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From Postmodern Ethics to the New Ethics of the Me Generation: The Transition from Mass Media to the Internet

De la ética postmoderna a la nueva ética de la generación me: la transición de los medios de comunicación a Internet

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SUMMARY: Postmodernism, a culture of vague boundaries, boosted values such as individualism and superficial character, with the Mass Media as a crucial factor in spreading them. The Internet is an heir of this period, but took on a life of its own, becoming the favourite information source for the population, and also an economic icon. The Internet put an end to the fragmentation of the media and introduced a bidirectional nature to communications. It is a multipurpose tool that generates values and changes (in reading, attention, memory or culture), requiring a critical evaluation of the new Me Generation axiology.

Keywords: Ethics, Postmodernism, Mass Media, Internet, Me Generation.

RESUMEN: La postmodernidad, cultura de límites imprecisos, impulsó valores como el individualismo y el carácter superficial, siendo los medios de comunicación esenciales en su expansión. Internet es heredera de este período, pero toma vida propia convirtiéndose en el medio de comunicación preferido por la población y en icono económico, disolviendo la fragmentación de los medios e introduciendo un carácter bidireccional en las comunicaciones. Es la herramienta multiuso que genera cambios (en lectura, atención, memoria, cultura) y valores, demandando una evaluación crítica a la axiología de la nueva generación me.

Palabras clave: ética, postmodernidad, medios de comunicación, internet, generación me.

1. *Postmodern ethics*

The starting point of this article is a brief characterization of postmodernism, more than 30 years after the publication in 1979 of Jean-François Lyotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition*¹ which meant the spreading of this term. The aim of this article is to understand the axiological universe where the Internet has been developed. The Internet is a communication and information source that, due to its features, has outshone the rest of the media, turning into a new intellectual technology, widely used by the population and by contemporary societies. The *Me Generation* (which uses the Internet as an essential and indispensable element of life) seems to be the heir of the generation in which the mass media determined postmodern morality. In the *Me Generation*, it is no longer traditional media (not in a major way, at least) which strengthens and spreads a certain axiological perspective. The Internet, a new way of mass communication, develops this and takes on its own life, being the decisive factor to understand the new morality of this generation.

The term *postmodernity* denotes a wide range of artistic, cultural, literary and philosophic movements of the 20th century, which are defined by their opposition or superseding of the modern *paradigm*.

It is not easy to find a definition or a demarcation for the concept of postmodernism, due to the difficulty of the process that must be defined, which is precisely characterized by the lack of unification, of a coherent system, of a whole. Postmodern tendencies are not parts of a unified school of thought. Daniel Innerarity refers to this shortage of concept as follows:

That is because we call *postmodernity* the confusion that cannot even be formulated in an original way. Due to this, understanding this situation requires, amongst other things, to be willing to accept an insufficient explanation. [...] Postmodernism continues considering the reason's impurity as a discredit, and responds with another kind of unilaterality: difference, fragment, dispersion, incorrigible perspectives².

¹ Cfr. LYOTARD, Jean-François, *La condición posmoderna. Informe sobre el saber*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1994.

² INNERARITY, Daniel, "Tras la posmodernidad", *Anuario Filosófico*, 27, 1994, p. 950. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

Utopias and the idea of progress are rejected, and religions are called into question. The myths surrounding politics and leaders are destroyed. Great charismatic figures disappear and little ephemeral idols arise.

Postmodern culture praises individualism –a value that remains and characterizes the Me Generation– in all aspects of social life. The body is limitlessly worshipped (corporal narcissism) and so is personal liberation. This is associated with hedonism and with the cancellation of effort as a value. Lipovetsky refers to this as a process of personalization:

Negatively, the process of personalization refers to the fracture of disciplinary socialization; positively, it is related to the production of a flexible society, based on information and on the stimulation of needs, sex and the assumption of “human factors”; on the worshipping of natural things, of cordiality and of sense of humour [...] It is that strict image of freedom which disappears, leaving the way open to new values that point to the free display of inner personality, the legitimization of pleasure, the recognition of singular petitions, the shaping of institutions on the basis of individual aspirations [...] Living free, without repression, each one choosing their own way of existence: that is the most significant social and cultural fact of our time, the most legitimate aspiration and right in contemporary people’s eyes³.

Ethics are usually defined as “the part of philosophy that deals with moral acts”.

In such a way that *actus humani* –that is to say, free and deliberate acts (perfectly or imperfectly)–, in contrast to *actus hominis*, would be the material object of Ethics [...] However, strictly speaking, what is the material object of Ethics? Is it constituted by acts, as it is generally affirmed? The word *ethics* derives from *êthos*; the word *morality* derives from *mos*. However, *êthos* doesn’t mean *act*, and neither does *mos*. *Êthos* means *character*, but not with the sense of the temperament that is given with psychobiological structures, its sense is the *way of being obtained*, the *second nature*. How do we achieve this second nature, this *ethos*? We already saw it, too: it is use or habit, *êthos*, which causes *ethos* [...] Ethics or Morality must deal mainly with character, the way of being that is obtained through habits⁴.

³ LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *La era del vacío. Ensayos sobre el individualismo contemporáneo*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 5-8. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

⁴ ARANGUREN, José Luis, *Ética*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 1997, pp. 161-163. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

The appropriate question in this section would be: What are the ethics that characterize postmodernism? Or, in other words, what are the principles or values that act as references to take acceptable decisions in the historic period that we call postmodernity?

The starting point to understand postmodern ethics involves their assimilation into the period of ideological disillusionment, rejection of utopias and progress, the death of metanarratives and the impossibility of a unifying plan. In contrast to the ethics of modernity, which state the value of work and saving, postmodern ethics state the value of consumption, spare time and leisure, together with the exaltation of individualism. Postmodernity is characterized by the search for gratification and pleasure, and also by the exaltation of personal independence and diversity of lifestyles.

Postmodern society is pluralist, with plenty of values and individual options. Indeed, none of these options have sufficient arguments to be considered as the main one. According to Zygmunt Bauman:

With the *pluralism* of rules (and our times are the times of pluralism) the moral choices appear to us intrinsically and irreparably *ambivalent*. Ours are the times of *strongly felt moral ambiguity*. These times offer us freedom of choice never before enjoyed, but also cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing⁵.

From a moral perspective, the media play a determinant role in the creation and preservation of certain postmodern values, especially the exaltation of the individual and all the values deriving from it. So the moral principle of respect for personal autonomy seems to take priority, as well as the prohibition of anything that puts this at risk. The predominance of the media in current society has been generating a culture of the spectacle. A section of this article is focused on the determinant role that was played by the media in the postmodern society.

The method adopted by morality in the context of postmodernity was called the “post-duty era”⁶ by Lipovetsky. These ethics are based on the individual right to autonomy, to happiness and to personal fulfillment. Postmodernity reorientates the matter of duty, which is the focal point of ethics, as a weak

⁵ BAUMAN, Zygmunt, *Ética posmoderna*, Siglo XXI, Madrid, 2009, p. 6. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

⁶ Cfr. LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *El crepúsculo del deber. La ética indolora de los nuevos tiempos democráticos*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2002, p. 12. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

and ephemeral way of commitment that must never be in contradiction with individual freedom.

In postmodern society, anything that limits individual rights coexisting with consumption, pleasure and search for private satisfaction is forbidden. It is a painless weak morality, in which anything goes, but duty and sacrifice disappear:

The postmoralist society designates a time in which duty is sweetened and anemic, in which the idea of sacrifice is socially undermined, in which morality doesn't demand to be established as an end that is greater than oneself, in which subjective rights prevail over imperative commands, in which moral lessons are covered with spots about living better, like the sun of holidays, the media fun [...] The values that we recognize are more negative (not to do) than positive (you must): behind the ethical revitalization, a painless morality succeeds. This is the last stage of a democratic individualist culture, which has got rid of moralism as well as of antimoralism, in its profound logic⁷.

Youth, health, slenderness, flippancy, immediacy and kindness are typical values of the postmodern society. These values are characteristic of individualism, but are not incompatible with commitments related to the needs of the others, provided that we are not trying to go beyond what can be called *painless altruism*. Innerarity points out:

There have never been so many calls for solidarity, so many exhibitions of inadmissible realities accompanied by a speech of disapproval. But this ecstasy for solidarity is epidermal, trivial and isolated. It is a superficial identification with other people, due to the repugnance that the spectacle of suffering causes; it is a partial and nomadic commitment, it is moderate and not particularly close⁸.

2. Media and Postmodernity: An Approach from the Moral Perspective

Many thinkers hold that postmodernity has been produced and controlled by the media (especially by TV). All kinds of minorities were allowed to

⁷ LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *El crepúsculo del deber...*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁸ INNERARITY, Daniel, "La ética indolora. En busca de una moral sin inconvenientes", en *Cuadernos de bioética*, vol. 4, n° 14, 1993, p. 57. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

express their opinions thanks to the media. This is a process of social diversification that makes it impossible to find only one point of view about reality, having ethical and political repercussions: many minority groups from all around the world have started to take the floor and make themselves noticed.

Gianni Vattimo associates the end of modernity with the sudden rise of the communication society and with the birth and development of postmodernity, where the media played a decisive role.

In postmodernity, mass media become great centres of power. The technological information revolution is a focal point to understand this historic period. Gradually, the content of the message becomes less important and the way it is transmitted becomes more valued, as well as the degree of persuasion it produces (there's supremacy of the act of communication over the nature of what is communicated, indifference about contents). This coincides with the overabundance of information (which is sometimes contradictory) in the media, which become transmitters of "truth". The receptor ends up turning information into merely entertainment. Vattimo affirms that the media are the main factor of postmodern society: "However I hold that the term "post-modern" still has a sense, I hold that this sense is linked to the fact that we live in a society of generalised communication, the society of mass media"⁹.

What has been happening as for changes in the media during the last years? Can we say that the media are uniform nowadays? Can we say that their manners don't have significant nuances? Did the printed word kill the spoken one? Did cinema kill the theatre? Did television kill the radio? Actually, as Henry Jenkins pointed out, it seems that the old media were forced to coexist with emergent media; the old ones are not being replaced, but their functions and status change with the introduction of new technologies¹⁰.

Henry Jenkins has studied the face of the new popular culture resulting from the interaction between new and old media. This new culture has new values, a new morality resulting from some phenomena that are conceptually characterized by Jenkins as "media convergence", "participatory culture" and "collective intelligence". We consider that the analysis of these three concepts is crucial for the aims of this article: how the media and the changes happened

⁹ VATTIMO, Gianni, "Postmodernidad: ¿Una sociedad transparente?" en VATTIMO, Gianni (et. al.), *En torno a la postmodernidad*, Anthropos, Barcelona, 1990, p. 9. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

¹⁰ Cfr. JENKINS, Henry, *Convergence cultura. La cultura de la convergencia de los medios de comunicación*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2008, p. 25. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

during the last years are linked to the historical period that has been called postmodernity, in which a new scale of values, a new morality, has emerged.

The culture of convergence is related to the shock between the old and new media. Popular media interweave with corporative ones, the producer's and the consumer's powers interact in unpredictable ways:

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. [...] In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms. [...] Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content¹¹.

The term “participatory culture” refers to a new way of interaction between the media producer and the media consumer: “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands”¹².

Finally, the idea of collective intelligence (a term coined by French cyber-theorist Pierre Lévy) can be enunciated like this:

None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions within convergence culture¹³.

Vattimo establishes a direct connection between postmodernity and the society where we live, the society of widespread communication, of mass media. The voices of different subcultures have been allowed to come to the surface by the mass media, finishing with the unitary vision of the world and history. Vattimo's *transparent society* becomes possible through the profusion and development of the media. The postmodern assumption that there is no uni-

¹¹ JENKINS, Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹² JENKINS, Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹³ JENKINS, Henri, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

fiction, whole, or universality, becomes evident in the media: we understand the world the way we've been taught to, reality is a combination of multiple interpretations and constructions:

What could freedom of information, or even the existence of more than one radio or TV channel, mean in a world where the norm is the exact reproduction of reality, perfect objectivity, the complete identity of map and territory? In actual fact, the increase in possible information on the myriad forms of reality makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of a *single* reality. It may be that in the world of the mass media a 'prophecy' of Nietzsche's is fulfilled: in the end the true world becomes a fable¹⁴.

In a similar sense, Jenkins points out that each of us builds his or her own personal mythology with the pieces of information extracted from the media flow. He affirms that we convert those pieces into resources from which we give a sense to our daily lives. In postmodernity, and due to the mass media, reality becomes a fable, tales originated through the culture of convergence; that is what strong criticism can be justified by, like Vicente Verdú's when he states:

All of them lie, and we know they lie. Media lie through their sensationalist business, government and opposition lie through propaganda, auditing firms and directors lie, cosmetic firms, scientists who long for fame, women's magazines, art critics, and weather men. But even if one of them told the truth, we wouldn't believe it because sophistry is the regular state and the truth is an abstract category¹⁵.

Therefore, the media open the way to weaken the notion of reality, escaping from uniformity and from control: "If, in this multicultural world, I set out my system of religious, aesthetic, political and ethnic values, I shall be conscious of the historicity, contingency and finiteness of these systems, starting with my own"¹⁶.

During the last years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, the importance of the mass media in postmodern societies has reached a situation in which it is difficult to make independent what is real from what appears

¹⁴ VATTIMO, Gianni, *La sociedad transparente*, Paidós, Barcelona, p. 81. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

¹⁵ VERDÚ, Vicente, *El estilo del mundo. La vida en el capitalismo de ficción*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2003, p. 113. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

¹⁶ VATTIMO, Gianni, *La sociedad...*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

in the media, getting to the point that the media create facts. These facts are always accompanied by evaluation and that is why media have become the moral conscience of postmodern society, establishing what is good or bad, what is right or wrong; in the sense of what is set out in the previous paragraph, the media have turned into the source of lines of arguments for a reality that is just a combination of interpretations, a fable. Until recently, television, video, the Internet or mobile phones were unknown.

The display of these ‘converters’ located between our lives and reality has distorted direct and indirect understanding of things, and maybe not even God reached such a confusion in his best days. Javier Echeverría (1999) speaks about the ambiguous reality that media create and he calls it the ‘third return’, so in the beginning there would be a natural environment (*first return*), then, a cultural and social environment –with cities and towns as canonical forms– (second return) and, now, a third return would prevail. In this third return, the mass media (phone, radio, television or electronic networks) decide what is real and what is not¹⁷.

In his conclusion, Jenkins is confident that consumers will be more powerful within this culture, on the condition that they recognize and use that power as consumers and citizens, as participants of our culture. His position is anthropologically optimistic regarding the Culture of Convergence process in which we all are immersed. According to Jenkins, education and pedagogy are the necessary tools to achieve these participants, these active members.

The revolutions that have happened in the fields of physics, biology or communication have provoked a new society called “risk society”. Ulrich Beck refers to this in a book with the same title¹⁸, which is curiously subtitled: *Towards a New Modernity*.

Changes in the mass media and their influence in the creation of a new morality have led us to a new process. In this process, the solution for the new set out problems, consists of appealing to the principle of responsibility of all those who participate in this society. The creation of “healthy habits” regarding the use of all kinds of mass media that surround us is still a task for Ethics (in the same sense as Jenkins’ references to education and media alpha-

¹⁷ VERDÚ, Vicente, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120. La obra de Javier Echeverría a la que se refiere Vicente Verdú es ECHEVERRÍA, Javier, *Los señores del aire: Telépolis y el Tercer Entorno*, Destino, Barcelona, 1999. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

¹⁸ Cfr. BECK, Ulrich, *La sociedad del riesgo. Hacia una nueva modernidad*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1998. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

betization), in its original form of *ethos* (second nature, way of being obtained through habits).

3. *From Mass Media to the Internet*

So far, we have been talking about the mass media and their implications in the origin and development of postmodernity; that is to say, in the origin of a particular way of prevailing values that spread in Western culture during the last years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st. In this section, we will deal with the Internet, highlighting that it is not a new kind of mass media or a new information source; instead, it has emerged as an intellectual tool that is capable to offer, through our personal computers, anything that the old media used to offer in a fragmented way. The history of the Internet compresses hundreds of years of mass media in only a couple of decades. Nowadays, the mass media coexist with the Internet, but in an asymmetric way: whereas the media suffer a technological decline and adaptation difficulties, the Internet spreads rapidly, becoming an indispensable element for the life of people and societies.

Since approximately two decades ago, we've been attending to the birth and development of a new revolution in mass media: the appearance of the Internet. We have welcomed enthusiastically every expansion in its reach without questioning or reflecting on the changes that are being introduced in our lives and in our societies. In other words, it is necessary to evaluate the risks of the Internet, as it is used by our society as an indispensable intellectual tool, and we must apply the moral principle of responsibility in this evaluation.

Given that there is a gradual transition from postmodernity to the Internet, it seems evident that there is a connection between both of them. Echaniz and Pagola point out: "New technologies open a range of anarchy, opening-up and lack of control that sometimes may be deceptive. The 'freedom' syndrome appears everywhere on the Internet phenomenon, as a symbol of postmodernity and happiness"¹⁹. These authors even consider the Internet to be the symbol of postmodernity. However, in this article we argue that the Internet was born in the historic period of postmodern development, but it has some specific properties that give it some distinctive features, which are able to generate

¹⁹ ECHANIZ, Arantza, PAGOLA, Juan, *Ética del profesional de la comunicación*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bilbao, 2004, p. 221. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

new values and, therefore, new ethics. These values and scales cement the *Me Generation*.

Besides, the mass media have operated in a fragmentary way, according to what has been expounded so far. Different communication technologies have been moving forward in an individual way: books, newspapers, magazines have shown texts and pictures, but not sound or moving pictures. Cinema and television have shown us moving pictures and sounds. Radio, telephone, record players, tape recorders give out sounds. If we want to do numerical operations, we use calculators. When we wanted to find out some information, we used to consult encyclopaedias. The media had a fragmentary history until the appearance of the Internet: when information gets digitalized, limits between media get dissolved (through a computer connected to the internet, we can have a direct access to anything that, in the past, was fragmentarily shown: texts, pictures, cinema, radio, music, encyclopaedia, etc.). Also, changes on the Internet happen at very high speed, owing to the fact that the production and distribution of electronic products on the Net is cheaper than manufacturing material goods and distributing them to retailers (this fits perfectly into the logic of capitalism). Nowadays, almost every media company distributes digital versions of their products through the Net. Traditional methods haven't disappeared in media, but they seem to be losing their economic and cultural power against the Internet.

Besides the fact that fragmentation disappears, the Internet differs from most of mass media in one important feature: it is bidirectional. The Net connects companies, becoming an important commercial resource (searches and orders on *online* catalogues). But the Net connects us individually, too: millions of people use it to distribute digital creations (such as blogs, photos or podcasts) or to modify or review other people's creations. Interactivity has turned the Internet into the world's meeting place, where people get together to chat, discuss or meet new people on new social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or MySpace.

The Internet appeared as a new technology, and its extent shows us in numbers that it has an overwhelming presence in our lives. Nicholas Carr points out:

Not even McLuhan could have foreseen the feast the Internet has laid before us: one course after another, each juicier than the last, with hardly a moment to catch our breath between bites. As networked computers have shrunk to the size of iPhones and BlackBerrys, the feast has become a movable one, available anytime, anywhere. It's in our home, our office, our car, our classroom, our purse, our pocket [...] The computer screen bulldozes our doubts with its bounties and conveniences. It is so

much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master²⁰.

The “feast” was quantified in an article in the Spanish Newspaper *El País*: there are more than 170 million blogs and 150 million websites, and they register a growth rate of 10,000 per hour. The equivalent of all the books written throughout human history was generated in digital data in 2006²¹. A third of the world’s population are Internet users already. The digital revolution is growing fast.

Internet technological companies have turned into the new icon of economic power in the United States. Google, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft are the most famous firms in the world, and also the most profitable (above 50% in almost all cases). These companies are a model of efficiency: reduced costs, small staff, and a minimum tax payment, thanks to tax havens. Unlike traditional industrial corporations, Internet and technological firms do not need banks for their financing because of the high profitability they offer. Apple accumulates liquid assets of 76000 million dollars; Google, almost 40000 million; Microsoft, 42000 million. These companies are the main agents in the most important corporative operations nowadays, due to their ability to generate money in the middle of a global economic crisis and to the lack of liquidity²².

As McLuhan pointed out in 1964, every new kind of mass media changes us: “Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot”²³. We must try to resist the temptation of axiological neutrality regarding the Net, and we must avoid pretending that technology itself has no importance. That is how we use it, transmitting the comforting supposition that we control it. The Internet is changing our lives and societies. In the following paragraphs, those changes will be put forward in order to do a moral evaluation of their extent

²⁰ CARR, Nicholas, *Superficiales. ¿Qué está haciendo Internet con nuestras mentes?*, Taurus, Madrid, 2011, p. 16. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

²¹ Cfr. VÁZQUEZ, Karelia, “Sin tiempo para pensar”, *El País digital*, 31-1-2011. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

²² Cfr. MUÑOZ, Ramón, “Millones, piratería y orgullo patrio. Las empresas tecnológicas, nuevo icono del poder económico de EEUU, emplean su imponente tesorería para librar la batalla de las patentes”, *El País digital*, 24-8-2011. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

²³ Cfr. McLUHAN, Marshall, *Comprender los medios de comunicación. Las extensiones del ser humano*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2009, p. 31. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

(we will focus on ethics applied on the use of this technology: Internet ethics or *Me Generation* ethics).

4. *The Me Generation or Internet ethics*

Postmodernity arises as a historic period in which ethics are mainly characterized by shallowness, by weakness of commitment, by weak thought and by the crucial role of mass media in its birth. The Internet appears on the breeding ground of postmodernity as a new kind of mass media and communication system with important limitations in its origin (memory, size and accessibility to personal computers). But soon those technical limitations were overcome and the Internet seemed to absorb the media and communication systems that preceded it, becoming the main tool for communication and information. Due to its power, it seems that it has boosted exponentially the characteristic values of modernity (especially, shallowness and weak thought and memory, lack of attention and of depth). But, as will be put forward below, whereas postmodern ethics were favoured by the mass media more or less adventitiously, the Internet firmly consolidates new ethics. These new ethics differ from postmodernity due to the distinctive features that affect and modify personal habits and neuronal connections. These are the new ethics of the *Me Generation*, emerging from postmodernity and existing thanks to it, since they have common values. But now there is a hypertrophy of these new ethics, and they have reached such a magnitude that it is necessary to raise them as a different category, at least so far.

The mechanism through which the Internet produces changes in the human mind is the same as the one through which changes of habits operate –and, therefore, of morality–. Using neurobiological terminology, the Internet changes in human brains operate through the mechanism of neuroplasticity. Habits have been classically linked to the ability to obtain a second nature (character) against the first nature, which is inevitably imposed (temper). A habit is a task that is done by repeating acts in one sense, gradually generating predispositions to act in one certain way. The habits that predispose us to act according to good have been traditionally called virtues, whereas those which predispose us to move away from that are called vices. Neuroplasticity explains, similarly to habits, how a new intellectual technology can change the life of people and societies:

Neuroplasticity provides the missing link to our understanding of how information media and other intellectual technologies have exerted their influence over the development of civilization and helped to guide, at a

biological level, the history of human consciousness. [...] Through what we do and how we do it, we alter the chemical flows of our synapses, effectively changing our brains. And when we hand down our *habits* of thought to *our children*, through the example we set, the schooling we provide, and the media we use, we hand down as well the modifications in the structure of our brains²⁴.

The Internet has provoked a revolution as an information and communication technology. A crucial factor in the change the Internet is generating is the fact that it has become an indispensable working tool for individual people and societies. The genetic determination of our ways of thinking, perceiving and acting is not unique; our experiences and the society where we live also have a crucial influence, but technology (tools) can influence profoundly those mental functions (deriving important ethical consequences). Therefore, the Internet is playing an important and durable role in what we think and how we think.

Due to the neuroplasticity mechanism mentioned above, brain changes occur as a consequence of the constant exposure to the Net (since it has turned into a multipurpose tool: personal relationships on social networks, ideological communication on blogs, news on digital press, consumption of films, music, books, a tool for commerce in all kinds of shopping, trip bookings, etc.). These changes go on organizing the operation of our habits (or our brain synapses, according to neurobiology) even when we are not *online* yet. The ways of thinking, receiving information, processing it, focusing our attention or memorizing are determined the same way when we are surfing the Net or just doing our daily activities. And this is crucial to understand how a new morality is originated:

The constant movement of our brain when we are *online* will make our brain more agile at multitasking, but improving our multitasking skills is detrimental to our capacity to think profoundly and creatively [...] What we do when we are in multitasking mode is obtain skills on a superficial level [...] *Given our brain's plasticity, we know that our online habits continue to reverberate in the workings of our synapses when we're not online. We can assume that the neural circuits devoted to scanning, skimming, and multitasking are expanding and strengthening while those used for reading and thinking deeply, with sustained concentration, are weakening or eroding*²⁵.

²⁴ CARR, Nicholas, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²⁵ CARR, Nicholas, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-174.

In a few years, we have witnessed a gradual transition from postmodern culture (strongly determined by the mass media) to a new Internet culture. This one includes the first one, due to its multipurpose possibilities, in contrast to the fragmentary character of the old mass media. Nevertheless, its repercussions and consequences are much more intense because of the profound changes that the Internet is producing on intellectual habits of people.

An especially interesting aspect is referred to the changes in reading habits. Reading a book requires a great ability to concentrate during a relatively long period, it requires a sustained, nonstop attention. Writing technology spreads new intellectual ethics: the book ethics. The development of knowledge is a private act with books, since each reader can create a personal synthesis from the ideas he or she gets by reading. During the second half of the 20 century, mass media development meant we had to spend more time and pay more attention to the great number of entertainment products offered by radio, cinema, record and CD players or television. However, these technologies couldn't transmit written words: they could displace, but not replace books. But the Internet and its electronic revolution is now becoming the people's favourite way to store, process and share any kind of information, including texts: the Internet does replace the book. Nicholas Carr reflects about this change from the book to the screen:

In the choices we have made, consciously or not, about how we use our computers, we have rejected the intellectual tradition of solitary, single-minded concentration, the ethic that the book bestowed on us. [...] When we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning. One can think deeply by surfing the Net or shallowly while reading a book, but that's not the type of thinking the technology encourages and rewards²⁶.

The Internet has become the population's preferred communication and information medium. Old mass media still coexist with the Net, but information and communication do not spread through newspapers, radio or television any longer. It is through personal computers that they do. The magnitude of the use of the Internet has no precedents, not even according to the standards of the mass media during the 20th century. New information technologies have produced a real revolution since the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. This new technology –the Internet– has become a new

²⁶ CARR, Nicholas, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-145.

intellectual tool that has revolutionized the process of communication. This is the equivalent of the introduction of nuclear energy for physics; or the advances in genetics and biochemistry and the discovery of elemental processes in origin, development and control of vital processes for biology. But the moral principle of responsibility was demanded by the changes introduced by the use of nuclear energy or the possibilities of biomedicine. In the same manner, it is necessary to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using the Net as an intellectual tool by the whole society and by individual people.

It seems obvious that using the Net brings profits, but, as McLuhan said, we must resist the temptation of axiological neutrality in connection with the Net, and we must avoid pretending that technology itself has no importance. The mass media are not just information channels; they provide the matter of thoughts, but they also model the process of thinking. McLuhan was a great visionary of the new reality with his maxim: “the medium is the message”²⁷.

Besides these changes, the ones the Internet seems to produce in the human capacity for attention and in memory and learning are also very interesting. Memory is a capacity of the brain that allows the organism to code, store and recover information. It emerges as a result of the repetitive synaptic connections between neurons, which creates neuronal networks. In practical terms, memory (or rather, memories) are the sign that learning has occurred. That is why it is so difficult to study memory and learning processes separately.

Contrary to those who pretend to put biological memory on the same level as the memory that computers store, the first one means a process of nonstop renovation (so that every extension in human memory means a widening in our intelligence). It is an essentially dynamic capacity, in contrast to the static nature of the memory that a hard disk stores. As we pointed out already, it is undeniable that this new intellectual tool is helpful, but when we try to replace biological memory (personal memory) for the memory stored on the Net, we run the risk of making our minds empty of richness and value. The loss of memory is the main sign of degenerative dementias in human beings: memory is such an important and vast dynamic capacity, it constitutes an essential and basic value for us to be defined as a specific category. There are no possible replacements for this, due to the features of human memory. Not even that great data warehouse, which already has an essential place in our lives as an intellectual tool, can replace specifically human memory. The static nature of the Internet will never be a replacement for our dynamic memory.

²⁷ McLUHAN, Marshall, *Comprender los medios de comunicación. Las extensiones del ser humano*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2009, p. 31. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

The mental capacity that determines what we remember and what we forget is attention; therefore this is crucial for memory consolidation. Attention is the capacity of willingly applying our mind to an aim, taking it into account or consideration. Traditionally, this has been considered in two different ways, although both ways were related to each other. On one hand, attention as a quality of perception refers to attention as a filter of environmental stimuli, deciding which stimulations are more relevant and choosing them by the concentration of psychic activity on the aim. On the other hand, attention is understood as the mechanism that controls and regulates cognitive processes; from the learning obtained by conditioning to complex reasoning. Nicholas Carr considers that the attention capacity has been especially affected by the use of Internet:

The process of memory consolidation can't even get started. And, thanks once again to the plasticity of our neuronal pathways, the more we use the Web, the more we train our brain to be distracted –to process information very quickly and efficiently but without sustained attention. That helps explain why many of us find it hard to concentrate even when we're away from our computers. Our brains become adept at forgetting, inept at remembering. [...] As our use of the web makes it harder for us to lock information into our biological memory, we're forced to rely more and more on the net's capacious and easily searchable artificial memory, even if it makes us shallower thinkers²⁸.

The damage on the capacity for attention and memory has other repercussions of great importance. The shallow minds typical of the *Me Generation* are originated due to the difficulty in paying attention, and to the resulting limitation to fix data in the memory, which should be a central value in human mind. This difficulty threatens the distinctive character of the individual, but also the collective memory, which is the culture we share.

Technology, the Internet, is at the service of instant communication, with its social networks for people who are constantly *online*. But has communication improved in depth and quality or just in quantity and speed? The hypothesis of this article is that there has been an increase of interpersonal superficial communication. The lack of commitment, which is a typical feature of postmodernity, spreads to communication among people. Lipovetsky accurately says:

²⁸ CARR, Nicholas, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

Relationships just regenerate upon a new basis according to individualist aspirations. [...]. What attracts us is the fact of striking up relationships and still be free and anonymous, mixing with strangers rapidly and without ceremonies, frequently multiplying and renewing our contacts and communicating through technology that stands in the way. Contemporary communication requires boosters and technological sophistication; it has entered the circle of the craze for interconnected nets²⁹.

Technology is also contributing to create a new society. As happened with the appearance of the clock, cartography, the printing press, the radio or television, this new technology, the Internet, is not neutral and it acts by changing social rules and influencing our choices. Morality has been described as the combination of rules, principles and values valid for a certain society in a specific historic period. The Internet generates new rules and, therefore, a new morality, the morality of the *Me Generation*, the morality of our time.

The general use of intellectual technologies among the population generates new ways of thinking that used to be restricted for the elite in the past. This has been proved before by the map or the mechanical clock. As Nicholas Carr suggests:

Every intellectual technology embodies an intellectual ethic, a set of assumptions about how the human mind works or should work. [...] The intellectual ethic of a technology is rarely recognized by its inventors [...] The users of the technology are also usually oblivious to it³⁰.

The ethic of the Internet is the ethic of efficiency in information management. That is to say, the prevailing value is efficiency in information collection, transmission and handling. Internet programmers expect to find the optimal method to carry out mental movements for the knowledge task. The ethics of efficiency start to rule in the cognitive and rational dimension of human beings. However, we are paying a heavy price by assuming the Internet as a new intellectual technology. We must actively and analytically reconsider the evaluation of this new technology; following McLuhan's advice (already mentioned in this article) to avoid succumbing to the temptation of axiological neutrality regarding the Net.

²⁹ LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *El imperio de lo efímero. La moda y su destino en las sociedades modernas*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2007, pp. 322-323. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

³⁰ CARR, Nicholas, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Speaking of the repercussion provoked by the development of these new instruments, Javier Bustamante revises the influences of technology on human beings. We can highlight the following influences: technology as a creator of social values (the Internet, as any other new technology, introduces changes that generate new axiological priorities and modify the former organization of values), technology as a driving force for social change (technology always introduces modifications into traditional ways of life, creating a crisis in culture: technology generates political, social and economic changes in the societies where it is introduced), technology as instrumental rationality (it has been assumed that the profits derived from the Internet would be important, but we must perceive unwanted side effects, such as social control by bureaucracies, risks for personal privacy, alienation at work and the disappearance of traditional jobs. All these things generate a crisis of confidence in this model of progress), technology as a creator of fears and phobias, and technology as a dynamic of domination³¹.

Eli Parisier (a specialist in social networks and advisor to Barack Obama) declares in the sense of assuming the moral responsibility derived from the use of the Net. He deals with the search engines and social network that filter information according to the tastes of the user, believing that tools are not neutral and suggesting ethic and political measures for controlling new intellectual technologies: transparency, control and civic ethics³².

Besides efficiency, immediacy has also become a predominant value in social networks such as Myspace, Facebook or Twitter. These companies provide their members with immediate updates. Network competition is just addressed to offer more and more fresh and abundant messages: “By turning private messages into bait for a new way of communication, social networks have provided people with a new convincing way of socializing and keeping in touch. They have also made an innovation by emphasizing immediacy”³³.

New biomedical technologies determined the need for taking charge of the risk of using them, assuming the moral responsibility derived from this risk. This gave rise to Bioethics as a hypertrophy of an applied ethic. In the last years (maybe, in the last days) we have been witnessing the change of our society as a consequence of using a new intellectual technology: the Internet.

³¹ Cfr. BUSTAMANTE, Javier, *Sociedad informatizada, ¿sociedad deshumanizada?*, Gaia, Madrid, 1993, pp. 33-87. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

³² Cfr. MAÑANA, Carmen, “La Red le adoctrina con su propio credo, si usted se deja”, *El País digital*, 21-8-2011. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

³³ CARR, Nicholas, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

As Bioethics did, it is necessary to analyze the risk the Internet represents from a critical perspective, in order to achieve responsible use. The ethic of the *Me Generation* is associated to the responsibility of using the Internet as a new intellectual technology.

Many authors have dealt, from different perspectives (ethics, politics and sociology) with the subject of risk, in view of new technologies and the associated responsibility. These are very useful evaluations to develop ethics for the responsibility applied to the use of Internet. Since the end of the 20th century, society has started to perceive the new risks derived from technological development, which are attributable to human actions and decisions; which is what Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist, called *risk society*³⁴: it's a situation in which consequences of the technological action are unforeseeable and there are not authorities to guarantee the goodness of actions, so it is necessary to manage risk in a democratic and responsible way. Beck makes an important distinction between *linear modernization* and the *risk society*: on one hand, *linear modernization* characterizes negative fatalism in view of new technologies, but also blind faith in progress; on the other hand, *risk society* is characterized by the ambivalence of reflexive modernization, in which there is a collective verification of the risks, and collective reflection and deliberation mechanisms are set up in order to make decisions.

In connection with the concept of ambivalence, highlighted by Ulrich Beck, and with the collective verification of the risks the Internet involves, we can find arguments for and against the use of Internet as an intellectual technology. Niceto Blázquez points out arguments in favour (it helps scientific development, it saves paper and promotes freedom of speech, it creates opportunities for companies, it's an important help for disabled people, it links people and nations favouring instant communication without borders –as the recent uprisings in the Arab world have proven–; it makes it easier to communicate with people we wouldn't be able to contact through other means, it serves as entertainment and stimulation), but he has arguments against it, too (it provokes the isolation of people, limiting face to face communication with the people in our environment, it is creating a *Me Generation* made up of people who want to speak but who don't like to listen, it distributes unreliable information without requiring contrast, cancelling out values such as objectivity or veracity, it can generate insecurity at work, it can mean a threat for the

³⁴ Cfr. BECK, Ulrich, *La sociedad del riesgo. Hacia una nueva modernidad*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1998. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

security of the nations, it favours piracy, it invades private life, allows fraud, transports pornography and marginalizes the poor)³⁵.

Evandro Agazzi (Bergamo, 1934) introduces two interesting contributions in connection with risk and responsibility. These contributions are very useful for the new ethic of the *me generation*: he deals with the inadequacies in the instruments to evaluate risk, in order to show the implacable nature of moral and political decisions against technological ones (if moral concern was reduced to the evaluation of risk, ethics would be absorbed by technology, confirming this way its self-sufficiency). He also introduces the concept of *fundamental option*, which means the acceptance of supreme and non-negotiable values that provide criteria for moral judgements on subjects related to new technologies³⁶.

Hans Jonas (3rd May 1903-5th February 1993, German philosopher) argues in favour of the need for technique to become an object for ethics (along the same lines pointed out in this article, about avoiding axiological neutrality on the Net). From a negativist and emotivist perspective, he suggests a representation of the possible remote effects appealing to the feelings which are aroused, treating doubtful (but possible) things as if they were true, since we cannot allow ourselves to make mistakes when issues of such importance and magnitude are at stake (in the case of the use of the Internet, reason, perception, memory, emotion). Ethics must take into account the long-term results of present actions, including the whole of humanity (whether it is present or future)³⁷.

Gilbert Hottois speaks about three methods of ethics in connection with technoscience: the first one consists of choosing anything that is technoscientifically possible; the second one, conflicting with the first one, is conservationist; and the third option would mean trying some possibilities depending on criteria that must be determined³⁸. Along the same line as Hottois' perspective, it is interesting to observe the differences between American and European philosophies; in the American, "digital optimists", represented by Bill Gates, are the majority; whereas, in Europe, the evaluation is more prudent, focusing on freedom and culture (at this point, we must mention the report about *The Internet and Digital Networks*, by the French Council of State, which literally

³⁵ Cfr. BLÁZQUEZ, Niceto, *El desafío ético de la información*, San Esteban-Edibesa, Salamanca, 2000, pp. 314-318. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

³⁶ Cfr. AGAZZI, Evandro, *El bien, el mal y la ciencia. Las dimensiones éticas de la empresa científico-tecnológica*, Tecnos, Madrid, 1996. Open translation for the purposes of the article.

³⁷ Cfr. JONAS, Hans, *El principio de responsabilidad. Ensayo de una ética para la civilización tecnológica*, Herder, Barcelona, 1995.

³⁸ Cfr. HOTTOIS, Gilbert, *El paradigma bioético*, Anthropos, Barcelona, 1991.

says: “The Internet and digital networks are primarily a new space for human expression, a space that transcends international borders, a decentralized space that no operator or any state can dominate completely, a heterogeneous space where everyone can act, speak and work an area with a passion for freedom.”

In conclusion, as with all the quoted authors, an ethical perspective applied to the use of Internet as a new intellectual technology, requires appealing to the collective responsibility and to a democratic deliberation, which must be open and participatory for all parties involved, in order to take prudent decisions on the new information society, which has been opened thanks to the Net. Moral and political control of information and communication technology means the submission of technique to human interests. The risks have been put forward and they are evident. Against this, a new ethic for the *Me Generation* is necessary, in order to appeal to the value of responsibility in the use of the Net.

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