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FREE-FLOATING IDENTITIES¹: SOCIAL PAIN OR SOCIAL GAIN?

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Abstract

The article is focused to the problem of identity. It sketches some basic assumptions and questions the notion of identity. Identities are not stable and everlasting entities of some sort, because it is typical of the present time to be aware of the absence of any firm ground that could make universal identification possible. The truth about identities has to be sought first and foremost in its constant course of redefinition and denial, some continuous cutting of the rotten away from the good parts; it is not, as could well be expected, a goal of some kind that individuals might eventually achieve. The question of identity is problematized within the new media environment too. The potential of virtual reality lies actually in the very process of redefinition of identities itself, which is very typical for this reality. The individuals should find out that they themselves are constructed but that they can redefine again their individuality and identity in the corresponding internet environment. As far as idea of “virtual liberation” is concerned – we come across many questions and problems. The first problem concerns the fact that virtual persons are still “the same” persons. The question of creativity is connected to this because it is more and more obvious that the biggest limitation in virtual world are the people themselves. They project into virtual space all that they have learnt and realized in everyday life. In this sense the internet and popular culture connected with it are especially and above all an extension and not the alternative to the existing culture.

Key words: identity, internet, collaborative culture, new media, user-prosumer

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¹ Idea of identity as free-floating means that identity is not connected to an 'essence', but instead to a performance. In this respect our identities do not express some authentic inner 'core' self but are the dramatic effect (rather than the cause) of our performances.

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Introduction: Identities at crossroads or at the dead end?

The notion of identity is evergreen topic for quite a long time. Its »vulnerability« is basic mechanisms for its long lasting popularity and concern among researchers. For sure, identities are not stable and everlasting entities of some sort, because it is typical of the present time to be aware of the absence of any firm ground that could make universal identification possible (Praprotnik, 1999: 155). For this reason, the very ideological mechanisms of the production of identities are highly diverse as well. They cooperate in one way or another in the formation and preservation of the awareness of the "reality" of the individual's identity, offering him the "reasons" for accepting identities, even though these are by the very definition, in accordance with Hegel's conception of identity, defined as a kind of endless impossibility. One of the basic motives of accepting ideologically constructed identities is without a doubt the individual's fear of the empty field of no-belonging. The so-called "beauty of community" offers the individual the provision of the meaning of his/her existence. Mechanisms of this kind could also be labeled as myths that keep insisting on the demand that all people must identify themselves in their "always-already" eternal image. Of considerable importance is also, of course, the effect of the identification process itself, because it is by their identification that individuals become that which they identified themselves as, thereby lending "retroactive" support to the substantiation of ideological mystifications of this kind. In this way, we wish to emphasize the performative dimension buried in the framework of ideological rituals or discourses (Praprotnik, 1999: 155-156). With the notion of performativity¹ we would like to stress and point to the basic process within »identity formation«: the ideologically generated "reality" is accompanied by the "always-already" effect, likewise referred to above, whereby that which is a result of habit is shown as an unequivocal sign of nature, which is simultaneously the moment of self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1968: 477) where a mere assumption of ideological belief has been turned into actuality. To be sure, all identities in themselves do not mean a thing, or better, only have meaning in terms of what we are able to explain by means of a set of "positive" labels. Any attempt at an apriori determination and attribution of identity to an individual is unsuitable in the very foundation. This is precisely the reason why ideological mechanisms frequently persist or lead to essentialism and mysticism that is to disarm arguments of this type. As has already been observed, the impossibility of identities of this kind finds further support also in the very definition of identities that can only consolidate themselves by incorporating an additional

¹ The notion of performativity originated in work of philosopher and linguist John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

negation in the sense of A#B, which at the same time reinforces the conviction that rather than regarding identities themselves as stable and “fixed” entities it is more appropriate to talk about identification. The truth of the identities lies therefore mainly in its permanent meandering of redefining and denying, permanent cutting the decay off the healthy flesh, and is not a goal, as we would expect, individuals can one day reach (Praprotnik, 1999: 157).¹

Do we still need identity?

Stuart Hall symptomatically titled one of his articles from 1996 with a question: Who needs identity? (Hall, 1996). Some other people claim that old fixed identities are a past and that time has come for the development of new ones. At the same time, this means fragmentation of a modern individual as a unified subject. Once “fixed” and solid identities of a certain class, sex, race, ethnicity and such that were supposed to ensure reliable “location” to the individual are supposed to get caught in the process of the transformation that at the same time as well changes the subject itself. The loss of a stable consciousness of the self is sometimes defined as a de-centring of a subject itself (Hall, 1992: 274-275). On the other hand modern discourse concerning identities shows the climate of “increased vulnerability” as far as identities are concerned. Let us put another way: identity could become an “interesting” or to say “problematic” issue in the circumstances where it fell into crisis, therefore in circumstances when her “fixed” or “eternal” character was replaced with constant insecurity. Of course, this does not mean that identities were once more solid and eternal but it means, as Charles Taylor states e.g. that in more or less distant past the identity itself was not always so problematic and unreliable. The recognition of an identity did not arise as a special problem because it was based on social categories that were accepted as self-evident by people. The feeling of the individual’s unchanged position was in fact a part of his perception of identity (Taylor, 1994: 34-35). The power of the institutionalized and settled order that once made pressure upon the individual mainly disappeared in modern societies. In modern times, the ideological mechanisms that are trying to represent the identity to the individual are growing bigger, because the recognition of a certain identity is no longer self-understandably successful.

The process of identification through which we project ourselves to the field of certain identities has become more open and more

¹ This is discussed in detail in: Praprotnik, *Ideološki mehanizmi produkcije identitet; Od identitete k identifikaciji*, ISH-Fakulteta za podiplomski humanistični študij; ŠOU-Študentska založba, Ljubljana, 1999.

changeable and with it more problematic. This led to the formation of the so called postmodern subject who is conceptualized as a subject without fixed, essential or permanent identity. The subject possesses different identities through time and there are different identities in disagreement inside of it, pulling each to different side so that the identification of the individual is constantly changing. If the individual feels that he possesses the same identity from birth until death this means that he constructed a large “supply” of narration about himself, because perfect and coherent identity is a fantasy (Hall, 1992: 277). Of course, this does not mean that there are “more or less” perfect identities. As we have already pointed out the individual’s identity does not exist as such. It is the process of identification that we deal with.

Identification instead of identity: new life style framework

From the post modernistic perspective, identity should be getting more and more unstable, fragmented, and dispersed. Within this situation postmodern discourses make the idea of identity problematic and also points out that this is a myth or an illusion. It is possible of course, that there are some other “surviving strategies” in existence instead of “eternal” and stable identity. One of the solutions lies in the increased level of reflexivity. Some people talk about this project of reflexivity which includes the preservation of coherent but constantly revised biographical narration, which is produced in the context of multiple choices (Kellner, 1992: 142-143; Kellner, 1995: 336; Giddens, 1991: 5). We must point out that identities do not vanish; on the contrary. Individuals constantly redefine their everyday practices in order to put themselves into one kind of identity narration. The notion of identity is highly connected with sense making processes in everyday life. Of special importance is the sense-making process conducted by individuals; it matters for their own well-being and it also matters for the development of interpersonal relationships. Important aspect of sense-making processes is directly connected to identity, so individuals constantly try to categorize ourselves and others in groups and according to these ascribed statuses constitute relationships, which reflect characteristics of these statuses. These groups and identities are not natural but change through time, space and culture (Praprotnik, 2012a: 76).

Information society and free-floating identities

Free-floating identities also looks very “consumer” orientated, which is perhaps “in the spirit of the time”. Society nowadays can be characterized as consumer, media, informational, electronic, high-tech society. Postmodernism predicts the end of different dilemmas, the end of stability and with it connected uniqueness, the end of distinctness, the

anomalies salvation of a centered subject. This does not only mean the liberation of such dilemmas and “vulnerability” in connection with it, but it also means the liberation of any other feelings. As Frederic Jameson continues, this does not mean that cultural products of postmodern era are simply without feeling, but it means that these feelings are now simply free-floating, with a tendency that certain euphoria will dominate over them (Jameson, 1991: 15-16). The consumer society is based on idea that constant transformation of identities (through consuming) brings pleasure and is meaningful. In contrast with previous production orientated capitalism, which emphasized given, and for that reason limited needs and demands, the main point of consumer capitalism is that it enables and emphasizes the produced and for that reason in principle unlimited needs and demands. Precondition for consumerism are “liberated” individuals (as far as needs, identities and life styles are concerned).

Experiences show that such constellation causes double uneasiness. On one hand there is “too much freedom”. Too many things depend on me. We are forced to make decisions. The basis of this frustration is the need for the Master that can be formulated this way: I want somebody to determine the rules in the story and takes responsibility for events development. Exaggerated freedom can be very frustrating (Žižek, 1996: 126-127). We have learnt from experience that too much freedom can cause certain uneasy feeling in the individual, because he is no longer at the “cross-roads” but at the “dead-end”. Namely, every-day life shows an interesting paradox; too much freedom can be very tiring. The individuals do not experience this extra freedom as freedom any more. The situation here is similar to the situation as far as discursive construction of identity in virtual environment is concerned. There we are the masters of our own identity and this role is sometimes hard to cope with.

The fall of the already mentioned role of the Master in modern western societies exposes, according to Žižek, the subject to radical ambiguousness as far as his desire is concerned. This happens because media is constantly bombarding him with demands to choose, when they address him as a subject who is supposed to know what he really wants. We could read television commercial for advertising itself with this on our minds as well. It says: “Advertising – the right to choose.” But on a more basic level the media robs the subject of a notion about what he wants and accordingly addresses completely adaptable subject that needs to be told what he wants. The naming of a choice that needs to be done, itself creates performing need for the choice object (Žižek, 1996: 130-131).

The arousal of a desire as such, which is not given and fixed any more (this is very obvious in advertising and marketing), gave a go to uncontrolled production of identities. When a desire was “let out of a bottle” the appearance of completely unpredictable needs and demands, or to say meanings and identities, increased. This of course, does not mean that resistance against social representation and a priori determined individual has increased. It means that growth of different identities and meanings has to a certain degree also caused the insecurity of the individual (Ang, 1996: 177-179). Because of this newly created insecurity he searches for the solution in new positions and interpretations, in new fictional identities.

At this point the question of “non-problematic” subject itself arises. Is he still, as Althusser would say, self-evidently caught in an ideological discourse? Can ideological interpellation “always-already” succeed? Has postmodern culture, with its slogan about “freedom and arbitrariness” of identities and subject himself only made possible that an individual with bigger sense of freedom (freely) accepts his inferiority, so he can “realize by himself” the procedures and deeds of his own inferiority. The individuals then “function by themselves”? (Althusser, 1980: 81-82) As Althusser pointed out, such self-aware and for his actions responsible subject is urgent. Namely, as such he is capable to oblige with his “characteristics” and to “consciously” obey the norms.

Virtual identities and shifting activities

The possibilities for the production of “new” desires undoubtedly lie hidden in the very nature of the new information and communication technologies. The basis for constant redefinition of identities lies in communicative characteristics and contexts of new media; there are various internet situations from synchronous to asynchronous, text based to multimedia formats which gave birth to redefinition of individual identities. These new communication context also give enormous opportunities concerning – as Erving Goffman would say- the art of impression management (Goffman, 1959). Another persuasive element for identity switching and redefining is communicative context of anonymity, often found in new media forms, for example in a context of synchronous chat-rooms and asynchronous on-line forums. *Facebook* profiles and weblogs are not the case, and we are going to put these formats aside.

As has been many times stressed the anonymity of the individual increases the absence of classical social ties. The main character of computer-mediated communication is supposed to be the so called

characteristic of social cues filtered out. Non-verbal characteristics that are typical for physical world are missing, and at the same time this form of communication consists of less information than the face-to-face communication. Computer-mediated communication is supposed to be reduced as far as contextual and visual ties are concerned. The consequence is that this type of communication is less personal and adaptable (Parks; Floyd, 1999: 2). Social presence theory claims something similar. According to it, fewer channels or social codes available within the internet medium leads to phenomena that users of the internet medium pay less attention to other participants in the communication. This way, the individual is more easily “missed” by other participants. There is one other thing important here too. The classical visual signs that usually accompany face-to-face communication and show the social- emotional reactions of the co-speaker, are absent and this leads to the fact that on-line users become less social sensitive and sometimes more rude to their co-speaker. They can use very aggressive language and tend to be more offensive. In the internet slang this is called flaming.

Anonymity thus has double effect; it reduces the level of social pressure on the individual. At the same time the level of aggressive or at least unpleasant communication is sometimes getting higher with the "liberation" of the individual (Boudourides 1995: 3-4). But the very lack of social and visual connections is on the other hand the condition for the growth of user's own “imagination”. The anonymity is supposed to be a part of the magic attraction in computer communication. As one of the participants said, she does not hide her identity because she would be afraid of contacts with other people, but because anonymity is part of the magic itself (Baym, 1998: 55). A great fascination for them is the disclosure of their own fantasies with typing alone. In this sense the potential possibility itself already fulfills a satisfaction. The very idea, that you are able to do something but you do not do it gives you more satisfaction than the act itself. You never go “all the way”, you just repeat a certain type of the game. You announce all the time but you never go through with it (Poster, 1998: 191-192).

We have to stress also the newer directions, for example in *Facebook* profiles. Anonymity is nowadays not any more the main attraction of new media. We are faced with kind of reframing of certain activities on-line. In the late 20th century the main goal was to hide, to mask, to disguise ourselves. Disembodiment¹ (especially anonymity) was – as already mentioned – the main attraction. Nowadays we are faced with so-called

¹ »Disembodiment signifies that a person's online identity is apparently separate from their physical presence, a condition associated with two features: textuality and anonymity« (Slater, 2003: 536).

collaborative culture based upon Web 2.0. Accordingly to this new climate we are faced with different kind of activities performed by on-line individuals: to share, to collaborate, to link, to like (as it is in the case of *Facebook*¹).

One of key and defining elements and activities of new media cultures is collaboration. This has influence upon transforming key activities and statuses, specially in the light of individuals: we know the traditional media category, such as the category »audience«, and subsequently new media category named »user«. New media technology with its possibilities shapes and fosters new cultural connections and relations, previously more or less overlooked. The process of multimedia production has been presented through a different types of inclusion promised in the technological forms. We are faced with the transformed »intimacy« of new media cultures, which presents further evidence of new and unstable, to a some respect a blurring divisions between public and private sphere of communication. World Wide Web as a multimedia form has absorbed many other media. Multimedia production of web pages and other cultural products has been a major channel for the democratization of cultural production and a location for the expression of individuals in a public sphere (Praprotnik, 2012b:7).

Redefinition of identities in virtual world of the internet: examples and considerations

Internet is offering itself as a counter-balance to the a-priori determinations of an individual. Mark Poster says that virtual reality makes the types of subjective experiences possible and that those experiences could "interrupt" or stop modern types of domination. The potential of virtual reality lies in the process itself, which is typical for virtual reality and through which the individuals could learn that they themselves are also constructed and that they can, in a certain environment, reconstruct themselves and the world. So virtual reality then functions this way, or to say differently, her functioning as such (the changing of identities) can work towards denaturalization of assumptions about "natural" given identities (Cooper 1997: 103-104). As far as individuals, for example on the Internet Relay Chat, freely change their identities when they play different discursive identity games, they can soon find out that identity is a construction that was framed to them by

¹ The role of popularity in social networking sites such as *Facebook* is discussed in detail in: Scott, Graham G., More Than Friends: Popularity on Facebook and its Role in Impression Formation, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 2014, p. 358-372.

others in the "real" world. In the world of virtual reality they can construct it by themselves, contrary to what happens in the "real" world.

Self-creation and self-presentation are supposed to be the new forms of constitution of identity. In everyday world we are namely used to search for identity within the limits of our own environment. We namely believe that a really harmonic relationship is possible when the individual constructs its identity from its "foundation". Internet space launched new thinking because here the individuals started to search for their identity in a different way. They tend to lean more and more towards manipulating with the internet environment itself, which they use as a tool to create their own identity. Internet is really that sort of a tool, because it does not involve the pre-existence of natural environment. The individuals themselves make the environment possible and that is by inventing it (Jones, 1997: 32). Internet so became the label for the new electronic environment where a lot of people can present their ideas and establish new reality, which is the summary of different opinions, ideas, praxes, and ideologies. All of this is presented through (multimedia) text. The user¹ is consequently "drown" into discursive space where he is being "bombarded" with large quantities of text constantly produced by numerous users. Because the user is constantly being encouraged to participate actively in the production of discursive community, the identity as well as community is being formed on the basis of discourses that are common to the participants of that virtual space.

Text as a mask: On the internet no one knows you're a dog²

"You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative...you can just be whoever you want, really...You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words." (Turkle, 1995: 184)

¹ Collaborative culture has brought to attention new activities and also new terms, for example *produser* and *prosumer*.

² Joseph Walther, an expert in the field of research of computer-mediated communication published, in one of his articles, a caricature with two dogs on it present in an office next to computer table. One of the dogs is sitting on rotating chair and saying to the other: "On the internet no one knows you're a dog". The message of this caricature that is that anyone can participate in the internet environment, is very close to popular idea of "virtual liberation."

In different anthropological books, articles, and travel books we can many times encounter very attractive descriptions of native dances and customs. In “our” material world we also have different customs or opportunities when we (can) put on a mask. In this world masks and costumes in carnival season “liberate” the participants. On the contrary to every year’s masquerades is the internet world short-lived and a non-material medium, where a typed text and the usage of nicknames provide a mask.

Men in chat-rooms “disguise” themselves through the usage of significant (symbolic) linguistic elements into women or vice-versa. The motivations that launch such behaviour are different. People are, for example driven by curiosity of how they are going to “feel” as a woman or as a man. Women often wish to avoid explicitly sexist statements against themselves. For other, such a masquerade is a form of experimenting with sexuality. Such experimenting and masquerade connected with it promotes a higher level of consciousness about problem of sexes and contributes to longer destabilization of moduses on the basis of which we construct both sexes in now-a-day world (Danet, 1998: 129-130).

Some people say that there is always “night” in virtual world. Basic characteristics such as age and sex are in some internet formats (such as chat-rooms and forums) also invisible. Anonymity and the very character of a media as a “playground” have strong behaviour influence. This enables individuals to behave in a way very different than their image presentation in every-day world, so they can express beforehand covered aspects of their personality in a similar way as on a masquerade. In virtual chat-rooms people can become exactly “what they want to be” or exactly “how they want other people to see them”.

In anonymous internet communication “we are and we are not” at the same time and this ambiguousness is one of the attractions of this environment. That is why this ambiguousness determines our attitude towards our screen images. On one hand we keep the attitude of outer distance so to say a game with false images in the sense “I know I am not like this (brave, seductive,...) but it is nice to forget our real image every now and then and to put on a more satisfying mask. This way you can get relaxed better and get rid of the burden to be the way that you are and to have to live with this and to be responsible for it”. On the other hand we also “are” on the internet what we are not or we not dare to be in real life. The internet person that people create can be “more me” than my “real life” person (my “official” image) as far as it makes those aspects of myself visible that I would never have dared admitting

in real life. The fact itself that we percept our virtual image purely as a game enables us to get rid of the usual obstacles that prevent us from realizing our “dark part” in “real” world and to freely show all our libidinous potentials. The charm of anonymity is also and above all in the following: We can carry out the “masquerade” in virtual world without actually doing it and this way we avoid the feeling of anxiety connected with the action in the real world. We can do it because we know that we are actually not doing it for real. Obstacles and shame are this way pushed aside. We can articulate hidden truth about our drives at the exact time when we realize that we are only playing a game on the screen. We accept our fantasies as far as we “know that they are only a game in virtual reality” (Žižek, 1996: 115-116).

The question is of course, whether in that case, what we perform in cyberspace dreaming is in a way “more real than reality”, i.e. closer to the gist of our own personality than the role we play in relationships with real partners (Žižek, 2000). We can be more “genuine” and “authentic” on the internet games contacting with a co-player than in real life. Because we know that virtual reality is “only a game” we can dare to play whatever we do not dare admit in “real” mutual contacts.

Conclusion: Social pain or social gain?

“You're sitting in front of a large computer screen.

You click on a little picture of an antenna and a window opens up onto a chat channel where everybody knows you as Cosmic Charlie.

You size the window and leave the chat channel open on a corner of your screen.

You click on a picture of a tiny piece of paper and open a document you are composing.

You click on a picture of a little castle and open an electronic window into a MUD where you are Zlx, a trigendered witch of the twenty seventh century.

You click on the Netscape icon and websurf.

Then you cycle for a few hours among your identi-frags. Chat, compose, MUD, surf, chat, compose, MUD, surf.

You do this all day, every day. For years.” (Rheingold, 2000:1)

Howard Rheingold presents in a metaphorical way the image of modern internet user. Nowadays we could add Facebook, Instagram and lots of others online services. His image could be frightening for some people, for other maybe not. Sherry Turkle says that we understand technology as something we must accept wholly or reject it without doubt and that is very typical and symptomatic for our way of thinking. Internet should make possible for the individual to recognize new aspects of our own

personalities. The potential of virtual reality actually lies in the very process of redefinition of identities which is so typical for this reality.

In the case of the Internet, we are faced with a rather different conception of communication which, according to its specific nature, also bears impact on the sole approach or attitude towards individual's identity and community in which this individual exists. Within an Internet community the individual is "liberated" of his body and space and therefore disposes only of multimedia images and words. This is what enables their imagination to develop within an "empty" discursive space. However, even in such a space the narration facilitates the formation of communities, enabling the individuals to perceive themselves as part of these communities and thus create their own identities. Contrary to "classical" communities where every individual has their own, often predetermined position as well as identity, Internet communities, in accordance with their intrinsic nature and technological possibilities, offer an inverse process or perception of community. In such communities the individuals as their members do not feel as if they belong to a certain community; instead they more likely feel that a community belongs to them. Moreover, the perception itself of identity is not merely a "derivation" of our identification with community, but results from our understanding of the community identity (Praprotnik, 2003:161). Virtual space does not constitute any leap into a completely autonomous subjectivity and virtual liberation. This is why, to a certain extent, this space does not represent an alternative to the so far existing physical space, but perhaps some sort of "comfortable" extension of the already established patterns of modern culture. In relation to the field of virtual space, we also cannot speak of an all-permeant subject, since individuals in front of PC screens are inevitably also subjects and therefore socially constructed entities. Even the wishes and motives of those individuals that are being fulfilled via the Internet do not bear any evidence that new, different subjects are being generated. This is already made clear by just a quick glance through the on-going "traffic" on the Internet. The reason for this may be found in the well known definition of the Internet opportunities, according to which our imagination is our only limitation. From the point of view of the subject, virtual space does not represent a radical break away from the past. Individuals and groups thereof project into virtual space very similar wishes and strategies to those that are being realised in the "real" world (Praprotnik, 2003: 162).

Let us end with the notion of community which is basic environment for identity formation. Are virtual communities different than real everyday communities? Internet communities are supposedly capable of creating a feeling of genuineness since they incorporate a space where complete

strangers can meet who share similar interests, needs, and wishes. It is because of this apparent non-functional connectedness (in virtual space, contacts are being established between complete strangers), as well as anonymity that it is made possible for such communities to acquire an aura of genuine authenticity. One of the core incentives for establishing these communities is the desire to be connected, i.e. to belong. As soon as the Internet technology becomes available to a wider audience, the latter starts to build communities. One of the principal reasons for such a "systemic" phenomenon appears to be exactly this "hunger" to belong to a community. This "hunger" is also an expression of individuals' fear of empty space or fear of not belonging (Praprotnik, 2003: 162-163). It, furthermore, demonstrates that the only thing that has actually become globalized is the space of separate imaginary nations, since certain individuals favour to become part of a community that interacts in their own language. These communities differ from one another only with respect to the "method" of construction, since they can expand via new medium. Virtual communities are therefore not a novelty – they only expand differently or, according to Benedict Anderson¹, they are imagined differently. Every virtual world is thus dependent on physical, social, pre-existing world and the connection between them is maintained by individuals. The matrix of Internet situations and meanings consequently represents nothing more but an up-to-date continuation of the "original" matrix, i.e. the matrix of pre-virtual worlds, since the individuals in front of PC screens have not, in fact, undergone any change whatsoever. And this is why virtual culture is still regarded more as an element or extension of real culture, rather than an absolute alternative to it.

¹ Author of well-known monography *Imagined communities*.

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