The Role of Social Networks in the Cyberspace Age: The Concept of Personhood

Cyberspace Social Network and the Reconfiguration of the Space-Time Continuum in the Human Condition

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Theme: History

The social network is the third-wave (1) redefinition of the concept of society via the highest stage of technological evolution achieved so far in the present era which is also known as cyberspace age. It is the actual realization of what Marshall McLuhan calls "the global village" in his **The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man** *published in 1962 (2) and* **Understanding Media: The Extension of Man** *published in 1964 (3). It is a transcendence of space-time, not that our sense of space and time is vanished but is likewise redefined as society has passed through the same process of reconfiguration. For one individual person to connect with another, geographical location is immaterial. Someone in the US may have a live virtual conversation right now with another in Ukraine in real-time. This is virtual reality. The reality of the shrunken world figuratively spoken of some decades ago is an absolute actuality here and now.*

Redefined along with the concept of society and the space-time sense is the concept of personhood. The human person, in the context of cyberspace, has been essentialized while the physicality of being is set aside. It makes some real philosophical sense in a way as it has been classically held that the core of humanness is fundamentally defined in non-material/non-physical terms and hence a distinguishing factor that separates the human being from the animals.

It is our material/physical reality that links us with the animal world. It is, however, our self-consciousness, creativity, and spirituality that put the demarcation line between our humanity and the animal world. In cyberspace, such a non-physical/non-material core is magnified and has redefined personhood as an instance of dematerialization. The human person is essentialized in a dematerialized state of affairs. While converging on a social network (e.g., *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *WhatsApp*, *LinkedIn*, *Tumblr*, *Pinterest, etc.*), human physicality is a secondary consideration and what matters to a large extent is virtual presence manifest in the articulation of thoughts and expression of feelings as well.

The ontological configuration of cyberspace or virtual-world reality is all in the mind. It is the "post-modern" realization of the subjective-idealist theorizing of the Irish philosopher of the early modern period, George Berkeley.

> "In terms of the digital technology of our contemporary world which Alvin Toffler calls the ´third wave´ era, the Berkeleyan paradigm is closest to the notion of ´virtual reality´. . . .
>
> "Berkeley´s conception of reality denies the existence of matter. He simply

believes that matter, as this concept is used in physics, does not exist. . . . .

"Berkeley´s reality—the world we experience around us on a daily basis—is virtual reality. In this reality, the ´computer´ that processes data is God whose power is far more immense than what we limited humans could come up with directly absorbing and processing all our experiences and sensations in our minds. We, in fact, actually explore and move around in the world that God has created in the same manner and capability that we can explore and move around in the Spatio-temporal milieu of a man-made virtual reality. Yet both these worlds—in the Berkeleyan sense—are nothing but illusory. Reality, therefore, rests alone on one´s experience of them and on the power that processes information to generate them." (4)

Virtual reality in its post-Berkeleyan rendering is no longer particularly concerned with the denial of material/physical reality but more especially concentrated on the importance of the mental, dematerialized aspect of being. In other words, cyberspace ontology capitalizes on the de-emphasis or de-signification of spatio-temporal materiality. Cyberspace is, therefore, a landscape of boundless possibilities that stretches on in self-generating dimensions whose regulating factor is the infinite flexibility of the imaginative and creative expanse of the human mind.

A social network, whose operational arena is cyberspace, is a dematerialized system of human interactive energies that forge relationships regardless of locational instant. Facebook as a case in point is a social network where people can relate with each other without having necessarily been acquainted physically, i.e., as warm bodies concretely present at a certain space-time point called paramount reality. In fact, friendships ranging from the most superficial type to the most intimate are established, nurtured, and sustained even without necessarily getting into an actual face-to-face encounter in the so-called paramount reality. Information from the most banal to the most essential in terms of personal or social importance is exchanged, disseminated, shared, discussed, and debated on in a social network. A pressing issue can get viral online through a social network and draw the attention of prospective advocates of different degrees of commitment and detractors of varying levels of dissatisfaction.

A social network is a post-personal conduit that is capable to yield the most detailed information or hide the most guarded facts about individual persons depending on the degree of their relational intimacy with or level of impersonal alienation from each other. Its functional base is in the hands of individual operators engaged within agreed-upon parameters wherein one does not only have the power to control her/his limitations but also the possibilities that could be triggered by the degree of her/his openness towards the other. At a certain point, social networking is a power game.

A social network is also utilized as an effective tactical channel of profitable business or commercial enterprises, both small-scale and big-time, to advertise/endorse/promote goods and services on a virtual person-to-person deal where travel time and transportation cost are non-issues as far as salesman-customer meet-up is concerned. This is post-modern salesmanship where even a well-furnished business office with an actual location address is a thing of the past. In this case, a social network makes a business appointment less businesslike and more personal. Online deals via social networks bridge the gap between, and hence dissolve, the traditionally held personal-formal divide in interactive engagement.

Social networking in many instances is a potent medium that raises issues and advocacies

of political import on a local, national even global scale. It is an effective tool to upgrade the awareness of stakeholders in a particular setting by way of substantial and detailed information dissemination. A social network is an operative agency to rally people to decisive action based on principled platforms aimed to effect an imminent event to change a social order. As a political tool, it could be reasonably inferred that social networking is both creative and destructive. It should not, therefore, be underestimated as a basic means able to topple a government and inaugurate a new one.

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Notes

(1) cf. Alvin Toffler´s Third Wave . . . http://www.gobookee.org/alvin-toffler-third-wave/

(2) http://www.scribd.com/doc/87539506/the-Gutenberg-Galaxy-the-Making-of-Typographic-Man

(3) http://beforebefore.net/80f/s11/media/mcluhan.pdf

(4) From Ruel F. Pepa´s ¨The Matrix Movie Series: A Berkeleyan Affirmation of Reality¨ pp. 171-173 in **Introduction to Philosophy: Readings in Academic Philosophy (with Logic)** . . . http://issuu.com/ruel56/docs/intro_to_philo

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