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Ethical Dimensions of Digital Age

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ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF DIGITAL AGE

Abstract. The subject of the article is reflection on some ethical dimensions accompanying the current digital age. The generated world of the media automatically brings with information content also its axiological message. In addition, this media's experience of a recipient determines its value orientation, which is explicitly reflected in the opinion pages and a specific aspect of social life. The media have their communicated context such as tabloidization, simplification and clipart. Trivialization and sensationalism have a great impact on broadcasting. The phenomenon of the media indubitably has a leading position within society. The media take up a similar position also in people's private life. The article also deals with the value of fun, which in the scope of postmodern area contributes to relativism and the equalization of values.

Keywords: digital age, ethical values, leading news, tabloidization, sensationalism, phenomenon of fun

1. Introduction. 2. Media – generated modification of ethical values. 3. Fun as a universal value in the media. 4. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The diagnosis of present time is hermeneutically intertwined with the adjective “digital”. This expression perfectly conveys the dominance of the media in the society and social life. In the long term process of the advancement of technology and the rise of technocracy the society was often led to believe that media are purely a commercial matter and

hence they do not need to be subjected to ethical scrutiny. This belief, however, does not change the fact that morality and moral judgements are inherent to media outputs. People often intuitively perceive that almost every newscast entry propagated by digital media contains not only factual information, but also axiological message¹.

The mutual connection of ethics and the media, or rather, the contents spread by the media, is apparent in the category of “leading news”. The importance of the news is usually determined by simultaneous fabrication of the story by different types of the media present in the given territory within the same time period². The phenomenon of weight or importance of leading news is simply determined by the media. From this point of view it can be said that “leading news is fiction created by our technological culture”³.

Let us add that the phenomenon of fabrication is not synonymous with communicating the unreal, but is used to underline the aspect of importance generated and accentuated by media. The importance and popularity of news is emphasized by its wide accessibility. It follows that a topic of leading news, which according to the creators of digital and new media pique the interest of all of us, can be e.g. the following events presented as leading news: the strike of doctors and teachers, roundup of special units of organized crime (family) groups, or reluctance of the president to appoint the attorney general. The latter issue has been dragging on for nearly two years now, since the moment when a candidate was proposed by the National Council. This issue has been pushed as leading news many times.

¹ All mass media, with the exception of print media, are considered digital media: radio, TV, video, internet, e-mail and the other mass media distributed soundtracks and videotracks, e.g. CD-ROM. Cf. V. Hochelová, *Slovník novinářské teorie a praxe*, Nitra 2001, 56.

² It is obvious that localized media influence at present time when technological connections make the world smaller constitutes a very vague determination. Within the context of our article the local media operation is confined to situating of a particular event; that event which is the object of particular news.

³ N. Postman, *Ubavit se k smrti. Verejná komunikace ve věku zábavy*, trans. I. Reifová, Prague 2010, 24.

This specimen of leading news provokes and incites us, the recipients of the events promoted in the media, to make an internal ethical judgement. Moral reflexion occurs in the minds of recipients despite the fact that many promoted events do not hold high interest or value for people. Simply such events do not enter the value system of the media consumer. An ethical viewpoint is present within the aforementioned leading news, the importance of which is very low or zero for many recipients. The creators of news consider the events important. People face many issues, which have economical, health or social aspects.

For this reason the leading news which is mostly the products of a political game often has no relevance to people's lives. Such news is irrelevant, as it does not help to tackle recipients' everyday issues. And so the digitally propagated news broadcast constitutes no more than a pastime, background noise, which appears ephemerally and vanishes instantly from one's everyday existence. The short time and fleeting topicality of the news is emphasized by the empirical observation that every stir only lasts for three days. From our chosen point of view the important aspect is the moral reflexion of events, which automatically occurs within the mind of recipients, despite the fact that the news is disconnected from everyday life experience of recipients.

It follows that a person of the digital era is not devoid of a sense of ethics, moral values, judgements, and ethical connotations⁴. Indubitably the a priori moral setting resonates within all of us, regardless of our social status, role, preferred lifestyle, or our intellectual or emotional paraphernalia and abilities. Thus in the everyday reality we are able to appreciate that a view of the world generated and mediated by media through the prism of ethics is uniquely determined for the recipient.

⁴ Postman considers ethical questions which are connected with media outputs in digital form. The determination of meanings of the adjectives 'ethical' will follow from the interconnections: subjective and practical action; and from objective, ethical and analytical view of contents evoked in media.

2. MEDIA – GENERATED MODIFICATION OF ETHICAL VALUES

Since ancient times the world has been mediated to people by signs (symbols), sign structures, which evoke their respective semantic connotations. The symbol, as well as the sign, is a basic construct of the media. In the words of Ernst Cassirer the symbol originates in mind as a result of the density of the communicated content (meaning), and becomes a way to new knowledge, new outlook and new dimensions⁵. By the same token, within the context of our discussion we are able to consider the new subjective ethical dimensions, additions or evaluations.

The invitation to ethical contemplation is a priori determined by the fact that “realities contain an implicit system of values and meanings”⁶. For the recipient, various ethical dimensions are brought by the syntax of the symbolic content of the media itself. The content communicates specific qualities, which unobtrusively seep into the life of the society. Nearly thirty years ago an American media expert Neil Postman pointed out these aspects inherent to the media: tabloidization, trivialization, sensationalism and dominantly clipart⁷.

The period, which has passed since the identification of the aspects of digital communication, has not deprived them of their relevance and significance. They are always present in today’s media communicated content. Their presence outside the area of digital media is manifest especially in tabloid journals. Since the tabloids are also accessible online, they are considered an inherent feature of the digital age. In these genre periodicals the predominant aspect is tabloidization. It is accentuated not only by the multiplication of images and photographic material rich in meaning, but also by the proportion of images. Their volume unequivocally dominates over the written material. The creators of tabloid magazines know all very well that visual material is more strongly communicative than a written article. Also, the imprint of picture in memory is more resistant to oblivion.

⁵ Cf. E. Cassirer, *Filosofie symbolických forem*, trans. K. Berka, Prague 1996, 54–55.

⁶ E. Kohák, *Človek, dobro, zlo. O zmysle života v zrkadle dejín*, Prague 1993, 198.

⁷ Cf. N. Postman, op. cit., 12.

Analogously, the phenomenon of tabloidization has its own ethical and axiological message, which transpires into the private and public sphere. If in the print as well as digital media the picture dominates over a deeper text analysis, this fact may lead to a certain shallow way of thinking. Explicitly, the recipient is prone to form fast, facile and trivial judgements influenced by trivialization. These mental processes are symptomatic in the private and also social sphere of life. Obviously even in teaching practice it is obvious that more and more frequently we are confronted with the described processes in the realm of education. Probably for these reasons some linguists call the media “cultural nerve gas”. It is a cultural poisoning, which not only destroys of the world’s linguistic variability, the variability of lifestyles of native speakers of different languages, but also to assimilation in education⁸.

The media have rightfully been considered effective technocratic tools, which have obvious consequences for society. The media not only inform, but more and more they also determine people’s life styles and evidently their communication style. They play a role in one’s education. Younger and older generations alike are subject to the educational influence. The only difference is the degree to which the directly and indirectly communicated vectors and contents of the media are internalized by audiences. In many cases the media influence is intentionally hidden and subtle, and in some cases it can be said that: “Neither the adult nor the child audiences are informed that they have entered religious terminology and territory. The phenomenon of multiculturalism and multi-religiosity is being spread via the media”⁹. In this case the media content facilitates the cultural-religious and at the same time syncretic modifications of the postmodern age.

We know that the primary education in life stems from past and present life experience, which, according to media expert John Brookshire Thompson is being increasingly supplemented but also eliminated by

⁸ Cf. S. Pinker, *Jazykový instinkt. Jak mysl vytváří jazyk*, trans. M. Hofmeisterová, Prague 2009, 297.

⁹ M. Zaviš, *Paradigma osobnosti křesťanského učitele v minulosti a dnes*, Bratislava 2013, 86–87.

the media-generated experience. Albeit in this case the experience is transferred, quasi-interactive and locally unanchored. Despite this it can become an inseparable part of life¹⁰. Thus the media leave their paradigmatic imprint on a person via changing or even determining his or her understanding and outlook on life. At the same time we know that the mediated vector is value-ambiguous.

Clipart and sensationalism have specific axiological parameters aspects. Both are hermeneutically connected. Their mutual interdependence is identifiable in the news in the digital and new media, such as the Internet. Clipart is determined by the short broadcasting time of individual media outputs, as well as by their fast alternation, or frequency. The script of broadcast is reminiscent of music video clips, in which the contents can only be internalized subconsciously due to high-frequency alternation of images. In this case critical correction, critical thinking is blocked.

We meet this way of processing intelligence also in the news broadcasts. Human mind is not normally confronted with such a high frequency of content change as in music clips; however the predetermined limit (the maximum timing is 90 seconds) and inconsistency of media outputs paralyse the ability to critically analyse and assess their meaning and message. Basically, after the broadcasting news, we are not able to rationally identify the most important content, rather the one which was the most sensational and emotional. The present philosophy of all the media broadcasts is based on fragmentation, disparateness and clip art. In reality this means that disconnected contents are mixed in the news pell-mell – e.g. serious felonies, corruption and political scandals, carnival in Rio, child abuse – along with noting the local earthquake in the bathroom.

The sole aim of people working in the media is to arouse interest. But the disparateness and atomisation of the communicated content can sometimes lead to a paralysis of the recipient's ability to act, to take a stance in the interest of upholding human rights. In the colourful

¹⁰ Cf. J.B. Thompson, *Média a modernita. Sociální teória médií*, trans. J. Jiráček, Prague 1995, 168–184.

mosaic of news broadcast, the establishment of importance and the ensuing authentic engaging of the recipient seem to be a fool's errand. There are rare occasions when the media mobilize the recipients to gestures of civic self-help, in the form of donations or expressions of solidarity.

Consider the following example. Not long ago some media published a story of children which were forcibly taken from Slovak parents living abroad¹¹. According to available sources the welfare authorities did not give relevant explanation and in doing so violated human rights of the children and the parents. This was not an isolated case in Europe. The axiological message of the story communicated in media was obvious in demonstrations in support of the return of children to their families. There weren't many people demonstrating, although this problem potentially concerns many young families. A young mother spoke at one of the demonstrations in Bratislava and spoke critically of the community centres for mothers. We know that these days even virtual support in a form of online petition is meaningful. At the very least it is an expression of solidarity. It is not only this example – which thanks to the media had a happy ending – that reminds us of the quote

¹¹ The case concerns Iva Boorova, who lived in Great Britain for several years. The family's living standard was average. The children (3 and 4 years old) were taken from their parents by Social Services without any good reason. Further contact with the children was very frustrating for the parents, as it was time limited and the visits happened in the presence of social workers. The case was only resolved after two years, in January 2013, when following the ruling of Royal Court in London the children were finally returned to their mother. And, the most important thing, they were finally able to return to Slovakia. Media publicity played a major role in their release. At certain point in time, it was the British side which put a stop on medialisation., affecting British journalists. In Slovakia it was private TV station JOJ which took up this sensitive issue. It is obvious though, from websites, that many cases with similar scenario occurred in other states of Western Europe. This is evidenced in both domestic and foreign website sources. Cf. *Slováci vyjdú v pondelok do ulíc na podporu Ivany Boórovej*, <http://udalosti.noviny.sk/pochybne-adopcie-deti/11-11-2012/> [accessed: 5.02.2013]; *Súd o slovenské deti? Slzy, hnev, zúfalstvo*, <http://udalosti.noviny.sk/pochybne-adopcie-deti/09-11-2012/ivana-boorova-asi-nevyhrame-nikdy.html> [accessed: 5.02.2013].

by expert ethologist K. Lorenz: “It seems, that many people are ‘normal’ only for, that the voice of humanity in them is speechless”¹².

3. FUN AS A UNIVERSAL VALUE IN MEDIA

In the preceding chapter we described aspects of the media news broadcast, which are closely connected with another aspect – that of an overtly or inconspicuously communicated value of fun. At present we can see that digital distribution mirrors the overall mentality of the era. The receiving of media contents became just “another form of consumerism, the source of excitement, fun and pleasure”¹³. It is known from genealogical discursion that synonyms amusement, fun, play, relax do not lack ethical dimensions. For example, from history we know that in ancient Rome *panem et circenses* was the means of controlling masses and inducing a widespread political apathy. The more fun the nation had, the more socially inert it became.

It is no different in today’s world. We can consider overflowing, accessible and mainly omnipresent supermarkets as an analogy of *panem* (bread). The meaning of the second term *circenses* has been modified and objectified for example into modern, universally accessible technologies. For years we have been witnessing and we can state with awe, that technological progress in the realm of personal communication appears to be infinite, i.e. unlimited by anything. The phenomenology scholar Eugen Fink concisely commented on this unlimited progress of human creativity: “as it seems to celebrate the power of the man a triumph in technique”¹⁴. Moreover, today we can witness that technology becomes real and universal object of idolatry, accepted with all gravity. As it used to be in the past, the aforementioned metaphorical connection bread and *circenses* (games) even today functions as an ideology tool – which, in the end, has been genealogically verified. Surely it is not hard to answer the question as to whether the deliberate

¹² K. Lorenz, *Odumírání lidskosti*, trans. M. Rýdl, Prague 1997, 109.

¹³ J.B. Thompson, op. cit., 206.

¹⁴ E. Fink, *Hra jako symbol světa*, Prague 1993, 216.

axiological intentions of those in power – which we had an opportunity to study in history – manifest themselves also in present times.

The phenomenon of fun, of saturation – often oversaturation, which is marked by satisfaction of senses doesn't only have a materialist-hedonist subtext. The implicitly social construct of fun is innate to many media products. The elements of amusement appear everywhere without exception. Even in serious and specialist programmes. Obviously the value of fun has successfully infiltrated into politics; more precisely, it has to enrich public appearances of politicians¹⁵. Furthermore, it is in the present broadcasting, it plays surely a positive role in the media appearances of scientists, for example in useful popularisation of scientific knowledge or specific scientific discoveries. Fun, amusement is not absent even from appearances of ecclesiastics, i.e. clergy, no matter what their religious and confessional allegiance is¹⁶.

Within the context of this era we can identify amusement as a commercial-ideological value. It is a value, which simply “sells” another value. In this case it is a religious value – a religious concept. It is obvious that simplification of the sacral realm via amusement, funny appearances can, at first, appeal to the audience and make religion more accessible. Furthermore, it may invoke the impression that upholding and practising the religious dimension in a person's life is easy. Religion in this case can be presented as an alternative form of amusement, or rather, such a phenomenon, which explicitly generates the alterna-

¹⁵ Even in the Slovak media space we met several singing Prime Ministers, Head of State – adventure traveller, who was kidnapped by Indians during his travels in Latin America. A special product of media is current Russian Head of State, whose media appearances, forever stored in cyberspace as well as in print media are signated by the current phenomenon of show.

¹⁶ In this context we can mention cases of singing and dancing clergy – monks or even archbishops home and abroad. It is not an exception if these singing and dancing performances take place in sacral space itself. They are easily accessible online, i.e. in digital space. In this context it appears that in the media space of the digital age it is not important whether it is a head of state, surgeon, solicitor, priest or teacher – because they all need to learn to be a good entertainer rather than how to meet specific requirements of their profession. Cf. N. Postman, op. cit., 116; *Vyhod'me Krista, prijmime WAKA, WAKA*, <http://cs.gloria.tv/?media=340876> [accessed: 5.02.2013].

tion of postmodern lifestyle. Consequently, in the context of religious practices, more precisely evangelisation there may appear a dilemma when the requirement for fun supersedes the legitimate requirement for holiness.

The phenomenon of fun is deliberately, albeit inconspicuously embedded in the media-communicated contents such as sensationalism, emotionalism, lasciviousness and others. All these aspects contain hedonistic or otherwise fun-infused design¹⁷. The ethical and axiological code encompassed in the redundancy of the factor of amusement in the media programmes diverts people from deeper thoughts. The core of amusement is to bring distraction and sense of satisfaction. Amusement as such positively attacks the emotional aspect of experiencing life. The amusement factor, pleasant experience ensuing from media products can be measured by telemeter.

We can say that today “the game of telemeter has conquered the world”¹⁸. The quality aspect as such not only encompasses the intellectual potential of media production, but also its ethical content. The second aspect often becomes a secondary appendix to the primary requirement, which is to achieve high ratings. From this point of view the digital products become the new invariant of *circenses*, because “it is in the very nature of the media to suppress the meaningful content in favour of what is required for visual engagement of the viewer, as well as in favour of amusement”¹⁹.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Obviously not only the media-specific modifications of the phenomenon of fun play into postmodern inconsistent, fragmentary and in the end also non-challenging way of thinking. Today’s world is not fond of deep existential issues, as witnessed by their absence on the digital scene. Sporadically death, suffering and troubled relationships

¹⁷ Cf. P. Kondrla, *Hodnoty a postmoderna*, Bratislava 2010, 105.

¹⁸ A. Remišová, *Etika médií*, Bratislava 2010, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

do figure in live broadcast. But the communication of these deep existential issues is depersonalized for the recipient, socially unanchored, fragmentary and so episodic and artificial. The phenomenon of the media indubitably has a leading position within society.

The media take up a similar position also in people's private life. A person without a cell phone is considered as odd fellow, or a social outsider. Simply digital accessibility is a necessary requirement for professional, social or personal communication. Although the flow of the media permeates our existence, there is a worry that it might lead us away from ourselves. As described in this medieval saying, quoted by Karl Jaspers in one of his works: "I don't know from where I am coming. I am, but I don't know who I am. I will die, without knowing the day of death. I surprise myself, that I am still merry"²⁰. Will this not apply also to a person of the technologically advanced digital 21st century?

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²⁰ Cf. K. Jaspers, *Šifry transcendence*, trans. V. Zátka, Prague 2000, 33.

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