Social behaviour in the internet era: Cyborgs, adolescents and education

Alexios V. Brailas[1]
Charalambos Tsekeris[2]

Abstract: The central aim of this concise reflection is to contextualise social behaviour within the substantive and analytical framework of the so-called internet era. It is stressed that contemporary world demands totally new media literacies and, as our culture is transformed by the evolution of digital life, the adolescents' behaviour is shaped by the evolution of their cyborg-extension. Currently, educators have the unique opportunity to be the very first to experience the nonlinear changes and adapt to them. Being a teacher nowadays is a valuable privilege that most teachers have probably not realised and appreciate in an adequate manner. This must necessarily involve the translation of constant change into adaptation, as well as the exploitation of chaos, uncertainty and nonlinearity.
Keywords: internet, cyberculture, cyborgs, education, chaos

For the modern teenagers, smartphones constitute an extension of their hands; of their hands or of their minds? While we are frequently consumed in proliferated discussions about potential internet dangers, lost personal time in online social networking sites, and Internet Addiction Disorder (not included in DSM-5 because of lack of data), we are probably missing what is actually going on in this new blended social culture we live in.

The definite theory of what children are experiencing today has not been written yet: "in the nature of the case, an explorer can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored" (Bateson, 1972, p. xxiv). This is a lived world of increasing technological mediation, where new, unprecedented technologies appear and where innovative, unplanned ways of using these technologies are permanently devised by individual human agents. The particular way in which new technologies are used, experienced and participating into human cultures is the

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[1] Virtual Reality, Internet Research & e-Learning Laboratory, Panteion University, Athens Greece. Email: abrailas@panteion.gr,
[2] Research Centre for Greek Society, Academy of Athens, Greece; Aegean College, Athens Greece. Email: c.tsekeris@aegeancollege.gr

uncertain outcome of an ongoing dynamic negotiation between people, communities and these digital artifacts.

Teens and smartphones actually constitute modern cyborgs. However, these cyborgs do not seem to be as variously envisioned by the writers of science fiction novels, even in their most bizarre imagination, just twenty years ago. How many of us do we carefully observe these modern, fashionable, virtual cyborgs, in order to grasp what is happening into their heads, how they think, what they feel, how they operate, and how they cyber-relate to each other?

On the website "Digital Playground", a website of the Greek Ministry of Public Order and of the Greek Police, aiming to inform parents and children about the internet (www.cyberkid.gov.gr), one can read:

> The internet addiction is one of the major problems for teens as well as for adults. It could happen to anyone. Find a remedy. Take back control of your computer [...] Follow a timetable in using your computer. One and a half hours a day is enough for entertainment and to satisfy your needs for information and news.

As long as we uncritically associate the word "internet" with problematic use, internet abuse or addiction, safety issues and how we can possibly protect young people, we see the tree but we miss the forest, despite good intentions and grounded fears. All these problematic issues seem to pertain to a reality that no longer exists. We, the adults, are the digital emigrants (Prensky, 2001) who have lived a significant portion of our life without mobile devises, without internet highways and Wi-Fi spots, without Facebook, Twitter or other social media.

Today's children will never live this era. Even if a teenager decides to stay offline (thus not to participate in the evolving shaping of the new digital culture), even if she decides not to use smartphones, even then, she will live in an overwhelming world where the other teenagers and classmates, in their vast majority, will have a sound digital presence and digital life. Nowadays, teenagers live in a world totally different in comparison to the world of our own adolescence, a world demanding totally new media literacies (Brailas, 2011). Unless we empathically try to get into their shoes, the shoes of the true digital natives, we will never understand what is happening and how we can handle it. As our culture is transformed by the evolution of digital life, the adolescents' behaviour is shaped by the evolution of their cyborg-extension:

> In biology, the behaviour of a living organism is shaped by its structure. As the structure changes during the organism's development and during the evolution of its species, so does its behaviour. A similar dynamic can be observed in social systems. The biological structure of an organism corresponds to the material infrastructure of a society, which embodies the society's culture. As the culture evolves, so does its infrastructure – they coevolve through continual mutual influences (Capra, 2003, p. 80).

In this technologically blended social landscape, characterised by fast transformation and growing destabilisation, educators are in an extremely advantageous position, in an optimal point of view: living and working among

children and teenagers, they have a direct experience of what is happening "in the living present" (Stacey, 2003). Hence, they are given the unique opportunity to be the very first to experience the surprising nonlinear changes and adapt to them, and even exploit or take advantage of them.

Being a teacher nowadays is a valuable privilege that most teachers have probably not realised and appreciate in an adequate manner. Maybe is true that constant change is hard to get digested, that is, to get transformed into adaptation (Tsekeris & Katerelos, 2012). Destabilisation is scary. Chaos often causes panic. A teacher now needs to alter and adjust his teaching mode in every new school period, in every new class. We live in the era of rapid changes; students' social behaviour is altered year by year in a dramatic pace.

We also live in a time where the unexpected is the normal case and the uncertain is a common value. Let's enjoy this era. Let's fully experience it as a stimulating period. This is the end of certainty as envisioned by Ilya Prigogine:

> Classical science emphasized order and stability; now, in contrast, we see fluctuations, instability, multiple choices, and limited predictability at all levels of observation. Ideas such as chaos have become quite popular, influencing our thinking in practically all fields of science, from cosmology to economics (Prigogine & Stengers, 1997, p. 4).

Chaos is neither avoidable nor destructive; instead, it can be imaginatively theorised as a unique opportunity and capacity to think, co-act and change, as well as something we should responsibly accept, acknowledge, embrace, celebrate and live with. Life is increasingly chaotic and chaos is indeed a very exciting thing. So, don't panic over chaos! Education should ultimately focus on the systematic study of uncertainty, rather than the infertile and unproductive attempt to overcome it. It should also empower the individuals, and especially young people, to realise themselves (as parts of a social network or system) in a more reflexive and self-determined way (Tsekeris, 2010). We are probably going to experience so many twists, as well as to witness so many changes in our culture and in the way of living, like no other generation:

> Like the biosphere, our human realm is endlessly creative in ways that typically cannot be foretold. Our common incapacity to know beforehand what Darwinian preadaptation will bring to biological evolution has an analog in technological evolution (Kauffman, 2010, p. 150).

Social processes emerge through personal action and are being constituted through individual agency, while they form and counter-constitute these individual actions at the same time – a dual, upward-downward, causality. In this relational dance of co-existence and mutual coevolution: I constitute you, while I am constituted by you, at the same time. The Social Web (Web 2.0) reciprocally interacts, coemerges and coevolves with human culture. Internet is indeed a cultural construction. It pertains to a complex, nonlinear combination of many different social actors, who are concurrently autonomous and interdependent. In

the years to come, cyberspace, society and culture will form a brand new virtual social space, but nobody can tell in advance how this space will look like.

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Notes on Contributors

Alexios Brailas is now working as a teacher in secondary education as well as a researcher at the Laboratory of Virtual Reality, Internet Research & E-Learning, at Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. Research interests and recent projects include: remodeling of Grounded Theory method (Networked Grounded Theory); research methods in cyberspace; virtual communities in education; digital storytelling in secondary education; complexity & learning and complex systems pedagogy.

Charalambos Tsekeris is currently Research Associate at the Research Centre for Greek Society of the Academy of Athens, Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Athens, Senior Researcher at the Laboratory of Virtual Reality, Internet Research & E-Learning (Panteion University), and Research Professor at Aegean College, Athens, Greece. His current research interests involve relational approaches in the social science, reflexivity and the self, human complex systems and psychosocial networks. He is the coeditor of the book *The Social Dynamics of Web 2.0* (Routledge 2014).