



# 15

## Cultural Aspects of Digitalization

In a gag cartoon, we see a woman and a man standing with a priest in front of an altar. Both are kissing and have obviously exchanged rings and finished the official part, the priest—instead of saying “You can now kiss the bride”—however says: “You may now update your Facebook status!”<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that the advancing digitalization is having a major impact not only on our working lives but also on our private lives. The most obvious influence is probably that on our communication. For many people today, sending e-mails, presenting themselves on the Internet, communicating and receiving information of all kinds has become a normal part of their lives. But not everyone has access to the Internet in the same way; in this context, one speaks of a “digital divide,” i.e. the division into so-called onliners and offliners.

There is much to be said for declaring access to the Internet as a human right today and even more so in the future. The basic principle of all human rights is immutable: no one may be existentially damaged in their self-respect. This is the core of human dignity, as it has found systematic expression, for example, in the ethics of Immanuel Kant or currently of Avishai Margalit (1996). However, the conditions of a humane society change with times and cultures. What constitutes a practice of exclusion and discrimination is not fixed once and for all but depends on cultural and economic conditions. Human rights apply not only in modern but also in traditional cultures, but state-guaranteed general education is a human right only in modern times because the conditions for it do not exist in traditional societies. Participation

---

<sup>1</sup>Comic by Black, Cuyler. <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/c6/56/0b/c6560b07c4e4ce18e091087c-da384de8.jpg>. Accessed 6 February 2018.

in communication, freedom of expression, and freedom of information is a human right—the media of communication and information change with the times.

The question whether “the internet is a human right” must therefore be made more precise: Under what conditions does access to the Internet become an individual human right?

Since the codification of human rights is carried out by states, the establishment of a human right to internet access would establish a state duty to secure this access. The development of the World Wide Web has already reached such a stage for large regions of the world society that exclusion from internet communication—for example, due to a place of residence from which internet access cannot be established or due to economic conditions that exclude numerous people from participation due to a lack of financial means—is no longer compatible with freedom of information and freedom of expression. What leads to an exclusion that is inadmissible from a human rights perspective depends on the cultural development itself. As long as internet communication was only possible for small minorities of the world society, access to the Internet could not yet be a human right. However, the more important internet communication becomes in comparison to other media of communication and the larger the proportion of those who participate in it, the more clearly exclusion from internet communication means at the same time a loss of essential information and communication possibilities. The possibilities of obtaining information free of charge (apart from internet access itself) give the internet a special status compared to most other media. This makes exclusion from internet communication more serious. When a growing number of people have internet access, exclusion from internet access can become a human rights violation. That time does not seem to be far away.

A completely different question is whether or not the internet as a communication medium is conducive to the realization of human rights in political practice. In 2001, the study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace came to a negative conclusion, using Cuba and China as examples: according to this study, dictatorial regimes can use the Internet for their own purposes, and the possibilities of using it against such regimes are small. Ten years later, this will have to be assessed in a more differentiated way. At the latest after the Arab Spring, there is much to suggest that the possibilities to inform oneself via the Internet, to communicate, but also to associate, for example, to hold demonstrations, can be politically very effective. Even the Chinese government’s smooth yet ruthless actions against dissidents and their potential for communication and association on the Internet has had a limited effect. The technical possibilities for circumventing internet blocking are

so numerous and the possibilities for control so weak that, taken as a whole, the Internet is more conducive than a hindrance to the realization of political and juridical practice that conforms to human rights.

Even though the Internet can trigger unexpected positive changes, its negative effects must not be neglected. First of all, this includes the fact that high use of digital media promotes certain usage skills (measurable by the processing speed per time unit), but at the same time, it also gives rise to an overload syndrome. This makes it understandable why members of the younger generation also temporarily or even permanently abandon parts of digital media and especially internet communication. For example, some people today consider it avant-garde to communicate exclusively via WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger and to close off all other digital channels. And in office communication, for example, it is recommended to limit e-mail communication to certain times of the day, to switch off the alert functions (automatic warnings, alarms, reminders) or to generally refer to a delayed response in the form of an automatic reply in order to gain time for concentration and protection of the nerves.

Another problem is that the private data of internet users almost inevitably end up with internet giants, who in turn pass it on to other companies, i.e., sell it. The simple recommendation to users that they should be more careful with their data does not take into account the current realities of internet communication. For large areas of the global society, non-participation in social media means de facto cultural exclusion, so that data-critical users pay for their right to informational self-determination with exclusion from social and cultural communities. The achievements of modern, liberal culture based on individual rights and opportunities for participation are being rolled back, and the separation of the public and private spheres that is so central to modern society as a prerequisite for a democratic order, as it was able to develop between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, is thus being called into question.

An undeniable problem is also the cultural regression that affects not only individual adults with an unstable character but also increasingly young people and children. Selfie culture, with its typical gesture of holding up the mobile phone to take a picture of oneself, can be seen as a kind of reprise of the gesture of the mythological figure of Narcissus, who—obsessed with his own image—kept staying by the river staring in his own reflection until he died from unrequited love. Studies have shown that the brain reacts to each Facebook like with a shot of dopamine. Although psychologists argue about whether or not social media breeds narcissists, it is clear that narcissistic behavior is encouraged by media such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and

Facebook. As media scholar Roberto Simanowski (2018) writes, narcissistic selfies and other posts ultimately conceal a fear of one's own experience. Instead of being real in the world, we are content with an image that—as the literary and media philosopher Roland Barthes (1981) observes—is *noticed* but not really perceived.

The fact that young people who spend many hours of their day playing video games that are as realistic as possible can develop psychological problems has also been proven in many ways. Violent games pose a special problem. There is a striking correlation between school massacres and intensive spending time in virtual realities characterized by hate and violence.<sup>2</sup> These so-called first-person shooters, i.e., computer games in which the player acts from a first-person perspective in the game, have their origins in a desensitization program of the US army. In commercial first-person shooters, the player can fantasize himself as a being of a cruel omnipotence and thus lower the standards of the ethical criteria of consideration, compassion, and respect.

Even if, fortunately, these effects only show up in a small percentage of intensive gamers and it can be assumed that at-risk adolescents and young adults were already highly unstable before their immersion in virtual worlds, the probability that certain perpetrators of violence are also intensive gamers is high. In fact, there seems to be a connection between virtual representations of violence and the concrete manifestations of real violence, be it in the case of the two shooters who indiscriminately killed and injured people at the American Columbine High School in 1999 before killing themselves or also in the case of the German shooter from Erfurt, who first shot 16 people and then himself in 2002. But not only video games, but also the virtual reality of films glorifying violence, or films in which violence is stylized as an act of spiritual liberation, have led mentally unstable people to emulate this in the past. A much cited example is that of John Hinckley Jr. who attempted to assassinate President Reagan after seeing the film *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1976).<sup>3</sup>

Another problem is the public displays of murder, manslaughter, and cruelty on “social” channels. The “game” of internet bullying, long considered harmless, is also part of this, driving many young people to despair and

---

<sup>2</sup>Violence plays a major role in many computer games—as it does in many US-American blockbusters. In the dramaturgy of the films, violence often has a ritual function and is presented as a kind of initiation rite. As Richard Slotkin has shown in *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), violence as a ritual act plays a central role in American narratives where violence is often associated with self-determination and reaching adulthood.

<sup>3</sup>There have been reports that a series of murders were linked to the film *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and the horror film *Scream* (1996).

sometimes suicide. Several US-American, but also European films have taken up this topic. One of these is the ABC family drama *Cyberbully* (Charles Binamé. USA, 2011) shot in Canada. The film which shows how young people can almost be driven to suicide by vile allegations on the Internet. In the film, all ends well: the attacked youths are saved at the last minute and rise together against their tormentors. The makers of the film had intended to contribute to the fight against cyberbullying—but did not succeed. A year after the film was released, the Canadian schoolgirl Amanda Todd killed herself after years of cyberbullying.

Internet pioneer Jaron Lanier, formerly one of the most ardent advocates and pioneers in the field of virtual reality, warns against such brutalization. In his book *10 Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts. Right Now*, he accuses social media of manipulating and ultimately getting users addicted.

In fact, the decline in the importance of traditional mass media in print, TV, and radio and the growing influence of algorithm-driven information channels is accompanied by an erosion of shared, inclusive political public spheres. In derailed election campaigns, such as that of the 2016/2017 US presidential campaign or the intra-Turkish dispute over constitutional reform in 2017, the actors disintegrate into groups with particular worldviews that are held together by beliefs but can no longer communicate with each other.

The understandable desire to exchange ideas with like-minded or similarly minded people, together with the preference for one's own interests controlled by algorithms, leads to a parceling of communication in the information offerings. Communication then takes place within more or less closed groups and communities, but no longer between members of different groups and communities. However, since democracy depends on comprehensive communication that includes the individual religious, ideological, ethnic, or whatever communities, these tendencies can certainly have a character that endangers democracy. It is to be hoped that the loss of importance of serious traditional media and their inclusive and selective and thus rationalizing function will be compensated by reliable and as universal as possible communication practices on the Internet of the future. Indeed, numerous serious discussion platforms give hope that civil forms of opinion exchange will increasingly gain influence within the framework of internet communication. Internet communication is not yet sufficiently inclusive to be able to speak of a world citizenship established via internet communication.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

