

ONLINE SELF- CONSPIRACY AS A CHALLENGE OF ONLINE-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT:

Drawing on the concepts of 'conspiracy of silence' and of 'conspiracy of courtesy' coined and developed by Joseph Ascroft, the author analyses the consequences of social media on development communication. Adopting a method of conceptual analysis of both concepts as well as using an analogy between development communication mediated by professional journalists and by online publishing laity, this investigation foregrounds the self-marginalisation of a vast chunk of the population which has emerged even in developed countries of the West and which tends to the self-conspiracy. The Western population, that imprisons itself in the national-identity (or ethnocentric) media 'bubbles', feels itself to be misunderstood by its own state authorities, and feels socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent, in short marginalised in questions of multiculturalism and self-identity. As a result, development communication in the field of social change must take a twofold effort – to overcome the barriers of silent mistrust or of uncooperative courtesy firstly 'inside the Western society' facing media 'bubbles' as well as 'outside' facing real conspiracy of silence or courtesy. The aim of this study is clarifying the role of development communication in processes of social change in the online era and assessing its ability to facilitate active participation of (self-) marginalised groups at all stages of the development process.

KEY WORDS:

conspiracy beliefs, emotions, marginality, online media Universe, online-mediated social change, paradigmatic change, self-conspiracy

Introduction

When Joseph Ascroft wrote his essay *A Conspiracy of Courtesy*, he based his starting point on the African tradition dictating that honoured guests are not criticised. The technical personnel for development in the



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Third World were considered such honoured guests. Hence, there was a lack of communication between those who came to help and those local nationals who needed help, but actually hampered it by their ‘local customs dictate’ of courtesy. *“It is obvious that people living in countries of the ‘Third World’ are not able to express their disagreement through ways and means typical for the Western civilisation”*,² but ordinary distrust of the alien supported by the local unwritten convention resulted in unintended silence. Indeed, the Ascroftian “conspiracy of courtesy”³ and “conspiracy of silence”⁴ are not synonyms, but both phenomena have grown from the same communication spawn – a culturally dimorphic approach to communication. The local morals preach that the locals will never tell an alien that he is violating good taste or the rules of decency, and it is only up to the alien himself to find out and judge that he is committing some violation or excess. But the alien usually does not know which of his words or acts are crossing the boundaries of the local value system. And the result is *“a seemingly unsolvable problem where one party doesn’t know and the other daren’t tell”*.⁵

In such an arrangement, a statement that current (online) communication technologies could have the potential to disrupt this communication stereotype, that they could help social change in understanding others, seems to be relevant.⁶ The World Wide Web Library is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing the most comprehensive information background on all human civilisations, cultures, and local customs from around the world. Increasing availability of the Internet and of the platforms of social networks cancels the elite’s privilege to select, create, and publish media content replacing it with the information-publishing self-service of the former mere media audience. The online life provides people with encounters with ‘otherness’ symbolising new ways of being, acting, feeling, self-shaping or shaping others, new ways of self-acceptance as well as acceptance of others as a specific kind of (co)existence based on sharing of one’s own perspectives. A distant online communication allows intensive mutual face-to-face communication without face-to-face or eye-to-eye contact. It allows speaking out. Hence, it seems to be something quite different from local conventions and traditions that discipline spontaneous communication and silence it by ordering what to do/say and how to do/say it.

However, the information-publishing self-service of the online population is based on media ‘bubbles’ of intellectual isolation of similar social identities. The ‘otherness’ is often seen as a potential threat to the given societal identity – and supporters of the ‘otherness’ are analogically seen as enemy-allies. In addition, human behaviour in the online environment manifests itself distinctly different nature to that in offline life. The partial outcomes of my ongoing research into *“the online man residing in the Universe of the social media”*⁷ indicate differences between online media life and offline media life in at least three areas: in relation to societal conventions, in relation to cognition and interpretation of truth, and in relation to traditional value hierarchies. The following analysis of courtesy and rudeness and of silence and speaking out will be based also on these findings.

Methodologically, this is a desk study which combines philosophical reflections on the potential of social media in the process of social change based on the concepts of “conspiracy of courtesy” and “conspiracy of silence” coined by Joseph Ascroft with the meta-analysis of psychological research on conspiracy beliefs by Andreas Goreis and Martin Voracek,⁸ and empirical analyses of the case studies on emotions in mediated

public life by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen.⁹ Simultaneously, it briefly describes and compares the opportunities and limits in the field of development communication that are available to publishing laity in social media on the one hand, and to professional journalists on the other.

People in Control of Communication Processes

Communication for social change, a term I have chosen for the title of this study, is only one among many that denote the same complex of societal engagement. The others are, for example, communication for development, development communication or development support communication. It is not my objective to provide a comprehensive definition of this complex, but it should be stated that I understand communication for social change as a vast interdisciplinary set of knowledge and practice in the field of interpersonal as well as intercultural dialogue in order to eliminate poverty and inequality at local, national or international levels. The editors of the anthology of the works on communication for social change defined it as *“a way of thinking and practice that puts people in control of the means and content of communication processes”*.¹⁰ This definition is worth investigating in terms of the online media. What means do people use for online communication? What content do they consume? What kinds of content do they publish? Do these means and content lead to overcoming unintended misunderstandings and thus to greater understanding among cultural aliens? In short, are people in control of the means and content of online communication processes?

Before answering these questions, let me briefly describe a peculiar ontological-epistemological-axiological environment of online communication (the social media Universe).¹¹ Analysing the online environment, the researchers of communication often use simplified concepts of the Internet or the Internet Network. From a cognitive point of view, I suggest, it is important to distinguish between Internet media (the blogs and vlogs of Web 1.0), social media (the social networks of Web 2.0), and the semantic media (the platforms of Web 3.0). Each of them functions differently: each of them requires a different user’s effort, evokes different expectations, and causes different consequences. The Internet (Web 1.0) has abolished the privilege of elites to publish media content and taught ordinary people to explore the world through self-presentation of individuals as well as of the institutions, i.e. without the risk of manipulation by editorial staff – professional journalists. The characteristic cognitive requirement of self-entertainment on blogs or vlogs is only the ability and skill to find and download the object of one’s entertainment.

On the other hand, social media (Web 2.0) set up a more active agenda – self-publishing and, along with it, a cognitive demand to acquire the ability to create and upload one’s own content (texts, sounds, images). The intricate cross-publishing of original content, slightly modified content or seriously distorted (even false) content by media laity for self-information and self-entertainment has resulted in a situation where truth has often ceased to be a criterion for media content. A more substantial criterion for ‘proper’ content expected by ordinary people seems to be the affirmation of sameness through ‘the like button’ or denial of ‘otherness’ through ‘the dislike button’.

Finally, the platforms of the semantic media (Web 3.0) allow not only self-presentation or self-affirmation, but also self-shaping. Nevertheless, they require immersion – a ‘jump’ into the online information-publishing self-service of connected users. The immersion means routine active media consumption as well as media production, so that search engines and software get as much feedback as possible about one’s current needs, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, wishes, rejections, etc. Both material and spiritual. The reward is the opportunity for free self-shaping; however, in a personalised information ‘bubble’. Such self-shaping is a cognitive-social paradox of online communication. On the one hand, it requires relatively high technological abilities and skills

1 ASCROFT, J.: A Conspiracy of Courtesy. In GUMUCIO-DAGRON, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange : Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 72.

2 SOLÍK, M., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: Social Recognition on a Global Scale: Opportunities and Limits of Media Reflection. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 21.

3 ASCROFT, J.: A Conspiracy of Courtesy. In GUMUCIO-DAGRON, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange : Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 71-75.

4 ASCROFT, J.: A Conspiracy of Silence. In *International Development and Reconstruction / Focus 3*, 1978, Vol. 3, p. 8-11.

5 ASCROFT, J.: A Conspiracy of Courtesy. In GUMUCIO-DAGRON, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange : Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 72.

6 On the role of the mass media in social recognition based on solidarity as a form of recognition of people living in countries of the Third World, see: SOLÍK, M., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: Social Recognition on a Global Scale: Opportunities and Limits of Media Reflection. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 20-31.

7 Note: The research project VEGA No. 1/0549/18 titled “Philosophical and Cosmological Aspects of Understanding the Evolution of the Universe and the Place of Man in It”.

8 GOREIS, A., VORACEK, M.: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Psychological Research on Conspiracy Beliefs: Field Characteristics, Measurement Instruments, and Associations with Personality Traits. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 205, p. 1-13. [online]. [2019-06-20]. Available at: <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6396711/pdf/fpsyg-10-00205.pdf>>.

9 For more information, see: WAHL-JORGENSEN, K.: *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2019.

10 GUMUCIO-DAGRON, A., TUFTE, T.: Roots and Relevance: Introduction to the CFSC Anthology. In GUMUCIO-DAGRON, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange : Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. xix.

11 Remark by the author: This paragraph of the study is the partial output of the research project VEGA No. 1/0549/18 “Philosophical and Cosmological Aspects of Understanding the Evolution of the Universe and the Place of Man in It”.

of users, but on the other, it captures them in a strict community enclosure where their cognition is exposed rather to the banal emotional challenges of emoticons and emoji, than to rational inquiry into the truthfulness and correctness of published information. Not precisely fun instead of knowledge, but achieving knowledge through infotainment and entertainment, with the appropriate consequences.

Western civilisation has long regarded emotions as the enemy of rational public discourse. Emotions belonged to privacy, rationality to the public. This has also been true for traditional media – newspapers, radio, television, their authors, publishers and broadcasters. The rules of professional media production as well as the media codes of ethics have been based on the principle of publication of true information in which facts are separated from values, news from commentaries. Today, however, the world's most important news medium is not a traditional publisher or broadcaster, but *Facebook*.¹² And there, in the online environment, the space for privacy and for public, for emotions and for rationality is mutual – even rational online information is processed on pure emotions. It means that it is selected, sorted, created, disseminated, preserved or excluded through public mobilisation and expression of private emotions. *“The centrality of emotion in directing the architecture of Facebook shows a paradigm shift in thinking about public debate as it takes place through social media.”*¹³ Compared to the online media, traditional publishers and broadcasters are boring and untrustworthy in their rational political and expression correctness. And although they are often accused of exaggerated opinion sterility, they are also stigmatised by the label of intentional editorial manipulation in the field of biases. The established societal conventions do not play an important role in the online space. The authenticity of emotions overtakes the mannerism of rationality.

A similar situation occurs in the approach to truth. The online user replaces logic with beliefs and intuition, and logical arguments with emoticons and emoji. Basically, in the online environment, there are two different forms of treatment of media truth – *“the one applied by media professionals and the one typical for amateurs (...), each one with its own ‘rules of the game’ and ‘truth regime’.”*¹⁴ Whilst media professionals publish their content under the freedom of the press, which orders them to publish proven or provable true facts and forbids them from inventing their sources of information, the online media laity publishes its content under the freedom of speech, which makes it possible to publish also non-truths – the so-called alternative facts, i.e. fake news and hoaxes without indicating the source of the information. Hence, the right to know the truth is scattered in the alogism of intuition, and of personal beliefs promoted as ‘alternative’ facts or truths.

This is also related to the questioning and rejection of the hierarchies established by the modern West. From the mainstream value frameworks of humanism and solidarity, to politicians, political parties and public or state institutions, to traditional media publishers. A peculiar phenomenon in the online media is the so-called anti-system, whatever the term means. Rather than in a system of (im)perfect institutions of the rule of law, Western values have always been embodied in the ideal of humanity expressed in values of human rights (*liberté*), human equality (*égalité*), and human dignity (*fraternité*) for everyone. The anti-system challenges all these value pillars of Western civilisation. *“Democracy is in crisis. The values it embodies (...) are under assault and in retreat globally. (...) The very idea of democracy and its promotion has been tarnished among many, contributing to a dangerous apathy.”*¹⁵

To sum up, these are the three specific areas in which online media life has started new perspectives on previously existing understanding of being, cognition, and values. Each of them has an impact on social change and the future of development communication: (1) discrediting of societal conventions, (2) alogism in cognition and interpretation of truth, and (3) destruction of traditional value hierarchies. But if we understand communication for social change as *“a process of private and public dialogue through which people determine who they are, what they need and what they want in order to improve their lives”*,¹⁶ there are relevant questions.

12 Even though we are able to witness the dynamic development progress of ‘alternative’ information sources, their credibility has not been able to match the level of influence of global information networks yet. See: SOLÍK, M., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: Social Recognition on a Global Scale: Opportunities and Limits of Media Reflection. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 21.

13 WAHL-JORGENSEN, K.: *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, p. 165.

14 GÁLIKOVÁ TOLNAIOVÁ, S.: Media and Truth in the Perspective of the Practice and Lifeform of the Modern “Homo Media-lis”. In *Communication Today*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 5.

15 ABRAMOWITZ, M. J.: *Democracy in Crisis: Freedom in the World 2018*. Washington, New York: Freedom House, 2018, p. 1.

16 GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T.: Roots and Relevance: Introduction to the CFSC Anthology. In GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange: Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. xix.

Is the online environment a proper mean for achievement of such a comprehensive aim? To what extent are people in control of the means and content of online communication processes? In this environment of community information ‘bubbles’, full of irrationality and contradictory emotions, based on beliefs and intuition rather than on rational questioning and judgment, is the thesis that *“affected people understand their realities better than any ‘experts’ from outside their society, and that they can become the drivers of their own change”*¹⁷ still valid?

The Self-conspiracy of Silence and Social Change à la Online Speak-out

Ascroft's approach to effective development communication grew out of his belief that people can not only be the drivers of their own changes, but that they really should be those drivers through the process of participatory decision making.¹⁸ Simultaneously, he argued against the use of an authoritarian approach in development communication, *inter alia* because it brings inequality into the distribution of the power which ultimately decides on the nature and extent of the change, but also creates a significant group of those who are only expected to obey.¹⁹ Hence, his development communication axiom lies in the participatory arrangement in which the participants are placed so that the locals (i.e. those to be helped) are at the centre of attention, not on its margins. Such an arrangement allows them to be actively involved from the beginning of the communication process: to articulate their problems, needs, opportunities or risks as well as to propose proper solutions on the background of their own traditions and beliefs. In other words, such an arrangement allows them to be equal participants in their own development; in determining the nature, range, timing, direction and trajectory of upcoming changes. However, the involvement of local people in participatory decision making is also accompanied by the undesirable phenomenon of “an academic imperialism”²⁰ in which developmental changes are articulated by foreign experts, in a foreign language, at foreign conferences and universities, in foreign research reports and monographs, and with the assistance of *“local social scientists whose captive minds are locked in imitative, uncritical reproduction of Western values while turning a blind eye to their own”*.²¹

Indeed, Western civilisation has often faced more or less intense attacks for its expansion and insensitive ‘export’ and imposition of its own values (especially rights and freedoms, culture or lifestyle). But it is not only a matter of values that the West understands as the universal values of humanity worthy of following and enforcing everywhere in the world. Analogically, the social evolution of all cultures around the world, modelled on the Western one, has become a grand narrative of the social change articulated even as progress in humanity. Nevertheless, stark inequalities that give matrix to social injustice are evident everywhere, with a significant (even though ambiguous) role of mass media and their outputs. The 20th century, but in particular its second half even gave rise to a new form of journalism – development journalism.²² It turned out that

RON, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange: Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. xix.

17 GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T.: Roots and Relevance: Introduction to the CFSC Anthology. In GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange: Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. xix.

18 Their fights for recognition also represent fighting for water, food, shelter, etc. See: SOLÍK, M., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: Social Recognition on a Global Scale: Opportunities and Limits of Media Reflection. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 21.

19 See also: ASCROFT, J., AGUNGA, R.: Excerpt from: Diffusion Theory and Participatory Decision Making: Participatory Communication Working for Change and Development. In GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange: Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 418-425.

20 ASCROFT, J., MASILELA, S.: Excerpt from: Participatory Decision Making in Third World Development: Participatory Communication Working for Change and Development. In GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange: Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 426.

21 ASCROFT, J., MASILELA, S.: Excerpt from: Participatory Decision Making in Third World Development: Participatory Communication Working for Change and Development. In GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange: Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 426.

22 See chapters 1, 4, 9, 10 in the publication: MELKOTE, S. R., STEEVES, H. L.: *Communication for Development: Theory*

“communication can be effective not only when adopted to induce change in awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours, but also as a tool to build trust, share knowledge, and explore options enhancing the overall results and sustainability of development initiatives”.²³

Traditional mass media practitioners (professional journalists as well as experts in triadic or multilateral communication) have become part of development projects in the field of strengthening human rights, social equality or social justice. The role of their empowerment has been educational and interventional, at both societal poles of providing development assistance. This means that the role of media practitioners has been to listen patiently and respectfully to rational arguments as well as emotions of those societies which need help in their development, but also those societies which provide this assistance. Analogically, they have had to explain patiently and respectfully to members of both societies the nature of the upcoming changes on a local scale and also globally. For, understanding the resulting benefits for individuals and for human society as a whole is a key factor for social reconciliation. However, the “art of listening and creating space for dialogue is often more difficult than the art of talking and imparting knowledge”.²⁴ Traditional mass media practitioners often did not manage to carry out their developing role properly and the audience often sought unintended meanings in media published outputs.

Summarising the results of research by several authors in the field of psychology, Srinivas R. Melkote and H. Leslie Steeves point out that in the West as well as in the Third World, there have always been “hard-headed non-adopters”²⁵ of innovations who kept their prejudices captured in their heads (‘in-the-head’ psychological biases). The difference was that whilst in Western countries these non-adopters belonged to a small opinion minority, in the Third World they formed a large opinion majority. However, the current situation suggests that the online environment allows speaking out and sharing these ‘in-the-head’ psychological biases among an increasingly expanding group of people, those living in the Third World as well as those living in the West (indigenous Europeans as well as Third World immigrants). And the online information-publishing self-service of people is even multiplying these biases. It turns out that online speak-out as a desirable tool of active participation of ordinary people in the process of social change can be just as harmful as it can be useful.

Whereas institutions in highly developed countries (including traditional mass media) are seeking a multicultural and cross-border understanding and correctness in the spirit of giving priority to horizontal approaches to other cultures, they face a growing chain of crises in the field of participative decision making of their own inhabitants. In other words, the vast chunk of the Western population, that imprisons itself in national-identity (or ethnocentric) media ‘bubbles’, feels itself to be misunderstood by its own state authorities, feels itself to be socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent, in short marginalised in the questions of multiculturalism and self-identity. A vast chunk of the Western population increasingly loses its beliefs that it is an equal participant in its own development in determining the nature, range, timing, direction and trajectory of upcoming changes. This part of population feels the wrong way that immigrants are preferred, i.e. that it is marginalised in its own living space by state authorities. Some people even do not participate in the usual political, cultural or societal activities, since they do not see the point of participation. Both of these marginalised groups then find understanding and involvement in online communities.

Yet this online self-marginalisation does not have a societal reflection in courteous silence, but in rude speak-out and political populism which intentionally emphasises ‘otherness’ on the horizon of alienation.²⁶ In these online ‘bubbles’ and their conspiracies, the Third World has been reduced to the notion of immigrant; with a negative connotation.²⁷ But migrants are increasingly presented as intruders or as criminals threatening

and Practice for Empowerment and Social Justice. 3rd Edition. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne : Sage, 2015.

23 MEFALOPULOS, P.: *Development Communication Sourcebook: Broadening the Boundaries of Communication*. Washington : The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank, 2008, p. 146.

24 MEFALOPULOS, P.: *Development Communication Sourcebook: Broadening the Boundaries of Communication*. Washington : The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank, 2008, p. 101.

25 See chapter 2 in: MELKOTE, S. R., STEEVES, H. L.: *Communication for Development: Theory and Practice for Empowerment and Social Justice*. 3rd Edition. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne : Sage, 2015.

26 See: WAHL-JORGENSEN, K.: *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2019.

27 See, e.g. chapters on securitisation and conflicting lines in: ŠTEFANČÍK, R., DULEBOVÁ, I.: *Jazyk a politika: Jazyk politiky v konfliktnéj štruktúre spoločnosti*. Bratislava : Ekonóm, 2017, p. 53-65; 89-124.

established cultural and social procedures even in the mainstream press.²⁸ Political correctness in public expressions, Ascroftian “tact and humility”²⁹ in approach to individuals as well as societies of the Third World are disappearing. *The Freedom House Annual Report on Freedom in the World in 2018* states: “the world’s most powerful democracies are mired in seemingly intractable problems at home, including social and economic disparities, partisan fragmentation, terrorist attacks, and an influx of refugees that has strained alliances and increased fears of the ‘other’. The challenges within democratic states have fueled the rise of populist leaders who appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment and give short shrift to fundamental civil and political liberties.”³⁰

The Asia-Pacific region is showing a similar trend of “anti-democratic forces on the march”,³¹ in the Middle East and North Africa “authoritarian rule and instability reinforce one another”,³² and in Sub-Saharan Africa “new leaders from old parties may fail to bring reform”.³³ “The Internet is growing less free around the world, and democracy itself is withering under its influence.”³⁴ Under the influence of globalisation, the states of the world seem to be gradually secluding themselves into their own national identities, ethnocentrism or teleological biases which take on the character of conspiracy beliefs in many online communities.

The conspiracy beliefs are usually described as beliefs in the existence of a vast, effective alien-network designed to commit an act of tremendous disaster with (almost) apocalyptic consequences. Exaggeration is one of the basic characteristics of these mythic collectives – ‘cahoots’ – that have a problem with the acceptance of the foreign.³⁵ Online communities are in fact ‘friendships’ that work behind closed doors; their truths are little known and unclear, and moreover, they often associate their online members in mistrust of not only ‘other’ but also of radically different. For, their collective identity works on the basis of delimitation – the others are necessary to find out ‘who we are’. Hence, the online portals of conspiracy beliefs (of the West as well as of the Third World) across the planet work with human superstition, social stereotypes, and cultural archetypes that are constantly evoked, renewed, and re-affirmed. But in such online communities, some people feel more in control of their own lives.

The literature on conspiracy beliefs lacks a theoretical framework; however, Andreas Goreis and Martin Voracek reviewed the psychological studies investigating conspiracy beliefs. They identified as well as systematically reviewed 96 studies and found out that conspiracies “appear to appeal to those who feel disconnected from society, who are unhappy or dissatisfied with their circumstances, who possess a subjective worldview that includes unusual beliefs, experiences and thoughts, and do not feel in control of their life”.³⁶ People who do not trust in society and its societal direction. On the one hand, such circumstances force members of online conspiracy communities to look for an effective communication means; on the other hand, they force them to effectively hide their real messages from the third party present in the communication. This means, they want to be seen and heard in society, but at the same time, they need to act as the conformed groups (even though rude and noisy, still not violating good manners and laws) and thus courteous and harmless.

Just as Ascroft’s conspiracies of courtesy and of silence stand and fall on (un)trust, so do cultural and social values (regardless of their origin) not stand on quantifiable assets (or amount of voters), but above all on public confidence. Trust in the system creates a cooperative support in society. And the mutual trust between the supporter and the supported, the developed and the developing creates the appropriate environment for social

28 HACEK, J.: Migranti na slovenských spravodajských portáloch v roku 2014. In HORVÁTH, M. (ed.): *Žurnalistika, médiá, spoločnosť* 5. Bratislava : Stimul, 2015, p. 122.

29 ASCROFT, J.: A Conspiracy of Courtesy. In GUMUCIO-DAGRON, A., TUFTE, T. (eds.): *Communication for Social Change Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. South Orange : Communication for Social Change Consortium, 2006, p. 74.

30 ABRAMOWITZ, M. J.: *Democracy in Crisis: Freedom in the World 2018*. Washington, New York : Freedom House, 2018, p. 1.

31 ABRAMOWITZ, M. J.: *Democracy in Crisis: Freedom in the World 2018*. Washington, New York : Freedom House, 2018, p. 14.

32 ABRAMOWITZ, M. J.: *Democracy in Crisis: Freedom in the World 2018*. Washington, New York : Freedom House, 2018, p. 16.

33 ABRAMOWITZ, M. J.: *Democracy in Crisis: Freedom in the World 2018*. Washington, New York : Freedom House, 2018, p. 17.

34 SHAHBAZ, A.: *The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism: Freedom on the Net 2018*. Washington, New York : Freedom House, 2018, p. 1.

35 The term “mythic collective and the acceptance of the foreign” comes from the Slovak media linguist Mária Stanková, who uses it in philosophical-literary contexts. See: STANKOVÁ, M.: Mýtické spoločenstvo a akceptácia cudzieho (Postava Čecha v Hronského románe Chlieb). In *Motus in verbo*, 2016, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 35-41.

36 COREIS, A., VORACEK, M.: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Psychological Research on Conspiracy Beliefs: Field Characteristics, Measurement Instruments, and Associations with Personality Traits. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 205, p. 1-13. [online]. [2019-06-20]. Available at: <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6396711/pdf/fpsyg-10-00205.pdf>>.

change. Vince P. Marotta maintains that an encounter with ‘otherness’ may not always be an encounter with difference. Moreover, sameness and diversity can cause discrepancies, but also the potential for intercultural dialogue.³⁷

Nevertheless, there is a sound reason for the people’s resistance. In the world of online media, nationalism, ethnocentrism, teleological biases are on the rise and they are not usually spread by media professionals. On the contrary, professional journalists are the ones who are trying for social reconciliation within the West, but also between the West and the Third World. The conspiracy online communities, however, exist to feed all the controversial societal stereotypes and biases, to validate them by renewing them. Irrationally, without respect for truth as correspondence with reality, and without accepting those values that do not fit within the framework of one’s ideas or intentions. Rational arguments have been replaced by emoticons and emoji. ‘Like’ and ‘hate’ instead of facts and evidence. Social venture instead of social responsibility.

Although we tend to assign irrationality, controversy in relation to truth, social hierarchies and traditional values exclusively to the media laity publishing in social media, it should be noted that the online environment also caused significant changes in the daily craft routines of professional journalists, including storytelling based on emotions. Because “*emotions are constructed and circulate through forms of mediated discourse as pivots of public life. They are part and parcel of production practices and routines, mediated texts and audience experience and participation*.”³⁸ Moreover, there is a growing number of professional journalists who understand their job ‘officially’; thus, they respect the editorial responsibility required by freedom of the press, but in their free time, they want to use (and they actually use) extended opportunities of publishing under the freedom of speech – because freedom of speech makes it possible to publish not only verified and verifiable truths based on logic and arguments, but also non-truths (‘alternative truths’, i.e. fake news or hoaxes) and various personal beliefs. One way or another, in terms of journalistic and non-journalistic online communication, which form an integral part of social media content, the attitude of the media audience in the perception of stories produced by journalists and created otherwise is quite unambiguous – people do not perceive media stories independently but ‘synthetically’ in their “*indivisible content and formality*”³⁹ – people are usually not interested in authorship of media content.

Nevertheless, we still insist that media content should be objective, separating facts from values, but this paradigm seems to be changing: “*emotions could be seen as an epistemological elephant in the room – the massive unspoken presence that hovers over everything but that we have for so long refused to see, talk about and engage with*.”⁴⁰ Karin Wahl-Jorgensen highlights that emotionality and rationality are not mutually exclusive and that the role of emotion must be considered by researchers in media and politics. Because emotions are everywhere in mediated politics, because they are performative, and because emotional storytelling may cultivate authenticity and compassion. She understands anger as the essential political emotion and love as the motivator of people to engage in politics.⁴¹

The question at the beginning of this part of the study was whether people were in control of the means and content of online communication processes. It turned out that the impact of online communication on social change is ambiguous. On the one hand, it opens up almost unlimited opportunities to explore other worlds, cultures, societies, but on the other hand, it captures people in peculiar cognitive ‘bubbles’ of re-affirmations of their own ideas and beliefs. Online communication leads people to a tendency to prefer emotions to rational deliberation. “The conspiracy of silence” was complemented by an online conspiracy of speak-out, a silent courtesy by a disrespectful defamation, and tact and humility by roughness and arrogance in expressions. “The conspiracy of beliefs” is a kind of escape for people who have lost trust in the authority and direction of the state. Their self-marginalisation compensates the feeling of social marginalisation of their beliefs. Hence, if people are in control of their communication processes in the online media, then it should be highlighted that this control is full of antinomies and delimitation based on emotions, alogism, and controversial understanding of truth.

37 MAROTTA, V. P.: Home, Mobility and the Encounter with Otherness. In MANSOURI, F., LOBO, M. (eds.): *Migration, Citizenship and Intercultural Relations: Looking through the Lens of Social Inclusion*. London, New York : Routledge, 2016, p. 193-208.

38 WAHL-JORGENSEN, K.: *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2019, p. 1.

39 VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: Komunikát – súčasť masovokomunikačného poľa a jeho špecifiká z pohľadu novinárstva. In MAGÁL, S., MISTRÍK, M., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): *Masmediálna komunikácia a realita II*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2009, p. 77.

40 WAHL-JORGENSEN, K.: *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2019, p. 167.

41 WAHL-JORGENSEN, K.: *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2019, p. 166-174.

This is a consequence of the evolution of mediated communication. Traditional Western human faith in progress is challenged by the actors of the social media Universe. People live in the online reality of the emergence of increasingly intricate structures within interpersonal relations and within increasingly complicated societal relations in general. Globalisation has undoubtedly caused seemingly unbearable proximity to foreign cultures, to aliens, to ‘otherness’.⁴² Simultaneously, it has provided the human community with tools for building new kinds of multicultural societal bridges. An appropriate solution, however, requires a paradigm shift in view of the role of human rationality and emotionality in communication processes.

Conclusion

Joseph Ascroft used the terms “conspiracy of courtesy” and “conspiracy of silence” to highlight the fact that marginalised groups are not powerless even though their power lies only in their ability to say nothing about their real feelings, needs or biases with the gentlest courtesy to an alien. Since according to African local morals, honoured guests are not criticised, local people use a culturally dimorphic communication, i.e. they use different approaches to communication with allies and with aliens. They treat outsiders courteously without revealing their true feelings and biases. The unintended consequence is that mutual communication and understanding of each other do not progress.

Increasing international and cultural mobility (physical/real as well as virtual/symbolic) after the advent of the Internet admittedly results in the expansion of connections between countries. Nevertheless, it has also caused the rise of populism, the return to the promotion of national identity, ethnocentrism, and teleological biases. Social networks have given people of various states and cultures flexible platforms to know each other, to make it easier to overcome the Ascroftian conspiracies of courtesy and of silence. But online speaking out in social media has built new communication barriers in the form of communities that have entered into their own conspiracy beliefs. The circulation of emotions shapes the character of human communication; emotions are everywhere in mediated politics. Moreover, emoticons and emoji have replaced logic and argumentation even in public discourse.

However, not only the availability and connectivity to the Internet has been on the rise in the world, but also digital authoritarianism of national governments as well as some of the conspiracy online communities. Simultaneously, the vast chunk of the Western population feels itself to be misunderstood by its own state authorities, feels itself to be socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent, in short marginalised in the questions of multiculturalism and self-identity. These people lose their beliefs that they can participate in determination of the nature, range, timing, direction and trajectory of upcoming changes and that they are in control of the social change of their own home country. These feelings result in their frustration and consequently self-marginalisation. Online self-marginalisation (often within the conspiracy communities), however, does not have a societal reflection in courteous silence, but in the rude speak-out and political populism which intentionally emphasises ‘otherness’ on the horizon of alienation. As a result, development communication in the field of social change must take a twofold effort – to overcome the barriers of mistrust and non-cooperation firstly ‘inside Western society’ facing media ‘bubbles’ as well as ‘outside’ facing real conspiracy of silence or courtesy.

The conspiracy online communities often lead the struggles that do not have rational reasons or that are not essential, but they ignore facts about those problems which are more complex than simple rallying cries. Yet, in the West, there are more and more listeners among ordinary people as well as more and more populist leaders. It seems to be important not to exclude into margins anyone who just does not meet a vision of current societal perfection. Marginality is not a static phenomenon. It does not matter whether it occurs in the Third World or in the West. It always grows out of the conscious or unconscious ignoring of the views and beliefs of the one who feels excluded from decision making about their present or future.

42 See also: MASARIK, J., PLAŠIENKOVÁ, Z., KMEŤOVÁ, K.: The Evolution of the Universe and the Place of a Man in It: Some of the Cosmological and Religious Aspects. In PLAŠIENKOVÁ, Z. (ed.): *Evolution – Science – Religion: Teilhard de Chardin’s Inspirations in the Contemporary World*. Bratislava : Comenius University, 2017, p. 224-249.

This study's central argument, then, is that understanding the role of development communication in processes of social change in the online era requires a perspective which also takes into account online communication that is often based on (1) alogism, (2) destruction of traditional value hierarchies, and (3) discrediting of societal conventions as relevant phenomena of online-mediated communication within the non-linear incoherent getting to know the world through online media. Such a development communication could be dialogic enough to play a critical role in searching and offering new philosophies and models which would facilitate active participation of marginalised groups at all stages of the development process.

Acknowledgement: This study was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-18-0103 "Paradigmatic Changes in the Understanding of Universe and Man from Philosophical, Theological, and Physical Perspectives". The paragraph "People in Control of Communication Processes" of this study is a partial output of the research project VEGA No. 1/0549/18 "Philosophical and Cosmological Aspects of Understanding the Evolution of the Universe and the Place of Man in It".

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