Fake news and the mediatised imagination

The experiential reception mode vs. information and the world image in the media

MAŁGORZATA LISOWSKA-MAGDZIARZ

KEYWORDS

representation, mediatisation, imagination, consumerism, pleasure, fake news

ABSTRACT

The mass media provide the auditoria with the attractive texts aiming mainly or solely at the powerful emotional and sensual stimulation. To the auditoria, these texts constitute the source of the narratives, heuristics, and interpretations handy in the description and representation of the world. Such a mediatised imagination facilitates spreading stereotypes, hearsay, and fake information.

It is possible to describe a certain type of people's cultural experiences in the mediatised society by means of a metaphor of the shock caused by the electric eel. The experience thus described is short and intense, composed of poignant sensations and strong emotions, still, devoid of any significant intellectual content. Such experiences provide a sense of detachment from reality and immersion into the alternative world, and participation in this world together with a large crowd of others. One can surmise that the experiential participation in culture contributes to the reshaping of social representations of various social phenomena, their altered evaluation, diffusion, and hierarchisation. It may be therefore co-responsible for the faith in the so-called post-truth, the dissemination of superstitions, the cultivation of stereotypes and prejudices, and the mediatisation of the imagination.

The logic of suspicion and eclecticism of methodology

The word "surmise" is being used consciously here, with the perfect awareness that in the academic discourse the conjectures need only be the basis for hypotheses empirically confirmable through an intersubjectively valid methodology. Hopefully, sometime such a methodology will be built. Meanwhile, the conjectures allow for the construction of an essay. It might be contributive to the discussion about the deep causes of the calamity that the mass-mediated distribution of fake news and the dissemination of post-truth has become in recent years. The distribution of fake news ruins the public sphere, distorts political choices of citizens, diminishes the prestige of science while bolstering the spreading of the common knowledge, and, releases demons hidden inside social stereotypes and prejudices. Technological explanations of this phenomenon lead to the easy attribution of blame to the social media tools: lo and behold, the reason fetched away as a result of the technical solutions enabling mass distribution and authentication of every, even the most absurd information both by humans and by the human-emulating algorithms. Sociological explanations point to the collapse of the social trust and the post-modern crisis of the world-ordering "great narratives". Political scientists describe the dangerous connections between the economic deprivation of the large groups of people and populism that uses their frustration to spread the totalitarian vision of reality. Each of these explanations touches the heart of the problem, but only to a certain extent. Media scholar/semiotician (which is the position of the author of this essay) is also unable to provide the key to its complete understanding. However, the media-socio-semiotic perspective may help to diagnose how the mediatised culture produces not only fake news on their own, but also the context

incentivising their distribution, paired with people's emotional and cognitive attitudes conducive to it. It can also indicate the cultural forces enabling the resistance against the post-truth invasion. The awareness of the inability to fully empirically validate the theses expressed in this essay has to lead to the partial scepticism as to the adopted heuristic and cognitive procedures. However, it does not have to lead to the complete disqualification of the applied methodology. It is instead useful to remind that its explicatory power is not absolute, so the used methods should be triangulated with the sociological, political and anthropological methodologies. Hence the methodological eclecticism: the use of socio-semiotic tools, sociological concepts and the achievements of communication science. The media studies, as a young discipline lacking a single unified Great Theory, feed on these encounters.

Experiences and practices

The metaphor of electric eel used at the beginning of this essay refers to the particular type of the experience of the media users, resulting from the comprehensive, very intense stimulation of their senses. It is based on the illusion of an intimate, direct physical reception of the cultural text, but in reality, it cannot do without the use of sense-enhancing technology. The technological mediation is also the source of the sense of togetherness, the co-participation in large aggregative processes, a kind of initiation binding the participants of the particular cultural event against the rest of the world. In concert with the character of our current culture such experiences happen to us incessantly - during a concert, performance, match, exhibition, election rally, at the shopping mall and in front of a TV. They are pleasurable because of providing users with the emotional and sensory stimulations, even though they do not have to be joyful or cheerful, and sometimes they rely on arousing anger, fear or disgust. Although very strong, they are transient and temporary. They are basically unrepeatable, although the recipients can try to reprise them, and they have at their disposal the text and image registration devices allowing to do it to some extent. Media science theories of media dependency[1] and the newer versions of the cultivation theory[2] suggest that the recurring, long-term technologically mediated cultural experiences of this kind generate the particular reception attitudes. This can influence the acquirement of knowledge or shape various

[1] S.J. Ball-Rokeach, J.Y. Jung, *The evolution of media system dependency theory* [in:] *Sage handbook of media processes and effects*, ed. R. Nabi, M.B. Oliver, Thousand Oaks 2009, pp. 531–544.

[2] M. Morgan, J. Shanahan, *Two decades of cultivation research: An appraisal and meta-analysis*, **"**Annals of the International Communication Association**"**, 1997, 20, pp. 1–45, doi: 10.1080/23808985.1997.11678937 [access: 1.07.2018]. Also: M. Morgan, J. Shanahan, N. Signorelli, *Yesterday's new cultivation, tomorrow,* **"**Mass Communication and Society**"**, 2015, 18/5, pp. 674–699, doi:10.1080/15205436.2015.1072725 [access: 1.07.2018].

people's choices not only in the sphere of culture, but also in politics, education, consumption, or lifestyle.

The experiential model of cultural reception is based on the synthesis of technologies and market mechanisms of the mediatised culture, mass-producing spectacular texts devoid of intellectual depth which then become powerful, collective experiences of large audiences. While pondering this type of media experiences, it is worth looking for a perspective allowing for the description of their social dimensions. The socio-semiotic theories of reception seem to be useful and applicative in this respect. Not without reason, Nick Couldry's[3] work on media practices has been in recent years widely cited in Western academia and applied to explain various phenomena in the realm of social communication. The British communication sociologist, drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein and Teodor Schatzky[4], perceives the media use as a kind of social practice: the set of recurring human activities of universal, repetitive, routine, ritualised character, incident to the human needs of communication and interaction, cooperation, trust and freedom[5]. Each time, they consist of the activity, co-related communication (production of discourse) and the re-ordering of the world knowledge, hierarchisation of the issues, establishment of the criteria of truth and accuracy of the collective interpretations of the various social phenomena. This clearly entails that practices are related to power, social hierarchy and knowledge production processes. Their repeatability and universality in our life[6] lead to specific collective attitudes and values. Therefore, the collective and repetitive nature of media practices has considerable practical import. They enable the dissemination of certain types of discourse, shape the construction and transfer of knowledge, lead to naturalisation of particular representations of social life. The media practices constantly interact with the consumption, political, religious, health, educational and family practices which leads to the changes in the collective evaluation of the social phenomena, and in the uses of culture, the tastes, and preferences, consumer and political choices, and private decisions of people. Therefore the character of the media texts serving as the background for the most prevalent practices is of enormous importance.

Convergence and unity

[3] N. Couldry, *Media, society, world. Social theory and digital media practice*, Cambridge 2012. See, by the same author: *Media w kontekście praktyk. Próba teoretyczna* [Theorising Media as Practice], "Kultura Popularna" 2010, 27/1, pp. 96–113.
[4] T.R. Schatzky, *Social practices: a Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social*, New York 1996.
[5] N. Couldry, *Media, society, world*…, op. cit., p. 34 et seq.
[6] E. Shove, M. Pantzar, M. Watson, *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes*, London 2012.

The metaphor of an electric eel culture relates to the era of industrial production and distribution of experiences. Despite their repetitive nature, they are promoted by the cultural industry as unique, perception-altering, and unforgettable, whereas the technologically-supported communication gives the access to the same "unique" experience to large numbers of people. Paradoxically, the cultural industry itself, while promoting the uniqueness of its products, uses different content, formal and distribution solutions to emphasise the collective character of the experiences of large human aggregates and encourage us to communicate with other users by means of the convergent interactive media. Such experiences are thus shaped by a specific inclusion/exclusion dialectics. They convey both the sense of uniqueness and intimacy of the experience of a single recipient and unity of emotions and sensations with the whole audience (therefore, a kind of tribalism, the group shared exclusiveness in opposition to the rest of the world). The sense of the simultaneity and collective involvement in this type of experience, along with the possibility of mediated exchange of opinions in real time is founded on transmediality and interconnectivity of various communication devices. Thus the technology leads to the interdiscursive obliteration of the media and genre boundaries. "I know Harry Potter" means either seeing one of the films, or reading a whole series of books, or just one of them, or its fragments; or playing an interactive game; or taking part in the social processes provoked by the media product. The media convergence allows different groups with various levels of cultural capital to participate in the consumption of the cultural product in their own way. It contributes to the effacement of the socially constructed hierarchy of communicative and cultural practices, and of the definite boundaries separating different genres, narratives and discourses. To boot, contemporary auditoria participate in many diversified cultural experiences simultaneously, which results in overlapping of sensations, fascinations, stories - usually in fragments, flashes, selected attractive moments and images, because in the vast excess and variability only the most spectacular, fascinating or controversial elements stay marginally longer in one's memory. These cultural bits and pieces form the basis for communication between the people who share information, disseminate recommendations and criticism, and recount their own impressions publicly, albeit within the technologically mediated space.

Rematisation and dicentisation

This, in the long run, changes the epistemological definition of the situation, the cognition and ordering of knowledge, thus leading also to a new organisation of aesthetic experience. In the centre of epistemology resulting from the culture of electric eels lies a combination of

seemingly incompatible texts, reception modes and experiences, and a collective sense of participation in a great collective process that would be incomplete if one could not share emotions with others. In this sense, the cultural experiences that are described here are not only technology-based but also communal, arising in the search for a specific syntony with a large crowd of co-participants. This leads to a shared image of the world and concerted emotional evaluation of its various representations - and the implication of their obvious naturalised nature. The semioticians will call the phenomena thus occurring the rematisation[7] and dicentisation[8]. Within the former process, we reflexively assume that the signs, since we are able to perceive them, must reflect real objects. The latter is the phenomenon of the assumption of a necessary logical or structural link between signs and actual appearances. Therefore, what is just the representative convention or emulation, is considered a proof of truth, especially when a representation is wide-spread and recurring, and when it comes from the sources deemed reliable, socially legitimised, and associated with knowledge, power, or politics. A prolonged representative practice leads to the naturalisation of the representation. It also (which may be even more important) breads the attachment to certain representation modes. The practice of consumption of the "electric eel-experiences" may lead not only to the reification of the specific world image, but also to the perpetuation of the criteria of the attractiveness, appeal, interest, and desirability of its particular representations. We are taught to expect specific types of representation, which is consequential due to the significant cognitive and persuasive aspects of representation practices.

Two essential phenomena converge here and inter-penetrate: on the one hand, the social dimension of representations, on the other - their simulacrisation.

A societal and simulative character of representations

Serge Moskovici[9] in his classic work on social representations used this term regarding the collective, elaborate concepts/definitions/descriptions of phenomena coined in order to effectively communicate about them (the symbolic dimension) and cooperate (material dimension). He proposed to frame this process in terms of anchoring and objectification. The obscure or incomprehensible phenomenon is originally inscribed into existing interpretive

[7] L. Chumley, G*ualia and ontology: Language, semiotics, and materiality; an introduction*, **"**Signs and Society**"** 2017, 5/1, pp. 1–20, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/690190 [access: 1.07.2018].

[8] C. Ball, *On dicentization*, **"**Journal of Linguistic Anthropology**"** 2014, 24/2, pp. 151–173, https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jola.12046 [access: 1.07.2018].

[9] S. Moscovici, *Attitudes and opinions* [in:] „Annual Review of Psychology" 1963, Vol. 14, p. 251, http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.ps.14.020163.001311 [access: 1.07.2018].

frameworks and received representations. In the course of recurring, long-lasting, repetitive representation practices, the social naturalisation occurs conducting to the recognition of the particular representations as normal, objective, common sense, understandable, and valid. Such an objectified representation produces (in semiotic terms) the conventionalised representative codes and practices[10]. Certain form and content solutions and styles become considered right and appropriate for the adequate depiction of the phenomenon. Specific symbols, metaphors, texts, indexes become associated with it seemingly forever. Thus, a new element becomes included in the pre-existing area of social representations. The new representation gets charged with emotions and values important for the group in which it is sustained. While it is possible to distinguish the social representations of specific problems, phenomena, places, events, the integration between them means that in practice they are mutually interwoven and form a holistic image of reality. This image is not the same for everyone, or universal. Certain social conditions make some clues, metaphors, descriptions and stories more important to some groups. This may result from both the specific interests of the group at the moment, as well as from the cultural specifics, historical events, the place in social structuring, living conditions, level of cultural competence, access to knowledge. It is therefore impossible to disregard the role of media practices in the shaping of the social representations. Social semiology finds here an extremely important role of various forms of transmodality[11], i.e. the communication between the groups using different semiotic resources and communication tools to distribute similar content.

These groups use various media as a result of diversified habitus, different levels of media literacy and environmentally shaped cognitive and aesthetic preferences. Still, the basic experiential model of the cultural reception premised on the search for the sensory stimulation, strong emotions and a sense of togetherness, seems to be shared by all strata. Shared is also the assumption of the role of a multimodal medium with a screen displaying sequences of moving images with sound intended for entertainment as the vital source of representations. The location of a medium with such modalities at the centre of media practices and related social practices fundamentally influences the results of processes of social representation of important societal phenomena. This medium, because of its omnipresence, has become a "natural" tool for representing the world. It produces the illusion of realism, truth and currency through skilful manipulation of the formal and material

[10] J. Fiske, *Television Culture*, New York 1998, pp. 3–14.

[11] D.R. Newfield, Transformation, transduction and the transmodal moment, https://www.academia.edu/30252947/Transformation_transduction_and_the_transmodal_moment [access: 1.07.2018].

modality markers. In fact, however, it offers only a certain construction of reality managed by various marketing and ideological agencies. It contributes to the production of social representations, but the means used for this purpose are simulative in nature. One of the classics of late modernity called it the precession of simulacra[12], "substituting the reality with the signs of reality"[13]. In fact, even the simulative or simulacrum character of those representations is not entirely unambiguous. There are the simulations – the reality-forestalling signs of the emulative nature, as well as simulacra – the signs without the actual relationship to reality, just to other signs. These in our experience intermingle with signs actually aiming at the information about reality or at its subjective depiction. Everything is too fast, too loud, too forceful, and too attractive; this attack on the user's senses eliminates the possibility of reflection. Our perceptual habits and social concepts of credibility and realism of various modalities do not keep in step with the development of technology. We, therefore, are drowning in a sea of electric eels, not adapted perceptually, not always prepared mentally, but trained by a mediatised consumer culture to seek for pleasant, sensual experiences and avoid intellectual effort as long as it is not absolutely necessary[14].

Infrastructural media dependency

It would be precipitant to demonise the media as the only source of the world representation for the contemporary human communities. There are many sources of knowledge, among which the media may not be the most important one. However, the media dependency theory is worth recalling here[15]: people need the media to understand the world and themselves, for the orientative purposes, i.e. the significant interaction and influencing others, and also for the purposes of play and recreation. The latter not having only a simple escapist character, but being the important device for shaping social roles, norms and values, and reflecting the norms and values of a seemingly "just playing" community. The lower the cultural capital and competences, the greater dependence on the media, also in the sphere of knowledge. The higher media consumption, the greater dependence on them as the source of knowledge and entertainment. Concurrently, the lower the cultural capital and competences, the greater consumption of the media, in particular, television, or - as we should phrase it today – the

[12] J. Baudrillard, Precesja *symulakrów* [The Precession of Simulacra] [in:] *Postmodernizm, antologia przekładów* [Postmodernism, the anthology of translations], ed. R. Nycz, Kraków 1996, pp. 175–189.
[13] Ibid., p. 177.
[14] B. Barber, *Skonsumowani. Jak rynek psuje dzieci, infantylizuje dorosłych i połyka obywateli* [Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole], Warszawa 2008.
[15] S.J. Ball-Rokeach, M.L. DeFleur, *A dependency model of mass-media effects* [in:] *Inter/Media: Interpersonal communication in a media world,* ed. G. Gumpert, R.S. Cathart, Oxford 1979, pp. 81–96.

multimodal screen medium in general. Finally, it is worthwhile to remind that the media dependency deepens in the conditions of uncertainty, crisis, and anomy[16]. The dependency between the cultural capital and competence and the type of the (excessively) consumed media does not come down to the old "print vs. television" dispute, where the press was once the realm of knowledge and public discourse, while television provided careless entertainment (as commented upon in the 1980s, at the beginning of the era of interactive media, by Neil Postman[17] or Joshua Meyrowitz[18]). In the convergence culture, this situation is more aptly described by the infrastructural theory[19] - resulting directly from the media dependency theory but also substantially modifying or undermining simplistic applications of uses and gratifications theory. It perceives the communication infrastructure as a kind of storytelling system[20] whose main function is to sustain social bonds in real life. One can, therefore, view the media as a multi-level system providing people with various narratives, but also as a context - the area in which human actions take place (the social practice perspective is adopted here to describe them). The system consists of large, officially legitimised media entities (*macro-agents*), medium-level entities – groups and collectives using their own media or existing official media to distribute their own narratives (*mezzo-agents*) and the individuals (*micro-agents*). These entities are involved in the processes of construction of the shared purpose-fitted "stories" of an integrating nature. At the early stage of development of the media dependency theory, these needs in terms of social life had been defined as the need for observation/supervision/control over the social world wherein the individual operates, and the need for usefulness, i.e. acting in it in an active and effective manner; as well for refuge/escapism, when internal tensions become too unpleasant. The infrastructural theory does not yet explain the roles of the participants at different levels and interrelationships in a sufficiently reliable way; it is also important not to treat it as the replacement of the dependency theory. It should be looked at as a supplement or development of the former, necessary in the situation of the empirically observable change in the way people use the

[16] W. Lowery, *Media dependency during a large-scale social disruption: The case of September 11* [in:] *"*Mass Communication & Society*"* 2004, (3) 7, pp. 339–357, doi:10.1207/s15327825mcs0703_5 [access: 1.07.2018].
[17] N. Postman, *Zabawić się na śmierć: Dyskurs publiczny w epoce show-businessu* [Amusing ourselves to death. Public discourse in age of show business], Warszawa 2006.
[18] J. Meyrowitz, *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*, Oxford 1985.
[19] S.A. Matei, *Can media system dependency account for social media? Or should communication infrastructure theory take care of it?* [in:] *"*I Think*"* 2010, http://matei.org/ithink/2010/07/27/from-media-dependency-system-to-communication-infrastructure-theory/comment-page-1/ [access: 1.07.2018].
[20] S.J. Ball-Rokeach. J.Y. Jung, *The evolution of media system dependency theory* [in:] *Sage handbook of media processes and effects*, ed. R. Nabi, M.B. Oliver, Thousand Oaks 2009, s. 531–544; also: S.J. Ball-Rokeach, *A theory of media power and a theory of media use: Different stories, questions, and ways of thinking* [in:] "Mass Communication and Society" 1998, Vol. 1, pp. 50–40.

media and the growing access of various entities to the storytelling system. The conclusions that follow should be optimistic: the interactive media are a force providing the previously excluded or marginalised social strata with access to the system. However, the infrastructural theory does also point to the worrisome aspect of the entire process: that, regardless of the open possibilities of participation, extreme inequality of access to resources, know-how and the ability to "tell" the story persists. At the mezzo level, in the niches, bubbles and sectioned-off zones, the citizens can briefly intercept the structural control over the development of social narratives, but generally, this process is being conducted primarily on the basis and around the texts developed by large broadcasting institutions and political entities. At the macro level, the mediatised social representations develop cumulatively, as they emerge from repetition and multiplication of the various world representations constructed purposefully with the maximisation of the viewership or clickability in view. The resulting mediatised image of the world is then dependent on the cultural industries' calculated production of the swarms of the electric eels.

Between the representation and the imagination

The representation of the world with the means of the electric eels results in the mediatisation of imagination. This process consists in production of the collective representations of various important social phenomena, places, people, groups, and co-creation of the narratives about what may or must happen in relation to them on the basis of attractive, essential and crowd-pleasing media texts about these phenomena. These texts concern the critical matters, so they are repeatedly consumed, discussed and redistributed, evaluated and negotiated. The use the term "mediatisation" seems apt here because mass media, through the process of representation, provide us with the necessary knowledge about the occurrences and phenomena to which otherwise we have no access or just a fragmentary one. Nevertheless, one cannot call it knowledge, but imagination, as these representations are in a large proportion built of the texts of the simulative or simulacrous nature.

How does the mediatised imagination arise? It would be rash to maintain that it is entirely divorced from reality. As in the case of stereotypes, for the imagination to root and spread, there must be some truth to it, and it must in some way refer to the peoples' real-life experiences. At the same time, however, it arises in response to the needs of security within the community, of the simplification of the incomprehensible and threatening world and simple solutions to severe problems or at least pointing to their perpetrators or culprits.

On the other hand, the composition and structuring of the mediatised imagination result from the impact of the most gratifying and widely disseminated media practices. In the culture of electric eels, the object of the most complex, multifaceted and long-lasting media practices are the particular multimodal texts/narratives that 1) have a formulaic character, i.e. despite marginal mutability are basically repetitive and reappear in various contexts; 2) are noticeable and visible, most memorable, and easily distinguishable on the message-and image-saturated background; 3) are cognitively straightforward, therefore easy to incorporate into already existing cognitive structures - which, as is already known, is the underlying mechanism for producing sustainable social representations with the use of the new material; 4) provide audiences with the pleasure associated with intense sensory and emotional stimulation; 5) allow for effective and satisfying communication with others, and in certain situations - for expressing one's own interests.

It is therefore easy to notice that – from the model point of view – the role of the media in the creation of social representations might rely on two kinds of influence. It may be based on an informational and educational impact, wherein various social representations are premised on legitimate knowledge of various issues, phenomena, figures. This kind of influence will be executed primarily through language, as the main semiotic resource generally associated with rational discourse, education, knowledge distribution, and bureaucratic power. It is worth noticing that it may involve unleashing the manipulative and persuasive potential of the words that can be enormous, especially when skilfully paired with the images or music through the anchoring and mutual semanticisation mechanisms. This representation mode calls for a highly media literate audience. It is inevitably associated with the social perception of knowledge as coming from legitimised educational and political institutions, hence relatively exclusive. At the other extreme, we find the formation of social representations through the appeal to emotions and sensory stimulation, with the texts previously referred to here as the "electric eels". It happens to a large extent without rational argumentation and intellectual analysis, mainly through unorganised, chaotically mixed multimodal messages: the short, attractive, sensual, fast-paced shreds and fragments of information, particularly suggestive images, soundbites and music fragments, shocking or humorous statements and pieces of dialogue; mixed, cross-contradicting, mutually commenting or jamming, combining fantasy and reality. Their attractiveness and value are strengthened by the emotional bonds forged by the viewers who exchange them. Hence the multitude of empirically observable situations when people include such fragmentary, chaotic and detached representations of reality into their own assessment and description of reality.

Mediatised imagination in action

There are numerous examples...

The portrayal of the forensic technicians in the numerous procedural TV series as the extremely sexy and charismatic scientists using state-of-the-art forensic technologies with 100% efficiency, contributed in the USA and Western Europe to the spread of the so-called CSI effect – the citizens' expectation that in real life the police will be equally effective and technologically advanced. A similar effect in Poland is called the "Leśna Góra effect" (after the name of the hospital in the TVP soap opera "Na dobre i na złe"); it is expressed through the unrealistic expectations towards doctors and healthcare institutions.

The mediatised imagination generates unrealistic images of various professional groups – police officers, doctors, clergy, scientists, and artists. This seems relatively innocuous, still the particular social attitudes towards various social and ethnic groups may also be partially founded on the mediated imagery resulting from the consumption of their most popular and response-provoking portrayals in the media (news, film fragments, social media posts, memes). There is a tendency in the US to treat men of colour as potentially dangerous – on account of the overrepresentation of the images of black criminals in film and television. This can lead to much more severe consequences than the excessive expectations regarding hospital staff: the day this paper is being written, the US police shot a black citizen calmly talking on the phone in his own backyard. The Romany associations not too successfully contend with the image of the Roma communities as consisting of wandering musicians or beggars and thieves. The citizens of Arab countries are too often equated with rapists or Islamic extremists, and the refugees from war zones - with terrorists. This, to a large extent, seems to result from the pervasiveness of the attractive, violent, moving media images and reports about the threats these groups allegedly bring. The mediatised imagination mythicises various ethnic groups and nations and produces distorted images of different social strata and relationships between the poor and the rich. It leads to the particular configuration of the so-called post-memory – the set of media-based projections about the relatively recent, important historical events among the people who had never experienced them in person nor met the eyewitnesses, displacing the actual historical knowledge. It also dictates the aesthetic patterns of the ideal human body and shapes the consumer lifestyle choices. Psychologists and sex therapists anxiously scrutinise the tendency, especially among the young, to transfer the expectations as to the appearance and fitness of the sexual partners from the media to people's

private lives - clearly, as a consequence of the exposure to idealised and seemingly immortal bodies of fashion models or characters of porn and superhero movies.

At long last, the emotional, experiential mode of media reception may serve as the ground for various conspiracy theories. This illustrates well the nature of the mediatised imagination: its portrayal of different life's occurrences consists of disparate elements of various status and authenticity, connected in a way that seems to be random or irrational, but does actually respond to the interpretive communities' need for the coherent world image of the unambiguous, understandable and pleasurable nature. The legitimacy of this image is solidified thanks to their collective processing in the information bubbles, whence people apply the claim definition of truth or the social one, based on the processes of the mutual confirmation of shared intuitions and beliefs as well as on the syntony of feelings, intuitions, tastes and communication styles. The danger lies in the fact that the imagination rarely stops at the false representation of a current state of affairs; it usually works on, producing the misconceptions and doomsaying about what may happen, what should happen, and what will happen inevitably. The unstoppable operation of imagination, especially when fuelled continuously by new images and words, leads to particular expectations as to reality, and to the protests when the reality fails to meet them. It may even lead to the active attempts to bend the disobedient reality to one's expectations: the people do, in fact, object against hosting refugees, refuse to vaccinate their children and vote for the politicians promising the fulfilment of their fantasies.

Experience or participation?

On the continuum of the cognitive effort and engagement with the media, the experiential reception mode lies at the opposite end to the important cultural trend which today's network and social change theorists term the culture of participation[21].

"The electric eel culture" is premised on the search for the powerful but short and impermanent, transient experiences. It provides the users with instant gratifications, albeit without leaving time or mental space for intellectual elaboration or self-aware self-analysis, or the reflection on the sources and causes of their own sentiments. The participant of such cultural experience is focused on their own pleasure. The perceived emotional syntony with other participants provides the sense of togetherness, but people have no time and most often no motivation for its further intellectual processing. This reception model is consistent with

[21] *The participatory cultures handbook*, ed. A. Delwiche, J.J. Henderson, New York 2013.

the consumerist axiology. The ideal media user/consumer is supposed to be an impatient, vital values-oriented hedonist. The media are to provide for their ludic needs. Materialist, seeking, in equal measure, the confirmation of their own class status as well as a self-fulfilment, they must be focused on themselves, responding to the inner compulsion for both having fun and assuaging status anxiety[22].

The participatory culture, on the other hand, would be differently defined within various research paradigms, but its essence is immutable. The experience of participation is essentially of an intellectual nature, as based on cultural, technological and communication competence. We are supposed to enter the area of mediated participation as a result of the use of the interactive devices for the purpose of multiway exchange of the cultural material while collectively producing the new, relevant knowledge representing more than the straight sum of the collected information bits. The participatory culture transforms various spheres of our experiences. The component of technologically mediated participation gets included in previously lonesome experiences such as reading, listening to music or watching films, of the individualistic character even when placed in a group in a darkened room. The participatory dimension of today's cultural experiences leads to the widening of contacts and communication with others, and the exchange of views and opinions. In the more engaged version, it encourages the transformative work and transition from communication to practical actions. We are also the active members of the participatory culture when, as a result of intense communication activity around some important aesthetic or social issues, we evolve from recipients to creators. This kind of communication practices is not just the rarely realised possibility. As a result of their recurrence, they form a kind of the default setting of the culture user. They are oriented at a longer duration, as they require the effort to maintain communication while calling for perseverance and purposeful pursuit of both individual satisfaction and collective benefits. Satisfactory experience of media participation is stretched in time and cannot be achieved without a lasting cognitive commitment and responsible communication with others. The media users' communicative strategies are aimed not only at passive attending and reception but also at the co-creation of the message and the negotiation of its place in the public sphere. Furthermore, they are also open on the Other, as the prerequisite for successful participation in the constant effort towards understanding others, interpretation of their intentions, and cooperation.

[22] A. de Botton, *Lęk o status* [Status Anxiety], Warszawa 2011.

The experiential and participatory reception modes coexist and can complement each other. The possibility of rational, competent and committed communication and the educational potential of the media do exist. At the same time, however, people's receiving dispositions shaped by technology, media systems, and consumer culture favour life in the world of electric eels and mediatised imagination, where sand castles are built of shreds, flashes, transient sensations, and collective sentiments. It definitely changes the conditions for the social distribution of knowledge and civic involvement. It is also, undoubtedly, co-responsible for the current troubles of the liberal democracies, since their predicament clearly results from people's undue belief in the claims of the populists, the spread of fake news and the rise of post-truth, and decline of social trust and empathy. One can parse the technological and financial reasons for which Cambridge Analytica unceremoniously dealt with our private data, and Russian bots prompted people to vote against their own rationally perceived interests. However, this would not be possible without their prior cognitive and emotional grooming.

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