

Digital Representations: Identity and Communication in the Virtual World

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Abstract:

The ongoing processes of the virtual world engage our understanding of being in ways that have yet to be entirely comprehended. Grasping virtual milieu in the context of present-day media necessitates understanding how the digital platform inspires one to re-imagine oneself and others around him and get involved in everyday life in such ways otherwise deemed impossible. Is it irrelevant to discuss the virtual world when global warming is increasing at an alarming rate? When a considerable number of people are without food and access to basic amenities? When millions suffer in one way or the other? The answer is no. It is very much essential to understand the technology and how it operates in all other spheres concerning every individual. Undoubtedly, technology brings with it the problems as well as the solutions. We as a civilization of virtual/real world have to decide what we do with it. The point here is not to discard one mode or the other but to understand the way it all works and influences our lives. The paper, in particular, shall analyze the areas that deal with the communication and identity vis-à-vis the current status of the digital world.

Key Words: Communication, Simulacra, Simulation, Virtuality, Identity, Postmodern

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“The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work...when you go to church...when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from truth.”

Morpheus, *The Matrix*

The emergence of the postmodern condition had repercussions in almost every field - be it art, politics, religion, or social life. The presence of virtual identity draws attention to the way communications in the postmodern world are handled by individuals and organizations. Especially, social networking has set up a radical and unprecedented way of communication. Cultures and societies once were classified geographically; our being is now categorized according to the mode we prefer to communicate. In this setting, citizens (no matter which culture and place they belong to) have transformed their real identities into simulated ones. This metamorphosis into the virtual simulation is the new reality of the present being. The technological advancement has been so absorbed by the postmodern society that its citizens are using social networking sites to collaborate, syndicate, advocate or oppose the various entities. Rich Andrew remarks that social networks “reduce the sensorial experience of you by removing the sound of your voice, the touch of your skin, the smell of your perfume, the mannerisms of your bubbling personality . . . [human] becomes a cardboard cutout. pixels, frozen in time, blips and phrases, icons and symbols. Fragments slotted into a profile” (Rich, 2012, p. 51). Physical presence is no longer needed to communicate. The traditional ways of communication have been completely deconstructed and it truly reflects the postmodern experience. Virtual experiences are preferred over the real ones. Communication methods have been replaced by simulacra that create the impression of reality.

Postmodernist, according to David McCandless “do not view truth as a single thing or idea; but instead see truth as assembled and constructed from many different components. Truth can be gathered from science, theories and studies; or happen simply through society, created through cultural mechanisms and processes seen by the individual” (McCandless, 2011). That is to say, various forms of social networks have provided everyone with the power to add to the given information. Consequently, there is no difference between the canon and the common. Social networking welcomes inconsistency, uncertainty, multiplicity, interconnectedness and the amalgamation of diverse things, all of which are the very basis of postmodern thinking.

Jean Baudrillard has extensively written on the communication process in the postmodern world. In one of his essays, "The Ecstasy of Communication" he writes:

I pick up my telephone receiver and it's all there; the whole marginal network catches and harasses me with the insupportable good faith of everything that wants and claims to communicate . . . Speech is free perhaps, but I am less free than before: I no longer succeed in knowing what I want, the space is so saturated, the pressure so great from all who want to make themselves heard. (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 132)

Baudrillard's postmodern world is where communication and media are profusely all over us without any boundaries. His understanding of postmodernism, in its extremity, leaves the people and all other things in the world entirely detached from the real and left with infinite simulacra. Furthermore, in a world where there is a continuous flow of images pouring in through media and communication, people become accustomed to a barrage of signs which they accept, not as something real, but, as something that replaces the real. Consequently, the real loses its sense, and what they deal with are simulacra.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard sketches four consecutive phases of simulacra/image: "1) It is the reflection of a basic reality. 2) It masks and perverts a basic reality. 3) It masks the absence of a basic reality. 4) It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Poster, 1988, p. 170). He gives numerous examples in this regard such as Disneyland, which no longer is the imitation of a real but has its reality. So, according to his explanation, an image is presented to us bearing a certain kind of imitation to the original one and ends up as something that has nothing to do with the reality, whatsoever. If one takes this theory into consideration and applies it to the modes of virtual communication and social networking, it becomes clear that this is what is taking place. The sounds, the videos, the images, or even the text does not seem to escape this "hyperreal" condition. Richard G. Smith argues that "These phases are not intended as historical stages but tendencies within the image . . . it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real" (Smith, 2010, p. 198).

As humans become increasingly dependent on digital networks of communication, the virtual replaces the real as the primary mode by which they conceptualize and process any phenomena. Gradually, humans have immersed themselves within the digital maze of technology to the point where they may no longer get out of this space. The innumerable sites operating for purposes like friendship, love, dating, marriage, knowledge, and counselling – to name a few – corroborate the premise of the argument presented here. To explain this further, one can study the processes which take place while going through these. The human being is reduced to numbers and user IDs; sometimes it is required to prove to a machine that she/he is not a machine. The codes and passwords prove the identity of a being. The point here is not to demonize the technology which by the way has become unavoidable but to study the ramifications concerning it.

Baudrillard's theory is exceptionally verified with reference to the effect technology has on the postmodern living. Social networking gives us a better peek into the concepts of postmodernism. The words, "friends" and "followers" have acquired an entirely different meaning. A friend used to be a person with whom one shared everything as he was taken as a confidante. Baudrillard explains it further by stating that "people no longer project themselves into their objects, with their affects and their representations, their fantasies of possession, loss, mourning, jealousy: the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished..." (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 127). One can claim to have thousands of friends on Facebook but how many of them are real friends in the traditional sense. The social networking giant Facebook "offers a variety of opportunities to satisfy the needs of the postmodern consumer, who uses it as a tool to display, create, and produce the "hyper-I", a persona which is enabled to enter a variety of relations and to communicate a multiplicity of meanings" (Postolache and Lamandi, 2001, p. 45). People produce virtual copies of themselves for other users which typify the condition of simulacra, a mediated version of our identity. "[Postmodernism] arguably has a legacy in popular culture: music videos, social computing sites such as YouTube, [Facebook, Twitter] and myspace.com, and the products of remix culture (DJs and VJs) are postmodern in their rejection of single, simple representational practices" (Donsbach, 2008, p. 3844)

The online models of communication that invade and colonize public life have already spilt over into the realm of the personal. For instance, if technology makes it possible to work outside the office, it also enables the same workplace to encroach our social life inside our personal space. Furthermore, this "easy transaction" within the social networks raises a barrage of questions regarding the data and its mining for commercial and political uses. Contrary to what we believe, social networking space doesn't make an individual or a community public, rather it privatizes them. There is a loss of both the private and the public. The concept of a secret space has been reduced to a myth. The arena that was regarded as intimate is displayed out there for the whole world to see. Our domestic screens are flooded with all the processes, secret or otherwise, all around the world. Baudrillard refers to this trend and says, "we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene. The obscene is what does away with every mirror, every look, every image" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 130).

The existence of "second life" as is referred to in many related studies. The existence is no longer merely text-based in the virtual world. People are represented graphically where they get to choose an avatar of

their choice. The identities (colour, sex, nationality, body parts, clothes, and names) can be customized according to their desires. As a result, people project their identities coexisting in the virtual world and otherwise. It is interesting to note that in a community where a particular type of predefined identity was assigned no longer exists. The concept of identity is no more innocent and simpler. It has transformed into a “hybrid identity.” Drawing on many evaluations in connection with virtual, Tom Boellstorff believes that the virtual is, in fact, real and ought to be perceived as equally important. He maintains that our experiences gathered online are meaningful as they are in offline. “In other words, “real” often acts simply as a synonym for “offline,” and does not imply a privileged ontological status . . . What happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 20). This is to say that the boundaries between physical and virtual have diminished altogether.

The environment of the digital world has become a stage where people present their performances before an audience who are also playing a part of their own. When a person presents himself before an audience, he is tacitly appealing them to take notice of everything he is doing. He expects them to believe what they see and hear from him. Although everyone knows that these roles acted online are artificially assumed, and we may not accept them initially, but we eventually incorporate these characters into our identity. In this regard, Goffman writes:

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. (Goffman, 1959, p. 19)

This idea of assumed personae, a distinct form of identity, one puts on for a role he plays in online platforms is beneficial in understanding what we think of ourselves and how we perform a certain role.

As already mentioned, one assumes an identity depending on the role he plays, or the social setting he is a part of. It raises a question on the heterogeneity of our selfhood in the real and the virtual settings. There are different suggestions on identity in the virtual sphere. One of them emphasizes that this kind of identity bears a close reflection of the physical one. Mark Childs quotes McKenna at el. saying:

individuals tend to express more aspects of their true selves when they interact with others on the Internet than when they interact in person . . . comprised of those attributes an individual feels he or she possesses and would like for others to perceive but, for whatever reason is generally unable to express and have acknowledged . . . (Peachy & Childs, 2011, p. 20)

The virtual platform offers a chance for the expression of the self that one desires. In this kind of environment, people experiment with an altered form of their being. For many, the virtual world is the first step towards a great adventure that imagination has to offer. This kind of reality guarantees transcending the boundaries of reality in the physical world. Others are more sceptical regarding the whole concept of virtual reality. They take it as something that has been imposed forcefully into their lives, and from which there seems no escape.

With each passing day, we are introduced to new technologies that not only influence our being but also the very nature of reality. Never in history has such a number of people been so extensively influenced by something that is beyond the physical being. Michael Heim states that “virtual worlds can threaten the integrity of human experience. We see how technologies disrupt our biobodies in the examples of jet lag and flight simulator sickness. The cyberbodies of virtual reality may further upset an already precarious ontological balance” (Heim, 1993, p. 131). The more time people spend in the virtual world, the more concerns it raises about various aspects of self or simply losing of self. This is to say that personal identity is compromised when one is in the process of keeping up with online acceptance and acknowledgements for what they feel and think.

A related issue is the propensity to attain as much online audience and recognition as they can. The hunger for tokens such as “likes” and “followers” emphasizes the importance of something people prefer over many other things. People post things online wanting to get rewarded by other people. They alter their self and identity according to the wishes of the people they many a time are not familiar with. Another issue in this regard is that of communication through text. The term text and what it entails has always been a topic of philosophical discussions. As far as the virtual is concerned, unsurprisingly it raises a lot of issues. It becomes problematic for even those who are comfortable in writing a text rather than expressing their ideas face-to-face. All important aspects of appearance, sounds, body language are missing here in this context. All of these are necessary for productive communication, and in the absence of these, it is highly possible to misunderstand the other person. It is obvious that the lack of physical presence lessens the trust and commitment in any kind of relationship. To cap it all, one can never be certain about the identity of a person he is dealing with. As German philosopher Gernot Böhmer states: “Technology has become a sort of infrastructure of human life itself, a medium of human life. What it is to travel in our contemporary lifeworld, what communication is, what work is, what perception is, can no longer be determined independently of technical structures” (Böhmer, 2012, p. 18).

The influence of digital revolutions is not limited to developed countries. It has moved into spaces that are extremely remote and impoverished. It has become an integral part of life and enjoys an unchallenged

power. Since antiquity, people have been using technologies to make their lives easier, but never in human history has technology been so much enmeshed with communications, identities, or the very existence. Notwithstanding, it is amazing to see how the phenomenon of the virtual world and its various influences go unscrutinised and is recognized as a part of our normal existence.

To strike a balance between online and offline identities may maximize our wellbeing. Comprehending the subtleties of this balanced sense of identity may help us understand the problematics brought about by the digital revolutions. Sherry Turkle who has been studying psychological consequences of virtual technologies writes: “We don’t need to reject or disparage technology. We need to put it in its place” (Turkle, 2011, p. 295). However, doing this is not easy at all. The present scenario of the technology is somewhat a case of double bind. We hope to use technology to make living simpler, yet many a time the same technology makes living more complicated. We take refuge in technology to assist us to deal with issues, only to find that the solution created other problems which are more challenging.

Following the shadowy version of the virtual world, we tagged all the practices and beliefs from the past as illogical and slow. A thorough look at the past and present will make it clear that technology has helped us undoubtedly but it made the means for the destruction all the more potent. However, the technology doesn’t work on its own, and cannot be catastrophic until we let it do so. It would be a positive outlook if the technology is viewed as an essential toolbox and nothing more than that. The change that will matter has to come from the objective consciousness in using the technology.

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