unusual popularity of communication by text messages may be proved by the fact that nearly half of the tested people sends more than 200 text messages per month, that is nearly 7 SMSes daily. The activity in the scope of text communication can be differentiated by the sex of the tested – girls send more text messages than boys, that is why they treat the phone as a substitute of social meetings.

SMS communication is reserved, above all, for the same age group – with adults the youth try to communicate by phone conversation. The little size of the phone enables to communicate in a discrete way, even during a lesson or in the cinema. The only limit is the limit of the size of the text message (up to 160 signs) and the manual ability of the one who sends – one must be skilful to write with a use of the mini-keyboard.

Easy access to a mobile phone connected with quite a low cost of the service allow young people to exchange their opinions concerning their everyday lives, moment by moment. It may be proved by the answers of the respondents concerning the content of the sent messages. Nearly 60% of the tested young people treat SMSes as a way of chatting and talking on the current situation. Nearly half of the teenagers use text messages to exchange their thoughts, reflections and opinions. The school subject seems to be a very popular topic (32,7%), and gossips as for one's friends (27,5%).

The research has proved that a mobile phone, as a modern tool of wireless communication, is a symbol of the youth subculture, one which contributes to social integration. What is more, it makes it possible for people, who are not socially involved, to create the feeling of belonging to some group – it is enough to have a mobile phone hung on “a lease” around your neck and you become a member of some society.

The mobile phones producers promote some peculiar fashion in the scope of apparatuses, and do take care in order not to weaken “the bond” between the phone user and the mobile phone by enriching it with more technical possibilities and new accessories. The majority of them, like the exchangeable housing of the apparatus

– video cameras or mp3 players are mainly directed to young receivers, and allow to introduce to the process of communication some elements of entertainment – listening and sending favourite music, taking photos or recording films.

2.2. Chatting on the Internet, that is loneliness in the net

In the ranking of popularity as for a mobile phone, even the Internet connection loses. It is not a doubt because the Internet mobility is limited by the size of the computer and the length of the phone cable. Whereas the wireless Internet offered by some mobile phones operators is still too expensive.

The possession of a home Internet connection is declared by about 60% of the tested, and 15% say that they regularly use it at friends' or the Internet café. The Internet is a favourable place of information exchange for 43% of girls and 44,7% of boys, who also spend more time on this kind of communication. Taking into account the budget of free time of higher school students after the school time, one finds that virtual communication is the basic form of social interactions and it takes place instead of a direct contact with teenagers. Moreover, the Internet communication usually takes place in loneliness as it is impossible to chat on the net when being in a company a situation which happens when using a mobile phone.

Students use the Internet to contact with friends (70,6%). An average user of the Internet communicator usually has got 88 persons on his/her contact list. Students make also new contact by the net (15%) which usually exist only in the virtual reality.

When thinking about the communication one should also get to know the content of the sent and received information. It is the most often chatting (30,7%), current affairs (13,7%), or gossiping (11,8%). Moreover $\frac{1}{4}$ of the tested arranges dates or flirts, and also exchanges information concerning school (14,4%). The Internet communication, in the opinion of the tested is easier than direct interaction because it allows to overcome one's shyness, but at the same time giving emotional safety. However, on the other hand it may be a danger at the same time. The anonymity that we experience with this form of interaction allows to behave in a way which would be not accepted by the social norms. Some little percentage of the tested young people (11,8%) has encountered some aggression owing to the Internet communication. These were very rare situations, and the content of the received information may be treated as unrefined jokes which result only from the hopelessness of the sender.

3.3. The media communication and the phenomena of alienation

The analysis of the subject proves that the media techniques influence directly the process of communication, and at the same time, the society. The matter of the empirical researches was to find answer to the question: do the young people who communicate by text messages show a higher level of general alienation, taking into account its detailed dimensions, anomy, nonsense, hopelessness, self-alienation and isolation? According to the above the raw research material received owing to the Alienation Scale underwent the statistical analysis. Taking advantage of the X^2 test of the relevance of the statistical verification differences there were formed two hypothesis:

H1: The frequency of communication through SMSes influences the level of feeling alienation in all its dimensions.

H2: The level of alienation in all its dimensions depends on the length of time spent on the Internet communication.

It has turned out that at the level of relevance $\alpha = 0,05$ the H1 hypothesis occurred to be correct only as for one of the dimensions of alienation, that is, as for the anomy feeling: the greater frequency of text messages sending, the greater level of anomy feeling among young people. The dependence between the communication through SMSes and the feeling of anomy for the tested young group of people is statistically essential and the power of its dependence is average.

The verification of the hypothesis H2: the level of relevance $\alpha = 0,05$ allows us to say that it is correct for two dimensions of the alienation feeling, that is, for the feeling of anomy and the nonsense feeling: the more time young people spend on the Internet communication, the higher level of alienation and nonsense one can notice in them. The dependence between the time spent on the Internet communication, and the anomy, and nonsense feeling is statistically essential, and the strength of its dependence is also average.

The positive verification of the depicted hypothesis only in specified dimensions of the alienation feeling means that the young people who prefer the text messages communication, which is equal to casual information exchange do not feel the need of behaving according to the social, moral and legal norms. Quite an important influence on such a picture of situation has the character of the contacts. The interaction with the use of text messages is send in a telegraphic shortage similar to communicative "fast food", where there is no place for behaving according to the social norms and etiquette. In the opinion of the tested young people it

is also an easier way of communication because it allows to express the thoughts which are not always positive for the second party. Moreover, text communication breaks barriers such as parents' control, place and time of information sending. It makes it more difficult to teach *savoir-vivre* in the process of communication.

The next problem is the higher level of nonsense feeling among the youth who spend on average 3 hours per day on the Internet communication. As for the feeling of nonsense, we talk about it when an individual does not know what to believe in, and it is expressed in the feeling of nonsense in life and a values crisis. Values have a vital role in the process of individual and social human development and describe, to a high extent, the style of their lives. For young people who are looking for their own identity the cyberspace became an everyday, enabling chatting, opinion exchange and even the creation of an imaginary character. It allows to create a virtual society, but on the other hand it disturbs in the sphere of values, ideas and notions.

Conclusions

The Gutenberg era belongs no longer to the present times, an era based on the printed information transfer. Presently, the generation of high school students have become the screen generation, for whom, earlier the image, and now more often the text have become the main information transfers. It can be expressed by the number of sent text messages and time spent on chatting. An interpersonal contact of a contemporary young person is enclosed in a few very laconic expressions, orders, casual requests and requirements. Young people often forget about true, deeper communication act dimension, treating it as a single word exchanging, words which do not form a unit. A young man creating a barrier in a form of the electronic means of transfer for personal contacts with another man, contributes to the lack of possibilities of creating higher forms of social bonds, where the basis consists of respect, politeness and friendship. It may be reflected by the results of the researches – a higher level of anomy and nonsense has been proved among young people using text communication. The simulated social bond feeling which may be created by the contacts through the electronic media disables the creation of value hierarchy and allows to express feeling by means of symbols.

The quality of communication is conditioned by the kind of interpersonal relation. Verbal imagination is based on fantasy and creativity of a man, on his abilities to make analysis and synthesis, on the abilities to elaborate an intellectual image

of reality. An image does not force us to create any imagination. As a consequence, the icon language creates people of similar imagination. This is why so many young people have the same opinions, fashion styles or outside behaviour.

In the very context the process of indirect interpersonal communication has a very essential meaning, enabling the dialog, discussion and different point of view presenting. The interpersonal abilities should be shaped by a family during everyday conversations and discussions enabling them to get to know the others, and create stronger family and social bonds. The media reality becomes a challenge to school and education. Polish schools need a critical and reasonable knowledge of media and good preparation as for the social science in order to support a family in the operations which increase the value of the interpersonal communication.

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