

Chapter 1

Changes in Online Subjectivity: Artificial Users, Subject Fragmentarization, and Multimodal Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Human subjectivity is deeply affected by the environment as mediated by the Internet. As users within this environment, people are not only affected by their entrance into it, but their subjectivity evolves along with the trends of online networking. The subjectivity of people is affected by (their networking with) human and artificial users of the environment and the possibility of influencing user's subjectivity is also given by other specific aspects of the environment. This chapter focuses on three areas: artificial users, subject and its fragmentarization, and multimodal interaction. Findings in conceptualizing change in terms of subjectivity are based within the poststructuralist philosophical tradition. There is applied the phenomenon known as the "death of the author," proclaimed in late 1960s, to the situation of the contemporary user to uncover changes in online subjectivity. The chapter also presents examples of implications of such changes at the level of interactions and distribution of messages and the role of artificial users in these processes within online marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter springs from the cross-disciplinary intersection of informatics and philosophy. From this standpoint, the chapter provides a description of certain features present in online behaviours and relations within the context of the framework of subjectivity, as articulated in philosophy. Understanding of the subject is focused on its ability to create new environments and to become an agent in them. In the information society, the subject is connected with the massive development of information and communication technologies (ICT), including Internet-based technologies and services. This paper analyses and discusses the impact of these technologies on human life, both current and future, which finds itself in a new Internet-mediated environment.

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The starting point of presented considerations is the philosophical approach to the subject and the reflection of these ideas in current ICT developments, including the adoption of these technologies by society. Conceptualizing the interrelation between the subject and the Internet-mediated online environment can orient us in today's socio-economical world, which is pervaded by the phenomenon of the Internet. On this basis, it is discussed socio-economic impacts of selected phenomena (e.g. fragmentarization or multimodality of interaction) that are associated with the subject and its environment. To present socio-economic consequences, examples from the field of online marketing were chosen.

The chapter is divided into several comprehensive sections. This section provides an introduction to the issue, including definitions of important terms used in the text of this chapter. The next section deals with the philosophical aspects of the subject. It is defined the subject of environment, its connection with the online or virtual environment (interaction), and possibilities of distribution and interpretation compared to such possibilities in the physical environment. On this basis, it is possible to identify the role of the Internet-based services (e.g. social media) user, both in its self-creation (subjectivity) and in its processing of communications, including further distribution through other services. It is also possible to present consequences in relevant field of online marketing in the third section. The conclusion summarizes the most interesting points and ideas.

DEFINITIONS OF IMPORTANT TERMS

The emergence of the information society represents an important qualitative shift, with significant implications for the future development of society. It was created new platform – it is a shared and continuously re-formed new environment designed for human and human made artificial agents (named e.g. software agents, softbots or simply bots). This environment is in various fields named in different ways, e.g.: cyberspace, online environment(s), Internet-mediated environment(s), virtual environment(s), virtual world(s). Each designation emphasizes another feature or aspect which is associated with a given environment. As appropriate designation for needs of this chapter was chosen virtual environment.

The most appropriate and sufficiently general explanation of this term is that it is an environment that consists of Internet-based services mediated by computers interconnected via networks (Internet). It is in accordance with a similar approach applies for virtual conversation, teams, products, organizations, etc. For example, virtual conversation is defined as communications that take place over computer networks, in which there is an essential element utilizing ICT for mediating such communications and cooperation among otherwise physically distant entities (Davidow, 1993; DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). Virtual conversation can be dynamically changed, e.g. resources can be added or removed according to the objective – so-called switching. (Mowshowitz, 1999; Mowshowitz & Kawaguchi, 2005). Virtual teams for instance, are formed as user-selected networks using the principle of switching. Relevant individuals are chosen while others are excluded, “switched off”.

To summarize, the features of the virtual environment are as follows: It is an environment composed of various Internet-based services, which are mediated by ICT (including Internet). A clear definition is important, because the term itself is not strictly defined or established in the current literature (Schroeder, 2007), and might lead to confusion or conflation with other terms, such as cyberspace, virtual reality, virtuality, etc. Additional definitions of terms can be found at the end of the chapter in section *Key terms and definitions*.

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