

# Digital Diversities



Digital Diversities:  
Social Media and Intercultural Experience

Edited by

Garry Robson and Malgorzata Zachara

With a Preface by Zygmunt Bauman

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## PREFACE

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

We – each one of us – live now, intermittently though quite often simultaneously, in two universes: online and offline. The second of the two is frequently dubbed “the real world,” though the question whether such a label fits it better than it does the first turns more debatable by the day.

The two universes differ sharply – by the worldview they inspire, the skills they require and the behavioural code they patch together and promote. Their differences can be, and indeed are, negotiated – but hardly reconciled. It is left to every person immersed in both of those universes (and that means to all and each of us) to resolve the clashes between them and draw the boundaries of the applicability of each one of the two mutually contradictory codes. But the experience derived from one universe cannot but affect the way the other universe is viewed, evaluated and moved through. There tends to be a constant and always heavy border traffic between the two universes.

One way of narrating the story of the modern era (a way whose pertinence and relevance was made particularly salient by the enthusiastic reception and spectacular, lightning-speed career of informatics technology) is to present it as a chronicle of a war declared on all and any discomfort, inconvenience or displeasure, and of the promise to fight such a war through to the final victory. In that story, the massive migration of souls in not the bodies from the offline world to the newly discovered online lands can be seen as the latest and most decisive among departures and developments; after all, that battle currently has been waged on the field of inter-human relations - a territory heretofore most resistant and defiant to all attempts to flatten and smooth its bumpy roads and straighten its twisted passages, as is aimed at the cleansing that territory of the traps and ambushes with which it has been thus far notoriously been spattered. If won, the battle currently waged may render childishly easy the awkward and unwieldy tasks of tying and breaking human bonds, having liberated them first from the incapacitating burden of long-term commitments and non-negotiable obligations.

The modern war on inconvenience, discomfort, unwelcome surprises and all in all on the haunting feeling of uncertainty deriving from the unpredictable caprices of the natural and social world, was started in earnest under the impact of the shock caused by the triple catastrophe (an earthquake followed by fire followed by tsunami) that in 1755 destroyed Lisbon, then one of the richest, most admired and proudest centres of European civilization. That shock prompted the need to take nature as well as human history under a new, this time human and guided by Reason, management. Two and a half centuries later Jonathan Franzen suggested in his rightly praised commencement speech at Kenyon College<sup>1</sup> that the “ultimate goal of technology, the telos of techneis to replace a natural world that’s indifferent to our wishes – a world of hurricanes and hardships and breakable hearts, a world of resistance – with a world so responsive to our wishes as to be, effectively, a mere extension of the self.” “Our technology has become extremely adept at creating products that correspond to our fantasy ideal of erotic relationship, in which the beloved object asks for nothing and gives everything, instantly, and makes us feel all-powerful, and doesn’t throw terrible scenes when it’s replaced by an even sexier object and is consigned to a drawer.” In other words: are old dreams now coming true, are words becoming flesh? Is the centuries-long war on life discomforts about to be won? Well, the jury (if there is a jury competent to pronounce verdicts) must be still out. Because there is a price-tag attached to each successive spoil of war, gains and losses need to be counted - but reason suggests that the balance of gains and losses ought to be calculated *retrospectively*; the time for competent retrospection (let alone for ultimate evaluation) has however not yet arrived.

Alain Finkielkraut, a writer/philosopher newly elected to join the small exquisite company of the “Immortals” of Academie Française, speaks of the “malediction” of the Internet.<sup>2</sup> “No doubt, it (the Internet) offers tremendous services (...) Researchers, academics, are delighted – they don’t have to go to libraries, the journalists can fill their files on invited guests much faster, etc. I however believe that in the universe of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted after the *New York Times* of 28 May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted after “TAISEZ-VOUS !” – Alain Finkielkraut, “l’homme qui ne sait pas comment ne pas réagir,” *Le Monde* of 10th April 2014 : “Bien entendu ça rend énormément de services (...). Les chercheurs, les universitaires sont ravis, ils ne sont pas obligés d’aller en bibliothèque, les journalistes aussi peuvent constituer leurs dossiers beaucoup plus vite quand ils invitent des gens, etc. Mais je crois, moi, que dans cet univers de la communication, tout peut être dit (...). C’est quand même un monde sans foi ni loi. Il est interdit d’interdire, on le voit sur Internet (...).”

communication everything can be said (...) All the same, it is a world with no faith and no law. It is prohibited to prohibit, as seen on the Internet.” The Internet: blessing and curse rolled into one and rendered inseparable...

The Internet’s blessings are many and varied. In addition to the ones Finkelkraut has mentioned by name, let me name as the first and foremost the promise to put paid to one of the most awesome banes of our liquid-modern, thoroughly individualized society afflicted by the endemic frailty of inter-human bonds: the fear of loneliness, of abandonment, of exclusion. On Facebook, one needs never more feel alone or dropped, discarded, eliminated – abandoned to stew in one’s own juice having one’s own self for the only companion. There is always, twenty four hours a day and seven days a week, someone somewhere ready to receive a message and even respond to it or at least acknowledge its reception. On Twitter, one never needs to feel excluded from where things happen and the action is: there are no gatekeepers guarding and most of the time barring to most people the entry to the public stage. One does not need to rely on the sparsely apportioned grace and benevolence of TV or radio producers and/or newspapers or glossy magazines editors. The gate to the public stage seems to stay, invitingly and temptingly, wide open, supplemented with a counter of visits and “likes” – that privately owned equivalent of TV ratings, bestsellers tables or the tables of box-office returns. Thanks to the Internet, everyone has been given the chance of the proverbial 15 minutes of fame - and the occasion to hope for a public celebrity status. Both appear easy and near-to-hand as they never did in the past. And the attraction of becoming a celebrity is to have a name and likeness turning more worthy in our world made to the measure of a vanity fair than one’s achievement.

These, no doubt, are blessings. Or at least they are deemed, and for good reasons, to be blessings by millions of people sagging and groaning under the burden of abasement and humiliation visited upon them by social degradation or exclusion - or the fear of their coming. Such a gain is huge enough to outweigh the possible losses brought by the constantly growing number of hours spent online by the constantly growing numbers of the Earth’s inhabitants. And let’s note that in most cases Internet users and addicts are blissfully unaware of what things and qualities they are in danger of losing or what has been lost already - as they had little or no chance of experiencing them personally and coming to value them; the younger generations of the present were born into a world already split (and since times for them immemorial) into its online and offline domains. But what are those losses - recorded or anticipated?

To start with, there are losses afflicting (or suspected to afflict) our mental faculties; first of all, the qualities/capacities thought indispensable to set a site needed by reason and rationality to be deployed and come into their own: attention, concentration, patience - and their durability. When connection to the Internet takes as long as a minute, many of us feel angry about how slow our computer is. We are becoming used to expecting immediate effects. We desire a world to be more and more like instant coffee: just mix powder into water and drink your coffee... We are losing patience, but great accomplishments require great patience. One needs to stand up to the obstacles encountered, the odds one did not anticipate though they confuse one's plans or arrest their fulfilment. Much research has been devoted to this issue, and most results show the attention span, ability to prolonged concentration - and altogether the perseverance, endurance and fortitude, those defining marks of patience - all falling, and rapidly. Academic teachers note that their students find it increasingly difficult to read an article (let alone a book) from the beginning to end. An argument demanding consistent attention over more than a few minutes tends to be abandoned well before its conclusion is reached. "Multitasking" tends nowadays to be the widely preferred strategy in the use of the web with its ever more numerous apps and gadgets, vying for a moment of (even if passing) attention; given the enormity of opportunities, fixing attention to one single screen at a time feels as if a reprehensible waste of priceless time.

There are of course indirect yet collateral casualties of such a run of affairs, not yet counted in full and needing more research to evaluate. Among the best scrutinized while also potentially most harmful damages caused by the wilting and accelerated scattering of attention are however the decay and gradual decrepitude of the willingness to listen and of comprehension powers as well as the determination to "go to the heart of the matter" (in the online world, we are expected to "surf" on visually or audibly conveyed information; the metaphor of swimming would suggest something resented for being more time-consuming as well as calling for deeper immersion and more engagement - like "swimming") - which in turn leads to a steady decline in the skills of dialogue, a form of communication vital in the offline world. Closely related to the trends just described is the potential harm to memory, now increasingly transferred and entrusted to servers rather than stored in brains. As the process of thinking (and creative thinking in particular) relies on connections emerging between brain cells, it cannot but suffer from storing information in servers instead. As John Steinbeck is reputed to have said well before the servers were built in Mojave deserts and cloud Internet invented: ideas

are like rabbits; you get a couple, learn how to handle them and pretty soon you have a dozen. We may add: indeed, unless that handling consists in depositing them in warehouses to prevent burdening your brain.

Next to consider is the likely impact on the nature of human bonds. Tying and breaking bonds online is immensely easier and less risky than it is offline. Tying them there does not entail long term obligations, let alone the “till death do us part, for better or worse” style commitments, it does not require so much of the protracted, toilsome and conscientious labour that offline bonds demand; in case all that proves too complex and onerous and the odds are felt overwhelming, it is easy to withdraw and abandon the effort. Breaking bonds, on the other hand, can be done with pressing some keys and desisting to touch some others, and calls for no awkward negotiation of settlement neither incurs the risk of Franzen’s “terrible scenes” to be thrown. Selecting and reselecting a network of friends and keeping it as long as the heart desires is an achievement attained with little skill, yet less effort, and virtually (yes, virtually) without risk. As the French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann<sup>3</sup> comments, it all feels so safe as long as one can log on with one click and log off with another; touching icons on screen one can feel, however counterfactually, in complete control of the social contacts and one’s own position they imply. No wonder that having tested and compared the two kinds of bonds, many internautes, perhaps their large and growing majority, prefer the online variety to its offline alternative. Though quite a few others think that those who do it, do it to the friendship’s (not to mention love’s) and their own detriment... According to those others the true (difficult, alas, and risky, calling for constant care and all too often sacrifice) love is the prime whistle-blower signalling the falsehood of the pretences on which many of us sometimes try to perch our self-esteem while laboriously avoiding testing it in field action. What the electronically sterilized and whitewashed version of love truly offers is not “looking forward in the same direction” as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry famously phrased it, but bets-hedging in the effort of defending one’s own self-esteem against the hazards for which the genuine article is notorious.

One more, perhaps the most contentious among the issues cropping up in the debate about the blessings and curses of the world-wide web. Universal, easy and convenient exposure to the world events in “real time,” coupled with opening similarly universal, and an equally easy, undisturbed entry to the public stage has been welcomed by numerous observers as a genuine turning point in the brief though eventful and

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<sup>3</sup> See his *Sex & Amour* (Armand Colin 2010).

stormy history of modern democracy. Contrary to quite widespread expectations that the Internet will be a great step forward in the history of democracy, involving all of us in shaping the world which we share and replacing the inherited “pyramid of power” with a “lateral” politics—evidence accumulates that the Internet may serve as well the perpetuation and reinforcement of conflicts and antagonisms while preventing an effective polylogue with a chance of armistice and eventual agreement. Paradoxically, the danger arises from the inclination of most internauts to make the online world a conflict-free zone; though not through negotiating the conflict-generating issues and the conflicts being resolved to mutual satisfaction - but thanks to the removal of the conflicts haunting the offline world from their sight and worry...

Numerous researches have shown that Internet-dedicated users can and do spend a great part of their time or even their whole online life encountering solely like-minded people. The Internet creates an improved version of a “gated community”: unlike its offline equivalent it does not charge the occupiers with an exorbitant rent and does not need armed guards or a sophisticated CCTV network; a simple “delete” key would suffice. The attraction of all and any – online as offline – gated community is that one lives there in the company of strictly pre-selected people, “people like you,” like-minded people – free from the intrusion of strangers whose presence might require the awkward negotiation of a mode of cohabitation and present a challenge to your self-assurance that your mode of life is the only proper one, one bound to be shared by everybody within your sight and reach. They are mirror reflections of yourself and you are a mirror reflection of them, therefore by living there you are not taking the risk of falling out with your neighbour, of arguing or fighting about political, ideological or indeed any other kind of issues. A comfort zone indeed, sound-insulated from the hubbub of the diversified and variegated, quarrelsome crowds roaming city streets and workplaces... The snag is that in such an artificially yet artfully disinfected, sanitized online environment one can hardly develop immunity against the toxins of the controversy endemic to the offline universe; or learn the art of stripping them of their morbid and eventually murderous potential. And because one has failed to learn it, the divisions and contentions carried by strangers in city streets appear yet more threatening - and perhaps incurable. Divisions born online are equipped with a self-propelling and self-exacerbating capacity...

Admittedly, the above inventory of actual and potential virtues and vices of splitting the Lebenswelt (“lived world”) into online and offline universes is far from complete. It is obviously too early to evaluate the

summary effects of a watershed-like shift in the human condition and cultural history. For now, the assets of the Internet and digital informatics as a whole seem to bear a considerable admixture of liabilities - though such an impression could only reflect the usual birth-pangs of new forms of life and the juvenal afflictions accompanying their maturation. For all that can be asserted at the moment with any measure of confidence, one of the least prepossessing sequels is that of the higher scores reached by the online universe on the scale of comfort, convenience, risk avoidance and freedom from trouble taking their toll – and by design or by default prompting a tendency to transplant the worldviews and behavioural codes made to the measure of online life-sphere upon its offline alternative, to which they could be applied only at the cost of much social and ethical damage.

One way or another, the consequences of the online/offline split of the Lebenswelt need to be closely monitored. The studies collected in this book combine into a timely attempt to fulfil that task.





## INTRODUCTION

GARRY ROBSON AND MALGORZATA ZACHARA

The scholarly analysis of ubiquitous computing and the rise of a global digital infrastructure is beginning to come of age. These relatively recent but utterly transformative developments, or perhaps more accurately their profound socio-cultural, social-psychological and philosophical ramifications, are now coming under sustained scrutiny from a range of perspectives as the trickle of critical studies that began to emerge in the early- to mid-2000s becomes a torrent. This volume adds to that torrent with an innovative multidisciplinary focus on interconnections between the two key themes of social media and intercultural experience, thereby drawing together in a range of integrated analyses two of the central processes of contemporary globalization: digitalization and global mobility.

As far as the latter is concerned we have been keen to explore the extent to which the use of social media may enhance (or indeed inhibit, as a number of chapters argue) the development of open and reflexive interactions, where personal experiences and understandings of culture are concerned, in globalized settings. This emphasis on the performative and fluid potential of such encounters connects with the broader debate on post-‘culturalist’ interculturalism – in which an emphasis on process, active negotiation and dynamic cultural syncretism replaces the reifying and culturally essentialising thinking of earlier phases of interculturalism and, indeed, of multiculturalism itself. Examples of this kind of stance include Paul Gilroy’s critique of official multiculturalism and endorsement of the improvised “conviviality” that characterizes everyday interactions in diverse settings,<sup>1</sup> Simon Fanshawe and Danny Sriskandarajah’s emphatic rejection of multi- and “traditional” interculturalism in favour of a sense of dynamic, post-multicultural agency,<sup>2</sup> and studies of interpersonal and inter-group relations in unprecedentedly diverse or liminal social contexts

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Fanshawe and Danny Sriskandarajah, *You Can’t Put Me In a Box: Super Diversity and the End of Identity Politics*, London: IPPR, 2010.

such as those by, respectively, Stephen Vertovec<sup>3</sup> and Fred Dervin and Mari Korpela.<sup>4</sup>

Five of our chapters (those of Ann Gunkel, David Gunkel, Garry Robson, Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska and Malgorzata Zachara) originate in a specific research project into social media usage among international student sojourners, the details of which are set out by David Gunkel. The rest do not, but all, in one way or another, probe interconnections between digital experience, culture and identity. The three chapters in the first section, *The Digitalisation of the Self and Its Discontents*, appear at first blush to converge quite clearly on a discussion of the role played by social media in “enframing” or “interpellating” young users into experientially reduced subject positions, as the trend towards the production of “avatar selves” influences, contends with, ruptures or replaces longer established modes of embodied self-understanding and presentation and communication. Garry Robson offers a discussion of issues relating to absence and presence in intercultural encounters, and in particular of the ways in which the limitations of disembodied interaction, posthuman ideology and the corporatization of the Internet intersect as forces tending to “reduce” the subjectivity of many users. Christian Olavarria is similarly preoccupied with what he sees as the deleterious consequences of disembodied, asynchronous forms of interaction in social and work contexts; he argues, after Jacques Ellul, that for many of us conformity to the requirements of heavily technologized social systems is unavoidable, and that those who might want to disconnect from or “mindfully reject” this close-to-mandatory membership of the global hive face an uphill struggle, to say the least. Marek Wojtaszek offers a similarly trenchant analysis of the “life-degrading” and narcissistically conformist aspects of digital technology immersion and the threat it poses to the capacity for mindful solitude, and to some extent supports the arguments of Robson and Olavarria. However, Wojtaszek’s insistence on at least the potential for life-enhancement inherent in *techne* ends by taking him in a different direction altogether: where Robson and Olavarria variously probe questions of self-reduction, psychological dysfunction, distorted communication and the undermining of embodied experience, Wojtaszek concludes, via his philosophically framed discussion of the concept of the “interface,” that a new ontology for the posthuman age will become possible only if we become *more* closely and

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Vertovec, ‘Super-diversity and its Implications’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30/6, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Dervin and Mari Korpela, *Cocoon Communities: Togetherness in the 21st Century*, Newcastle-Uopn-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.

profoundly engaged in virtual processes. Thus does Wojtaszek take that ongoing, Heidegger-inspired argument for the shift from epistemology to being which is also at the centre of Robson's argument, and arrives at very different conclusions. Where the essence of social experience is to be found, for Robson and Olavarria, in embodiment and the direct phenomenological experience of face-to face encounters with others, Wojtaszek argues that a transition to a new kind of being, aided by digital, synthetic technologies, might emerge: an "immanent environment wherein to be and to know are no longer hierarchically juxtaposed but essentially co-expressive."

The next section, *New Negotiations of Mobility, Place and Intercultural Experience*, focuses on relationships between technology and mobility at a less philosophical level, with two papers focused on the practical experiences of global mobility; both chapters here argue that considerations of space and place, and in fact the ways in which the former is converted into the latter by those on the move, must be afforded a central analytical role. Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bienkowska bases her analysis on a conception of place as being "constructed" out of social interactions and networks of social relations. Place is understood and experienced, from her perspective, through movement and interaction and, crucially, the effort each individual must make to turn mere space into meaningful place. Social media, rather than undermining this effort, facilitate it in a number of important ways. First of all there is the potential of Facebook, Skype and the rest to aid sojourners in their attempt to manage feelings of vulnerability and dislocation early in their stay; as a set of tools and practices with which to convert the vulnerabilities and insecurities of depersonalized space into places which can be experienced as safe, solid and restful. In this respect Stasiewicz-Bienkowska attributes far more positive potential to social media than Filho, Robson or Szymkowska-Bartyzel; the process of shaping a place to meet individual social-psychological needs is a prerequisite of the new global mobility, and is almost unimaginable as a general phenomenon without new media and digitalized connections. Ultimately, however, it is argued that a fully satisfying conversion of space into place is best achieved through embodied interaction with others who are culturally situated in and "know" places in three dimensions, explored here through a discussion of the phenomenon of couchsurfing, an interesting example of the merging of off- and online experience.

The significance of digital photography and self-representation in the creation of a stable and manageable experience of place - both for posters of pictures and their followers on social media - is at the centre of

Stasiewicz-Bienkowska's discussion; the visual plays a key role in the apprehension and rendering of place. It is likely that this centrality of the visual is increasing, and the recent emergence of an exponentially expanding and globalised realm of digitalised image making, and its manifold and as yet poorly understood ramifications, is something with which all of those attempting to make analytical sense of globalization must contend. In the next chapter Yasmin Gunaratnam and Les Back consider the role of the visual and the immediacy of social media in a dual context: of the ever-shifting patterns of urban multiculturalism in the inner London borough of Newham, and the experimental "real time" ethnographic methods that they have been developing in order to meet the challenge of studying complex experiences of place, time and intercultural experience, linking "movements through life as well as migrations across space." Starting from the contention that the smartphone has profoundly transformed the contemporary experience of migration and mobility, they go on to suggest that it is also affording new possibilities to re-imagine ethnographic observation and the generation, analysis and communication of research. More than this, the smartphone and social media may also offer the potential to re-think the relationship between not just participants and researchers but also the public circulation of findings and knowledge.

In seeking to extend the spatio-temporal and conceptual boundaries of research in globalized, intercultural urban settings, Gunaratnam and Back focus their attention on a number of the core themes of this volume: the problem of the "real"; the emergence of off/online as a merged and increasingly significant realm of presentation management and social interaction; embodied experience and place; and the extent to which social media may enhance or degrade intercultural communication and understanding. And they present a critique of the techno-determinist view that sees the ubiquitous users of digital technology and social media as somehow enjoying privileged access to and understanding of the unfolding "now" of social experience in the age of globalisation.

Opening the section "*Digital Natives*" and *Cosmopolitanism in the "Real" and "Virtual" Worlds*, David Gunkel brings to the fore some key themes in the study of student experience, and the need for much more research into them, in the framework at hand. He sets out the details of the research project from which five of the chapters in the book are derived (see above); in doing so he discusses important issues relating to the roles played by digital and social media in intercultural student experience, noting that our understanding of these relationships and processes is much in need of development.

Ann Gunkel takes up this proposition in a chapter which asks some

fundamental questions about some of our underlying suppositions about digital experience, the students comprising the research sample described in the previous chapter and the conceptual frames of reference they draw on in reflecting upon their experience. By way of problematizing the widely used and by now naturalized term “digital natives,” she examines the problem of the “real” and its supposed counterpart “virtuality,” asking why so few young users of social media seem to have a problem with treating these two notions as distinct and largely exclusive of one another. This gives rise to some of the central questions in the study of ubiquitous computing: what are the ramifications of the emergence of a fused sphere of offline/online experience and interaction?; what effects does one have upon the other; can or should we continue to consider embodied, face-to-face interactions as “realer” than those that take place remotely?; what are the implications for these kinds of questions for the attempt to better understand, and perhaps promote among the young, meaningful intercultural communication and understanding in the age of globalization? The chapter concludes, pointedly, by questioning the widely prevailing view that “digital natives” enjoy some kind of privileged understanding of the new digital landscape: “It is genuinely fascinating to report from our data that so-called digital natives make frequent use of social practices of digital communication which they simultaneously suspect, according those practices less authenticity and even less reality. It is really interesting that in the context of our research, our so-called native informants know just as little about the territory as we do.”

Moving on from these theoretical issues in online communication and discussions of the real, we come to some more empirical discussions of the ways in which social media may frame and influence efforts at experiencing or encouraging intercultural communication. Though it is argued in a number of the chapters that the creation of digitally mediated social “cocoon” (after Dervin and Korpela – see the chapter by Robson) or “bubbles” may actually *decrease* the likelihood of open intercultural encounters among sojourning international students, (an argument made also by Filho, Szymkowska-Bartyzel and, to a lesser extent Stasiewicz-Bienkowska), it is clear that social media have a role to play in fostering the kind of cosmopolitan perspectives that underpin positive intercultural relations - both in education and in the broader sphere of cultural diplomacy. Though it is now commonplace to question the easy (or, perhaps, early) assumption that the apparent openness and cultural heterogeneity of the Internet is somehow linked to the emergence of new forms of cultural openness, the extent to which homophily and social separation occur on sites such as Facebook can remain striking. Examining

examples of practice with students in the USA, Anne Bizub offers a strong argument for the potential effectiveness of using Facebook to challenge homophily and draw young people away from small-world thinking towards the kind of cosmopolitan awareness that can make them more “world ready.” Again, the notion of “mindfulness” makes an appearance, this time in terms of the cultivation of the mindful openness engendered among groups encountering, for the first time and via social media, not only classroom challenges to stereotypical thinking but “other” people (in South Africa and Egypt) themselves. Bizub argues that educators have been slower on the uptake than might have been expected in utilizing the kinds of social media favoured by students in the attempt to build global perspectives in a society which, despite its apparent diversity, appears also not to be characterized by high levels of intercultural curiosity at the global scale.

In this regard the comparison with Europe offered by Jolanta Szymkowska-Bartyzel’s chapter is instructive. Her assessment of the effectiveness of the Erasmus educational exchange programme, with a particular focus on the participation of Polish students, in building a pan-European cosmopolitan student culture, and the role played by social media as part of this, suggests that the differences between Europe and the USA may be considerable. What comes across most strongly here is the existence of a sphere of grounded cosmopolitan experience, with students of various nationalities relatively comfortable with moving between geographical and cultural spaces. This is not to suggest that exchange programme “culture shock” has become a thing of the past; far from it. But the familiarity with Europe on the one hand, and the use of social media and digitalised cultural consumption on the other, minimizes experiences of strangeness and isolation that for many would once have been the norm. Szymkowska-Bartyzel’s study suggests that the cocoon/bubble phenomenon is as characteristic of the Erasmus experience as it is of sojourning student experience more generally. E-nearness allows students to manage homesickness in a new way and social media allow protective social spheres to be formed and maintained, but they also lead to increasingly mediated experiences of new situations and enable the avoidance of deeply immersive (and often challenging) experiences of otherness.

Ciro Marcondes Filho concludes this section with a study that combines its two main elements, being a philosophical discussion of places, the people in them and their encountering by sojourning students, in both the world before social media and now. For him, travelling abroad for extended periods in the pre-digital age was a rite of passage through

which the young person faced the existential difficulty resulting from their separation from home and sense of dislocation and moved towards the self-actualisation and maturity that comes from having the grounds of one's prior experience cut away. This experience of "disturbing loneliness" and disorientation was staged in places - strange places, with strange others dwelling in them. His discussion of the effects of social media on these processes and the international sojourns of his Brazilian students echoes, to some extent, some of the other contributions in this volume; his insistence that the self-protective, ghettoizing "bubbles" enabled by social media and the gadgets that deliver them tend to prevent people from engaging fully in deeply intercultural experience: if an encounter with the metaphysical "face" of the other is lacking, the experience of place risks becoming depersonalized and superficial. Culture shock - in its potentially creative sense - is minimized and the existential grounds of immature selfhood are not challenged or remade.

New and emerging strategies of political communication and elaborations of political identities are, broadly speaking, the theme of *Shaping Political Identities and Narratives through Social Media*. Malgorzata Zachara argues that the use of social media, albeit at a less concrete level than those examined by Bizub and Szymkowska-Bartyzel, has played a major role in building new global perspectives on difference and intercultural understanding. Like Jasmin Siri in the following chapter she is interested in the ways in which social media have transformed the public communications of politicians and political organizations and supported the development of novel forms of civic activism, while noting that beyond the formal routes of political discourse, in the sphere of public diplomacy, digital-cultural representational practices (such as marketing-derived place and nation branding) across geopolitical boundaries have done much to facilitate common experiences and understandings between members of different cultural and national groups. Thus have emerged, Zachara argues, new modes of group identification and reconfigured ways of initiating and developing individual interactions.

Next is Jasmin Siri's analysis of "multiple political selves" in the German context. Contrasting Facebook homophily with the more fluid heterophily of Twitter - these constituting the primary platforms on which new modes of political communication and identification have emerged in recent years - Siri suggests that different social media are used to create varieties of "desired political self." Every medium frames and produces specific aesthetics and political narrations, leading to the emergence of a "multiplicity of political selves" constructed through specific channels of communication. This analysis leads Siri to promulgate nothing less than

the emergence of a new *political public*, characterized as a “diverse and multi-contextual non-place.”

This conception of a social media-driven and disembodied realm of political communication receives further elaboration - and complication - in the chapter by Irem Inceoglu, in which she argues that Twitter was at the centre of a very concrete example of civic activism and cross-cultural coalition building in Istanbul’s 2013 Gezi Resistance. Inceoglu’s primary focus, like Siri’s, is on the way in which social media platforms can underpin and channel the creation of new political public spaces. What is especially important in the case under discussion here is that these spaces make clearly visible the various identity positions often excluded from or marginalized in the formal politics of the public sphere and largely estranged from one another in the normal course of events. This social media-led emergence of a new awareness of diversity and its value represents, to return to Zachara’s argument about digital-cultural diplomacy, the creation of novel forms of intercultural communication and identification *within* the framework of a nation state.

As is well known, new media offer plentiful contexts for the restaging of both old hatreds, and attempts on the part of people of good will to overcome them. For an example of intercultural communication at its most intense we have Alina Bothe’s analysis of the “commentary culture” that has developed around Holocaust survivors’ testimonies on Youtube. Focusing on testimonies both benign and hateful, Bothe sets out an account of the modes of interaction involved, the temporal peculiarities and lags which characterise this form of communication, and the relationship between the online and offline worlds. She notes that those posters aiming hateful messages at survivors tend overwhelmingly to choose anonymity, a reflection perhaps not only of potential legal consequences but of the kind of unrestrained spitefulness that becomes possible when interlocutors do not, literally, see eye-to-eye. Olavarria and Robson also refer to this effect, acknowledging the ease with which online contexts can produce not meaningful intercultural cultural communication but its opposite.

In the final section, *Digitalising Human Fundamentals Across Cultures*, Douglas Ponton takes us back to probably the most crucial question of all in the attempt to understand the complex and thorny question of online/embodied selves and the nature of the relation between these spheres: what is real? As we have seen, some of our authors argue that we should continue to position the embodied and face-to-face at the top of a hierarchy of interaction, others that this hierarchy should, or perhaps will, be collapsed or redefined. Ponton examines the contention,



made by a number of the subjects in his study, that virtual friendships may be as real as face-to-face ones. From a linguistic perspective he examines online discussions and experiences of virtual friendship and builds a corpus of the terms and concepts used on selected websites. He concludes, though he himself is broadly sceptical as regards the extent to which the online experience of friendship can be fully equated with the embodied variety, that when a poster under consideration talks of the pain and joy associated with real and virtual friendships being identical, “she is making an ontological statement. There is no such thing as ‘virtual’ pain.”

Talking as we are of fundamentals, matters of death and remembrance arise in Magdalena Szczyrbak’s comparative study of Polish and American online obituary sites. This comparison highlights two important aspects of the shifting to online contexts of much older, customary forms of expression. Firstly, the ways in which these older genres evolve to accommodate changes in the “socio-rhetorical” setting in which they are made - there is an echo here of Siri’s discussion of the ways in which the structures and conventions of different online platforms are producing distinctive and novel rhetorical styles and perspectives in the political sphere. Secondly, such sites not only express societal approaches to death and remembrance but continue to convey culturally specific values, attitudes and emotions in a more general sense. In the midst of digitalized life we are in death; and “death notices or obituaries, in whatever shape and form, will continue to exist as long as people attach much importance to death and feel the need to share their grief and relate to other human beings.”



**PART I:**

**THE DIGITALIZATION OF THE SELF  
AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# “YOU ARE FORCED TO BE WHO YOU ARE”: EMBODIMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE

GARRY ROBSON

In the face-to-face situation the other is fully real. This reality is part of the overall reality of everyday life, and as such is massive and compelling. To be sure, another may be real to me without my having encountered him face-to-face... Nevertheless, he becomes real to me in the fullest sense of the word only when I meet him face-to-face. Indeed, it may be argued that the other in the face-to-face situation is more real to me than I myself.

—Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*

It may very well be that one gets different types of relationships through social media than face-to-face (and again, this would need to be demonstrated empirically rather than just asserted), but this whole formation of hierarchy of relationships by medium is getting old and tiresome. There is no reason to assume a priori that face-to-face interactions are more authentic or deeper than digital ones.

—*thecrankysociologists.com*

### Introduction

This chapter takes as its starting point the clear preference, among respondents in the research at hand, for face-to-face over online communication. There is little doubt that social media enable the sojourning students in our cohort to psychologically “anchor” themselves at home through daily contact with family and friends, and also that it can facilitate the development and maintenance of a highly meaningful “cocoon community”<sup>1</sup> within which to live for the duration of the sojourn -

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<sup>1</sup> See Fred Dervin and Mari Korpela, *Cocoon Communities: Togetherness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

however disassociated from the surrounding cultural reality that cocoon may be. But the repeated appeal to “reality” seems also to point in other directions, to hint at a desire for un- or less-mediated experience at, apparently, two levels: the first is connected to a sense that communicating with others in the cocoon is facilitated by digital technology but also reduced and simplified in ways which compare unfavourably with direct, embodied experience, and that something may be being lost in the latter as a consequence; the second, with a feeling that living in the cocoon, and remaining at the centre of a gadget-anchored “youniverse,”<sup>2</sup> actually inhibits the risky and demanding project of opening oneself to the cultural Other in a meaningful and potentially transformative sense - the sense which many of our respondents left home somehow wanting to experience. After presenting, in brief, salient aspects of the research that support this interpretation, the bulk of the chapter attempts to start unpicking, and theoretically framing, the apparent disjuncture between the observations and preferences of this particular sample of mostly twenty-something “digital natives” (see below) and the claim now frequently being advanced by certain social theorists, technophiles and futurologists that the “hierarchy” of social interactions which privileges face-to-face is archaic, and dissolving; and more than this, that the shift to disembodied, remote interaction somehow presages a brighter future for humanity.

### **Embodied and Disembodied Interactions: The Preference for *Reality***

For the purposes of this piece I analysed the interviews from a “grounded theorising”<sup>3</sup> approach, working to identify emergent categories and concepts in the data for subsequent analysis. This beginning point of analysis yielded three main categories for further investigation. Two of these seem relatively uncomplicated at the theoretical level, and will be introduced only briefly; the third is denser and less clear, and therefore is at the centre of analysis here. These categories are, respectively, *Anchoring Cocoon Community* and a more imprecise cluster of themes connected to the sense of *Reduction*, or simplification, or contraction, in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=youniverse>

<sup>3</sup> Meaning here, in a general sense, the data-led generation of concepts to be investigated in this chapter rather than a full scale *Grounded Theory* approach to the project as a whole. For an account of the distinction between these two things see Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, Third Edition 2007, 159.

face-to-face social experience occasioned by routine social media interactions. As can be seen in David Gunkel's report on the NCN research project from which this chapter is derived, many respondents had at least some reservations about the "knock on" effects of social media, and Facebook in particular, on their embodied social lives; almost all voiced a preference for face-to-face interactions given the choice. This, of course, is not to imply a rejection of social media per se; the psychological and emotional continuity provided by the ability to "anchor" oneself at home - or wherever there are significant others - is widely seen by most as an obvious gain, and helps support users in their orientation to the new place.<sup>4</sup> One effect of this is that many individuals remain significantly focused on home and home culture, while simultaneously participating in the creation of a social media-enabled collective, especially on the Polish side of the study. It is clear that these two processes are closely intertwined, if not continuous: anchoring is arguably a core, psychologically stabilising element in the creation of the kind of flexible, short term, unbinding but very meaningful collectives identified, as we have seen, by Fred Dervin and Mari Korpela as "Cocoon Communities."<sup>5</sup> Largely independent of the surrounding cultural reality - in the Polish case, almost by necessity for reasons of deficits in language and cultural expertise - such groups enjoy a mobile, rolling and supportive field of social support and leisure activity existing, on the whole, on its own terms. The extent to which this 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon of collective sojourning in culturally opaque settings is enabled and framed by social media cannot, if our data is anything to go by, be overestimated. Thus are the undoubted benefits of routine social media use for most of our respondents; it allows individuals to both expose themselves to much that is new while significantly staying the same:

I actually expected my micro culture group to be left [at home]... I predicted I would leave it, come here and form a new one. But I'm glad that didn't happen because that micro culture is me, what I can demonstrate as being me. I use the same clothes as I did [at home]... I kind of expected to be immersed in the high culture [in Krakow], smoking pot for weeks but, of course, nothing...I expected to come here and be

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of the dynamics of this process see Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bienkowska's chapter in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> This finding is also congruent with those presented in this volume by Ciro Marcondes Filho, who writes of his Brazilian students' tendency to wish to dwell in a social media-framed "bubble" when travelling or sojourning abroad, and Jolanta Szymkowska - Bartyzel in her chapter on students in the Erasmus exchange programme.