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Internet as the New Mass Medium: Opportunities, Threats, Perspectives

ABSTRACT:
The article concerns the matter of similarities and differences between Internet and traditional mass media, like newspapers, radio and TV. Internet is often perceived opposite to these media, mostly because of its specific character of a medium involving active participation on the part of receivers, because of its interactivity, ease with which it may take on a role of a mass broadcaster, individualised user circles, diversity of configurations of communication instead of just one, and an impersonal pattern of mass communication. However, the Internet may be considered also as a mass medium because of the institutionalisation of Internet broadcasters, user circles becoming similar to mass audience, the messages becoming standardized, the creation of many individual acts of communication in the mass communication model, and the building of a common system of meanings. When the Internet is conceptualized as mass medium it is still important to remember that not all Internet-based communication replicates traditional pattern of mass communication. The question about the role of the Internet in the process of building the public sphere may also be considered.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Internet, media masowe, komunikowanie masowe, nadawca, odbiorca, zbiorowość odbiorcza, środek przekazu, przekaz, masa społeczna, kultura masowa, użytkownicy, komunikacja indywidualna, strony WWW, *clickstream*, sfera publiczna
KEY WORDS: Internet, mass media, mass communication, broadcaster, receiver, audience, medium, message, mass, mass culture, users, interpersonal communication, WWW pages, clickstream, public sphere

The Internet is often contrasted with other mass media such as Press, radio or television. The Internet differs from them because it is interactive, there are diminished boundaries between senders and recipients. Thanks to it, it is easy to become a mass broadcaster to an individualised group of recipients. The Internet is often seen as revolutionary in human mass communication. Some even say that it may be the end of traditional media which will be replaced by virtual forms of communication. On the other hand, there are many similarities between his new medium and the traditional. Both are worldwide with millions of people having access which means that it can be used as means to transmit information. This article will show that the Internet possesses many characteristics of a mass medium in a traditional understanding and, therefore, it can be considered such, still taking into account its individualistic characteristics.

Mass media and mass communication characteristics

According to T. Goban-Klas[1] what characterizes mass media is that they are systematic, they are accessed by the masses and they shape society's identity due to their scope, reach, regularity and repeatability. They play a great role in society as they transmit public information, are an instrument of power, a forum on which public issues are discussed. They are a source which defines social reality, also a source of entertainment, a way of spending free time.

The phrase mass media was created in the 1940s in the US when a similarity was noticed between the old medium, the press, and the new media – radio, cinema, television. They were all indirect in communication, directed at the masses, open in character and potentially accessible by everyone. Mass reception is the number one similarity between all

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[1] Goban-Klas T., *Media i komunikowania masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu*, Warszawa 2004, p. 13.

the mass media. In mass communication, the sender (usually an institution, not an individual) creates his broadcast to a heterogeneous, spaced out audience, not integrated by common ties. Perhaps press readers, early on, could have been classified as a social group interested in public issues. However, later on mass media recipients were so numerous that they could not possibly be classified as a group with similar characteristics. In order to describe its character that phrase 'mass' was coined.

This phrase, however, has been present earlier on, in European thought, since the French Revolution but it had a negative connotation. It was used to describe society from a critical point of view. The term was associated with enormousness, apathy, homogeneity, amorphousness and primitivism. The mass, according to J. S. Mill, is collective mediocrity which needs to be guided by elites or more noble members of society[2]. Jose Ortega y Gasset[3] described the masses as mediocre, passive and banal, the people as limited, undistinguishable from one another, unable to do any great things or even with the ability to have a discussion. These negative connotations of the masses were also transferred to mass audiences of recipients.

According to Herbert Blumer[4] the masse are characterized as heterogenous, anonymous, with weak interaction and a limited exchange of experiences between spaced out individuals, loose organization and lack of ability to co-operate together. The masses do not have common values or goals. His theories of unorganized masses corresponded to general theories on social change with growing atomization, individualization and lack of social ties.

According to F. Tonnies[5], in the industrial era, communities were replaced by associations which were bound by economic trading. Societies were based on associations of formal, business-like character of social contacts, with atomization, lack of common ties, but also with synchronization and unification. To a large extent, irrelevant were old social classes divisions. As a result of many migrations, due to the industrial revolution, people were not feel part of small communities and did not have common culture.

New forms of growing roots had to take place. One of these was mass culture which is characterized by homogenization of the symbolic layer. In other words, all members of modern societies are served the same content, information, ideals of behaviour. In order for mass culture to develop, it needs mass media which transmit and reproduce such culture. The mass media exist due to technological progress which allows quick and wide broadcast. However, it was the shape of social structure which determined their success. The mass media came in when small group direct contacts between people ceased to be the basic form of socialising. Large, atomized, modern societies could not shape their identities solely based on direct contacts. The mass media were the answer with their indirectness, they allowed people to interact in a broader sense and to feel like they belong to a larger society.

The mass media shaped a new system of meanings, norms and values. It became mass culture because only such culture could be assimilated by members of the new society. This type of culture unifies its members as it offers them identical broadcasts and ideals of behaviour. As A. Kłoskowska writes, "The mass media are great tool of unification. They offer to enormous human masses, heterogenous in their original culture character and scattered in space, unified norms and social values, common knowledge and experiences. They allow people to understand and communicate with the broader environment, they ease assimilation and identification with a group, thus the feeling of unity"[6]. An important media characteristic is that they offer standardized broadcasts, strengthening mass culture and the 'association' character of social structures.

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[2] Mill, J.P., *Utylitaryzm. O wolności*, Warszawa 1959, p. 122.
[3] Ortega y Gasset J., *Bunt mas i inne pisma socjologiczne*, Warszawa 1982, p. 7-8.
[4] Blumer H., *The Mass, the Public and Public Opinion* [in:] Lee A. M. (red.), *New Outlines of the Principles of Sociology*, New York 1939.
[5] Tonnies F., *Wspólnota i stowarzyszenie. Rozprawa o komunizmie i socjalizmie jako empirycznych formach kultury*, Warszawa 1988.
[6] Kłoskowska A., *Kultura masowa. Krytyka i obrona*, Warszawa 1980, p. 206-207.

Another characteristic of mass culture is that it is treated as a community, and its creations – as products. There is the so-called 'culture industry' which, in an assembly line manner, produces normalized culture content. E. Morin states, "The production of mass culture is run by a technologically bureaucratic concentration"[7]. The same is regarding mass media, their content is targeted at selling-buying, with a maximisation of profits as the key goal. Broadcasts are targeted at the majority's demands which buys them (directly or through advertising). This must have an effect on their quality. According to G. Simmel, „that which makes people feel closer, which unifies the masses must relate to lower, more primitive instincts of the people"[8]. The mass is comprised of what is the most primitive, simplest and of least value. In order to cater to mass recipients' tastes, the aim is very low. Hence, the phenomenon of vulgarization of mass culture and the constant decreasing level of broadcasts. Hence, the media's reluctance to incite a more in-depth public debate or to address difficult issues. Mass culture and media have therefore quickly come in for a lot of criticism. The Frankfurt philosophers accused them of being futile, repetitive, requiring ever lower intellectual standards from recipients, of ignoring more valuable content and public debate in favour of cheap entertainment[9]. Counterculture elements accused them of pseudo-objectivity, impersonal nature, distorting recipients' consciousness and being trading commodity instead of a communication means[10].

Blumer's concept of collective reception has been criticised due to its over atomized theory. Presently it can be said that are in existence certain ties and smaller groups within the masses and, therefore, advocated should be direct contacts and personal influences which result in the masses not being entirely passive[11]. Still, the recipients can be characterized as "numerically great, spatially spread out, where individuals do not know each other, it is constantly changeable, due to its size and heterogenous make up it does not create feelings of identity, it is not ruled by regulation, it is not an entity on its own but an object of outside influences"[12].

The broadcaster-recipient relations are impersonal, one-way and asymmetric. Recipients are not treated individually but as one entirety which can be offered a standardized media product. Mass communication is systematic and regular in its broadcasts. It is one way, not in form of a dialogue where the recipients have virtually no possibility to answer back. N. Negroponte[13] states that all intelligence is on the transmitter's side. There is then a status disparity, as the broadcaster appears smarter, with more qualifications and prestige. According to the model of division of labour, present in industrialized societies, journalists (media organizations) are specialists in information choice and they possess special competences which allow them to be mass broadcasters. In the mass communication model, the active role is on the broadcaster's side while the recipient is a passive object.

Internet Specificity as a mass medium

In view of the present means of mass communication the Internet is a complete novelty, something entirely different from the traditional. In order to illustrate the differences

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[7] Morin E., *Przemysł kulturalny* [in:] Hopfinger M., *Nowe media w komunikacji społecznej w XX wieku*, Warszawa 2005, p. 565.

[8] Simmel G., *Socjologia*, Warszawa 1975, p. 40.

[9] Cf.: Horkheimer M., Adorno T., *Dialektyka oświecenia. Fragmenty filozoficzne*, Warszawa 1994; Marcuse H., *Człowiek jednowymiarowy. Badania nad ideologią rozwiniętego społeczeństwa przemysłowego*, Warszawa 1991.

[10] Cf. Jawłowska A., *Drogi kontrkultury*, Warszawa 1975, p. 187-198.

[11] Ie. T. Goban-Klas proponuje pojęcie agregatu ustrukturalizowanego. Cf. Goban-Klas T., *Problematyka publiczności na tle struktury społecznej*, „Studia Socjologiczne" 1972, nr 2.

[12] Goban-Klas T., *Media... .*, p. 212-213.

[13] Negroponte N., *Cyfrowe życie. Jak odnaleźć się w świecie komputerów*, Warszawa 1997.

between the two, E. Bendyk[14] uses the theory of Syzyf and Tezeus. Syzyf is passive and sedentarny just like traditional media recipients to whom consumption of media, "is an element of their daily ritual reconstructing world order, knowing that at the same time hundreds of thousands of other people are doing precisely the same". This way the mass media support a unification of society and a standardization of mass culture. Tezeus, on the other hand, is a nomad who surfs the Internet and who creates his own, individual paths based on his needs, interests and tastes. He himself decides what to choose. He is not a passive recipient of content prepared by a broadcaster but an active individual in the process of communication.

In other words, one way traditional communication has been replaced by interactivity. Because of the Internet, the other media, such as radio and television, have also undergone changes and become more interactive (ie. during the "Expres reporterów" programme at the bottom of the screen there is a chat in which viewers can participate). There is also co-operation with the Internet (traditional media have their own sites with information, etc.) or traditional media becoming solely Internet based (radio or TV).

Growing media interactivity implies lessening disproportions between the sender and recipient, with a growing role of the latter. The broadcasters still decide what is transmitted but it is the recipient who decides if, when and how he obtains the content. The linear fashion of the broadcast is eliminated. Each Internet user creates his own *clickstream*[15], or his own space with content and an individual path of cyberspace exploration. Moreover, he can respond to what he is exposed to, he can become the broadcaster. Standardization and unification, characteristic of traditional mass media are replaced by individualisation in the new era. Broadcasters are no longer the only monopolists of knowledge and truth. Internet encourages cooperation of users and new initiatives as almost everyone has the right to send broadcasts (ie. Wikipedia). In result, it is difficult to treat all users as one audience. They are rather a group of individuals, active and creative.

Passiveness replaced by more activeness reflects the advancing process of de-massing the media and personalising communication. According to A. Toffler[16], it is a 'third wave' society which is not a mass one but is comprised of small groups and web contacts which articulate their identities. The Internet allows for the creation of specialized broadcasts for people with specific interests (even if there are few of them). The individual plays an increasingly greater role in the process of communication. He is active in his choices. Negroponte states that this is due to digital media progress which allows each individual such possibilities. Static mass audiences are replaced by individual ones who choose, first and foremost, information that best fits their interests. Moreover, as said before, anyone can become a broadcasters whose transmission has the possibility to reach many. Previously only professional journalists had such opportunities. Now all you need to do is set up your own website or write a message on a forum. The individual decides who to contact and when through the Internet. This way he creates his own personalised web of contacts, including e-mail, forums, discussion groups, etc.

Scholars attempt to distinguish those characteristics which differentiate the Internet from the traditional media. Sheizaf Rafaeli[17] presents 5 which define communication via the Web:

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[14] Bendyk E., *Gutenberg odwiedza google*, „Niezbędnik Inteligenta", „Polityka" 2005, nr 50.
[15] Autorem tego pojęcia jest John Battelle. Cf. Battelle J., *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, New York 2005.
[16] Toffler A., *Trzecia fala*, Warszawa 1997.

[17] Newhagen J. E. and Rafaeli Sh., *Why Communication Researchers Should Study the Internet: A Dialogue*, "Journal of Communication" 1996, nr 46(1), http://www.usc.edu/dept/annenberg/vol1/issue4/rafaeli.html

1) *Multimedia*. In contrast to traditional media which stimulated one of the senses, the Internet can stimulate several as a single broadcast can include text, graphics, pictures, animation, sound and elements of virtual reality.

2) H*ypertextuality*. Linearity by traditional media is being replaced by Internet hypertextuality. Vertical and hierarchical old media order is replaced by a horizontal and egalitarian model of communication. Internet users can easily create new content available to others.

3) *Package switching*. On the Internet information is sent in package form and can travel via various routes across the Web. Such technical architecture means that no institution can decide what goes which way. Therefore, there are no 'gate-keepers' there.

4) *Elasticity of synchronicity*. Although lately communication is becoming all the more asynochronic, the Internet stretches the synchronicity of communication. Internet communication can be simultaneous or with much delay.

5) *Interactivity*. This function allows response from the recipients and, therefore, becomes more similar to dialogue.

Morris and Ogan[18] describe the new medium as *multifaceted*, through which various communication configurations can take place. It is like a continuum, with a traditional model of mass communication on the one end and personalized communication on the other. Sometimes Internet communication can be *one-to-many* (large media organizations websites), or *many-to-many, many-to-one, one-to-many*. It can take place during thematically oriented discussion groups or be directly *one-to-one*, as is done using e-mail.

John December[19] distinguishes more detailed categories of Internet communication:

1) *point to point* – one sender to one recipient (e-mail, direct messaging)
2) *point to multipoint* – one sender to many recipients (ie. discussion list)
3) *point to server broadcast)* – one user sends a message to a server which broadcasts it to all users who access it (ie. IRC, discussion groups)
4) *point to server narrowcast* – a user sends a message to a server which makes it available only to those who are directly connected to this server. Sometimes passwords are necessary (ie. MU systems).
5) *server broadcast* – server broadcasts to all that wish to receive the information. Access is anonymous. (ie. WWW sites).
6) *server narrowcast* – server sends information to only select users who must gain access or register..

It is easy to see the interactive element and dialogue style of the Internet as well as user activity, decentralisation and egalitarianism of such communication. The Internet possesses elements of mass communication as well as that of individual and this is what distinguishes it from traditional media.

Internet as a New Mass Medium?

According to Merrill and Lowenstein[20] each new medium is at first a novelty used by a small group of people, later popularisation comes and it becomes widespread or a mass medium. The same occurred with the Internet.

For a long time the computer network, ARPANET (Internet's predecessor) was an egalitarian source of communication, mostly among scholars and scientists who, thanks to the network, could create international research teams. It can even be said that without it there would not be such great progress in science which requires a comparison of large amounts of data, specialized apparatus and cooperation of people from around the world. This medium was also of interest to computer scientists, there were few users so communication was

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[18] Morris M., Ogan Ch., *The Internet as a Mass Medium*, "Journal of Communication" 1996, nr 46(1).
[19] December J, *Units of analysis for Internet communication*, "Journal of Communication" 1996, nr 46(1):
[20] Merril J., Lewenstein R., *Media, Messages and Men: New Perspectives in Communication*, New York 1971.

predominantly *peer-to-peer* among colleagues and did not possess characteristics of a mass medium. It should also be noted that its usage initially required a fair amount of computer knowledge. The basic form of communication was through e-mail (all others came much later) which required special programmes and was not very user friendly.

With time, using the computer network started becoming more popular with increasing numbers of users. There were several reasons for that, one – the computer revolution brought PCs into the households, two – ARPANET was transformed into the Internet thanks to the invention of protocol IP. However, the biggest factor in popularizing the Web was the invention, by T. Bernes-Lee, protocol HTTP and HTML language which allowed content to be placed on WWW sites. It was this system which quickly evolved into a world wide web of information and became the most popular usage of the Internet. One did not have to be a computer scientist or a scholar to be able to use it. Obtaining information was easy, creation somewhat more difficult but did not require specialist computer science knowledge. WWW sites became an interface for other usage of the Internet (e-mail, chats, forums, discussion groups). The Internet was user friendly and could be accessible by everyone. All people needed to move around the web was a proper browser tool. In 1994 launched was the Netscape browser and following, made available by Microsoft (with Windows '95), Internet Explorer. M. Castells states, „Although the Internet was created in the minds of computer scientists in the early 1960s, and by late 1970s the was a large group of scholars and programmers communicating, for the common folk it was born in 1995".[21] In the minds of ordinary people the Internet is WWW sites and its interface.

Internet content quickly started to become perceived as products which could be adjusted to users' needs and then sold for a profit. It became evident that Internet communication, based on the WWW system, including elements of individual as well as mass communication was very attractive to people. The Internet quickly became privatized and under the control of private institutions (there was less and less space for non-commercial, social and selfless issues). Large Internet portals were launch (American AOL) and other endeavours which offered users free e-mail, fast news, chats, dating services, discussion forums, blogs, etc. It turns out that many of these offers were quite mass in character. Similarly to printed press which was initially for a select social group interested in social and major events around the world, the same was the case with first Internet users. Later the press as well as the world wide web, due to greater availability, became for the masses.

A large part of Internet communication fits the classic model of mass communication – broadcaster – standard broadcast – mass auditorium. Major broadcasters include large commercial or public portals. They belong to large media companies which broadcast various content – press, television programmes, radio, film, music, etc. Broadcasters are institutions specializing in the production and distribution of transmissions. Their reasons for existence are predominantly for profit (advertising). There are very few individual broadcasters who can reach the masses (ie. through their personal websites or blogs) without their services. Such content exists predominantly through the use of space made available by mass media companies, ie. Internet forum content which, in fact, can be erased by the owner at any time. Individual mass broadcasting is still, therefore, very limited.

Mass broadcasters offer users standard, public media products such as information and communication services. According to McLuhan, broadcasting means is a broadcast, it can be said that what is broadcasted is largely dependent on the means through which it is transmitted. In other words, if it is a chat or discussion forum we know what kind of content to expect. Recipients can access such freely (regarding content they insert it is more limited) or change the theme (new forums) but only according to the rules the mass broadcaster has set. The broadcaster controls the content and what is made available to recipients as he is the owner or the "master'. He can remove comments, chats or discussion forums or change their location. It turns out that a large part of individual communication (ie. chats) is in the mass

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[21] Castells M., *Galaktyka Internetu. Refleksje nad biznesem, Internetem i społeczeństwem*, Poznań 2003, p. 27.

communication form, where the broadcast is the service offered. It can be said, according to Morris and Ogan, that a majority of new communication configurations such as *many-to-many, many-to-one, one-to-many* are being replaced by *one-to-many*. Or, according to December, that new Internet communication is largely mass and to a lesser degree- individual.

The Internauts are a heterogenous, anonymous, spatially spread out, non-organized group of individuals without a group identity based on common value. In contrast to other media, however, there is interaction between them which can even lead to a creation of virtual societies. They are not an organized group and the only thing they have in common is Internet usage. This way they are similar to mass audiences. Their one important characteristic is heterogeneity. They should not be seen as a primitive rabble since they are diversified intellectually, have interests and individual culture. However, the majority is not creative or active but rather passive in their consumption of mass media products. Although most people have their individual strategies of usage, they are limited in their choice of offers presented by broadcaster. There is the famous *clickstream* initially considered emancipated from the common thought but it is also based on popularity (the more often a site is visited, the closer to the *clickstream* it is). It works just like other mass media and their prime time programmes based on audience figures. As we all know, these are not materials which a very advanced intellectually. The same is with the press where the tabloids enjoy the highest popularity with short and simple stories. In the Internet, the same is true, most popular are sites with easy content and simple entertainment. This way initial individualized Internet users have become more mass like.

The Internet is experiencing similar negative trends to other media such as standardization, propagation of mindlessness, simple content overriding more complex one, and cheap entertainment. In other words it is faced with the same criticisms as other mass media. These negative tendencies stem from its commercialisation. Broadcasters who wish to sell their products need to target them at the widest audiences by including content which appeals to what is common to their tastes or, as Simmel wrote, what is most primeval and primitive. It should also be noted that Internet users are constantly growing in numbers and with the average age and education decreasing.[22] Also, they are not uncomfortable about their intellectual shortcomings. That is why the Internet offer is very simple in its form and content. The same is true regarding chats, discussion forum and other comments being placed on the Web. One does not have to be an expert on any issue he comments, he can be completely ignorant and is not ashamed of it. He is the customer, he pays and he demands. Hence, we are exposed to a great variety of ignorant and vulgar commentaries written ungrammatically or with spelling errors. There are countless examples of radical, extremist, fanatical, offensive or simply stupid comments formulated without any thought whatsoever[23]. We are reminded of words by Jose Ortega y Gasset that the masses are given modern means of communication but they have little to say except for "mediocrity, arrogance and power of means but little spirit"[24].

The Internet is similar to other mass media in that it plays a social function in the way it builds a common system of norms, meanings and definitions of reality. It reconstructs, this way, mass culture (ie. with information on blockbuster premieres or the lives of famous people, but it is also an unlimited source of new information created as a result of Internet communication. An example is the phrase 'mohair berets' coined by Internet users.

However, we need to keep in mind two factors which distinguish this new medium for the traditional. The first, that it changes in a revolutionary way the means of communication between people. It offers unprecedented ways of individual communication, ease of establishing and maintaining contacts despite great distances, as well as a potential for the

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[22] In Polish conditions this is supported by research "Diagnoza społeczna 2005."

[23] Cf. Migaczewska E., *Fora dyskusyjne jako forma e-komunikacji wśród czytelników prasy* [in:] L. H. Haber (red.), *Akademicka społeczność informacyjna*, Kraków 2005.

[24] Ortega y Gasset J., op. cit., p. 53.

creation of virtual societies, based solely on impersonal contacts. It also changes mass communication from one way to interactivity. Moreover, the Internet definitely influences traditional mass media.

Secondly, not all activity in the Internet can be controlled by commercial broadcasters. There are users who are able to transmit without their control. They set up their own, independent websites, services blogs and discussion forums which have a similar impact on recipients as traditional mass media. This is the case with opinionated blogs on public issues. A large part of Internet group communication (ie. IRC, Usenet discussion groups) is not controlled by commercial stations. They are in a way similar to initial Internet communication among scholars as they use university networks and are subject to them. Also e-mail does not have to go through commercial services. Therefore, not all Internet communication can be described in the categories of traditional mass communication models. The web is too diversified and it introduces far reaching changes in the process of communication. At the same time, the Internet possesses more characteristics of a mass medium than is commonly considered.

Internet and Building the Public Sphere

The coming of a new and powerful medium of communication has resulted in people once again pondering on the role the media should play in society. The critics focused on media's negative influences and what the media could and should be. They pointed out media's cheap entertainment on the one hand, and, on the other, their potential role in multi-way co-operation, education of society and public debate on crucial social issues.
In Poland there is continuous debate on the role of public media, whether they should be profit oriented or carry out a mission and educate people to propagate democracy. The same issues regard the Internet - should it be a forum for serious discussion and exchange of ideas or just a medium offering cheap entertainment and other products not requiring deeper thought? In other words, the questions about Internet perspectives as a medium which could create, according to J. Habermas[25], a public sphere/stage for important to public opinion issues. Habermass states that in modern societies the public sphere has become dominated by "mass culture" as media are profit oriented, they promote mass entertainment and are not interested in building the public sphere. Meanwhile, they do have the potential to become such a platform. If the traditional media have failed in this area , then perhaps the Internet could take advantage of such an opportunity? It seems to be predisposed for this role, it enables interactivity, discussion between users, constant exchange of opinion and judgements.

The perspectives for the Internet are, however, not so bright. Firstly, although its users are active, creative and searching, they are not organized as a group and are not interested in common goals and issue. Internet supports individualism and new forms of socialising built around single individuals (they are personalized societies according to B. Wellman, or network individualists, according to M. Castells). If there is an issue of acting for the common good, it is understood differently inside the Internet than outside of it. Virtual societies differ from regular societies or nationalities. The Internauts are a mass of individualists acting on their own and only sporadically entering into alliances with others. If such action takes place, it is rather sporadic than regular.

Secondly, the Internet possesses many characteristics of mass media which have been criticised. Commercial interests override public ones. As shown above, large part of Internet communication is mass communication, with broadcasters fighting for audiences by offering them standardized media products and cheap entertainment. The Internet has been criticised for the creation of culture industry, propagation of conformism, ignoring valuable content and catering to primitive tastes and urges. Such a medium is not capable of creating a public

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[25] Habermas J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1989.

sphere because its users are not interested in rational discussion based on an in-depth analysis but rather on the consumption of entertainment. Broadcasters offer what is demanded. Even discussion forums, initially created for serious discussion, are not a place of rational discussion. They are places where small talk of various kinds and mouthing off takes place. Even ones dedicated to political discussion or social issues end up just being primitive lists of people's grievances. There is usually no civilized or balanced discussion of any kind. The Internet is technically not responsible for the level of people's conversations yet broadcasters do nothing to increase this level. They do not prevent vulgar arguments and even stimulate them (there was talk of broadcasters employing people to incite heated discussion and arguments). They do not make more ambitious content available and do not educate people. The bottom line is that Internet is profit and not public sphere oriented.

Thirdly, the style of Internet communication does not encourage in-depth discussion. According to P. Wallace[26], it is anonymous and limited as far as social control which does not promote conformism but rather provokes deviant behaviour. People feel free to present extreme views (polarization). Moreover, a large number of users means a great amount of comments and not enough time to read them all or to respond (as the joke says – conversations and acts have been written up but no one will want to read them). Also, there is often no time and place to have serious, balanced discussions.

It should be noted, however, there is also rational debate on public issues on the Internet where people do not offend each other and opinions are supported by reasons, ie. on some closed IRC channels (in Poland: #gaduly, #chaszcze), in some discussion groups (in Poland: pl.rec.fantastyka.sf-f, where sci-fi plots are a starting point to debate on the problems of the modern world). Unfortunately, such discussions take place among elite virtual societies closed off to regular users in order to prevent invasion of primitive commentaries. These can not be considered public sphere. The question remains whether Habermas' theory is at all possible to make real among the masses. Is it not so that the greater the audience, the lower its intellectual level? If so, then the mass media would have no chances of becoming a platform for building a public sphere based on rational discussion. Habermas reminds us that the public sphere initially developed in literary salons and cafes among the intellectual elites and not with the participation of masses. Perhaps the Internet reflects the old divisions, elite virtual societies are a modern counterpart of old literary salons, while mass broadcasts are like games for the masses. The public sphere still remains a beautiful intellectual utopia.

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[26] Wallace P., *Psychologia Internetu*, Poznań 2003.