

The Virtual Network City and the Long-Tail of Social Media Alienation



Virtualno omrežno mesto in dolgi rep odtujenosti
zaradi družbenih medijev

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ABSTRACT

Castells' fundamental first volume of his Information Age trilogy entitled *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) significantly overlooks the social phenomena that comprise and lead back to insularisation in online networks and abroad. As the call for this special issue notes, "the world we live in today is characterised by high levels of interconnectivity, codependence, and overwhelming amounts of information", which "shapes our desires" and "evoke[s] ideas of isolation, remoteness, and detachment from everyday worries." (Oroz and Simonič 2023) Unfortunately, these often unconscious desires to disconnect from McLuhan's celebrated "global village" and Jameson's unsavory "junkspace", as *repressed* desires, may manifest as anti-social sentiments that develop longitudinally under the conditions of what I theorise as the virtual network city.

KEYWORDS: network city, social media, alienation, insularisation, digital environment

IZVLEČEK

Castellsov temeljni prvi del trilogije Information Age (Informacijska doba) z naslovom *The Rise of the Network Society / Vzpon družbe omrežij* (1996) pomenljivo spregleda družbene pojave, ki vključujejo in vodijo k izolaciji zaradi rabe spletnih omrežij. Kot je zapisano v vabilu k oddaji prispevkov za to posebno številko, je »za svet, v katerem danes živimo, značilna visoka stopnja medsebojne povezanosti, soodvisnosti in ogromna količina informacij«, kar »oblikuje naše želje« in »vzbuja ideje o izoliranosti, oddaljenosti in odmaknjenosti od vsakodnevnih skrbi« (Oroz and Simonič 2023). Žal se te pogosto nezavedne želje po odklopu

od McLuhanove slavne »globalne vasi« in Jamesonovega neprijetnega »junkspacea«, kot *potlačenih* želja, lahko manifestirajo kot antisocialna čustva, ki se razvijajo v okviru tega, kar teoretiziram kot virtualno omrežno mesto.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: omrežno mesto, družbeni mediji, odtujenost, izolacija, digitalno okolje

INTRODUCTION

Are cities inevitable? I don't intend this in the sense of some sort of deterministic teleology of human nature like a modernist grand narrative as Marx or Francis Fukuyama might have it. I refer to the current historical conditions of post-industrialism, mass global populations, and digital network societies. It has been more than two decades since the recognition of the tectonic importance of Manuel Castells' fundamental first volume of his Information Age trilogy entitled *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) as well as since the nearly contemporaneous advent of the Web 2.0, which gave rise to the ubiquitous forms of social media with which we are familiar today. In that time, a full generation of digital natives have come of age in an era that has never been absent of these forms of social media. In 2010 Castells writes: "The constitution of a new culture based on multimodal communication and digital information processing creates a generational divide between those born before the Internet Age (1969) and those who grew up being digital" (Castells 2010: xviii). However, I argue that Castells significantly overlooks the social phenomena that comprise and lead back to insularisation in online networks and abroad.

The problem in building virtual societies around a capitalist-society determined narcissistic self-commodification that occurs in social media arenas is the long-tail of alienation in which the utopian potential of an originally democratic internet is subsumed into inevitable insularisation. In terms of the repressed social desire to disconnect from the information overload of perpetual connection to the network city, these alienating narcissistic behaviours emerge as slow-mounting negative micro-responses that cumulate over time and promote a propensity to disconnect, either literally or emotionally, from even long-lived friends and family connections that would have remained intact under different conditions. As the call for this special issue notes, "it is important to recognise that isolation still has a pull that captures our imaginations, invades our daydreams, and shapes our desires. For many people, romantic notions of secluded and remote places are still alluring utopias that evoke ideas of isolation, remoteness, and detachment from everyday worries" (Oroz and Simonič 2023). Unfortunately, these often unconscious desires to disconnect from McLuhan's celebrated "global village" and Jameson's unsavory "junkspace", as *repressed* desires, may manifest as anti-social sentiments that develop longitudinally under the conditions of what I call "network cities". This phenomenon gives rise to a specific formation of "oases of different temporal rhythms that emerge amidst the hustle and bustle of [network] cities" and that float like islands of insularisation in a sea of interactive media activity, separate from the wider ocean of the web while also remaining globally contiguous with it. Network cities are no longer strictly physical communities tethered to geography and constrained by proximity, but virtual/

digital ones that emerge between the broad network society that Castells describes and the smaller network communities that he observes. This phenomenon provides an opportunity to apply these insights to a longitudinal analysis of both the progressive and alienating effects of social media that emerge in these insularised city “islands”.

Arguably, Castells’ contribution to understanding the contemporary state of political economy is as important as Marx’s in his day, while it suffers from some of the same shortcomings in its broad political economic perspective and from the economic determinism that cultural studies has been wont to mitigate. For all of its insight, his some five-hundred-page tome and the other two books in his trilogy do not go far enough in the direction of understanding the structures that make up the very network society he postulated. Castells does not make any significant gesture towards theorizing or defining these factions using the useful metaphor of the material urban city to understand its digital counterpart. Indeed, a further distinction is that the network city emerges as entirely autonomous of the contiguous geographic parameters that tethers them to economically motivated flows in the material world, although it operates in an immanent relationship to the so-called real world. The network city comprises a phenomenon of virtual social homophily (rather than strictly economic determinants) and is characterised by the flows of social harmony and alienation that are carried into the digital realm from the material world. The very nature of what we understand as a city is experienced very differently for those born into the digital virtual world Castells describes, and the new organisation of time, space, and social hierarchies within the network society have consequences in both the digital and material social realms.

In summarizing the import of Castells’ text, the Wikipedia page surveying his contributions quite accurately reports that Castells’ theory of the Information Age argues that “our physical selves exist in different places and experience different cultures, but the mind has essentially migrated into the world of the internet and the television” (Wikipedia n.d.). Castells claims that the “communication system” of the “information society”

is a system in which reality itself (that is, people’s material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience. [...] [I]t absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience. (Castells 2010: 404)

Summarily, Castells concludes that “[I]ocalities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographical meaning, and reintegrated into functional networks, or into image collages, inducing a space of flows that substitutes for the space of places” (Castells 2010: 406). According to Castells, “[t]he global city is not a place, but a process. A process by which centers of production and consumption of advanced services, and their ancillary local societies, are connected in a global network” (Castells 2010: 416). However, while Castells offers compelling economic, historical, and nationalist political evidence to support his theses, he often falls short of offering a nuanced micro-perspective on the social politics and organisations that characterise the nascent network communities he observes.

Moreover, in his second volume, *The Power of Identity* (1997), for example, he argues that even “cultural communes [...] [work] on raw materials from history, geography, language, and environment. So, they are constructed, but materially constructed, around reactions and projects historically/geographically determined” (Castells 2011: 65). Indeed, as much as Castells offers astonishingly prescient understandings of the virtual/digital arena of network communities, his descriptions remain tethered to the geographic nodes of flows, mostly economically determined, that he theorises.

In this regard, with respect to his more nuanced theorisations noted above, the earlier insights (or pessimistic apocalyptic prognostications) of Jean Baudrillard are instructive. Baudrillard outlines at the beginning of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) that the virtual map of reality has come to supersede the actual landscape so that human experience is lost within a virtual reality. As Castells extrapolates: “Thus there is no separation between ‘reality’ and symbolic representation. [...] [W]hat is historically specific to the new communication system, organized around the electronic integration of all communication modes [...] is not its inducement of virtual reality but the construction of real virtuality” (Castells 2010: 403). Similarly, with specific reference to the notion of a city, Baudrillard discusses “the disintegration of the city itself, which is transplanted outside the city and treated as a hyperreal model, as the nucleus of a metropolitan area based on synthesis that no longer has anything to do with a city” (Baudrillard 1994: 78). Baudrillard is still, in fact, referring to the material world, but he begins down a theoretical path now widely understood as an entirely virtual “hyper-reality”. Indeed, in turn echoing DeBord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Baudrillard states that “[t]he social, the social phantasmagoria, is now nothing but a special effect, obtained by the design of participating networks converging in emptiness under the spectral image” (Baudrillard 1994: 107). Beneath the hyper-pessimistic hyperbole of Baudrillard’s text are the beginnings of some deeply insightful understandings of the coming virtual community that can exist solely in cyber-space.

Under these conditions, Castells explains that such communities exist “by their pervasiveness, their multifaceted decentralization, and their flexibility. They sprawl as colonies of micro-organisms” (Castells 2010: 385). It is only logical that some of these pervasive communities of hyper-reality should collapse entirely into the virtual/digital realm. Again, with explicit reference to the phenomenon of the city, Castells states that

the development of these loosely interrelated ex-urban constellations emphasizes the functional interdependence of different units and processes in a given urban system over very long distances, minimizing the role of territorial contiguity, and maximizing the communication networks in all their dimensions. (Castells 2010: 64)

Castells argues for the “existence of material supports of simultaneity that do not rely on physical contiguity, since this is precisely the case of the dominant social practices of the Information Age” and concludes that “the network of communication is the fundamental spatial configuration: places do not disappear, but their logic and their meaning become absorbed in the network” (Castells 2010: 442).

From this point of departure, I attempt to theorise the digital city, a virtual urban organisation, as a way of understanding the social, capitalistic, and ecological consequences of the exclusively digital side of the global network society. My thesis defines the “net-city” as networked both within and outside its borders. Just as power dynamics, or at least class hierarchies, are striated or rhizomatic within and between real physical cities, so too are they online. In the material world, New York is cosmopolitan while L.A. is neo-vogue, but neither are autonomous. Similarly, Facebook might be considered something of a digital “retirement community” for ostensibly older participants while Insta is a neo-vogue community, but there are netizens that belong to both, cross-overs. Here are echoes of Raymond Williams’ cultural categories of “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,’ [which] both explains how dominant social structures maintain their dominance, while at the same time other social groups and in fact individuals can contradict or subvert those cultures” (mrjerrero 2016: n.p.). More practically, just as consumerism has been a market-oriented determiner of social status in capitalist society, invisible algorithms are less democratically slicing up the digital social environment by political bias more than by mere consumerism (but always in the service of advertising and the audience commodity). Netizens become members of social groups that expand outward by familiarity with others as they would into the social arena of the material world but that remain socially insularised based on increasing levels of homophily.

THE NETWORK CITY

Early in the updated preface to his text, Castells offers an interpenetrating definition that presents a useful starting point for theorising the network city:

[C]ities were born from the concentration of the functions of command and control, of coordination, of exchange of goods and services, of diverse and interactive social life. In fact, cities are, from their onset, communication systems, increasing the chances of communication through physical contiguity. [...] On the other hand, social practices as communication practices also took place at a distance through transportation and messaging. [...] This new form of spatiality is what I conceptualized as the space of flows: the material support of simultaneous social practices communicated at a distance. It [...] relies on the development of localities as nodes of these communication networks, and the connectivity of activities located in these nodes [...] by information flows. (Castells 2010: xxxi–xxxii)

Castells goes on to argue that “a decentralization of activities, residence, and services with mixed land uses, and an undefined boundary of functionality [...] extends the territory of this nameless city to wherever its networks go” (Castells 2010: xxxii). Castells states that

[w]hat is important in the location of advanced services is the micro-network of the high-level decision-making process, based on face-to-face relationships, linked to a macro-network of decision implementation, which is based on electronic communication networks. In other words, meeting face to face to make financial or political deals is still indispensable. (Castells 2010: xxxvi)

Castells refers to these geographic locations as “nodes” (Castells 2010: xxxviii) through which economic activity circulates.

This materially tethered understanding of the city, however, is not, in fact, absolute. In Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* (2008), tellingly subtitled “How Change Happens When People Come Together”, he explains. “Now that we have ridiculously easy group-formation, [...] structure is relaxed, and the result is that organizations that assume geography as a core organizing principle, even ones that have been operating that way for centuries, are now facing challenges to that previously bedrock principle” (Shirky 2008: 155). More recently, one of the great insights achieved out of the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic is that face-to-face meetings are decreasingly necessary across a wide range of social and vocational activities. Castells counters that “[o]ur societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the self” (Castells 2010: 3). However, this understanding may not be universally accurate. A network community brings the net and the self together outside of the economic determinants that Castells surveys but alongside the rise of the non-vocational identity constructions that he observes. He explains that

few people in the world feel identified with the global, cosmopolitan culture that populates the global networks and becomes the worship of the mega-node elites. In contrast, most people feel a strong regional or local identity. [...] The contradictory relationship between meaning and power is manifested by a growing disassociation between what I conceptualized as the space of flows and the space of places. Although there are places in the space of flows and flows in the space of places, cultural and social meaning is defined in place terms, while functionality, wealth, and power are defined in terms of flows. (Castells 2010: xxxix)

However, it is just as evident that the distinction between the phenomenon of flows and the materiality of places is collapsing, more on an inter-personal and social level than on an economic one. Iain Chamber’s theorisation of postmodernity highlights this fact:

Post modernism, whatever form its intellectualizing might take, has been fundamentally anticipated in the metropolitan cultures of the last twenty years: among the electronic signifiers of cinema, television and video, in recording studios and record players, in fashion and youth styles, in all those sounds, images and diverse histories that are daily mixed, recycled and ‘scratched’ together on that giant screen which is the contemporary city (cited in Harvey 1991: 60–61).

Indeed, while the network city has overlaps and connections to the material world, it can exist as an autonomous digital phenomenon in its own right.

Castells admits that “[v]irtual communities seem to be stronger than observers usually give them credit for. There is substantial evidence of reciprocal supportiveness on the Net, even between users with weak ties to each other” (Castells 2011: 388). Martin Lister et al. add that “[g]iven that our everyday and ‘common-sense’ understandings of community have at least in part been determined by spatial relationships and a sense of belonging to a place, then the metaphor extends into thinking about belonging with one another in particular ‘spaces’ in the non-place of cyberspace” (Lister et al. 2003: 172–173). Bertha Chin argues that

[i]f [Benedict] Anderson's [imagined] community members used media and cultural artefacts such as newspapers and novels to maintain a sense of connectedness with one another, then members of Internet communities made use of computers and the various networks and software applications such as the World Wide Web and Internet browsers to mediate and maintain their connection to one another in the space of newsgroups, mailing lists, chat forums and social networking sites that double as communities. (Chin 2010: 122–123)

Chin extends this insight from Mary Chayko's argument that such community members "maintain their connectedness mentally and may even exist without any of their members ever meeting in literal space, as in an Internet community" (Chayko 2002: 41). Castells adds that "[t]he web allowed for groupings of interests and projects in the Net, overcoming the time-costly chaotic browsing of the pre-www Internet. On the basis of these groupings, individuals and organizations were able to interact meaningfully on what has become, literally, a world wide web of individualized, interactive communication" (Castells 2010: 383). Again, however, Castells does not go much beyond "groupings" to describe this strictly virtual community.

Otherwise, Castells spends much of his text outlining how this society comes into existence through already factionalised digital communities. In contrast, "Barry Wellman has shown in a stream of consistent findings over the years that what has emerged in advanced societies is what he calls 'personal communities': 'an individual's social network of informal, interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties. [...] Both group communities and personal communities operate on-line as well as off-line'" (Castells 2010: 387). To this, Bertha Chin adds:

Rather than just continuing the assumption that fan and/or fan fiction communities are formed as one general, homogenous community that appears to unify the various fan practitioners (fan fiction authors, fan video producers, fan artists, and the like), [...] smaller, fringe groups [...] have dispersed from major ones to form sets of new and differential communities. (Chin 2010: 155)

From these understandings it is clear that the online environment has become one of significant interpersonal interactions and broad individual migrations from within the great community of the internet.

However, even the term "community" no longer captures the breadth of "urbanisation" that certain networks have attracted. The sheer size of some online social media memberships defies the grassroots communal nature of the very idea of "community". Eli Pariser explains, for example, "When I joined MoveOn in 2001, we had about five hundred thousand U.S. members. Today, there are 5 million members – making it one of the largest advocacy groups in America, significantly larger than the NRA" (Pariser 2011: 8). On the social level, there are even celebrities within the network cities, either social media or fan-fic superstars who have garnered an online following, or real-life celebrities epitomised in George Takei's online Facebook group. According to Kirsten Pullen, "celebrities from all forms of media engage in live, interactive, online discussions with their fans, especially when promoting a new film, special television programme, new season, or music release" (Pullen 2004: 84). Ian

Bogost indicates that politically-motivated interactions also find social life in the network city: “Blogs and meetups also take advantage of the spatial property of the computer, creating coherent environments for voters to explore. Meetups even span the gap between virtual and physical spaces” (Bogost 2010: 124). However, organised state politics are of little relevance in the network city because they are anarchist in that there is no formal governance (beyond the commercial political economy of media platform ownership) and because they emerge relatively spontaneously. In any case, the scope and migratory possibilities of membership in these social media is better understood as a full-fledged city replete with alienation and anonymity more than any sort of cohesive or socially unified community.

In order to better understand the dynamics and constitution of the network city, a useful point of departure is the notion of concentric circles of social media “ties” indicated by Barry Wellman’s findings cited above. Robin Dunbar’s “magic number” of a maximum of 500 social relations is the theoretical correlative upon which Wellman’s findings are predicated. However, as Dunbar goes on to explain, this number is only one in a series of social “layers” that is reflected in online social media.

In humans, these layers have values that approximate 5, 15, 50 and 150, and extend beyond this in at least two further layers to 500 and 1500. The first three layers have been identified in several online datasets and ... appear to be a consequence of a constraint on available social time combined with a relationship between time invested in a relationship and its quality (as rated in terms of emotional closeness). The two outermost layers (at 500 and 1500) correspond, respectively, to acquaintances (people we would not consider as personal friends or family, but know well enough to have a conversation with) and to the number of faces we can put names to. (Dunbar 2016: 2)

However, this concentric circles theory is problematically quantitative and only superficially considers the nuances of the social composition. Castells reports how “current research suggests that North Americans usually have more than one thousand interpersonal ties. Only half a dozen of them are intimate and no more than fifty are significantly strong. Yet, taken together a person’s other 950+ ties are important sources of information, support, companionship and sense of belonging” (Castells 2010: 389) – a digital imagined community. I propose a hypothesis that extends Dunbar’s magic number, and even his outer limit of one thousand five hundred, into a much wider network city where even weaker ties comprising a mere cumulation of “followers” rather than any sort of real social connection come into contact.

The components that comprise the network city can be quite arbitrarily selected from any one of a number of urban constructs, but almost any that is chosen has an allegorical corollary. If we understand “suburbs” in the material city to be on the outskirts of the urban centre, heavily residential, populated mostly by a neo-liberal middle class with well-maintained lawns and gentrified post-modern clean lines of residential landscaping and property division, then the network city equivalent is the cumulation of well-curated social media pages with tasteful and conservative meme posts visited by a specific fifty to one hundred and fifty population of homophilic “friends” with limited social media interaction beyond that arena. The material downtown core, replete with corporate skyscrapers and “boojie” food services outlets to serve them, finds its network city equivalent in edifices of profes-

sional pages and groups such as the corporate intranets sustained by university communities or those comprising LinkedIn, often connected to well-curated and/or paid marketing, and frequently complemented by gentrified food blogs. The industrial district might be understood as a population of “how to” blogs and YouTube videos, interactive hardware store websites, and Amazon. The shopping malls would not be Amazon, actually, because the conceit of malls is generally organised around ambulation in a crowded physical space, even if anonymously, whereas Amazon tends to be an isolated shopping experience (although it is slowly incorporating interactive lists and other connectivity affordances). The equivalent of the shopping mall is better located in shopping on Facebook, where all your connections can witness the purchasing activity in the stream and then take part by either following suit or commenting. The inner-city projects are, of course, Instagram. This list is subjective and not exhaustive, and one could argue for an endless array of material city phenomena and the network city counterpart for each.

In the online arena, the network city does not have limits beyond socially determined ones. And yet, the network city is not global. The network is fragmented into cities by broad material cultures that align most significantly with nationalist-linguistic differences. “Rubert de Ventos [...] has suggested [...] the emergence of national identity through the historical interaction of [a] series of factors: primary factors, such as ethnicity, territory, language, religion, and the like; generative factors, such as the development of communications and technology, the formation of cities” (Castells 2011: 31–32). Moreover, according to Castells, “language, and particularly a fully developed language, is a fundamental attribute of self-recognition, and of the establishment of an invisible national boundary less arbitrary than territoriality, and less exclusive than ethnicity” (Castells 2011: 52). For example, all of China, especially with its xenophobic clones of Western media phenomena – Bilibili is YouTube, WeChat is WhatsApp, etc. – obviously comprises its own network cities. So too does Japan with its advanced digital technologies and its linguistic monoculture. Most interesting are the Russian network cities which, for reasons of linguistic proximities, include members from otherwise hostile factions such as Ukraine, both geographically centred and in diaspora. While ethnicity can be masked in the virtual realm of avatar identities, linguistic facility cannot. And like real cities, a network city is criss-crossed by anonymity, community, family proximity, variation, and gentrification.

The architecture of the network city is especially visible on Instagram or Pinterest, where the webpage/newsfeed of a specific individual is populated with enough “infrastructure” – memes, recipes, selfies, weblinks of interest, updates, etc. – that it becomes the virtual geographic centre of a city of “weak ties”. In the same way, everyone in a city, on a scale from completely anonymous to close friends, mutually recognises the downtown or city centre (which they either intentionally approach or actively avoid). However, in this new digital urban construction, there can certainly be more than one downtown core, subdivisions if you will, and rather than being organised around economic considerations (the office tower and the shopping arcade), it is structured around more social and individualised forms of identity construction. Castells concludes that “[m]ultimedia, as the new system was hastily

labeled, extend the realm of electronic communication into the whole domain of [social] life, from home to work, from schools to hospitals, from entertainment to travel” (Castells 2010: 391, 394). Within the architecture of the network city are, of course, the traditional edifices of capitalism, now moved online.

Tele-banking is being imposed upon customers by both incentives and penalties from the banks. On-line shopping is exploding, not in opposition to the shopping malls, but in connection with them, although some traditional stores (for example, bookstores, record stores, perhaps car dealers) will be either phased out or transformed by on-line competition. Universities are slowly but surely entering an era of articulation between personal interface and on-line teaching. Personal communication by e-mail, the most usual CMC activity outside work, is growing exponentially. (Castells 2010: 391)

However, Castells argues that “the growing importance of on-line transactions does not imply the disappearance of shopping centers and retail stores. In fact, the trend is the opposite” (Castells 2010: 426). Nevertheless, this observation may only be based in the phenomenon of the real numbers expansion of the global population. Today we witness the significant concentration of corporate mega shopping in the synecdoches of Walmart and Amazon respectively. Baudrillard’s era of a culture bereft by the corporate shopping plaza, the sort of “junkspace” borrowed by Fredric Jameson in “Future City” from Rem Koolhaas (Jameson 2003: 69), dominates bricks-and-mortar retail sales, and even individual franchise outlets for such seemingly insuperable commercial giants as McDonald’s or Tim Horton’s are shallow husks of their glory days. Especially post-Covid there are blocks and blocks of derelict small or independent businesses that did not survive; all but the most resilient are gone, such as the non-profit Age UK used stores (a national chain in its own right), or something with an always guaranteed clientele such as a local pub that survives on alcohol addictions and as a social hub for many rather than merely a commodity output venue.

From this perspective, even slower migrations than the ones that Pariser describes are realised longitudinally. In a process that mirrors the mass urbanisation migrations of the 20th century, Facebook had a thriving community of over a billion users in the 2010s. In 2024, it reached a milestone of over three billion users and stands out as the most used online social media in existence, dwarfing even China’s WeChat with less than 1.5 billion users in 2024. Nevertheless, while Facebook was a thriving metropolis in the 2010s, even with its excessive growth, and perhaps even because of it, it begins to become a city of decay as populations migrate their use habits to younger and more modern communities like Instagram or TikTok. While Facebook’s membership is large, its comparative usage is questionable and remains popular in this regard primarily with an older generation of social media users. Eventually Facebook will need to rejuvenate its infrastructure and industry, or become a ghost town. One can only imagine the volume of digital detritus left behind in such abandoned cities – oceans of obsolete email addresses, defunct links and webpages, abandoned user names and passwords, and billions of gigabytes of photos and videos lost in the “web” of the past.

The social migrations made available in the network city are tellingly untethered from geographic constraints. Clay Shirky outlines one example in which “[i]n 2007 several

conservative parishes of the Episcopalian church in Virginia voted to break off from the American church in protest over the ordination of an openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson” (Shirky 2008: 154). The inability of the traditional church to control the insubordination and subsequent exodus is exemplary of much larger social and less cohesive social organisation than the term “community”, even the “great” ones, can sustain.

Instead of forming their own break-away church, though, the parishes joined the Nigerian church, whose Bishop, Peter Akinola, is deeply antagonistic to homosexuals’ involvement in the church in any form. The idea that a church in Fairfax, Virginia, could simply declare itself part of another diocese on a different continent upends centuries of tradition. [...] What the Virginia diocese has done is not to relocate but to de-locate. By announcing that Virginia churches are part of a Nigerian diocese, in contravention of all geographic sense, the Virginians are doing more than voting their conscience on the issue of acceptance of gays; they are challenging geography as an organizing principle. (Shirky 2008: 154–155)

With the advent of Zuckerberg’s Metaverse and other such fully realised VR-generated “cities”, whose implementation and potential popularity is as yet unmeasurable, it remains possible that even the urban experiences of ambulating a shopping arcade or visiting friends “face-to-face” could be entirely uncoupled from geographic contiguity and partially subsumed into the digital arena.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND INSULARISATION

So how is this understanding of the virtual community valuable in understanding new mediated forms of social alienation? I argue that when these virtual constructs are understood as network cities that foster connections, however superficial, well beyond the outer ring of weak ties theorised by Dunbar, it offers a better understanding of social flows within the network cities. In her summary of cinema that is symptomatic of the zeitgeist, Kristen Whissel references a spate of films that

thematize anxieties about the relationship between the individual and the community endemic to an era defined by processes of globalization and new digital technologies that create new patterns of (bodily and informational) migration and diffusion along with new group formations that link collectivity to connectivity and, in the process, make and remake ideas about the relationship between the individual and the community. (Whissel 2010: 109)

Summarily, contra the utopian Chicago School’s understanding of the “great community” (Baran and Davis 2015: 306), Eli Pariser, in his theorisation of “filter bubbles” explains that “the era of civic connection [...] dreamed about hasn’t come. Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another’s point of view, but instead we’re more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we’re being offered parallel but separate universes” (Pariser 2011: 8). But why is this so?

Broadly, “[u]nder such new conditions” as what I have theorised as the network city, “civil societies shrink and disarticulate because there is no longer continuity between the log-

ic of power-making in the global network and the logic of association and representation in specific societies and cultures” (Castells 2011: 11). Chin adds that “[e]arly discourse on Internet communities tends to be polarised between the celebratory creation of new communities ... and the lack of obligation these very communities promote (Postman [1993] cited in Chin 2010: 121). Perhaps most importantly, Chin argues that, on the one hand, online “interaction can provide a way of understanding how individuals imagine themselves as communities; but on the other, interpersonal interaction can also shed light on how communities fracture as boundaries are shaped and formed while members negotiate the values, rituals and norms of their community” (Chin 2010: 124). Chin takes this insight from Lynn Cherny:

Boundaries indicate who is inside and who is outside a community; they distinguish the members from those they differ from or wish to be seen as different from. These boundaries are usually in the minds of the members and those excluded from the group [...]. Boundaries are often symbolic, dependent on abstractions like friendship, rivalry, jealousy, similarity. (Cherny 1999: 254)

And again, with specific reference to the city, Castells reiterates that “[o]ne of the oldest debates in urban sociology refers to the loss of *community* as a result of *urbanization*” (Castells 2011: 60). In the realm of the online network city, these phenomena are decidedly borrowed from the material world and amplified in the digital arena.

I theorise a long-tail of social alienation that emerges in tandem with the network city to understand some of the ways these digital communities have given rise to a very particular kind of social alienation and homophily-based community insularisation that arises from responses to the phenomena of social narcissism and idealised virtual identity that social media tends to generate under the conditions of negativity bias. Within these homophilic network cities emerge nuanced long-term alienating effects that are in some ways the result of the excessive social proximity brought on by the social media comprising Marshall McLuhan’s “global village”. Castells makes mention of McLuhan’s notion of the global village in a number of instances in the service of articulating network flows. Castells argues that “unlike the mass media of the McLuhan Galaxy, they have technologically and culturally embedded properties of interactivity and individualization” (Castells 2010: 385). However, he is astute to ask, “do these potentialities translate into new patterns of communication? What are the cultural attributes emerging from the process of electronic interaction?” (Castells 2010: 385). The questions have broad answers, but in the context of the global village, Rem Koolhaas’s critique of the material post-modern city is instructive, an arena littered with what he refers to as “junkspace”: “Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends. [...] A fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed” (Koolhaas 2001: 176). In the relentless connection imposed by social media, this proximity can engender long-term alienating effects.

Under the conditions of the network city, a number of determining phenomena emerge, the most broadly theorised by Paul Rozin and Edward Poyzman as the “negativity bias”. “The *negativity bias* is a cognitive bias that results in adverse events having a more

significant impact on our psychological state than positive events” (Pilat and Krastev 2024). Alexandra Siegel reports that “[h]ateful users are seventy-one times more likely to retweet other hateful users and suspended users are eleven times more likely to retweet other suspended users, compared to non-hateful users” (Siegel 2020: 63). In the online realm, “[b]ecause of our predisposition to focus on and scrutinize the negative, posts that express anger or hostility grab our attention and inform our perceptions. By nature, we extrapolate and then use these negative impressions to cast future judgment” (Pilat and Krastev 2024). This phenomenon comes into sharp focus with the phenomenon of the “disinhibition effect” theorised by John Suler. Broadly, Suler explains the ways that the preconscious illusion of anonymity and/or distance prompts online users to relax their codes of social propriety.

In an increasingly intimate e-mail relationship, people may quickly reveal personal information, then later regret their self-disclosures – feeling exposed, vulnerable, or shameful. An excessively rapid, even false intimacy may develop, which later destroys the relationship when one or both people feel overwhelmed, anxious, or disappointed. (Suler 2004: 321–322)

Suler argues that there can be therapeutically positive results of the disinhibition effect, but in concert with negativity bias, it is generally understood to manifest undesirable social consequences.

Furthermore, amongst his three types of identity construction, Castells defines “project identity” as occurring “when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure” (Castells 2011: 8). Apropos, Kaja Silverman offers a psychoanalytically-inflected argument for the specular propensity of identity construction under the repressed perception of the gaze of the super-ego (Silverman 2013: 133). Under the conditions of late capitalism related to Guy DeBord’s understanding of the commodified “Society of the Spectacle”, in tandem with the democratic interactive social media affordances that make up the network city, Silverman’s psychoanalytical phenomenon of “putting oneself into the picture” has reached ostentatious levels of narcissism. This may be gender-biased based on the more critical social expectations placed on women, but men are certainly not exempt from it. Indeed, with brief reference to Christopher Lasch’s seminal argument regarding rising American narcissism under the conditions of late capitalism and to DeBord’s “Society of the Spectacle”, Castells describes this phenomenon as a social pathology: “The urge to express one’s identity, and to have it recognized tangibly by others, is increasingly contagious and has to be recognized as an elemental force even in the shrunken, apparently homogenizing, high-tech world of the end of the twentieth century” (Castells 2011: 28). From this perspective, Castells’ prosocial prognostications for the phenomenon of “project identity” might be unduly idealistic.

In many cases, people are seeking new identities out of self-commodification and a culture of spectacular narcissism. Zywica and Danowski theorise “the idealized virtual identity hypothesis, the tendency for creators of social network site [SNS] profiles to display idealized characteristics that do not reflect their actual personalities” (Zywica and Danows-

ki 2008: 6). While “Mitja Back and his colleagues tested this hypothesis and discovered it happens far less often than most people think” (Baran and Davis 2015: 351), the frequency of occurrence may be masked in their synchronic study. In a longitudinal and experiential examination, any SNS user will certainly have connections that have behaved as such. “It is, as Christopher Lasch diagnosed, a culture of narcissism. Faith in ourselves, in a world of make-believe, is more important than reality. Reality, in fact, is dismissed and shunned as an impediment to success, a form of negativity” (Hedges 2009: 27). One phenomenon that strikes me, in particular, is something of an inverted Munchausen syndrome by proxy. I have a number of young relatives who grew up as social media digital natives and who have very young children. The stories that some of them share online are often characterised by the description of the miraculously precocious behaviours and insights of their children. One telling example is characterised by presenting conversation narratives like a script for a screenplay. In many cases, these narratives of extraordinary children are highly unlikely, certainly edited by secondary revision, and in some cases simply developmentally impossible. Even so, Pablo Barberá argues that especially when a social media connection is deemed a “friend” or “relative”, the online user is likely to click on, or at least attend to a post even if its message is unsavoury to the receiver (Barberá 2014: 40–41).

What effects can this ill-motivated click engender? At the risk of potentially alienating the reader with a transcript of a conversation, I am reminded of a joke my son, an autistic user of online media affordances, once shared with me after seeing it, ironically, online. “Have you heard that there is an app that can reveal racism, misogyny, and narcissism? It’s called ‘Facebook.’” My son’s autistic mind tends to observe ideologically-charged social media material with a clinical perspective that leaves little room for emotional responses to social iniquities – very pragmatic – which brings the bare truth of the “joke” into sharp relief. The disinhibition effect brings much otherwise masked bigotry and ignorance into the light. The network city is particularly significant here as the construct beyond network communities that allows for the possibility of a wider audience than those within smaller concentric circles of Dunbar’s theory. For the narcissistic performer, there is hope of some level of wider public purchase. For the narcissistic audience safely endowed with a network city of other social possibilities with which to replace the performer(s), there is safe space to disdain and eventually possibly socially reject the alienating performance.

These narcissistic performances take longitudinal time to develop and to disaffect the observer, a long-tail of social media alienation. Over time, especially in the instances, however rare, when social media interaction comes to significantly *replace* physical interactions, the long-tail alienating effects of narcissistic social media behaviours take their toll. Castells argues that

[i]n this condition of structural schizophrenia between function and meaning, patterns of social communication become increasingly under stress. And when communication breaks down, when it does not exist any longer, even in the form of conflictual communication [...], social groups and individuals become alienated from each other, and see the other as a stranger, eventually as a threat. (Castells 2010: 3)

I have a number of social media friends, one couple in particular, who, over the years, have come to post virtually everything to their social media. There does not seem to be a thought that comes into their heads, an intimate family evening, or the most banal trip to the grocery store that does not require a photographic sample, always blatantly artificially posed, that does not make it into their mutual social media platforms. The need for such public display could hardly be a better example of Baudrillard's theorisation of social life collapsing into the realm of simulacrum. I also note that I frequently get friend suggestions based on Facebook algorithms following my own friend list. Of late, after many years of friendship, whenever such a suggestion comes through because the candidate is also friends with this couple, I have come to recognise an alienated reaction from myself in which I feel that their relationship to this couple is, in fact, a bad endorsement, and that I have no desire to generate friendships with people of their social ilk. Under these conditions of friendship on the precipice, it would take little more than one politically unsavoury post from either of them for me to finally "unfriend" them. "For John B. Thompson, this mediated interaction, or quasi-interaction as he calls it, establishes a 'non-reciprocal intimacy' 'which does not involve the kind of reciprocity and mutuality characteristic of face-to-face interaction'" (Thompson [1995: 219] in Chin 2010: 212). Indeed, these friends of mine are otherwise good people, old and dear ties, but as I moved away from their part of the world, our friendship became exclusively online, and the alienating effects of the network city have taken hold. From all class strata and all other identity factions that Castells delineates, it becomes the case that the more you expose yourself online, the more you perform a narcissism that alienates, unless it is legitimised by the dubious patina of the new capitalist vocational identity of "influencer". But an influencer has no audience unless they are a citizen of a network city.

In the network city, predicated on Dunbar's concentric circles theories of increasingly weak ties, it is the ability to migrate in and out of friendships that defines it. Castells argues that while "people resist the process of individualization and social atomization, and tend to cluster in community organizations that, over time, generate a feeling of belonging, and ultimately, in many cases, a communal, cultural identity," it is also the case that "for this to happen, a process of social mobilization is necessary. That is, people must engage in urban movements [...] through which common interests are discovered, and defended, life is shared somehow, and new meaning may be produced" (Castells 2011: 60). As many theorists have argued, under the conditions of negativity bias, the "filter bubbles" which may comprise the homophilic communities Castells describes, create only the illusion of a friendly world syndrome (Miller et al. 2021). Castells makes a strong case that identity construction informs the development of city spaces as well. Within them, "[s]ocial movements tend to be fragmented, localistic, single-issue oriented, and ephemeral, either retrenched in their inner worlds, or flaring up for just an instant around a media symbol. In such a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, people tend to *regroup* around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national" (Castells 2010: 3). Again, taking the example of online fan communities, and citing Bourdieu, Chin states that "[i]n a sense, these fans go on to develop their own *illusio* [...], continually generating the boundaries that determine who the insiders

and outsiders of the game are” (Chin 2010: 156). Indeed, as a fully virtual phenomenon, the network city is the paradigmatic “*imagined* community”, and the illusion of cultural security and belonging generates a temerity to disdain. When people participate in their virtual communities as part of a network city, replete with a seemingly endless supply of potential social contacts, there emerges a fearlessness to discontinue old connections that have become stale in the real world and then alienating in their virtual long-tail. “The cost, however, is the high mortality rate of on-line friendships, as an unhappy sentence may be sanctioned by clicking away the connection – for ever” (Castells 2011: 89) because there are always “plenty of fish in the sea” of the virtual city.

CONCLUSION

Untethered from geographic limits and from the limits of the broad society theorised by Castells or the micro-communities that comprise it, the network city opens a space to understand socially alienating and insularising effects that borrow from the material world but supersede it in exclusively virtual/digital networks. The slow-rising resentment and disdain outlined above, and the migratory social behaviours it may engender, is surely not determined by the network city, but it is the theoretical landscape which makes it feasible. The network city is the “imagined community” re-imagined with the new conditions arising from the virtual community, in which the previously imagined shared national identity fostered by mass media actually brings a more material ontology to the commune, either derived from real-world relationships complemented online through social media, or developed through filter bubbles and echo chambers returning only like-minded social connections from the broader internet arena – a digital homophily. Indeed, in perhaps his most apocalyptic prognostication, Castells indicates that the “communalism” that is characteristic of what I have defined as the network city is quite doomed, because it is pervaded by narcissistic individualism (Castells 2011: 64). As such, eventually the network city leads back to the material world, in which the long-tail of social media alienation can only be ameliorated by face-to-face physical human interaction.

Certainly these alienating effects do not occur for all, and perhaps not even for most SNS users, but as a “long-tail” effect, the phenomenon requires longitudinal time-scales to measure, or even recognise. As Clay Shirky explains:

This is also the shape behind Chris Anderson’s discussion in the long tail; most items offered at online retailers like iTunes and Amazon don’t sell well, but in aggregate they generate considerable income. The pattern doesn’t apply just to goods, though, but to social interactions as well. Real-world distributions are only an approximation of this formula, but the imbalance it creates appears in an astonishing number of places in large social systems. (Shirky 2008: 126)

However, unlike the dystopic vision of E. M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909), for example, in which individuals have socially evolved past physical interaction into a dystopic realm of atomised cells and all communications are electronical-

ly mediated, Castells points out that the digital and the physical social worlds currently operate in a complementary way rather than a mutually exclusive way, and while a wider range of social interactions can emerge under the convenience of social media, the pre-existing alienations from the realm of physical interaction can find their way into the digital realm and then be exacerbated by the disinhibition effect. As it is theorised here, the network city does not generate so much *isolation* per se as much as *alienation* and *migration* combined with homophily into a social-digital insularisation, raising issues of atomisation and segregation in the network city communities characterised by negativity bias and media narcissism.

Perhaps the lost hope for the internet to introduce a new era of improved global democratisation lies in understanding its virtual communities in this way. It may be the case that global cities are no longer attached to a specific country per se, but merely an ideology, or even just a methodology, a preference for a particular combination of interactive options, a certain urban digital flavour that suits your fancy (although China and the U.S.A. *do* still maintain a media imperialism that keeps those nationalist categories relevant). As Castells argues, “[i]ndeed, [cultural communes’] strength, and their ability to provide refuge, solace, certainty, and protection, comes precisely from their communal character, from their collective responsibility, cancelling *individual* projects” (Castells 2011: 67). Quantitative measures of this phenomenon are likely impossible, and just as likely irrelevant. What is important is the fact that this long-tail of alienation occurs, in whatever quantity, under the specific conditions made possible by the network city. From this point of departure, cultural analyses arising from a nuanced understanding of the dynamics made possible by the network city can emerge, offering at least the superficial insight that for a truly progressive network city to emerge, it will require the significant decommodification and “de-narcissification” of the cyber-space in which it occurs.

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POVZETEK

Avtor razpravlja o problemu novih oblik komuniciranja na področju »omrežnega mesta«. Močno se opira na Castellsovo teorijo o družbi omrežij in se ukvarja s problemi izolacije, ki jo prinašajo digitalna omrežna mesta. Na podlagi izhodišča, ki se sklicuje na ideje Castellsa, Jeana Baudrillarda, Berthe Chin in številnih drugih virov s področja teorije medijev, poskuša teoretizirati digitalno mesto, virtualno urbano organizacijo, kot način razumevanja družbenih, kapitalističnih in ekoloških posledic izključno digitalne strani družbe globalnega omrežja. »Omrežno mesto« opredeljuje kot del omrežja tako znotraj kot zunaj njegovih meja. In tako kot so dinamike moči ali razredne hierarhije

progaste ali rizomatične v odnosih tako v kot med dejanskimi, fizičnimi mesti, so takšne tudi na spletu.

Teoretično izhodišče za obravnavo te preobrazbe je odnos med mesti, kot jih poznamo, kot geografskimi entitetami, in novimi virtualnimi mesti, zlasti z vidika problematike strukturiranja in prestrukturiranja skupnosti in s tem povezanih identitet. Prehod od prostorske k digitalni bližini pa kot posledico prinaša tudi nove vrsto izolacije. Prostorski izrazi, s katerimi opisujemo dele mest, kot so »predmestje«, »industrijsko okrožje« ali »mestno središče«, imajo svoje ustreznice v omrežnih, virtualnih mestih. Na ta način spreminjajo naše razumevanje migracij, ki so zdaj veliko hitrejše in pogojene z drugačnimi razlogi. Posledično nastanejo tudi nove oblike izolacije in odtujenosti, ki jih najdemo pri učinkih, ki so že teoretizirani v literaturi o kulturi omrežij.

Na splošno se pod pogoji tega, kar se teoretizira kot omrežno mesto, »civilne družbe skrčijo in razčlenijo, saj ni več kontinuitete med logiko ustvarjanja moči v globalnem omrežju ter logiko združevanja in predstavljanja v specifičnih družbah in kulturah« (Castells 2011: 11). Prispevek teoretizira dolgi rep družbene odtujenosti, ki se pojavi skupaj z omrežnim mestom, da bi razjasnil, kako te digitalne skupnosti povzročajo zelo posebno vrsto družbene odtujenosti in izolacije, ki temelji na homofiliji. Le-ta pa izhaja iz odzivov na družbeni narcizem in idealizirane virtualne identitete, ki sta posledici negativne pristranskosti družbenih medijev.