Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL 2013 AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

Ontological Security in the Digital Age:
The Case of Elderly People Using New Media

Irena Reifová

1   Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to set up a theoretical framework that will enable us to see two inter-related phenomena: new media and the way in which they are used by elderly people, and the management of new social risks. Elderly people and the generational aspects of their use of new media – the way they deploy them to deal with new risks – are at the centre of our interest here. There are no doubts that new media has the potential to increase quality of life in old age. We will argue that both use of new media and the treatment of new risks bring about an accumulation of individualisation and that this kind of parallelism eventually presents a massive threat to "ontological security" (Giddens, 1990).

How is the decrease of ontological security experienced by elderly people? Old age is often regarded as a period of "frailty", general vulnerability in physical and psychological terms. From this perspective, whatever is difficult in life is even more difficult in old age, when one is enfeebled by dying or by unavoidable death coming closer. Nicholson perceives frailty as a state of "in-betweenness", when people lose some connections, try to sustain others and perhaps even create new ones (Nicholson, 2009 as quoted in Nicholson/Hockley, 2011: 103). This argument allows us to assume that the further shattering of ontological security experienced in old age adds damage to the already damaged quality of life. This chapter, therefore, represents an enquiry into the experiences of potential threats to ontological security (brought about by the individualised use of new media in dealing with the individualised new risks) in the context of frailty in old age.

2. Generations and the media experience

The inclusion of age as a category refining the way we consider media audiences or users, implies a generational perspective. There are two basic views of generations in sociology. In terms of chronological definitions, generations are seen purely as age cohorts, i.e. people who were born and happen to be alive at about the same time. In terms of cultural definition, generations refer to people who share the experience of the same formative events (or processes) and collective memory. The latter approach was first outlined by Karl Mannheim (1964) in his essay "On the Problem of Generations"[1] and then adopted by, for example, Ron Eyerman and Bryan S. Turner, who define generation as "a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time" (Eyerman and Turner, 1998: 93).

Some authors emphasise that the events which have the potential to form generations must be of radical, for example, traumatic, nature (Wyatt, 1993). The scholars who speak of media generations – which is the specific application of a cultural approach to generations that takes into account the "potential role of media and technology in construction and self-construction of generations" (Buckingham, 2006: 4) – however, emphasise continuous processes more than radical events. Also, June Edmunds' and Bryan. S. Turner's (2002) concept of "global generation" takes into account the role of media. According to the authors, it is possible to argue that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of international generations, which communicated mostly through printed media. This period was followed by the transnational generations of the mid-twentieth century, which had access to new broadcast communications. These movements remained nationally focused. From the 1960s onwards, generations have been globalised because television and particularly the internet allow a shared experience to transcend time and space (Edmunds and Turner, 2002: 566).

In media generation scholarship, there is a strong bias towards the focus on media profiles of the contemporary young generation. Marc Prensky (2001: 1) says that contemporary students "are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet". We can argue that it was mainly the age cohort of people already born into the digital condition that inspired all the ado about media generations. Although some more utopian renditions of the digitally-grounded creativity[2] of the young generation have been rightfully criticised for their technological determinism, it remains clear that people who were fully socialised in the new media environment simply do things online differently to older generations. As Mannheim admits, the older generations experience certain historical processes together with young gener-

ations, but make different meanings out of them due to the "different stratification of their lives" (Mannheim, 1964: 298). Older people tend to perceive the world as it used to be when they were young and compare the contemporary world to the time past. Mannheim adds that "in estimating the biographical significance of a particular experience, it is important to know whether it is undergone by an individual as a decisive childhood experience, or later in life, superimposed upon other basic and early impressions; early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world" (Mannheim, 1964: 298). We focus on the generational use of new media by the age group of people whose personality had been completely formed when they used computers and the internet for the very first time and for whom the new media environment is not their "second nature". Eyerman and Turner use the perspective of political economy and argue that, apart from collective memory, generations also exercise "a strategic access to collective resources" together with exclusion of "other generational cohorts from access to cultural capital and material resources generally" (Eyerman and Turner, 1998: 93). Provided that some generations practice exclusion, other generations must be the object of it. Structural exclusion is, of course, not a part of people's agency, and nobody can be blamed for it. In spite of that, exclusion is a concept that describes the impaired access of the elderly people to new media in comparison with those who are less disadvantaged by age. Age, then, becomes a factor of digital divide.

3.   Double individualisation: new media as a threat to ontological security in old age

3.1   Individualisation and new risks

The second principal element of our conceptual triangle – the management of new risks – is borrowed from Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society, one of the most authoritative explanations of the modernisation process and its consequences (Beck, 1992). Beck's new risks, which constitute risk society, are not any random hazards or threats – they are side effects of the process of modernisation, especially (but not exclusively) of its industrialisation dimension. On the one hand, the new risks are invisible, elusive and deterritorialised. On the other hand, there are constant attempts to objectify them by recognising them, insuring against them, and minimising their impacts. The new risks mostly do not have a clear material existence. We cannot taste any genetic manipulation in the corn while eating our morning cereals, nor do we feel anything when free radicals supposedly attack our cells. Otherwise intangible new risks exist

only to the extent to which we register, acknowledge, and confirm them by our decision to take precautions. The underlying dynamics of the risk society involve the ongoing transformation of indeterminacy and fuzziness into provisional determinateness, a process that is fuelled by delimitation of the risks. According to Beck, the risk society cherishes the illusion of having control over something that cannot be controlled at all (Beck, 2004: 400). Some discourses – e.g. science and the media – specialise more than the others in isolating the new risks from a cloud of indeterminacy. They function as lenses that enable us to see what is otherwise unobservable – and we will never find out if they only magnify what is already out there or give rise to an entirely new, manufactured reality. The discourses of science and the media delimit the new risks from above. The new risks, however, can also be delimited by practices coming from below – by people's agency, which involves the interpretation of the media and science production, and the final resolution to act on the basis of an assumption that the risk really exists (or not).

The determination of the new risks from below, by people's decisions to take them for real and act accordingly, has been a sore spot in the ultimate individualisation of the process of decision-making. In Beck's opinion, the process of individualisation is one of the most typical parameters of the risk society (1992: 90). The path from the first to the second modernity is metaphorically paved with growing individualisation[3]. Beck's concept of individualisation does not refer to individualism in the sense of egoism or self-centeredness. It is much more closely related to the isolation of the individual in modern society from larger, super-individual collectivities. The process of individualisation encompasses a weakening of the systems of previous collective guarantees, solidarities, and determinations. Religion lost its power on the way from tradition to the first modernity. The shift from the first to the second modernity witnessed the dissolution of class identity. All these processes of the erosion of belonging to various collective systems resulted in the inevitable individualisation of responsibility that frustrates contemporary citizens in risk societies. Life steps and acts which were kept outside of decision-making or planning – being understood as a given destiny, or through class-based determinations – have been turned into a series of personal options. Fate has been replaced by a fabricated lifestyle.

"In the welfare states of the West reflexive modernization dissolves traditional parameters: class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles. It dissolves these forms of the conscience collective, on which depend, and to which refer the social and political organizations and institutions in industrial society. These detraditionalizations happen in the social surge of individualization." (Beck, 1992: 87)

Decision-making is a fundamental form of agency in the risk society, and it fully applies to the management of new risks as well. People's willingness to accept certain risks as objects of their decision-making process confirms and solidifies the position of these risks, their social existence, and emergence from the field of indeterminacy. The new risks are crossroads that cannot be bypassed. They are the types of options that are open when the only thing that is not an option is to not take any option. The new risks manoeuver people into situations where making a decision is inevitable. People have to decide, and they have to do it under informational conditions of the "chaotic paradigm" (McNair, 2006), grounded in an unstable, context-based verification of truth-claims, and the rhizomatic and contingent nature of information gathering. This condition makes a decision between "incommensurable varieties" (Lyotard, 1993: 99) almost impossible. Zinn adds: "People have notoriously to decide without having the time and knowledge for carefully weighing their decisions […]" (Zinn, 2008: 34). People disentangling information rhizomes woven around the new risks are left alone with nothing more than their own individual responsibility for approving or denying the existence of a risk. The individualised responsibility related to the new risk management assumes even more relevance when we perceive it as an effort to be taken up in the old age, as will be clarified later.

3.2 Individualisation and the new media

Our enquiry into the management of new risks via new media in old age is inspired by a homology between the new risks and new media. The principle of individualisation was identified not only in dealing with the new risks but also in the ways in which one navigates oneself through cyberspace. If the new risks are treated via the new media, the principle of addition is put to work, and the individualisation of the management of new risks is synchronised with the individualisation embedded in new media use. Their relationship is one of the logics of equivalence. We will show that this kind of "double individualisation" has consequences that may be especially challenging when the users are older.

There are numerous works confirming that the use of new media is a highly individualised practice. The areas of user-generated content, or "produsage" (Bruns, 2007), can be seen as prime examples of individualisation, because in these cases decisions to produce and provide media content are generated outside collective professional organisations and stem from individuals. Vincent Miller (2010) disentangles a paradoxical double bind of the individualisation of blogging. Traditional solidarity-based relationships were, in his opinion, destroyed by individualisation. The blogosphere today functions as a substitute

for traditional relationships and, simultaneously, it is constituted of the individualisation that killed them. Miller claims that blogging and related virtual communities represent purely voluntaristic relationships based on nothing more than decisions, tastes, and private inclinations (2010: 536).

For that matter, individualisation, seen as a series of individual options without any external driver, is the constitutive logic of hypertext, i.e. the underlying syntax of the entire internet. Hypertext is a non-sequential, non-linear text composed of particular blocks of text that are mutually interconnected by links or hyperlinks. Hypertext is thus more precisely defined as a method for generating texts rather than as a textual entity. It is a nomadic text, which is always "under construction" and has no fixed form, as users constantly "re-write" it by developing new and new routes through the links. George P. Landow (2006: 13) stresses that "this reconfiguration of text introduces three entirely new elements: associative indexing (or links), trails of such links and sets or webs composed of such trails. These new elements in turn produce the conception of a flexible, customizable text, one that is open – and perhaps vulnerable – to each reader".

Setting a trajectory that takes one through the syntactic level of the new media language (hypertext) is not dissimilar to the management of new risks in the risk society. Both sets of practices evolve around privatised responsibility and individualised decision-making, lacking any external assurance. Questions arise regarding the consequences of this synergy between the two individualisations. How do people experience the parallelism of social and technological individualisation? How do they put up with the double individualisation of the responsibility for: a) their decisions to grant existence to the risks which cannot be taken for granted, and b) the decisions to follow the trails through the hypertext which were invented solely by them? Dealing with the new risks via the internet is like dealing with the invisible via the intangible. The reverse side of the expanding individualisation is a decline of available recourses to collective systems of trust and the ensuing decrease of certainty and feelings of security. The pre-internet media had the potential to impose some structure and regularity on people's everyday life through the spatial and temporal characteristics of their distribution. This potential was famously theorised by Roger Silverstone, who referred to it using Anthony Giddens's concept of ontological security (Giddens, 1990). Silverstone (2004: 167) argued that the media, especially television, "provide in their narratives and in the formalities of their delivery within ritual or on neo-ritualised occasions, a framework for the creation and sustenance of ontological security". The online environment empowers audiences so that the media narratives or formalities of media delivery no longer steadfastly set the frameworks. The users were given considerably broader access to "the steering wheel" of the entire communication engine. They gained significant autonomy, but its dark side was individual responsibility followed

by the absence of any external assurance. Reflection on the combination of individualised practices (such as the delimitation of new risks by navigation through the new media environment) eventually raises a simple question: what happened to ontological security in the time of the new media and double (and perhaps multiple) individualisation?

4. Conclusion

Scholars have looked at how the deficit of ontological security and expansion of uncertainty combines with other social disadvantages, and the point has been raised that old age radicalises the experience of fluidity, uncertainty, and insecurity. Ontological security, according to Giddens, "sustains trust in continuity of past, present, and future, and connects such trust to routinised social practices" (Giddens, 1990: 105). In the concept of ontological security, there is an inbuilt assumption that it is an essentially good thing. It provides stability to everyday life by means of the repetition of routines and rituals, which have their origins beyond a present individual creation. Not least, it protects people from a direct confrontation with the contingent and fluid nature of social contracts. Practices symptomatic of postmodern and globalised society, however, tend to expose fluidity and contingency rather than deflect them, which is also the case for the individualisation of the new risk management and new media use. The unmasked threats to ontological security may become a source of social or cultural anxieties, which affect trust and the feelings of certainty. The stress generated by individualisation impacts all generations, nevertheless there are two arguments for emphasising that older people are more disadvantaged in individualised conditions via their (already mentioned) frailty and their memory. Elderly people developed their expectations of what it means to be old when they were still young – and these expectations are very different from what it means to be old today, in the era of individualised responsibility and privatised security management.

The gerontological literature confirms that experience of security and predictability is an extremely relevant value in old age and that elderly people painfully sense any damage to these domains. It is mainly critical gerontology that takes up this point and voices discontent over transformations of aging in the second modernity, i.e. exactly the same phenomena which we tackle in this chapter.

> "Debates in gerontology have implicated globalization processes in the move from defining ageing as a collective to an individual responsibility. […] the pressures associated with the achievement of security are themselves generating fresh anxieties across all generations. Risks once carried by social institutions are now displaced onto the shoulders of individuals and/or their families." (Phillipson, 2009: 620)

Critical gerontology points to the dark side of the second modernity and shows that the fluid transitions of identity, multiplicity of choices, decision-based relationships, and privatisation of responsibility may be a marketplace of options for some groups but insecurity and anxiety for many others, including older people. Chris Phillipson urges critical gerontology to theorise issues such as the ways older people will maintain a sense of security and identity in what Beck (2000) describes as a "runaway world", or how they can avoid experiencing the more fluid identity as psychological disintegration. Reflection on the intricacies of growing old in the globalised society is of particular relevance to our study of elderly people, the new media, and the new risks. It provides an abstract, macro-sociological context for the use of new media in the management of new risks – including the accumulation of the individualisation of responsibility within this process - by the elderly and others who may be too vulnerable to withstand the side-effects of this transformation.

Notes

1   The essay was published for the first time in 1928 as "Das Problem der Generationen".
2   The best example here is Donald Tapscott and his concept of the "net generation" (Tapscott, 1998).
3   The second modernity is a specific stage in the development of modern society. In the second modernity, the societal backbone rests in solving problems generated by boom and progress in the period of the first modernity (Beck, 2004, p.15). The second modernity functions as a kind of convex mirror which reflects the first modernity – in other words, the triumphs of the first modernity are projected into the second modernity as the latter's new risks. Therefore, Beck also speaks of a "reflexive modernization" (2004: .5-6).

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Biography

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