

# HUMAN DOWNGRADING – THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN DEGRADATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT:

Virtual environments and social media platforms are an important communication hub and source of socialisation, shaping the referential framework for many digital natives. Social media have undoubtedly changed the way the human community communicates and shares information. It is thanks to them that social contacts can be maintained almost continuously, and information can be quickly accessed. Their downside is – which is also the primary focus of this study – that they have also become the generators of various dependencies and a source of human downgrading. Through sophisticated algorithms and targeted manipulative techniques of digital oligarchs, social media exploit the weaknesses of the human psyche. The ambition of this study is to provide an analytical and descriptive socio-critical insight into a relatively new phenomenon – surveillance capitalism and attention economy. The text identifies the selected socio-cultural consequences of the use of social media in the online and offline environment through the optics of *human downgrading*.

## KEY WORDS:

human downgrading, social media, social networks, attention economy, surveillance capitalism

## 1 Introduction

In his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, director Stanley Kubrick presents a nice metaphor of man's slavish dependence on technological achievements. In one of the segments, in which the astronauts are trying to conquer Jupiter, the HAL 9000 control computer decides to eliminate the crew to complete the predefined mission. One of the astronauts, Dr David Bowman (Keir Dullea), is trying to save his colleague during the mayhem caused by the computer and is holding his limp body by means of a lunar module, demanding entry into the spaceship. This very image can be interpreted as human sacrifice to the machine. Bowman uses simple language, which the control computer understands: Open the door, HAL. The refusal and revolt of the latest technological advances was finally overcome by human ingenuity and presence of mind. This scene is fictional, but it reflects the dependence of man on technology to some extent. The dependence we may not even realise, and we might be living in. The origins of the current technocratic state can be traced to the rather strong onset of technology and its penetration from purely industrial areas into other areas of our lives. The philosopher and sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky has presented his analysis of this period, quoting Jacques Ellul: "*Technology not only belongs to civilisation; it has become the organising element that defines all areas of our lives – economic, social, cultural and individual. Technology with a capital T conveys a certain way of existence*



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and changes the nature of all world cultures. It is far from being limited to the field of machines and equipment – on the contrary, it is a universal language, intellectual and cultural equipment, thanks to which we may enjoy its offer in the individual departments. Technical universalism is steering the world toward a unified lifestyle, and the same symbols, values and normative systems are promoted everywhere: efficiency, rationality, general predictability and optimum use of resources for the given purpose.<sup>1</sup> We see a qualitative shift of technology from its original field of application, defined by machines and equipment, towards organisational principles. The organisational element, which was imported into our lives, and whose catchphrases go along the lines of efficiency linked with performance, process optimisation, numerical transformation related to calculations, and the powerful and untouchable ‘logos’ overarching them all, are part of our everyday lives even today.

The analysis of the current social situation brings us to the analysis of society in which digital technology is a dominant feature. In addition to the positive perception of technology in facilitating our work and life, we should not avoid mentioning its downsides and negatives. The newly formed *homo digitalis* often links the use of technology with messianic ideas. This would not be a negative if technology remained on the utilitarian plane and if human relationship to technology would not be deformed by an ostentatious intronization and promotion of the recent advances in technology to the highest ranks in our personal hierarchy. This involves the inverse relationship between man and digital technology, in which technology does not serve man, but man is a slave to technology. The digital-technical overpressure thus redefines social relations, and the introductory metaphor in Kubrick’s cult film becomes increasingly relevant.

In his precise diagnosis of our times, Byung-Chul Han has identified a new social configuration. Specifically, he is talking about the formation he refers to as a “digital swarm”. He is also comparing it with the previous formation – the mass. He is highlighting the typical differences between the two, which can be characterised by the citation from Han’s publication. We should add that he builds on the now classic work of Gustave Le Bon *Psychology of Crowds* in his reasoning. “*The digital swarm is not a crowd or mass only because it lacks the soul – or the spirit. The soul collects and unifies. The digital swarm is composed of isolated individuals. The crowd is structured quite differently. It has certain characteristics that cannot be reduced to the single individuals it consists of; the individuals have merged into a new union within which they no longer have an own profile. A random cluster of human beings does not constitute a crowd. Only the soul – or spirit – makes them a self-contained homogeneous crowd. The digital swarm lacks the crowd soul or the mob spirit. The individuals connected in a swarm do not constitute ‘us’. They have no accord to congeal the crowds into acting masses. Unlike the crowd, the digital swarm is not internally coherent. It is not manifested as a single voice.*”<sup>2</sup> In his comparison, he continues by defining the operations in both formations. While the masses are typical for sporting events or gatherings of people with a particular unifying idea, which creates the mass soul, *homo digitalis* is characterised by isolation and hanging out alone in front of the monitor screen. This description mostly concerns leisure. The situation at work is equally alarming. In addition to its undisputed benefits, digital technology is changing the concept of our private time. It should be used for regeneration and relaxation after a day’s work. However, digital technologies invade it with work thanks to mobility. Thus, they exceed and erode the private sphere of individuals. This notion can be confronted by the view that some jobs require a sense of urgency. Our answer would be affirmative: indeed, there are professions where a 24/7 approach is necessary. This group could easily include health care, emergency or public services, or security. We should also add that the common denominator of all these components is service – service to man. And this very humanist approach can be used as an ‘apology’ for the use of digital technology. It is, however, absent in many other cases. We find ourselves awaiting the moment when technology surpasses human strength and intelligence. We are already experiencing technology overcoming human weaknesses. This brings us to the heart of the problem, and our research question. Our aim is to determine the extent to which the frightening concept of “human degradation” is manifested in the context of omnipresent and pervasive technologies. The said term<sup>3</sup> was introduced by the computer scientist

1 LIPOVETSKY, G., JUVIN, H.: *Globalizovaný Západ. Polemika o planetární kultuře*. Prague: Prostor, 2012, p. 50-51.

2 HAN, B. C.: *Výhořelá společnost*. Prague: Rybka Publishers, 2016, p. 146.

3 Remark by author: “Human downgrading” – the idea introduced by the American computer scientist and activist Tristan Harris – lies in the reduction of quality of people (their degradation) as a combination of negative effects of digital technology on people and society. This term indicates that the omnipresent and ubiquitous manifestations of technology, including smartphones, social media and constant

and activist Tristan Harris, and it best describes the condition of humanity in the recent development phases of communication and information technology. The concept of “human downgrading” outlines the important moral and ethical issues of technological companies (mainly the oligarchs in Silicon Valley), but it can be applied to understand the thinking, acting and feeling of contemporary man – hopelessly engulfed in the network of networks – on the Internet – and in the “onlife world”, as defined by the media theorist Lev Manovich.<sup>4</sup> The same author also emphasises that in an information society, the computer is becoming an important artifact of man’s working day as well as his time of rest – the browser window has gradually replaced the movie screens and television screens, gallery spaces, libraries and books. “*A completely new situation has emerged: the whole culture – the present and the past – passes through the computer and its interface.*”<sup>5</sup> The premise about the semiotic code of the information society on the human-computer axis is backed by the argument that in all activities, such as data input and analysis, simulations, searching and playing on the Internet, watching videos, trading stocks, etc., the user always works with the same tools and commands: the computer screen and mouse, web browser, search engine, and the SELECT, PASTE, COPY, DELETE, or SEARCH commands.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the futuristic, sceptical and paranoid views of technology, we are forgetting the fact that artificial intelligence and advanced systems are already actively managing the hypermodern world. They have become part of our everyday life and are integrated in all aspects of our existence. The exponential growth and development of artificial intelligence is also forcing the public to think about the actual routing and potential of today’s technology.

## 2 Human Downgrading

The above introduction raises an important question: is this ‘enslavement’ of man through technology happening accidentally and inadvertently in the omnipresent media culture with dominant digital media, or are other manipulative factors at stake regarding how *homo digitalis* works in the world of perfectly cross-linked media? Can our existence in physical and virtual reality even be separated? The Dutch media theorist Mark Deuze notes that “*it must be clear that the media are not just a certain type of technology, or a bulk of content filling the world around us – i.e., the external factors affecting humans in countless ways. If nothing else, we can see the today’s use and adoption of the media as something that coincides with everything that people do, the places they are at, and the persons they are trying to become. Life in the media has no exterior – what we perceive as an emergency exit – the way out or the ‘delete’ key – is only an illusion. In fact, life outside the media can only be imagined.*”<sup>7</sup> Luciano Floridi (one of the key figures of information philosophy) further develops this idea by saying that we are probably the last generation to experience a clear distinction between the online and offline world: “*If you are at home where your data is, you probably already live on Google Earth or in the cloud.*”<sup>8</sup> The belief in the power of the Internet – that it can and should be a force to improve people’s lives – is also in contrast with the feelings of contemporary man that the current relationship with technology (which we naturally do not want to give up) is unsustainable. Hyperconnectivity on the Internet is not the problem *per se*; it is rather the fact that it is increasingly slipping out of user control. The culturologist Andrea Olejárová notes the paradoxical phenomenon in that the users of digital media calm the anxiety and desire for ontological security by the permanent availability of information, and by doing so, they support the demand for the economy of trust.<sup>9</sup> Marianna Mazzucato, Professor of Economics at University College London, notes that the digital platforms know our preferences better than we do in many ways, and can steer us to actions they can further exploit, and asks the following question: Do we really want to live in a society where our

connectivity, worsen and impair the quality of people and the human life. For more information, see: LERMAN, R.: *Q&A: Ex-Googler Harris on How Tech ‘Downgrades’ Humans*. Released on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2019. [online]. [2021-07-15]. Available at: <<https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/qa-googler-harris-tech-downgrades-humans-64899036>>.

4 See: MANOVICH, L.: *Jazyk nových médií*. Prague: Karolinum, 2018.

5 MANOVICH, L.: *Jazyk nových médií*. Prague: Karolinum, 2018, p. 100.

6 MANOVICH, L.: *Jazyk nových médií*. Prague: Karolinum, 2018, p. 100.

7 DEUZE, M.: *Media Life*. Prague: Karolinum, 2015, p. 7.

8 FLORIDI, L.: *Čtvrtá revoluce. Jak infospféra mění tvář lidské reality*. Prague: Karolinum, 2019, p. 114.

9 OLEJÁROVÁ, A.: *Vsietí post-pravdy. Nové digitálně mediální ako simulakrum reality*. Nitra: Constantine the Philosopher University, 2021, p. 118.

innermost desires and expressions of our personal motives are for sale?<sup>10</sup> Social media controlled by artificial intelligence are a completely new kind of power and influence. Social media use various methods to abuse the human proclivity to addiction and susceptibility to influence. Therefore, we consider it important to outline the current problems in the tech industry and social media, which increasingly influence the human mind, society and culture. Our study has the ambition to contribute to the current ongoing global initiatives and debates on serious questions about the direction and possible transformation of digital infrastructure. The same set of issues is outlined in the documentary *The Social Dilemma*<sup>11</sup> (2020, premiered on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020 at the Sundance film festival). The presentation of this documentary on *Netflix* on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2020 greatly encouraged active public debate about social media. The documentary offers the views of various experts and former employees of global tech companies that reflect the alarming state of social media (often thanks to their own inventions), and in particular their increasing tendency to negatively interfere in people's lives. The creation of this documentary was possible thanks to a number of renowned contemporary activists and practitioners. The documentary features Tristan Harris, the former *Google* ethical design specialist and co-founder of the Centre for Human Technology, as the main protagonist: "Tech companies have three main objectives: high interaction – you should not stop scrolling; growth – you should be constantly returning back and inviting friends; and advertising – to earn as much money as possible. Each of these objectives is based on algorithms to determine what to show to the users for the numbers to grow," sums up T. Harris.

The documentary reels with warnings against surveillance capitalism (the tech companies monitor the browsed content, constantly devise 'tricks' to maintain our attention, which they subsequently monetise on) by means of technology exploiting human weaknesses against man himself. The former CEO of *Pinterest* Tim Kendall says that although he was the one to control the system, he himself became controlled and dependent on his own social networking site and a constant collection of the most detailed data morphed into increasingly sophisticated algorithms, which no one can escape; thus, he warns against polarisation, radicalisation, civil wars, and the end of the world as we know it. This docudrama has seen a tremendous response from the audience especially because it bluntly and explicitly claims that the invasion of user privacy is not just an unintentional error of the originally well-intentioned tools for communication, but a consciously implemented function. Our efforts will not focus on a comprehensive mapping of these digital ecosystems and their problems. Our goal is not to accentuate how social media use the algorithms and artificial intelligence to programme civilisation, and how global tech corporations exploit and manipulate users for profit and monetisation of their digital products and services. With the help of analysis and description, we will identify selected sociocultural implications of digital social media in the online and offline world through the above-mentioned concept of "human downgrading". Our endeavour involves a critical assessment of the acquired theoretical knowledge and empirical observation, which we will use to infer its specific manifestations.

### 3 Human Downgrading under the Influence of Attention Economy

For many people, social media are a mere supplement to real life. On the other hand, there is a growing number of people for whom social networking sites represent an alternative lifestyle – an escape from everyday reality. The virtual environment, particularly social media, are an important communication centre and a source of socialisation, forming a frame of reference for many digital natives. Mark Deuze notes that many people spend most of their time consuming the media, unaware of the constant and parallel contact with them. This is caused by the fact that people use the media continuously, thus blurring the boundaries between previously segmented categories of everyday life – school, work and play – which they can no longer meaningfully distinguish.<sup>12</sup> Social media have undoubtedly changed the way we communicate and share information. It is

10 MAZUCATTO, M.: *Jak předejít digitálnímu feudalismu*. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019. [online]. [2021-05-02]. Available at: <<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/platform-economy-digital-feudalism-by-mariana-mazzucato-2019-10/czech>>.

11 *The Social Dilemma*. [online]. [2021-03-20]. Available at: <<http://www.thesocialdilemma.com>>.

12 DEUZE, M.: *Media Life*. Prague: Karolinum, 2015, p. 230.

thanks to them that social contacts can be maintained, and information can be quickly accessed. "The presence of social networks, and the subsequent emergence of specific social groups contribute to the heterogeneity and atomisation of the recipients as such. The emphasis is on individuality and a separate choice of topics. The form, author's design and the frequency of mediated content causes habituation, trivialisation and dehumanisation in relation to other members of groups on social media," writes the philosopher and media theorist Martin Solík.<sup>13</sup>

However, social media have become the generators of various addictions, they have a range of negative effects on mental health (anxiety, depression, lack of sleep), and they have also become an ultimate platform for cyberbullying. Thanks to sophisticated algorithms and targeted manipulative techniques, today's social networking sites make use of the weaknesses of the human *psyche*. Many scientific studies bring dire statistics, for example, on the fact that every fourth person on Earth is addicted to the Internet and social networking sites. Real life is pushed into the background to the detriment of social platforms. Millions of people suffer from Internet addiction, or the so-called netolism,<sup>14</sup> and have a specific kind of fear known as the FOMO syndrome<sup>15</sup> (i.e., fear of missing out). In short, the FOMO syndrome can be summed up as anxiety or motivation that the social media users feel when they want to belong to a particular social group, event or moment other users publish posts about. The users then feel a morbid fear of being left out.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, the users may also suffer from JOMO syndrome<sup>17</sup> (i.e., joy of missing out), which is the complete opposite of the FOMO syndrome. In this case, the users feel joy at being left out by other people involved in the discussions or being omitted in their posts. The statement that most social media absorb young people's lives comes as no surprise. Young people are the most vulnerable group, as they were born in and grew up together with information technology. Therefore, their digital 'immunity' is greatly weakened.

The companies such as *Google*, *Apple*, *Facebook*, *Amazon* and *Microsoft* are among the richest and most successful companies in history. Their products and services are used daily by billions of users worldwide. Currently, they possess a plethora of online tools and mobile applications, without which everyday life can be hardly imagined. All of these online services and products have been created to help users achieve their goals and facilitate their work. The users can use them free of charge in most cases – or so they think. The truth is that the technology giants have built a highly efficient money machine through the monetisation<sup>18</sup> of online products and services. The companies operating in the field of social media are legally obliged to maximise profit for the shareholders. This profit often correlates with the number of ads shown to users. As a result, maximising interactions, such as clickbait<sup>19</sup> (misleading links, clicks, comments, and total viewing time – watch time), often takes precedence over real interests.

The social media platforms are controlled by artificial intelligence algorithms. These algorithms collect and analyse data about each user interaction in cyberspace in real time. Based on the user's life online, they compile their profile. These personal profiles are used by artificial intelligence to predict the reaction of users, identify their interests, social relationships, location, physical or mental weakness, etc.<sup>20</sup> With every click, like

13 SOLÍK, M.: *Uznanie ako problém spravodlivosti a jeho mediálna reflexia*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2021, p. 110.

14 FERTALOVÁ, T. et al.: Úroveň závislosti od internetu – prieskum. In *Česká a slovenská psychiatrie*, 2019, Vol. 115, No. 1, p. 9-13. [online]. [2021-03-12]. Available at: <[http://www.cspychiatr.cz/dwnld/CSP\\_2019\\_1\\_9\\_13.pdf](http://www.cspychiatr.cz/dwnld/CSP_2019_1_9_13.pdf)>.

15 SCOTT, E.: *How to Deal with FOMO in Your Life: The Origin of FOMO and How It Affects Our Health*. Released on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2021. [online]. [2021-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-cope-with-fomo-4174664>>.

16 Remark by author: Belonging somewhere has always been one of the key human needs. We are missing a lot of aspects of physicality in our everyday lives today. Our lives are being increasingly influenced by virtual forms of escapism leaving us without roots and disoriented. On physicality and its importance in social and cultural communication. See more: JAKUBOVSKÁ, K.: Physicality as a Determiner of the Quality of Communication among Cultures (Interpersonal and Intercultural Perspective). In *SCEM 2016: Proceedings from 3<sup>rd</sup> International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts. Anthropology, Archaeology, History & Philosophy Vol. 2*. Albena: STEF92 Technology, 2016, p. 773-782.

17 *JOMO: The Mindful Counter-trend to FOMO*. Released on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2020. [online]. [2021-05-17]. Available at: <<https://www.ionos.com/digitalguide/online-marketing/social-media/joy-of-missing-out/>>.

18 GANTI, A.: *Monetize*. Updated on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2022. [online]. [2021-07-14]. Available at: <<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/monetize.asp>>.

19 CBS NEWS: *Former Facebook Executive Blames Company's Business Model for Social Media Addiction. (Full Video) HD*. [online]. [2021-03-01]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjN30XGcXw>>.

20 Remark by author: This process goes hand in hand with the new marketing strategies. In their analytical study focused on content marketing, marketing specialists E. Štrbová and S. Boldišová claim that although the customers used to be viewed mainly in terms of the traditional sociodemographic indicators such as gender, age, place of residence, marital status, income or employment when planning the marketing communications, contemporary companies are focusing on adequately determining a plethora of segmentation criteria, including the behavioural

or post, millions of users around the world voluntarily provide this information through various devices and equipment. The more data becomes available to artificial intelligence, the easier it is to manipulate the users. It is therefore not surprising that in the recent years the academic community has been increasingly focusing on the relatively new terms, such as “attention economy” and “surveillance capitalism”. While attention is an abstract term and it may seem incomprehensible at first sight, it is in principle no different from other limited resources – human beings only have a limited amount of it: “The term ‘attention economy’ was coined by psychologist, economist, and Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon, who posited that attention was the ‘bottleneck of human thought’ that limits both what we can perceive in stimulating environments and what we can do.”<sup>21</sup>

The systematic and deliberate distraction of user attention goes hand in hand with the growing level of multitasking: “The advent of digital media has intensified multitasking and made it an indispensable companion of the new modernity, which under the guise of a more efficient use of time dispels the perception and attention of an individual among several actions, which certainly cannot be deemed routine.”<sup>22</sup> V. Moravec’s statement suggests that reality can be seen as a flexible and dynamic phenomenon, given that there is a temporal manipulation in order to increase efficiency. Time and place are nothing other than the essential components of reality. The digital media numb our sensitivity to the perception of time. The fragmentation of ideas, segregated messaging formats, the amount of information the life of which is a few minutes and is forgotten afterwards. To take a closer look at the relationship of media, senses, perception, time and attention, we should not leave out the human *psyche*, which actually determines our perception. The development from complete illiteracy to the state in which society develops mechanisms that can control the individual’s *psyche* and reach the state of complex interconnection of the world, for example through the media, is determined by the perception of space and time. The media theorist and visionary Marshall McLuhan sees the technological development as a catalyst of cultural change. This changes the world view. It deconstructs the old ways of perception and puts an emphasis on individuals to adapt to external reality. The senses function as a link between the mental world of man and the environment. It is, therefore, important in what form information is provided to us and what material is transmitted (through the media) to our senses for processing. The problem lies in the fact that “the effects of technology do not appear in the thoughts or opinions, or areas in which we have learned to be critical, but in the ordinary sensory life, which creates vertices and confusing substrates for thinking and actions.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, “(...) electronic technology today affects the most common ways of perceiving and acting, which again and quickly instigate in us the mental processes of most primitive people.”<sup>24</sup>

Following sociologist Manuel Castells, Mark Deuze points to the mixing of the time planes in the media through the creation of a time collage, in which genres are mixed and their timelines run synchronously on a low horizon without a beginning, end and progression.<sup>25</sup> Attention economy definitely benefits from this. Systematic distraction leads to a compulsive checking of notifications and addictive behaviour. Umberto Eco likens the influence of the media on individuals to the process of “self-hypnosis” or “projection”.<sup>26</sup> Through participation and high engagement of the senses – for example, the auditory sense in the case of television – a particular sense is isolated from other senses and “(...) hypnosis is based on the same principle: isolating one sense. And stupefying others.”<sup>27</sup> M. McLuhan further argues that “the result is the disruption of relationship between the senses, a kind of loss of identity.”<sup>28</sup>

(Self-)hypnosis can be seen as a mental process because it equals identification, deprivation of the critical part of the individual Self, or removal of the power of the message mediated by the media in the recipients. Hypnosis is based on the same repeatability – repeatability of the plot or message. Umberto Eco applies this idea of redundancy to literary works, but the same phenomenon can be observed even in the phenomenon analysed by us – the digital media. “Stealing the (recipient’s) attention has to do with the rejection of the plot of the event, the escape from the tension between the past, present and the future to the moment we love because it comes back and repeats.”<sup>29</sup> Eco sees the problem in how the redundant content appears as part of our lives. When the overlooked or forgivable rate of adoption of redundant stories – whatever their media carrier may be – becomes “a standard for all imaginative activity”, we are talking about an uncritical and unconscious consumption of the products of media culture. In this process, the individual is subject to manipulation by the media, which create this content for a profit. The consumer thus succumbs to the willpower of the media, which stems from the consumer alone. Essentially, this process is repeated not only in respect of the product and the consumer, but also the media and the recipient. In relation to the dominance of visual content in contemporary culture, popular culture theorist Martin Foret notes that “the recipients still treat the images that have become a dominant part of mass media as self-taught, and are very easily manipulated by them, and the theorists of mass communication often treat the images as unproblematic and/or overlook them. However, if we want to understand or interpret visual text (images), we must first learn to read them.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, man is willing to be ‘hypnotised’ by information of any kind in any medium because they serve (the question is who serves whom...) as an “invitation to rest, the only way to achieve tranquillity...”<sup>31</sup> “In today’s industrial society (...) the alternation of parameters, collapse of traditions, social mobility, consumption of models and principles – can all be labelled a ‘permanent informational burden’ that appears during the heavy shocks and induces the regrouping of elements of responsiveness, adaptation to changes in psychology and retraining of intelligence.”<sup>32</sup> This idea sounds like a defence or excuse of the fact that individuals become believers in something akin to ‘pseudovalues’ and ‘pseudonorms’ offered by the media. Culturologist Katarína Gabašová concurs, noticing the spirit of the era, which through the media, social networking sites, virtual reality, celebrities and influencers<sup>33</sup> calls for consumerism and a hedonistic way of life where real problems are marginalised.<sup>34</sup> Understanding redundancy as a refuge from/under information pressure as the only way stands in opposition to redundancy as hedonism, indifference, apathy, indolence and conformity, or acquiescence of the social situation based on the “controlled” (member of society) and “controlling” (medium) dichotomy. Another aspect of the growing attention to redundant content is whether it is caused by man himself or by the social situation (especially surveillance capitalism and attention economy in our context). This question entails the question whether the Internet (and especially social media) as the ‘new’ medium has reshaped our senses and given us a new perception and a cultural twist. M. McLuhan gives us a clear answer, and we have no reason to disagree: “Our environment bombards us every hour with a myriad of messages to the point of us becoming inefficient.”<sup>35</sup>

and psychographic. See more: ŠTRBOVÁ, E., BOLDIŠOVÁ, S.: Generation Y Preferences in Online Content Consumption: Content Marketing Implications for the Arts. In *Social Communication*, 2021, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 2.

21 Remark by author: “Later, in 1997, theoretical physicist Michael Goldhaber warned that the international economy is shifting from a material-based economy to an attention-based economy, pointing to the many services online offered for free. As fewer people are involved with manufacturing and we move away from an industrial economy, emerging careers work with information. Although the ‘information economy’ is a common name for this new state, Goldhaber rejects this; information is not scarce, attention is.” See more: MINTZER, A.: *Paying Attention: The Attention Economy*. Released on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. [online]. [2021-06-17]. Available at: <https://econreview.berkeley.edu/paying-attention-the-attention-economy/>.

22 MORAVEC, V.: *Média v tekučích časoch*. Prague : Academia, 2016, p. 92.

23 MCLUHAN, M.: *Člověk, média a elektronická kultura*. Brno : Jota, 2008, p. 135.

24 MCLUHAN, M.: *Člověk, média a elektronická kultura*. Brno : Jota, 2008, p. 135.

25 DEUZE, M.: *Media Life*. Prague : Karolinum, 2015, p. 19.

26 See: ECO, U.: *Skeptikové a těšitelé*. Prague : Argo, 2006.

27 MCLUHAN, M.: *Člověk, média a elektronická kultura*. Brno : Jota, 2008, p. 128-129.

28 MCLUHAN, M.: *Člověk, média a elektronická kultura*. Brno : Jota, 2008, p. 128-129.

29 ECO, U.: *Skeptikové a těšitelé*. Prague : Argo, 2006, p. 239.

30 FORET, M.: O interpretaci vizuálního textu. In BOČÁK, M., RUSNÁK, J. (eds.): *Média a text II*. Prešov : University of Prešov, 2008, p. 47.

31 ECO, U.: *Skeptikové a těšitelé*. Prague : Argo, 2006, p. 241.

32 ECO, U.: *Skeptikové a těšitelé*. Prague : Argo, 2006, p. 241.

33 Remark by author: In the recent years, the so-called social media influencers have become pivotal in these processes. These hypermodern microcelebrities set the standards, ideals and models for their followers to compare against. The users increasingly perceive their personal value as distorted either through their own profiles on social networking sites – with the role of quality and value instruments taken over by likes and comments – or in comparison and confrontation with modern celebrities/role-models/influencers. For more information, see: MIKULÁŠ, P.: *Celebrity v mediálnej a marketingovej komunikácii*. Nitra : Constantine the Philosopher University, 2020; SPÁLOVÁ, L., MIKULÁŠ, P., PÚCHOVSKÁ, O.: Attitudes Towards Different Influencer Categories – Exploration of Generation Z. In *Communication Today*, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 44-60.

34 GABAŠOVÁ, K.: Koncept krízy kultúry v kontexte myslenia o kultúre. In *Kontexty kultúry a turizmu*, 2019, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2019, p. 93-104.

35 MCLUHAN, M.: *Člověk, média a elektronická kultura*. Brno : Jota, 2008, p. 289.

## 4 Human Downgrading under the Influence of Surveillance Capitalism

One of the most notable and detailed insights into this revolutionary change was voiced by the American social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.<sup>36</sup> S. Zuboff, one of the key thinkers in this area and author of the concept of “surveillance capitalism”, argues that the very human freedom, democracy and the world as we know it are at stake. S. Zuboff speaks of a new economic policy, which exploits the very human experience as a raw material. The key commodity is ourselves and the data about us.<sup>37</sup> In her opinion, this new global market trades exclusively in human future: “These markets have earned trillions of dollars and made the Internet companies the richest companies in human history.”<sup>38</sup> T. Harris notes that thanks to data and advanced software, IT companies “(...) know exactly when people are lonely, when they're depressed, and when they look at the photos of their ex-es. They know what you do late at night – they know everything. They know whether you are an introvert or extrovert, what neuroses you suffer from, and what type of personality you are”.<sup>39</sup> Lucia Mendelová, a philosopher and conceptual artist, interestingly reflects and discusses “immersion capitalism”,<sup>40</sup> which creates a space for the consumers – a sandbox for children and adults where they can do almost everything they want: “The main goods in immersion capitalism is ‘embodied information’, and one should realise that this term has perhaps never been so literal. Virtual reality and augmented reality are not yet another type of medium that operates in the cloud networks of data about us; they are not ‘just’ another consumer model of entertainment and infoentertainment built within the complex socio-technological systems. These are cognitive media which potential cannot be underestimated.”<sup>41</sup>

Computer scientist Jaron Lanier likened the business models of companies such as *Facebook* and *Google* to a large, automated computer whose job is to generate profit. The said companies make astronomical profits and are worth several trillions of dollars. The author therefore asks the key question: what are the tech companies getting paid for? He points out that the principle of advertising and ad sales across social media is a great simplification of the actual and a much more serious problem. He continues by saying that “(...) the product is a gradual and inconspicuous change in the behaviour and perception of the users themselves. That is the product. It's the only possible product. It's the only thing that huge companies can monetize on. They change what the user does, how he thinks and who he is. It is a gradual and inconspicuous change.”<sup>42</sup>

In 2013, T. Harris, who worked as an ethical designer for *Google*, made the viral presentation titled *A Call to Minimize Distraction & Respect Users' Attention*.<sup>43</sup> He subsequently circulated it by internal mail to his colleagues at *Google*. This author's manifesto had a clear message: digital well-being can be attained by minimising digital distractions, respecting people's time and attention, and perception of what can be designated as human vulnerabilities. As a developer, T. Harris realised that there was a serious moral and

36 See: ZUBOFF, S.: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London : Profile Books, 2019.

37 Compare to: ZUBOFF, S.: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London : Profile Books, 2019

38 ORLOWSKI, J. (Director): *Social Dilemma*. [online]. Los Gatos : Netflix, 2020. Available at: <<https://www.netflix.com/sk-cs/title/81254224>>.

39 ORLOWSKI, J. (Director): *Social Dilemma*. [online]. Los Gatos : Netflix, 2020. Available at: <<https://www.netflix.com/sk-cs/title/81254224>>.

40 Remark by author: “The English term ‘immersion’ stems from the original Latin *imersio*, which can be translated as to ‘delve into’ or ‘be engulfed’ by a certain activity. It describes the effect that the virtual or fictional worlds have on the viewers: the perception of the world around us is kept to a minimum and one identifies with the fictional world, which they are fully immersed in. Although we can immerse ourselves in any activity, virtual, augmented and mixed reality is defined by this term as the ‘tools for creating computer-generated immersive and interactive experiences’.” See more: MENDELOVÁ, L.: *Realita virtuálna. Skúsme sa vo virtuálnej a rozšírenej realite poučiť z toho, čo sa stalo internetu*. Bratislava : Kaligram, 2019, p. 62-63.

41 MENDELOVÁ, L.: *Realita virtuálna. Skúsme sa vo virtuálnej a rozšírenej realite poučiť z toho, čo sa stalo internetu*. Bratislava : Kaligram, 2019, p. 72-73.

42 ORLOWSKI, J. (Director): *Social Dilemma*. [online]. Los Gatos : Netflix, 2020. Available at: <<https://www.netflix.com/sk-cs/title/81254224>>.

43 *A Call to Minimize Distraction & Respect Users' Attention*. [online]. [2021-05-17]. Available at: <<http://www.minimizedistraction.com/>>.

ethical issue in the development of digital products and services. He argued that technology should primarily enhance human life, and not distract us or act disruptively. Distraction is, in this sense, understood as a barrier for an individual to be devoted to something meaningful – something outside the virtual world. Subsequently, in 2018, he established the movement *Time Well Spent* to open a major debate about technology. In this context, however, we are not told why people do not mind surveillance and data trading. Two possible answers come in mind – people either do not know about it, or have simply grown to accept it. The answer is also offered by Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari in his publication *21 Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>44</sup> The issue of surveillance capitalism and attention economy can also be portrayed in the context of a much more radical change to the entire human civilisation. Y. N. Harari says that we have entered a completely new era comparable to the Industrial Revolution in which a new world religion – dataism – is born: “Dataism declares that the universe is composed of streams of data and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to the processing of data.”<sup>45</sup> Y. N. Harari adds that this idea, while slightly eccentric, has even taken root in the academic environment. The author explains that this term combines biochemical and electronic algorithms and points out that the same mathematical laws apply in both directions. “Dataism thus destroys the barrier between animals and machines and expects the electronic algorithms to decrypt and overcome the biochemical ones. (...) Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a bubble on the stock exchange, or the influenza virus, are merely three formulas of data streams that can be analysed with the same basic concepts and tools.”<sup>46</sup> The reason for the popularity of dataism in academia is, in his opinion, the ability to bridge academic gaps and build mutual understanding even between seemingly disparate disciplines. “Dataism believes, however, that people have lost grip of the immense stream of data, and can no longer distil information, knowledge or wisdom from it. Data processing should be entrusted to electronic algorithms whose capacity exceeds the capacity of the human brain. This practically means that dataists are sceptical of human knowledge and wisdom and have a greater confidence in data and computer algorithms.”<sup>47</sup> Modern science tells us that we should completely surrender our lives to computer algorithms, which can understand us better than ourselves. Does this mean a virtual end of faith in humanism and human uniqueness? Dataists consider *homo sapiens* to be an obsolete algorithm. Y. N. Harari explains it with the superiority of man over chicken. A human being is superior to a chicken simply because we can receive and process data better and more comprehensively using better algorithms than a chicken. Y. N. Harari, however, asks the question: if in the future a system is made, which will be able to process and receive information faster and more comprehensively than man, should not such a system be superior to us?<sup>48</sup> Publicist Jaroslav Fiala notes yet another negative effect of dataism: the growing power of oligarchs in politics with enough money for massive PR and digital advertising: “Democracy changes into an infantile theatre, a paradise of bizarre statements and irreconcilable Internet discussions. We know that Facebook likes heated debates and bombshell news because it can collect more data about people through them. Politics is then downplayed to a fight for the target audience of customers in which even small disagreements can escalate into harsh interpersonal face-offs.”<sup>49</sup> J. Fiala goes even further by aptly identifying one of the key phenomena of today: the destruction of ‘obsolete’ democracy whose slow institutions simply cannot compete with computer algorithms. Data corporations are so powerful that they are a potential competition to the governments, he concludes, and adds that “if they alone formed a state, it would become the seventh largest economy in the world. And although they don't own an army or soldiers, they can invade the privacy of its users better than any secret service in the world.”<sup>50</sup>

44 See: HARARI, Y. N.: *21 Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London : Vintage, 2019.

45 HARARI, Y. N.: *21 Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London : Vintage, 2019, p. 332.

46 HARARI, Y. N.: *21 Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London : Vintage, 2019, p. 332.

47 HARARI, Y. N.: *21 Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London : Vintage, 2019, p. 333.

48 HARARI, Y. N.: *21 Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London : Vintage, 2019, p. 344.

49 FIALA, J.: *Facebook a Google kšeftuji s našim soukromím. Jsou to nová impéria*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020. [online]. [2022-03-09]. Available at: <<https://denikn.cz/331194/facebook-a-google-kseftuji-s-nasim-soukromim-jsou-to-nova-imperia/>>. For more information on political communication, see, for example: SPÁLOVÁ, L.: *Politický branding – Modely persúazie v politickom marketingu*. Bratislava : Európska akadémia manažmentu, marketingu a médií, 2021; CHLEBCOVÁ HEČKOVÁ, A.: *RESpublika: Politická komunikácia v mediálnej spoločnosti*. Nitra : Constantine the Philosopher University, 2015.

50 FIALA, J.: *Facebook a Google kšeftuji s našim soukromím. Jsou to nová impéria*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020. [online]. [2022-03-09]. Available at: <<https://denikn.cz/331194/facebook-a-google-kseftuji-s-nasim-soukromim-jsou-to-nova-imperia/>>.



In this context, it is also worth noting the ideas of sociologist Heinz Bude. He notes that we are facing a surplus of accumulated information and money and/or a fear that generates a lot of data, which is stored and available, and money, which is constantly produced by the players on the financial markets. He also notes that “every use of the Internet makes us vulnerable, and with every turnover on the account we enter into a financial relationship of mutual demands that try to make extra money out of the existing money.”<sup>51</sup> H. Bude puts it very clearly that this fear of the world on the edge of the abyss cannot be completely eliminated, as it is a fear of our own choices, to which we have been lured and seduced, and not a fear of the ‘great unknown’. The author describes a situation in which we feel fear of our own options, being attached to a system that we ourselves have created, and which destroys itself through its peculiar deviations. “The fear, which is spreading after the functional and legitimacy crises of capitalism and the Internet, is the image of self-regulatory systems based on the reactions, choices and decisions of the individuals involved. However, not by the methods of inclusion, but by provocation and crossing the borders. The fear is that no one is steering this process because everyone participates in it and promises something for themselves from it. The fear of a lack of boundaries is a fear of the government of no one in which everyone participates.”<sup>52</sup> The above work by Y. N. Harari is a fascinating demonstration of where we are headed as humanity. The result is the reduction of people, communities and all living organisms to clusters of impersonal data and mathematical formulas – algorithms – that can be freely examined and reshaped. The very nature of power and wealth changes when things are converted to data. The winner is the one who collects the biggest amount of data about people, who possesses the best tools for data analysis, and who can shape human behaviour.

## 5 Social Networking Sites as a Slot Machine/ Degradation of Human Autonomy

The success of social media lies in the fact that they are addictive. They exploit a wide range of elements to achieve this goal. Total human exhaustion is a frequently recurring theme in this context – the comprehensive impact of the ‘vibrant perks’, which insistently draw the user’s attention away and affect their mood. The very presence on the Internet does not seem to be problematic; it is rather the fact that it is increasingly out of control, says C. Newport in his *Digital Minimalism*: “Few people want to spend much time online, but these tools can form dependent behaviour in people. The urge to check Twitter or update the Reddit feed becomes a nervous tic, which breaks our undisturbed time into fragments too small to keep our conscious attention.”<sup>53</sup> With refreshing and infinite scrolling, the technology giants in Silicon Valley created highly addictive systems similar to a slot machine to bring an endless flow of new content to the users and make them spend more and more time on social media. The intermittent and predictable rewards are the most addictive and the most difficult to stop. The refresh function (by swiping one’s finger down on the device screen) on various social media (*Facebook*, *Pinterest*, *YouTube*, etc.) rewards the user with something new and allows them to play an endless virtual slot machine. T. Harris says that these are the real casinos of attention, and we spend a lot of time with them. And as usual, the casino always wins. He also asks whether the user receives the same value for their time spent on social media. Although the rewards in the form of new posts, messages or content are predictable, the users always tend to expect something more. In a way, the refresh or gesture on the device screen is the imaginary button on the slot machine.<sup>54</sup> This behaviour can also be caused by unpredictable feedback because, as C. Newport rightly notes, we live in an era of feedback.<sup>55</sup> Each beep, alert, notification or like feeds our addiction: “When we open the app to check the

notifications, we’re (metaphorically) pulling the lever (on the slot machine) to see if we get a lot, a little or nothing. Whether our mind likes it or not, our attention is fuelled by expectations – the harrowing tension to see if we get social appreciation.”<sup>56</sup>

As social beings, people can never completely ignore what others think about them. Own human value is naturally assessed in the process of comparison with other members of society. Self-esteem is built by an ongoing process of self-validation and a fight against the threats to own values. M. Solik aptly described this process in the following statement: “The ability to understand, interpret and realize one’s own needs and desires as an autonomous being largely depends on the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. One can acquire these practical attitudes to oneself only intersubjectively through mutual recognition.”<sup>57</sup> Comparison with others can positively lead to higher performance and better results – however, it also brings a lot of negative emotions and feelings, such as feelings of shame, anxiety, inadequacy, etc. Social media not only contribute to these constant comparisons and confrontations with others, but they also significantly boost them. The creation of own self-esteem and recognition through compulsive comparisons with our friends or influencers can make us question ourselves.<sup>58</sup> As remarked by F. Fukuyama: “It is not enough for me to realize my own value if it is not publicly recognized by others – or, worse, if they humiliate me or completely disregard my existence. Self-confidence increases proportionally to the value we hold for others. Human beings naturally require recognition; therefore, the modern meaning of identity very quickly changes into identity politics, in which individuals require public recognition.”<sup>59</sup> Social psychologist Adam Alter notices that such behaviour is adaptive. As early as in the Palaeolithic, it was important that one carefully maintained their social status among other members of the tribe because their survival depended on it. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, digital technologies abuse this deeply rooted human motivation to create an addictive behaviour, which can be monetised on.<sup>60</sup> From the psychological point of view, it is natural that people tend to facilitate their life. The less personally mature they are, the fewer versatile and complex stimuli they received in their early childhood, and the greater the tendency for a recourse to addictive behaviour or addictive tools. Addictive features can also be measured in technology; however, it is difficult to ban or eliminate them.

C. Newport notes that some of these addictive issues are random, while many others are quite deliberate (compulsive use is the basis of many social media business plans). He thinks that this irresistible attraction of the screens makes us believe that we are losing our own autonomy when deciding where to focus our attention.<sup>61</sup> This is certainly also due to the fact that a smartphone has become an extension of the human body, or another sense. Awkward media, such as personal computers and later laptops, were not sufficiently equipped to be carried around wherever we go – but smartphones are with us almost all the time. We wake up, eat, travel, and fall asleep with them. Smartphones are subtle, but pervasive; they serve us, but require our constant attention. They lure us with their shining light and bombard us with notifications. According to research carried out by the insurance company Asurion, an average American checks their smartphone roughly every 12 minutes. A smartphone is visually checked approximately 80 times per day. If we mentioned teenagers specifically, this number would increase up to 150 daily interactions.<sup>62</sup> The increasingly popular phenomenon of people swapping their ultrathin smartphones for old ‘dumbphones’ (a term coined by an owner of an online shop with mobile phones) without a myriad of features and applications, is not even surprising.<sup>63</sup> This return to ‘prehistorical’ and ‘primitive’ phones is one of the ways to regain (at least partial) control over the amount of time and attention we give to digital technologies – i.e., to be in time and space, and to be ‘offline’.

51 BUDE, H.: *Spoločnosť strachu*. Krásno nad Kysucou : Absynt-Kaligram, 2019, p. 90.

52 BUDE, H.: *Spoločnosť strachu*. Krásno nad Kysucou : Absynt-Kaligram, 2019, p. 91.

53 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava : Lindeni, 2019, p. 11.

54 *A Culto Minimize Distraction & Respect Users' Attention*. [online]. [2021-05-17]. Available at: <<http://www.minimizedistract.com/>>.

55 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava : Lindeni, 2019, p. 36-37.

56 *Attention Economy: Obrovské tržisťe s našou pozornosťou*. Released on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2019. [online]. [2021-07-13]. Available at: <<http://www.factezcech.cz/materials/43?fbclid=IwAR0cMJuY4cl69iA6LmRZpNaHkhdAClaV87NCR6tAqIbqJKLISg3idL0-uJo>>.

57 SOLÍK, M.: *Uznanie ako problém spravodlivosti a jeho mediálna reflexia*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2021, p. 112.

58 Remark by author: M. Solik also reflects on the need for recognition in his other studies. See, for example: SOLÍK, M.: *Komunikácia v spoločenskom kontexte – Uznanie ako intersubjektívny predpoklad*. In *Communication Today*, 2010, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 41-57; SOLÍK, M., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: *Sociálne uznanie v globálnom priestore: Možnosti a limity mediálnej reflexie*. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 20-31.

59 FUKUYAMA, F.: *Identita*. Bratislava : Premedia, 2019, p. 22.

60 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava : Lindeni, 2019, p. 38.

61 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava : Lindeni, 2019, p. 11.

62 MARKOŠ, J.: *Sila rozumu v blízkej dobe. Manuál kritického myslenia*. Bratislava : NPress, 2019, p. 178.

63 MIKO, J.: *Zvrat: Ľudia začínajú meniť smartphony za klasické telefóny typu Nokia*. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2014. [online]. [2021-07-15]. Available at: <<https://www.letemsvetemaplem.eu/2014/06/02/zvrat-lide-zacinaji-meni-smartphony-za-klasicke-telefon/>>.

## 6 Outline of a Philosophy behind an Effective Use of Technology (Instead of Conclusion)

The path to a philosophy of an effective use of technology is paved by various philosophical approaches, often on the opposite sides of the proverbial opinion spectrum – one extreme is represented by neoluddists (proponents of the idea of renouncing most new technologies). The other is the proponents of the Quantified Self community, who carefully integrate digital devices into all aspects of their lives to optimise their existence.<sup>64</sup> In this context, the concepts of “technological maximalism” are brought back to life in the sense that when it comes to technology, more is better: more contacts, more information, more options. This philosophy – as C. Newport points out – fits perfectly into the general concept of liberal humanism whose aim is to provide more freedom to the people. And all this for a simple reason – to make it look seemingly illiberal to avoid modern social networking platforms.<sup>65</sup> C. Newport disputes this assertion by claiming that to hand over one’s autonomy to the conglomerates of the attention economy is the exact opposite of freedom and may lead to the degradation of individuality. The process of dehumanisation arises from the action of external (de)cultivation factors, such as the media devices, procedures and the emerging digital culture of omni-optic surveillance (a state in which everyone watches everyone else, or this surveillance is assumed): “*We let ourselves be monitored: this task is fulfilled by the state authorities, security organizations (both private and public), companies, various social groups and all of us, the mass-self-presenting individuals, but also the nascent Internet of Things.*”<sup>66</sup>

In his work *Benedict’s Choice*,<sup>67</sup> journalist Rod Dreher recalls how he went to a conference in the Clear Creek Benedictine monastery a few years ago, where he was unexpectedly hit by a digital fast. This made him think about how technology ruled his life. In his book he offers a number of observations that intersect with those in the Netflix docudrama *Social Dilemma*: “*In its various forms, online technology is a phenomenon which, by its very nature, crushes and distracts our attention like nothing else, radically threatens our ability to understand the world, physiologically rebuilds our brains, and makes us powerless against our impulses (...) We naively believe that various technologies give us more control over our destiny. In fact, they started to control us,*” says Dreher, who also claims that technology has become the new ideology. “*A technological man understands freedom as liberation from everything that is not freely chosen by an autonomous individual. (...) In a deeper sense, technology as a world view teaches us to prioritize what is new and innovative over what is old and common, and to uncritically valorise the future. It destroys tradition because it rejects all limitations on its creativity. The technological man says: ‘If we can do it, we must have the freedom to do it.’ The questions as to why we should or should not accept a particular technological advance are difficult to understand for the technological mind,*” says Dreher, who concludes our deliberations: a truly free man can control himself and is not a slave to his own desires and those imposed on him from the outside.

The view of M. McLuhan is also worth mentioning: he describes the speech of General David Sarnoff, director of RCA. On the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Notre Dame, he stated the following: “*We have too strong a tendency to turn the technological tools into sacrificial lambs for the sins of those who hold them in their hands. The products of modern science are not good or bad in and of themselves, and their value is determined by how they are used.*” McLuhan criticises Sarnoff for ignoring the nature of the media in a narcissistic way, sarcastically applying Sarnoff’s theory to weapons. If the theory was valid, weapons themselves would not be bad or good. It all depends on their use. Basically, he says that when they hit the right targets, they are good, and when they hit us, they are bad. According to McLuhan, Sarnoff is forgetting an important fact: “*no technology can do more than add to what we already are.*”<sup>68</sup> C. Newport calls for the need for a full *philosophy of technology use*, which would be deeply rooted in our inner

values, and “*which provides clear answers to the question of what tools to use and how, and, just as importantly, confidently ignore everything else.*”<sup>69</sup> M. Deuze talks about “infobesity” which needs to be treated by an ‘information diet’, and which ultimately leads to the disruption of our ability to consume quality information. Y. N. Harari has systematised the findings with the following succinct statement: “*With so many scenarios and options, what should we pay attention to? The world is changing faster than ever before, with overwhelming amounts of data, ideas, promises and threats. People are giving up power in favor of the free market, collective wisdom and external algorithms in part because they cannot handle the sheer amounts of data. In the past, the flow of information was blocked by censorship. But in the twenty-first century, we no longer know what to pay attention to, and often spend time researching and pondering irrelevant things. In ancient times, access to data meant power. Today, if you have power, you know which data to ignore.*”<sup>70</sup> The central part of Deuze’s reflections on life in the media is focused on recapturing man as a being that lives only and exclusively in the media. For Deuze, the ‘zombie’ metaphor is a possible answer – a soulless body that loses its sense of Self, its ego and uniqueness when engulfed by other possible identities. “*The function of the media is not so much the formability and infinite virtualization of oneself, but rather the expansion and strengthening of the possible (and conscious) thinking about how humans are connected to nature and technology,*” says Deuze.<sup>71</sup>

The above paragraphs make us conclude that a one-sided focus on the evil and outright dark sides of the media and technology is a path that leads to a dead end. Children and adolescents are usually confronted by threats and complaints from parents or teachers about the smartphones and computers making them incapable, stupid, lazy, obese, antisocial and selfish, etc., but parents and teachers often show no interest in their world and make no efforts to step into it. These most vulnerable groups of digital natives often lack a positive view, understanding and accompaniment. In the encyclical *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis writes: “*Today, we adults are tempted to make a list of catastrophes and mistakes of today’s young people. Some may even applaud us because we look like experts to identify the negative aspects and dangers. But what will this attitude result in? An even greater distance, less closeness, less mutual help.*”<sup>72</sup> It is important to remember how technology makes our work and education easier and more efficient, how it connects us with people all around the world, and how it serves us. We are convinced that communication via the Internet, applications and social media can awaken the good in people, improve their relationships and motivate them to real action. Thanks to communication technology, the human community can react quickly, mobilise and help – as we have seen during various environmental disasters or war conflicts. Even during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, technology plays an important role in maintaining contact with the world and our loved ones. We believe that a person begins to degrade when they lose the measure and opts for the extreme – a lifestyle without personal relationships, real experiences, face-to-face communication, movement in the fresh air, inner peace or spontaneous joy. And then it does not really matter whether it is caused by technology, alcoholism, workaholism or other addictions.

Therefore, an answer to the potential question ‘How to liberate ourselves from media addiction and information naivety?’ could be formulated along the lines of the necessity for the individuals concerned to first become aware of the state they are in, and then to qualitatively move out of this state. This activity requires an active involvement of volition. We mean a certain resistance to external impetuses and incentives in the form of personalised advertising, or being constantly bombarded by new audiovisual stimuli, and the associated ‘saving’ of our time. Simply put, the affected person should recover their leisure time. Time to think, but also to realise the importance of time and the resulting austerity measures when managing it. Time and control over one’s own Self. The path to a truer and freer life in the media requires us to identify our addictions and gradually get rid of them. At the same time, however, *en route* to a real individual and collective control over reality, we must accept the fact that life in the media is constantly changing. Hyperreality, the illusionist nature of which stems from overcoming one simulacrum after another in the name of the virtualisation of the present, seeks a perfect and pure allegory of the true nature of ourselves. Hyperreality promises us that whatever

64 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava: Lindeni, 2019, p. 14.

65 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava: Lindeni, 2019, p. 71-72.

66 DEUZE, M.: *Media Life*. Prague: Karolinum, 2015, p. 214.

67 DREHER, R.: *Benediktova voľba*. Bratislava: Postoj media, 2017, p. 279-280.

68 MCLUHAN, M.: *Jak rozumieť médiám: Extenze človeka*. Prague: Odeon, 1991, p. 22.

69 NEWPORT, C.: *Digitálny minimalizmus*. Bratislava: Lindeni, 2019, p. 14.

70 HARARI, Y. N.: *21 Lessons for 21st Century*. London: Vintage, 2019, p. 357.

71 DEUZE, M.: *Media Life*. Prague: Karolinum, 2015, p. 238.

72 See also: BERGOGLIO, J. M.: *Christus Vivit. Posynodálna apoštolská exhortácia Svätého Otca Františka mladým a celému Božiemu ľudu*. Trnava: Spolok sv. Vojtecha, 2019.

we are looking for; touching or communicating with it (be it inanimate recorders or audiotext robots) is an interpersonal 'touch' that has never been more alive than now. It often creates a hyperbolised communication quality between the recipient and the information source and among the active recipients themselves.

It would be superficial to perceive social networking sites as the proponents of the myth that technology is a carrier of evil and destroys humanity. By reflecting on the problem areas, we do not only reflect on the possible future negative impacts of technology on humans. At the same time, they put a mirror to contemporary society and changing interpersonal relationships. The main premise is not the idea that technology is bad and destructive. On the contrary – technology helps us and makes our life easier. It is the people who find persuasive and manipulative ways to abuse technology.<sup>73</sup> Technology is becoming a scapegoat for our failures and shortcomings. We should emphasise that technology is only a mediator/medium that has enabled us to do what we could not do before and revealed our hidden and dark selves. One of the ways to escape the current situation is offered in the study by V. Jakubovská and J. Waldnerová, in which the authors reflect on the present time through the optics of happiness and a happy life. They recommend us to rethink the existential and spiritual dimension of our being and shift the emphasis to quality of life, self-expression and spirituality.<sup>74</sup>

We have shown that it is not only necessary to work with technophobia, technoparanoia and the dark future of human-absorbing technologies as a simple concept, but to emphasise the complex problems of today's society; its potential development is determined by the use of futuristic technology. Our view is not the imaginary window to the future, but a mirror to the present corruption. What today's man comes into contact with is a kind of 'liquid curtain' of the simulacra,<sup>75</sup> allowing us to virtually see, hear and feel everything in an instant. On the one hand, the awareness of this civilisational state is amazing, but on the other, we can sense the hidden threats of a socio-psychological decline of the individual or social masses, provided that the level of technological challenges and global informatisation resigns to the moral and ethical codes related to the consensual conclusions about human nature.

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<sup>73</sup> Remark by author: We deal with this topic in more detail in the study *Media Manipulation and Propaganda in the Post-Truth Era*. See more: MORAVČÍKOVÁ, E.: Media Manipulation and Propaganda in the Post-Truth Era. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 23-37.

<sup>74</sup> JAKUBOVSKÁ, V., WALDNEROVÁ, J.: Reflections on Happiness and a Happy Life. In *Ars Aeterna: Literary Studies and Humanity*, 2020, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 34-44.

<sup>75</sup> Remark by author: Simulacrum (from the Latin *simulare* = to imitate, to appear) is a philosophical concept in poststructuralism, which was analysed mainly by the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In his understanding, a simulacrum is a virtual copy of the non-existent original, which is more real than reality itself. Simulacra are often discussed especially in connection with the creation of a virtual illusion of digital media and their impact on the critical competencies and media literacy of the audience.

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