

# zu|schnitt #23

**Networked Individuality**  
**Implications of current media change for social theory**

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## **Abstract**

This text connects some of the more loose ends of current debates regarding the role of the New Media and Computer Mediated Communication with a sociological discussion of social integration in contemporary modern societies. Our aim is twofold: first, we want to revisit some classic debates on the societal function and impact of the media from a sociological perspective. While a critical strand of social theory has criticized the media and their technological development, blaming them for the loss of social capital, the dissemination of a false consciousness or social disintegration, another perspective sees them as integral to social coherence and the democratic process in modern society. Building on this review of ideas, we endeavor to sketch a social theoretical perspective of how the current media convergence might be placed within such a social theoretical frame. We build our argument on the basis of the growing importance of mediated communications for the way modern society is organized and the pivotal role of communication for the construction of social reality. Adapting a systems theoretical notion of communication and the ideas of individualization theory we propose a perspective of social communication as increasingly founded on a *networked individuality*. We sketch a scenario beyond fears of the disintegration and segmentation of current media society by modeling social cohesion as a permanent process of addressing and referencing information within a media based network as exemplified by the popular social network site *Facebook*.

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## Networked individuality.

### Implications of current media change for social theory.

„[...] The social impact of the Internet depends on the impact of society on what the Internet becomes.“ (DiMaggio et al., 2001, p.327)

## Introduction

*The role of the media for society* is not only a contentious matter in everyday debate; it has become the subject matter of a whole number of academic fields. Two developments have recently brought this classic question back on the agenda: the proliferation of media channels and the fundamental change within media technology that might be summarized as “digitization”. New objects of inquiry have emerged and spawned new subfields of research, old disciplines have discovered the media – or rather the fact that they have always been engaged in theorizing the media. With the media system in constant transition and the expansion of the media beyond the traditional borders of public communication, the field of communication research is expanding. These developments have broadened our perspective on societal communication and its media, making possible – or even necessary – a shift in perspective.<sup>1</sup>

While mass communication research traditionally subscribed to a social-scientific approach to the role of the media for modern democracies based on the core concept of *communication*, other traditions depart from the concept of the *medium*. Faced with the enormous increase in and differentiation of media and communication technologies and related practices, as well as with the deterioration of earlier theoretical categories, a current approach to mediated communication increasingly transgresses such traditional demarcations. Potential answers to the question of the converging media for current modern societies can only proceed from the insight, that the processes under observation comprise both a technological foundation (media), the dimension of their social uses (social-interaction) as well as the embeddedness of such concrete technologies and practices in a larger discursive, cultural framework. Historical processes bring about new technological means which then impact on society in a number of ways but never independent from their concrete uses. At the current juncture a discussion of the “new media” might help us shed new light on the interrelation of media infrastructure and social organization.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the efforts subsumed under the heading of “mediatization theory” that researches the close interdependence of media- and social change (Livingstone 2009, Lundby 2009).

Our point of departure presupposes a close but by no means deterministic relation of the two, while at the same time aiming at the macro-level of explanation.

If we follow the main developments of mass communication research from its beginnings in early 20<sup>th</sup> century sociology and political science we might discern its main paradigms by adopting Elihu Katz' famous differentiation: whereas the early stages of mass communication research tried to answer the question "What the media do to people", the focus later shifted towards the uses and gratifications that recipients derived from their media consumption. The central question had thus changed to "What do people do with the media?" (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, p.378) This shift took on board the notion that the audience was neither homogeneous nor passive in its relation with the media. People select those modalities and content that they deem useful or gratifying and attach both personal needs as well as social uses to their media consumption.

Faced with the immense momentum of social and cultural change today – on a local as well as global scale – and regarding the multiple, contradicting yet self-reinforcing developments in today's world, the significance of the media is still increasing. In the light of the changes that industrial nations and their particular version(s) of modernity are undergoing, the role of mediated communications begs yet another re-wording of this classic question. We need to ask *What do the media do to society – as a whole?* With media use at an all-time high, ever new communication devices pervading our life-world and with regards to the increase in media outlets, cross-platform content and the global flows of data the media have long become a central force for modernity itself. Only now is this role firmly acknowledged. While earlier paradigms of media theory have taught us about the various effects of the media on the psyche and the role the media play in communicative flows within groups, organizations and even nations, a renewed sociological approach needs to firmly focus on the *macro-level* of inquiry. This implies understanding the media – the broadcast as well as the media of interpersonal communication – as a social force in their own right. Instead of conceiving of communication as an addendum to other, allegedly more fundamental social processes or analyzing the media as economic, cultural or political (epi)phenomena respectively, our suggestion is to genuinely engage the media as a phenomenon within a *theory of society*.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective we must first discern what counts as a medium – all the more so, since traditional classifications crumble in the face of rapid technological change. They must no longer be used as synonyms for mass communication, although they might still be involved with communicating in a one-to-many mode, reaching an indefinable public. One effect of the rise of global ICTs is that the earlier differentiations of broadcast media and media of interpersonal exchange are no longer helpful. Rather, we are dealing with a hybridization of technologies that strengthen the already universal nature of the media as communication devices. For what cate-

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<sup>2</sup> There are of course examples of such a treatment of mediated communication within sociological theory, most notably the works of Niklas Luhmann (1996) and Jürgen Habermas (1981).

gory fits a classic news program watched at a later date on a handheld device, or how should we classify a personal blog that today potentially reaches a global audience? Is a smart phone, which combines a whole host of media features (camera, text messaging, web-browser, etc.) an interpersonal means of communication or a broadcast receiver? In other words: technological classification by functionality does no longer result in distinct types that make for “natural” research categories.

Thus, we must engage in a discussion of what this new hybridization means – not for the technological classification or the traditional categories of media research, but for the social environment as a whole. If the media of interpersonal exchange and those of societal information (and entertainment) are no longer separable, what social-theoretical implications does this development entail? If modern society may fruitfully be analyzed as a *media society*, how can we bring to bear the importance of media research on sociological inquiry and, vice versa, the important question of social effects on media-technological progress? (Adolf, 2012a, b).

### **Media’s function(s) for society**

While functional approaches have helped to rectify some of the more speculative accounts that were overly normative (see Merton 1949), their analytical detachment tends to depict the media’s role as too clear cut. Functionalist accounts – especially within the realm of communication research – are problematic, as the media might best be understood as producers of cultural goods, with the concept of culture genuinely challenging the notion of plain functionality. Behind seemingly neutral descriptions of “society” or “the media” lay theory- or theorist-specific notions of what constitutes the nature or core of such phenomena. While we remain wary of such implicit reifications we henceforth adopt an approach that uses the notion of *function* for describing the consequences of mediated communication and its manifestations on the macro-level.

The functionalist approach to the societal role of the media has a long tradition. The media have, over the years, been ascribed a great many distinct functions for modern society from the more common *information* to more critical notions such as *narcotization*. A well-known account that established classic functions was the work of Charles Wright (1959, p.16) who summarized four main purposes of the modern media system: “(1) surveillance of the environment, (2) correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment, and (3) transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next” as well as “entertainment”. Even before him, and under the impression of a more critical approach to the media by their immigrant collaborators of the Frankfurt School, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton famously discussed some social effects of mass media in their classic piece “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action” (1948). Merton, who provided the chapter on “some social functions of the mass media” (Simonson, 2010, p.149) identified “enforcement of social norms, status conferral function, narcotizing function” as the three main functions of the media.

With the expansion of communication research and media studies the list would grow longer: information, surveillance/responsiveness, integration/socialization, economic circulation (advertising), entertainment/recreation are among the most commonly noted. As modern society grew more diverse and complex along the lines of functional differentiation – the core concept of modernity according to some of the more influential social theorists (e.g. Durkheim, Parsons, Luhmann) – the social functions were elevated to the more general notion of *social cohesion*. Leaving behind the more critical occupation with power (as is still tangible in the aforementioned piece by Lazarsfeld and Merton), the media are increasingly understood as the one societal institution that provides a communicative center for the rest of a highly dispersed society. While the old modes of social integration gradually diminish their unifying grip, and the once powerful institutions (church, parties, etc.) lose their unifying properties and biographical patterns change, the role of establishing a *common* society increasingly lies with the media. Those theories that center on the notion of the public sphere as the principal discursive process of the formation of the political will (*volonté generale*) afford a central place for the media in their theories. The more diverse and complex modern societies become, formerly concrete spaces of information, interaction and debate must be substituted by the spatially decentered functionality of the media. The public sphere of modern, democratic society is necessarily a mediated public sphere – only the media can bridge the spatial and temporal, topical and ideological diversity and the moral plurality of modernity. From such a perspective public communication and its media take center-stage in and for the coherence of the modern state. Both from the vantage point of political as well as from the tradition of social integration of modern society (Adolf, 2011), the role of communication and their media play a vital role. Summarizing the arguments, mediated communication becomes pivotal both for the functioning of the various societal spheres (politics, commerce, culture, etc.) as well as for the constitution of society in general. In the first instance, the media serve primarily as tools that aid or even drive the developments of such human activities. The printing press drives the alphabetization of early-modern society, newspapers spread information far and wide, the telegraph becomes the instrument of communicating across the vast expansion of the territorial state. Closely related but taking the perspective of socio-cultural cohesion, the second perspective emphasizes the role of the expanding media (technologies) as constitutive for the mutual construction of a shared cultural horizon, for the emergence of conventions and common-places that people rely on in the connection of their individual lifeworlds. Put differently, the shared knowledge that makes us part of a community or social structure that is no longer ascertainable individually is communicatively created – and this communication is made possible by the expanding uses of technological media.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, and emphasizing – often rather implicit assumptions of – the functionality of the mediated communication for society as a whole, the media gain a new sense of importance. Rather than conceiving of the media as merely secondary to other historical process-

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred Schütz (1971) speaks of *doxa* to denote this kind of quotidian knowledge. See also the contemporary discussion of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* with regard to current communicative developments in Knoblauch (2008).

es, their role for enabling communication becomes constitutive for modern society. This becomes particularly clear in those accounts that warn of the veining ability of the media system to serve its integrative purpose.

### **Social consequences of the media**

As we have tried to show, the postulation that mediated communication plays a substantial role in and for modern society is usually attributed to their fulfilling an *integrative* function which creates social cohesion.<sup>4</sup> This is, interestingly, in stark contrast to those theories that propose just the opposite, i.e. that the rise of the modern media has disintegrated society as we once knew it.

Robert Putnam's (2000) social capital approach to the media represents such a dysfunctional position that depicts television as a catalyst for social disintegration. In "Bowling Alone" (2000) he argues that the broadcast media and especially television cause the erosion of social capital and therefore of social cohesion by disintegrating our community.<sup>5</sup> Time that had previously been spent on social activities is now used to sit in front of media devices like the television to consume information and entertainment mainly in an isolated and individualized manner (Putnam, 2000, p. 216). He illustrates his argumentation by quoting T.S. Elliot:

"It [television] is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome" (in Putnam, 2000, p. 217)

According to Putnam major social shifts connected to *individualization* are caused by the widespread diffusion of television technology and its extensive usage. The history of television is in fact a successful one, which has spread widely and deeply in to Western societies after World War II. In conjunction with its precursor, the radio, it ushered in a new era of broadcasting communication which, according to McLuhan (1964) replaced the former "Gutenberg-Galaxy" (Castells, 2004b, p.358). As television production and usage increased immensely over the years it decreased the time that could have been used to participate in community activities and civic engagement. Since – for Putnam – these activities *make up society* (Putnam, 2000, p.220 ff.) their decline amounts to a decline of society in general. Disintegration through television is es-

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the term function underscores the magnitude of the media's role: while the media accomplish a great many feats with regard to social subsystems, like e.g. helping the economic system to circulate its products through advertising ("Leistungen"), their function for society as a whole ("Funktion") lies with being the only remaining mode of objectifying society for itself.

<sup>5</sup> Putnam (2000, p.19) attributes the social capital concept to Hanifan (1916, p. 130) who describes it as „[...] these tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit" and summarizes it as follows: "The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value." Accordingly, Putnam fears that an erosion of social capital causes a decline of social cohesion because individualization, in his view, dissolves the glue of society and community through destroying interpersonal relations, community activities and civic engagement and subsequently the value they provide. Thus, the general question related to the discussion of individualization is whether society is facing its demise due to inclining tendencies of social atomization and fragmentation.



pecially attributed to entertainment (2000, p.231): “Nothing [...] is more broadly associated with disengagement and social disconnection than is dependence on television for entertainment.”<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to this argument we subscribe to the position that *television as a broadcasting mass-medium has certain qualities that are positively connected to social cohesion and integration*. Due to its near total penetration in modern societies, television has developed the capability to create a space of mediated communication and shared experience for its audience – even though the contents are consumed individually or in a small group context. It produces a social consciousness which countervails tendencies of alienation and isolation pictured in Putnam’s approach: “Beginning in the 1920s, print was joined by film, radio, and television as competing mass media, *spanning the cities and nation-states with a common culture and similar sets of interpretations of the day’s events*” (Neuman, 1991, p.7, our emphasis). The importance of broadcasting media for (social) communication is also emphasized and summarized aptly by Manuel Castells (2004b, p.364):

“But the media, and particularly audiovisual media in our culture, are indeed the basic material of communication processes. We live in a media environment, and most of our symbolic stimuli come from the media. [...]. The real power of television, as Eco and Postman have also argued, is that it sets the stage for all processes that intend to be communicated to society at large, from politics to business, including sport and art. Television frames the language of societal communication.”

The dissemination of a common system of symbols, of general relevancies and specific topics is a source of social integration. Television, due to its immense popularity, played and plays an important role in conjunction with other media (radio, press, books, etc.). Doubtlessly, the modern condition sports different modes of social interaction and Putnam’s reproach of the physical isolation directed at television are indeed connected to this communicative practice. Television might cause individualization in the sense of increased physical separation and a decline of interaction, but *does indeed create a common locus of experience, a collective – if mediated world – that people can refer to*. From the perspective of the functioning of social relations within modern society the question is not, whether we like this mode of socialization and permanent enculturation; it is how the complex world of a modern society might otherwise be connected if not by (mass) mediated communication. For an inquiry into the communicative structures of a modern society, Luhmann’s famous quote marks the point of departure: “Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media” (Luhmann, 2000, p.1). Today, the media are the storage of societal knowledge and thereby ensure that certain foundations of human interaction do not have to be constantly reproduced.

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<sup>6</sup> Putnam’s position here stands in for two common allegations: a) that television usage in itself is problematic (denigration of the medium as form) and, b), that entertainment is a lesser form of media content than some notion of “proper” information. This dismissal of popular culture is a recurring and still widespread topos in social scientific debate, despite the work of theorists like Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre, who devoted much work to a rehabilitation of popular culture as politically viable (see for example du Gay et al. 1997).

They can be referred to through the use of media (Fuchs, 2005, p.64). The topical information that is provided daily through the large broadcasting networks is but the most visible of these phenomena. Rather, it is the whole variety of television content that is relevant for the communicative and cultural frame of social interaction. Television – the media system and its increasing supply as a whole – provide innumerable opportunities to learn, even if from content that at first glance defies the classification of useful knowledge. Shared cultural resources need neither be rational nor conform to a certain, imposed normative standard to unfold their integrative role.

In retrospect the era of mass communication, when technological restraints and state regulation permitted only a limited number of channels, provided few focal topics of general debate. The variety of information available then pales in comparison to the immense increase of media outlets, the globalization of media content, but most importantly to the digital revolution in the wake of the public accessibility of the Internet. At a time, when nation states had a circumscribed media menu and usually not more than one or two, mostly public service channels it is conceivable that this limited supply had a “channeling” effect. The scarcity of frequencies served as the argument for their centralized administration and resulted in a large group of people consuming similar if not the same content. Television was thus – in the eyes of its proponents – the unifying medium of modern society and allowed for reaching society as a whole through one medium. Within this line of reasoning, TV and other media integrate society by providing common knowledge. More concretely, at the level of everyday execution, they provide the topics of communication.

Such a common communicational horizon is significant because it allows for the possibility of follow-up communication<sup>7</sup>: “Television takes center stage [...], so that we discuss it the next day.” (Katz, 1996, p.25) Accordingly, the feature of being able to create “referring potential” as a basis for follow-up communication counteracts the idea of individualization as fragmentation causing social disintegration due to a lack of communication. Quite contrary to the communitarian arguments put forward by Putnam and others, it is the ability of the modern media system to communicatively integrate individuals beyond the constraints of co-presence and synchronous time that makes them such central integrative institutions. Klaus Schönbach<sup>8</sup> uses the term “referring potential” to describe the ability to presume shared information one can refer to in a communication process (2007, p.347). This contention ties in with a systems theoretical understanding of social structure. Building on Luhmann’s communication theory, Dirk Baecker (2007, p.147 ff.) holds that society continues to exist as long as what happens in society is the basis for further social actions. In other words: society as an entity is reproduced as long as communication spawns communication. Mediated communication of the broadcast media takes on a pivotal role in perpetuating the cycle of communication, both systemically, as the driving force of topics and themes; as well as very concretely in the shape of media programs that become “the talk of

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<sup>7</sup> In German: *Anschlusskommunikation*.

<sup>8</sup> Schönbach himself borrowed the phrase from the German author Burkhard Spinnen (Schönbach, 2007, p.347)

the town". From a systems theoretical point of view, communication is *the* social operation making up society and "as long as social incidences follow-up social incidences, society sticks together" (Baecker, 2007, p.149).<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, one can describe television – or any other *Leitmedium* (central or leading medium) – as a mass medium, that unfolds a space that makes communication and therefore society more likely to happen. Thus, understanding television as a medium providing a commonly shared, social "referring-potential" is a crucial factor for our argument. Manuel Castells also identifies the role of the mass media as a key-word provider that converts information into socially relevant issues that would otherwise remain confined to circumscribed groups (2004b, p.364 ff.).<sup>10</sup> A systems-theoretical approach to modern society as based on communication thus underscores the pivotal role other theorists have attributed to the (mass) media. The dissemination of knowledge, the familiarity with codes and the selection of topics is the core function of the modern media system for its society.

The high hopes attached to the media as agents for creating collectivity can be observed more distinctly once this regime started to decline. It is feared that, due to the increasing differentiation of programs and the enormous growth of content – especially in the case of television – the "old media" may lose their unifying properties. The quantity and diversity of available channels has increased immensely which has led to a fundamentally different media landscape compared to the classic model of nationwide networks and their standardized program (Castells, 2004b, p.9; p. 366 ff.). The US-American household for example received 118.6 TV channels in 2008, a new record according to Nielsen (Nielsen, 2008). Therefore, Elihu Katz detects the waning ability of television to unite its audience. According to Katz, societies need mediated spaces for the public to come together, and classic television was just that place. The circumscribed program of (public service) television was the nation-state's modern equivalent of communing and the place where a common societal horizon was established (Katz, 1996, p.23 ff.). Since the advent of commercial networks and the deregulation of national media systems the increasing opportunities for the audience to individually select content such public spaces are in decline. Talking about Israel and the inauguration of the "dual system" that allowed commercial and privately owned television stations to broadcast, he spells out the concern that the political debate will fragment and a joint consensus will vanish:

"It [TV] no longer serves as the central civic space; one can no longer be certain that one is viewing together with everybody else or even anybody else, and the here-and-now of current affairs is being minimized and ghettoized and overwhelmed by entertainment." (Katz, 1996, p.24)

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<sup>9</sup> "Solange gesellschaftliche Ereignisse auf gesellschaftliche Ereignisse folgen, hält die Gesellschaft zusammen" (Baecker, 2007, p.149)

<sup>10</sup> The classic tradition of agenda setting-research – although more geared towards political communication – is akin to this understanding of the role of the media.

As we enter the Internet era the same fears emerge again. At a time when Internet technology and its new modes of communication had been firmly established, Cass Sunstein (2001) painted a dreary picture of public debate. Only now it is the new media channels the internet provided and the multiplication of topics and actors that would lead to a segmentation of the populace. That is why we need to extend the questions raised by Katz to present-day media change and ask, how the development described relates to the proliferation of the Internet and its media offers? If the expansion of television channels already posed a threat to the integrative potential of the media, what about the massive increase in content diversity observable on and through the Internet? Katz himself predicted that: “[t]here is nothing in sight to replace television, not even media events or the Internet” (1996, p.33). Jürgen Habermas, whose model of a deliberative public debate seems to have become more likely with the advent of the Internet, also addresses the question of fragmentation. He concludes that the internet indeed causes fragmentation and subsequently threatens these important cumulative functions fulfilled by publics deriving from traditional media (Habermas, 2006, p. 4):

“Use of the Internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. This is why the Internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes. But at the same time, the less formal, horizontal cross-linking of communication channels weakens the achievements of traditional media. This focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time. The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Individuality and communicative ties in the network era**

Taking into account these observations we argue that the Internet is strongly connected to a certain form of individualization that is able to ensure the existence of media communication's integrative function as a network-medium. It is our hypothesis that the proliferation of the internet is accompanied by a two-sided process of individualization that on the one hand incorporates an increasingly individualized media-reception (Hasebrink & Domayer 2010). But on the other hand the network organization of the Internet creates possibilities for reintegration by giving the users the opportunity to constantly refer to contents circulating in the internet and eventually by referring to information about the individual itself. Thus *referring-potential* is creat-

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<sup>11</sup> German: „Die Nutzung des Internet hat die Kommunikationszusammenhänge zugleich erweitert und fragmentiert. Deshalb übt das Internet zwar eine subversive Wirkung auf autoritär Öffentlichkeitsregime aus. Aber die horizontale und entformalisierte Vernetzung der Kommunikationen schwächt zugleich die Errungenschaften traditioneller Öffentlichkeiten. Diese bündeln nämlich innerhalb politischer Gemeinschaften die Aufmerksamkeit eines anonymen und zerstreuten Publikums für ausgewählte Mitteilungen, sodass sich die Bürger zur gleichen Zeit mit denselben kritisch gefilterten Themen und Beiträgen befassen können. Der begrüßenswerte Zuwachs an Egalitarismus, den uns das Internet beschert, wird mit der Dezentrierung der Zugänge zu unredigierten Beiträgen bezahlt. In diesem Medium verlieren die Beiträge von Intellektuellen die Kraft, einen Fokus zu bilden.“ We adhere to the English translation by Andrew Keen (cf. [andrewkeen.typepad.com](http://andrewkeen.typepad.com)).

ed which builds the basis for follow-up communication and therefore for social cohesion grounded in communication.

We may call this process *networked individuality*. The concept's basic notion is the simultaneity of a growing individualization of people in the western world with regard to highly individualized media(ted) communication and the emergence of communicative networks that re-integrate the individual media user. While the almost limitless space of the Internet allows for disparate media use and idiosyncratic media-repertoires it is accompanied by the concurrent creation of networks enabled by Internet applications that provide referring potential and thus follow-up communication. Subsequently, the Internet enables the existence of communicative social cohesion that was formerly ensured by the television and other mass media as discussed above – but with a changed modality. Therefore, we argue that networked individuality is a societal phenomenon which exceeds the idea of the internet as a place for vital but closed online communities that provide social capital (as described for example by Scott and Johnson, 2005; Ellison et al. 2007).

In the following we interrogate this conceptual idea against the backdrop of our initial question pertaining to media "effects" on a societal level. The parts of our conception themselves are not new: The role of communication for the creation of shared social knowledge and the organization of social relations is a classic topic of many social theories (phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, etc.). The importance of interpersonal communicative relations for the dissemination of media messages has been a research tradition at least since the Columbia school (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955). The role of the new media for the transformation of public communication has been at the heart of studies on their relation to democratic deliberation. And finally, to approach social relations via the metaphor of the network goes back decades, and is one of the dominant approaches since Manuel Castells opus magnum (1996-1998). What we attempt is to connect these ideas within a social theoretical context that weds the findings of media and communication research with those of sociology.

### **Individualization – A two-sided process of in & out**

In order to conceptualize the interdependence of the media system and the process of individualization as *networked individuality* we need to first re-visit the concept of individualization as a social theoretical concept. We then proceed with adapting individualization to the changing communicative realities of the current media system.

In contrast to the communitarian social capital approach represented by Putnam, a review of social theory dealing with individualization shows that the process of individualization does not merely consist of disintegration that results in societal dysfunction. According to the two-fold phenomenon we want to elaborate, individualization is rather composed of a two-sided process which follows the pattern of *in & out*. Ulrich Beck for example states that individualization is characterized by three important aspects. First, individuals are disembedded due to *removal*

from traditionally prescribed social forms. Second, they are confronted with the *loss of traditional security*; and finally, they are re-embedded through a *new type of social commitment* (Beck, 2004, p.128). Beck's perspective is lodged in his theoretical framework of *reflexive modernization*<sup>12</sup> which posits a first modernity – industrial society – as leading to the current stage of a second modernity that is understood as endogenously produced by the historical social consequences of its predecessor. In the long run, first modernity instated a *decomposition process* causing a detachment that releases human beings from traditional lifestyles such as the strong bonds within families or the involvement in guilds and other powerful social institutions that represented the main socializing entities of first modernity. Thus Beck includes the necessity of the creation of new societal patterns developing new ways of integration into his conceptualization of individualization: it contains the individual's disembedding as well as its re-embedding (1993, p.149 ff.; 2007, p.13).

We might now transfer this social theoretical mechanism to the more communication-informed notion of *networked individuality*.<sup>13</sup> Emphasizing the importance of communication for the shaping of social relations, media technology and its specific modalities are entered into a discussion of the social theoretical foundations of current modernity. "Network sociality is a technological sociality insofar as it is deeply embedded in communication technology, transport technology and technologies to manage relationships." (Wittel, 2001, p.69) Media change and social change are inseparably intermingled. We understand internet technology as a result of the first modernity that *disentangles* the individuals from a traditional structure – in this case from the elaborated broadcasting media model represented by limited channel, centrally organized television. By doing so, it reflexively causes the *replacement* of this pattern.<sup>14</sup> The increased freedom of choice of the offline and net-based media consumption and production permits highly individualized internet usage, reducing the probability of commonly shared information serving as referring potential. This describes *one side* of the process connected with Networked Individuality.

The *other side*, corresponding to Beck's *new types of social commitment*, is contained in the term "networked". New technical means available to the majority of users enable and facilitate the development of communicative networks as the new form of integration in the "second modernity". Van Dijk describes this development by talking about a "duality of media structure" that emerges similar to the "duality of social structure". Accordingly, there is a simultaneous frag-

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<sup>12</sup> Beck also explains reflexive modernization as „self-confrontation“ which describes the decomposition of first modernity and the replacement with the second modernity (Beck, 2007, p.5).

<sup>13</sup> This term has been in infrequent use for some time. It is mostly associated with the work of Barry Wellman who uses it to describe the changes in social relations and bonds: "This is a time for individuals and their networks, and not for groups. The proliferation of computer-supported social networks fosters changes in "network capital": how people contact, interact, and obtain resources from each other. The broadly-embracing collectivity, nurturing and controlling, has become a fragmented, variegated and personalized social network. Autonomy, opportunity, and uncertainty are the rule." (Wellman, 2002, p.12) While our usage of the concept is informed by Wellman's work, it is not derivative of it.

<sup>14</sup> The disentanglement through new media also happens on the territorial level that formerly defined individuals: „Computer-supported communication will be *everywhere*, but because it is independent of place, it will be situated *nowhere*." (Wellman, 2001, p. 230)

mentation and integration of individuals through the emergence of follow-up communication (van Dijk, 2006, p.171). Complaints that the current conditions lead to a fragmentation of traditional publics as well as fears that (especially young) people mostly move within the virtual spheres of online communication are substantiated, even if internet-based networks only complement “real-life” sociability. What has been neglected is the process that connects these two (usually critical) observations: they represent the detachment from a prior mode of communicative socialization at the same time as they co-create its new mode. Rather than subscribing to a fatalist mourning of the demise of “the public” or acknowledging only the “nonsensical” practice of spending (allegedly) too much time in meaningless online socializing these two processes are tied up, and a merely the visible part of a larger process of shifting modes of (social) communication.

These basic patterns of individualization are also identified by Thomas Kron and Martin Horáček (2009, p.9) who describe them as a *process of in and out*: “The actor gains individuality due to the disintegration of traditional structure (out) and the simultaneous integration in new structural relations (in).”<sup>15</sup> So, the evolutionary process of individualization provides the individual with more freedom; decisions and actions are increasingly a matter of personal choice. This is just as true for online communication that creates a huge space of possible and contingent choices for the individual through its immense variety of content. As a consequence the individual is under constant pressure to select, a permanent obligation to choose which contents will be consumed, appropriated and re-produced (Köcher, 2008, p.86; Wirth & Schweiger, 1999, p.48). This account of online communication often heard – at the same time – represents a very adequate description of modernity as a whole. As seen from individualization theory, what is true for current changes in societal structures of communication characterizes a general phenomenon of modernity. The individual constitutes itself through its own choices rather than being constituted through social structures like belonging to certain groups or a certain family status. Life has become a malleable project that spawns the responsibility of orchestrating the individual biography (Beck, 1993, p.152 ff.). These decisions create the possibility for the individual to demarcate itself and to define its personal and highly contingent position in society. Anthony Giddens sums up these facets of modern individualization in one simple question: “Who are you, and what do you want?” (2007, p.74)<sup>16</sup>

Niklas Luhmann even declares that a sociological theory that wants to be treated seriously has to handle the relation of individuality and collectivity as a relation of progression. The new degrees of freedom for the individual which emerge in the process of detachment are accompa-

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<sup>15</sup> German: „Der Akteur gewinnt mit den Auflösungen von traditionellen Strukturen (Raus) und der parallelen Eingliederung in neue Strukturzusammenhänge (Rein) an Individualität.“ (Kron & Horáček, 2009, S.9)

<sup>16</sup> In the light of the above social theoretical considerations it could be argued that the significant feature of individualization is an evolutionary one: established patterns disintegrate and are replaced by new ones. It is conceivable that the analysis of such change processes might be intertwined with normative valuations bemoaning the vanishing or embracing the emerging patterns. Primarily, we need to understand how they come about. The communitarianism implicit in Putnam’s critique, craving demarcation, solidarity and “we-feelings” might itself be understood as a reaction to the uncertainties that flow from the manifold individualizing processes described above (Beck, 2004, p.14).

nied by more flexibility for the society as a whole. Subsequently, there is no benefit that can either be distributed for the profit of the individual or the collective. It is rather a combination of individuality and society that creates new possibilities for both entities (which again contradicts Putnam's position)<sup>17</sup>. This notion of a progressive relation between the individual and the collectivity can already be found in Durkheim's "About the Social Division of Labour" (Luhmann, 1992, p.31). Durkheim discusses social cohesion by applying two different concepts of solidarity. For Durkheim the traditional form of cohesion (before the emergence of the division of labour) is based on similarities and aptly named "mechanical solidarity". This subtype is characterized by a collective consciousness that fully incorporates the individual and its individuality (Durkheim, 1992, p.113). The subsequent type of society that is based on the modern principle of the division of labor involves a solidarity that is rooted in difference: "organic solidarity". Every individual now depends on other individuals and this dependence ensures cohesion while simultaneously securing the individuality of each. And Durkheim, too, stresses the point that this is to be understood as progression; the new solidarity provides society with more flexibility and increases individual freedom (Durkheim, 1992, p.181 ff). Thus, in a functionally differentiated society individuality is increased and individualism becomes institutionalized (Luhmann, 1993, p.151). From the perspective of this theoretical architecture, the individual cannot act as one entity in one social subsystem exclusively. Rather, it is situated in different systems with different parts of its personality, and from this viewpoint, exists outside of society. Identity, then, can only be constituted through *exclusion* instead of inclusion (Luhmann, 1993, p.158 ff.). This development is related to problems concerning the continuance of social cohesion:

"The problem lies in the participation of already individualized individuals and to ensure this participation, different offerings must be created, according to the particular functional area if the emergence of the widely dreaded estrangement shall not become the leading principle." (Luhmann, 1993, p.160)<sup>18</sup>

To transfer these insights for the purpose of this paper, Internet technology and its inherent feature of network building may be depicted as one such contribution of the media system: it provides the functionality for society itself to include the already *individualized individuals*. Thus integration can be ensured and individuals become accessible, or rather: addressable, for society, while at the same time maintaining their full individuality.

The shifts in the communicative infrastructure, the expansion and re-structuring of the media system amount to the same qualitative alteration: while the former centralist implementation of broadcast-television served as a source of mechanical solidarity by creating a collective con-

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<sup>17</sup> Niklas Luhmann in the foreword of Durkheim's "About the Social Division of Labour" (Luhmann, 1992)

<sup>18</sup> „Dann liegt das Problem in der Partizipation von bereits individualisierten Individuen, und dafür müssen, je nach Funktionsbereich, unterschiedliche Angebote entwickelt werden, soll nicht die vielbefürchtete Entfremdung zum Prinzip werden" (Luhmann, 1993, p .160).



sciousness, the internet of today is a network of nodes that are identified by their difference to each other. The question is thus, whether such a change in the composition of the central backbone of mediated communication – making these differences visible and referable – will lead to a shift comparable with the creation of organic solidarity? As internet-communication is moving towards an integrated network structure itself – embodied by the enormous success of Social Network Sites (boyd & Ellison, 2008) – in which the (physical) individual is (re-)instated as a genuine node (i.e. addressable in its individuality, represented by a SNS profile) – the analogies to such a social theoretical underpinning become more visible. Sociality is increasingly comprised in “informational social bonds, bonds based less in hierarchical relations and more in the complex, reciprocal intricacies of the transverse networks of information exchange.” (Wittel, 2001, 67)

### **Networked Individuality: a communication model for Network Society**

It is important to recognize that *networked individuality* is not merely a result of the Internet technology and its proliferation. Manuel Castells has pointed out that social organization within networks precedes the internet and its widespread use. Similar to Durkheim, who proposed that modern societies are held together in a more flexible way via organic solidarity, Castells defines networks as the next source of sociability in complex societies that *replace* elaborated patterns. Accordingly, the Internet is the “material backbone” accompanying these developments and making the realization of these new social patterns feasible (Castells, 2005, p.140 ff.). Barry Wellman also identifies networks as sources of community that have existed before the internet became prominent: “The proliferation of personal networks happened well before the development of cyberspace [...]. Yet, the rapid emergence of computer-mediated communications means that relations in cyberplaces are joining with relations on the ground” (Wellman, 2001, p.228). The social organization in networks is related to increases of complexity that result in difficulties of societal coordination. Modern communication and information technologies are the manifestations that make these new uncertainties manageable, they build “computer-supported social-networks” (Castells, 2000, p.15; Wellman, 2001, p.228). For Wittel (2001, p. 71) an emerging “network sociality” results not from the proliferation of the internet but from changes in the modern economy. In contrast to community cohesion, “network sociality” is a product of integration *and* disintegration which fits to the presented two-sided process and therefore counteracts the idea of a traditional *Gemeinschaft* (Wittel, 2001, p.51, p.62).

Understanding modern communication technologies and their applications as crucial factors of sociality also beg the ideas of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which overcome both a crude technological determinism and a one-sided social constructivism with regard to the role of technology. ANT takes humans- *and* non-humans into consideration for sociological inquiry and examines the “associations” of humans and non-humans that together make up the social (Latour, 1992, 2007; Law 1992). Our notion of networked individuality makes use of this insoluble connection of (social) communication and its (technological) structure: the hybrid network of the

Internet and its particular modes of communication constitute the “medium” of networked individuality:

“The Internet is not a technological system or mass medium. It requires human activity and communication in order to self-organize. It forms a socio-technological system where a technological structural network of computer networks that is based on the TCP/IP protocol functions as a mass medium of social activity and networked communication. This mass medium is a carrier of objective social knowledge *that is permanently reproduced and reactualized through networked human communication.*” (Fuchs, 2005, p.79)

### **The Form of Networked Individuality**

We have already hinted towards the *form* of the process in question that prompts our turn towards a new kind of sociability based on changing communicative patterns. But how are the processes of communicative reintegration exercised concretely? We believe that the architecture of the Internet enables a permanent process of addressing and referencing *of* and *to* information. Every link – representing a media borne information<sup>19</sup> – that is shared (or published) in an email or via an instant message represents this notion. Someone *selects* a certain piece of information out of the tremendous amount of contingent possibilities and shares it with others so that he can rely on the expectation that his interlocutor is aware of similar information repositories: referring potential is created. This process is a quotidian one, a standard process that we execute every day in interpersonal communication. The relevance lies with the institutionalization of this kind of interaction on a large, potentially global scale, as for example on social network site (SNS) like Facebook – and it is hinged on the individual referring such information. The latter shall serve as our main example for an internet application matching a society characterized by networked individuality: here, the recipient, the consumer, the audience member is re-instated as an individual and simultaneously placed in a network structure.

### **Facebook – Institutionalizing Networked Individuality**

“Social Network Sites” can be understood as a service “that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd/Ellison, 2008, p.211). The construction of a public or semi-public profile on Facebook amounts to the institutionalization of the individual described above in Luhmann’s terminology. The basic unit making up the whole network is the *individual*,

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<sup>19</sup> We use the concept of information in a wide sense here: it includes any manifest communicative content that might be circulated using media technology. The category thus comprises online news, links to websites, blogs, petitions, videos, etc.

represented by the self-orchestrated profile.<sup>20</sup> The variety of information that is possible and needed to define what an individual is, is itself a manifestation of modern society and its detachment processes.<sup>21</sup> Another significant facet is that these self-defining processes on Facebook also allow for, even facilitate, self-presentation [“Selbstinszenierung”], a demand of modern individualism according to Georg Simmel. The freedom of modern individuals with its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the French Revolution does not only demand for freedom but also for equality of individuals in relation to each other (Simmel, 1992, p.811). This leads to the following dilemma:

“After the individual had been detached from the rusted chains of guilds, the classes and the church, the detachment continues in the way that the independent individuals now want to distinguish themselves from each other; being a free individual is no longer the central issue, but to be unique and distinctive”<sup>22</sup>

Facebook enables the individual to display its uniqueness. Every information given via the “liking” of groups, artists and the like is a way to demarcate oneself from all the others. The visual proof of your distinctive existence are given by photographs, uploaded to show where you have been, what you have done and who you have met. This information provided by the individual via the network is a way to define one’s position in a modern society and providing an answer to Anthony Giddens’s (1994, p.74) question for everyone to see: “Who are you and what do you want?” The pinnacle of this mechanism is the status-update<sup>23</sup> on Facebook: a channel allowing the individual to constantly update the network with their own current personality, and at the same time the continuous possibility for others to receive information. The feature of the SNS-definition given above of showing who is connected to a person’s network is realized on Facebook. There is the visibility of relations the individual itself has created through his own choices, deciding who is a relevant member of one’s personal network – and thus defining one’s own individuality, too. It is here, where the nature of our modernity is coming into its own: the network is nothing without the individual; and the individual outside the network is increasingly isolated. “The rise of SNSs indicates a shift in the organization of online communities” write Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 219).

“While websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests.

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<sup>20</sup> This is also where we depart from Luhmann who has little place for the individual actor in his theory. For the process we have in mind a process-carrier in the form of an individual actor is crucial.

<sup>21</sup> It is worthwhile mentioning that this process is standardized on a social network site like *Facebook*. So, although there is freedom in the sense of a variety of possible information defining oneself there simultaneously is a standardized spectrum of possible criteria.

<sup>22</sup> „Nachdem die prinzipielle Lösung des Individuums von den verrosteten Ketten der Zunft, des Geburtstandes, der Kirche vollbracht war, geht sie nun dahin weiter, dass die so verselbständigten Individuen sich auch voneinander unterscheiden wollen; nicht mehr darauf, dass man überhaupt freier Einzelner ist, kommt es an, sondern dass man dieser bestimmte und unverwechselbare ist.“ (Simmel, 2008, p. 351)

<sup>23</sup> “What’s on your mind?” asks the dialogue box.

Early public online communities such as Usenet and public discussion forums were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal (or “egocentric”) networks, with the individual at the center of their own community.” (Ibid.)

### **Communication – Referring and Addressing via the Network**

The important feature enabled by Facebook is that it gives every user the possibility to provide his network with links to information. Apart from providing your peers with personal experience (ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary) these references are mostly links to other content available on the net. This way, the individuals unfold a space of shared information they each can then refer to.<sup>24</sup> This is by no means a unique feature of Facebook – but is its sheer size and popularity as well as unique usability that make Facebook the prototype network device. SNS become the great connector – the network within the Internet that serves as a hub, in which the individual (user) becomes a node. Every content “shared” via Facebook symbolizes a *selection* out of the complexity of the web but now entails a personal recommendation, a shared or legitimate relevance that sets it apart from all the other possible addresses. The easy form of reaction (“like”, “comment”, “share”) enables fast and simple, visible follow-up communication that can again function as referring potential in *on- and offline communication*. Facebook thrives on the insight that people rely on others’ selections and capitalizes on it. SNS utilize this fundamental social pattern by providing a tool which shows people the contents of websites, products and services their Facebook-friends “like” (Lischka, 2010).

As such, SNS like Facebook can be seen as the manifestations of these interpersonal networks and communicative flows that mass communication research had discovered as an integral part of social communication a long time ago (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955). According to Elihu Katz, the discovery of “limited effects” (Katz, 1987) let research branch out in two directions: selection and diffusion. On the one hand finding only limited effects of mass communication that seemed mediated through interpersonal networks led to the discovery of the multiple flows of communication after reception (Two-Step flow model; multi-step flow model and ultimately the analyses of complex networks). On the other hand, and probably more famously, the limited effects made researchers inquire into the motives of media usage on the part of the recipient, paving the way for what later became “uses and gratification research” (Katz & Foulkes, 1962) which is ultimately about understanding selection processes. The hybrid communication of net-based plat-

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<sup>24</sup> This is a critical point, especially with regard to the questions: a) who produces the content that can be referred to? See our final discussion for critical questions regarding the production of content needed to keep the referencing-cycle in motion. And, b) what does this massive shift towards a self-referential media system entail? With SNS like Facebook we increasingly enter a situation, where the tendency of the media to refer to each other comes full circle. Network references to other media – even if they do not substitute references and accounts of first-hand experience (experiential reality) – become self-contained. A media structure refers to another media structure, ad infinitum.

forms brings both these insights together, once it is possible to observe references to be selected and disseminated via networks of “recipients as communicators”.

In contrast to the traditional broadcasting system, a platform like Facebook provides the user with a new source of information he or she can refer to. Not only is the audience active in the (mass) communication process, it is increasingly the activities’ originator. Public and private communication merges. The displaying of the individual via a network like Facebook converts personal individuality into a *network publicity* and transforms it into referring potential. This is a necessary feature for a highly individualized society according to Luhmann who states that a highly individualized modern society has to deal with the problem that every individual must be able to permanently provide others with its own individuality and uniqueness. There must be ways to show-off the own highly contingent biography so that others can calculate expectations concerning the individual’s behavior. Luhmann predicted that a possible formation of impersonalized expectations such as social roles or the recognition of fundamental values could be an instrument for making the calculation of expectations feasible (Luhmann, 1993, p.251 ff.). But he could not imagine an application like Facebook which is constantly emitting personal biographies and the individuality of others thus accomplishing a basic feature of network sociality.

“In network sociality, social relations are not ‘narrational’ but informational; they are not based on mutual experience or common history but primarily on an exchange of data or ‘catching up’.” (Wittel, 2001, p.51)

Facebook helps de-contextualized individuals to construct social relations in the medium of “networked sociality” and to replace shared biographies with information exchange (Wittel, 2001, p.65 ff.). Personal information that has been private in the past now enters the digital publics and thus become a part of what is talked about and referenced to (Münker, 2009, p.116). Thus each individual itself can become the issue of communication and the network-generated referring-potential gets quantitatively enhanced in comparison to the referring potential formerly created through mass media like the television. Also, by fulfilling these functions Facebook makes social actions more expectable, at least for those who are members of the network. The individual itself becomes the issue of (follow-up) communication and subsequently selects particular things out of the possible horizon of meanings which enables follow-up communication and therefore society (Luhmann, 1984, p.139 ff.). On the Internet users are constantly producing new content: “[...] human actors permanently re-create this global knowledge storage mechanism by producing new informational content, communicating in the system, and consuming existing informational content [...]” (Fuchs, 2005, p.67).

It seems possible that *networked individuality* can serve as a modern source of societal reflexivity and therefore for social cohesion – a function that was formerly provided by classical mass-media and their mode of communicative integration. Socialization (“Vergesellschaftung”) is provided by the comprehensive inclusion of individualized individuals, and no longer as an audience. To be sure, this perspective is experimental and the current situation of the rapid exten-

sion of network sites such as Facebook is preliminary. But they provide exactly the stuff that social integration of a modern sociability is made of – communication – and lots of it. In this sense – and in this sense only – we may expect Facebook and other net based social networks to take over the task formerly exercised by the lead media of their time, most recently: television. The analytical approach presented in this paper is merely concerned with the question of whether highly individualized citizens of highly complex societies still generate the ability to share a common set of references to ensure follow-up communication. This does not take onboard the quality of the circulated contents. And it is here where the sociological question of cohesion departs from a communication's inquiry into quality. While the first approach is concerned with the production and reproduction of social cohesion through communication as a social process (macro-level), a communications perspective will need to ask about the kind of and the quality assurance of the communication thus produced and circulated. In our concluding section we will raise some of these issues that have hitherto been subordinated to the analysis of structure.

### **Discussion and outlook**

We want to conclude our theoretical enterprise by pointing out a couple of important holes in as well as consequences of our conception. While some are to do with more general observations of the change process currently under way, others depend more directly on the viability of our point of view.

(1) The first problem is to do with the durability of social network sites: will they prevail, how will they be further developed and will they become inclusive (and thus big) enough to provide the functionality we potentially ascribe to them? Are the networks and networks of networks *comprehensive* enough to enable a process comprising society? Taekke remains cautious stating that the problem of these networks is that the individual is the central node deciding who participates and who does not: "They [networks] are invisible to those participating, and even the participants do not receive all the messages or simply notification that others are receiving messages or services." (Taekke, 2010, p.8). This is ultimately a question of "organizational" complexity and – with regard to a means of communication – a question of the dispositive form of the medium. We are not claiming that in the future internet-based networks will be the only viable structure to organize societal flows of communication. On the contrary: other means of information and communication will co-exist, some will merge, and new ones certainly appear. Still, as it seems unlikely for modern society to revert to older forms of social integration (tribes, estates, guilds) as individualization and globalization increase, only a decentralized mode of communication is likely to unify individualized individuals within any kind of common social frame.

(2) A second uncertainty concerns the question of the material and technological structure of the backbone that stabilizes such networks. This pertains, first, to the question of potential super-gatekeepers that have privileged means of designing and managing network architectures,

such as developers, government agencies or powerful economic actors. On the level of the networked individual within its relations this also raises, second, the question of the kind of information selected for referencing. The network alone is not able to provide the criteria of relevance from within itself, nor can the individualized individual educe supra-individual criteria regarding the content (quality) of its communications. In short: what flows through the networks is still bounded to the production of other social systems (education, law, politics, family, etc.).

Since filtering is increasingly done by algorithms of “intelligent” machines (Google, etc., see boyd 2011), are we then merely replacing one set of gatekeepers with another, even more inscrutable set of gatekeepers? Facebook, for example, filters which friends’ news you get to see and which not (Lischka, 2011; Pariser, 2011). Eli Pariser calls this “the filter bubble”, because the individual unwittingly moves within a bubble whose boundaries are determined by the algorithms of Facebook, Amazon, Twitter & Co. filtering what kind of information and communication we encounter in our daily online life. Thus an algorithm defines how the individuals interact with their network and subsequently influence their source of sociality significantly. We are reminded of the ordering effects non-human agents can have for society in the sense of ANT (Latour 2007, 1992; Law 1992; for a discussion with regard to the *public sphere*, see Gerhards & Schäfer 2010).

(3) The above problem is closely related to another and often neglected circumstance related to new media and their uncertain economic development. Much of the content provided and linked widely through individual referencing stems from professional media production. Articles, videos, streams and blogs are pointed to that depend on the economic cycles and professional ethos of the “old media”. While much of what has emerged out of the new possibilities of decentralized cultural production has enriched us and user created content (and labour) plays an influential role in network society we cannot make do without these services and expertise. The free floating content that makes up the pool of referable information still mainly consists of professional content, i.e. information provided by public service or commercial news corporations (e.g. the websites of quality papers, public broadcasting stations, government agencies and commercial as well as non-commercial organization). There is the danger of a drying out of these resources if the willingness of payment declines. We might currently live through a transitional period where the merits of the declining media economy provide the feasibility of the current situation. But this need not be a sustainable state of affairs: as professional journalistic services disappear due to lacking economic feasibility, we might no longer have much to reference in our far-reaching networks. This again brings up the issue of “quality” since the new referencing media borrow much of their credibility from the old ones, just like they rely on them for the impact of their own stories. So far, the old media still serve as the bottleneck for new-media information; for many, they remain centers of attention and thus the main sources of issuing stories and topics.

(4) Also within media-economy falls the fourth question. With the advent of Facebook and others as the central networking platforms within the emerging manifestation of networked individ-

uality the classic question of “who owns the media” is revived. If indeed online networks become central societal integration devices, the fact that they are privately owned and ultimately managed as commercial enterprises means that society relies on a private infrastructure for some of its central reproductive processes. Social cohesion, to some extent, then, is privately owned (York 2011). This raises some important questions (while we also need to acknowledge, that the public has always relied on privately owned and often commercial media for its communication; the free press, e.g., has throughout its history been mostly organized along the lines of profit driven institutions): Is the function of social network sites as it is described and hypothesized in this paper as important as the free press and media in the traditional system for a democracy or society? If this was the case, must we take into consideration the need of publicly owned social network sites which could ensure neutrality and quality?

(5) This economic question is accompanied by another unsolved issue: modern democratic societies offered special (usually constitutional) protection for those members and institutions of society that made it their task to observe and critique it. Journalists and their media are protected under these classic rights, but Facebook is not. As old categorizations and nomenclatures crumble against the backdrop of classificatory uncertainty we need to establish new ground rules for the freedom of speech, the freedom of (mediated) assembly, the freedom to have access to high-quality information and to create and innovate in a growingly corporate culture of patents and copyrights.



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