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Youth and Media

New Media and
Cultural Participation

INTRODUCTION:
Remediation

The report we are presenting is the result of a research project in which we used ethnographic fieldwork and theories of culture, society and media in an attempt **to identify the basic dimensions of the social environment co-created by new media, and to describe the individuals growing up in this environment and the ways in which they shape it.**

New media

As this report will attempt to show, new media are not only technological artifacts, but also, a historically new type of thinking, experiencing and acting in society. Given this perspective, all discussions of 'new media' will always be a debate about tensions between the old and the new, and the forms of their co-existence. As Carolyn Marvin writes:

> New media, broadly understood to include the use of new communications technology for old or new purposes, new ways of using old technologies, and, in principle, all other possibilities for the exchange of social meaning, are always introduced into a pattern of tension created by the coexistence of old and new, which is far richer than any single medium that becomes a focus of interest because it is novel. New media embody the possibility that accustomed orders are in jeopardy, since communication is a peculiar kind of interaction that actively seeks variety. No matter how firmly custom or instrumentality may appear to organize and contain it, it carries the seeds of its own subversion. (1990:8)

In this manner, the term 'new media' refers to a broader social and cultural change, within which the appearance of new practices engaging new technologies has consequences beyond the direct ones. In this sense, this is not a report about new media, but rather, a report in which we follow problems, conflicts, or opportunities associated with new media in an attempt **to reconstruct broader cultural dimensions of life in a world remediated by digital media. The term 'remediation'** (Bolter, Grusin, 2000) **refers to the dialectical relationship between the old and the new forms of communications. This relationship is productive – people and objects-media engaged in it are creating new aesthetic forms, new types of communities and new types of subjectivity.** "... (W)hat is new about digital media lies in their particular strategies for remediating television, film, photography, and painting," write Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000: 50). We are looking at the way in which digital and networked media remediate not only older media, but also the practices which engage these media – and further the social environment co-created by these practices.

What is the meaning of "cultural participation" in a world remediated by digital media? To pose the right question about relations between people, institutions and cultural texts, we must understand the essence of ongoing remediations. Examples of remediations include the rise of communicators such as Gadu-Gadu (transl. note: chit-chat in Polish and a popular instant messaging client), systems for archiving and sharing opinions such as Nasza-klasa (transl. note: Our-class in Polish, a Polish social networking site), or cell phones, into personal relations which create an unprecedented intensification of togetherness. Remediation is also seen when behaviors surrounding learning and interactions with school meet a-hierarchical forms of non-sanctified knowledge such as Wikipedia, and *The Iliad* is not only a book in the school library, but also an mp3 file available online. Remediation also occurs when personal passions, such as creating, collecting or listening become more intense and productive when combined with online social networks of similar-minded people using the same practices.

All of these remediations do not run along plans and scenarios imposed in a top-down fashion. Nobody's remediating anything – with remediation, we are talking about emergent effects of social practices, for which the arrival of new digital forms of communication made a significant difference. Remediations – bundles of practices engaging the new media, are helping create networked and digital social contexts that are always local, whose results are always uncertain and the world emerging from them is unstable.

The problem with cultural participation (1)

These changes demand new ways of thinking about culture, and a new vocabulary to discuss it. We decided to pursue an ethnographic research model to attempt to identify processes which often escape our notice due to a lack of theoretical and research tools which would allow us to see them. Our fieldwork, with all of its inherent unpredictability and consciously open frames of reference, allowed our partners (the high school students in the field, our research team and the experts writing this report) to notice and identify these processes. In this report, Wojciech Burszta writes about "an inadequacy of most existing analytical terms (culture, free time, cultural activity, cultural identity, cultural canons, cultural participation)", (182) in the face of a changing social context. This observation is worthy of a pause, as it identifies one of the crucial problems of writing about and studying culture in times of remediation.

While writing this report, we often felt that many of these categories (most notably 'cultural participation') have become what the sociologist Ulrich Beck refers to as "zombie categories." (2002: 203) "Zombie categories" are the living dead of theory: they no longer refer to empirically describable events or significant

social practices, but continue to haunt the discussion of them. Further, when used in empirical studies, they can create artifacts: results which despite the most scrupulous methodology and precise study do not describe the world which they supposedly depict. Our choice of ethnographic methods was meant to help minimize this danger. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote, ethnography is fieldwork conducted not only in the physical 'field' but also, simultaneously, in the philosophical sphere – the world of terms. (1990)

The difficulty of the ethnographic process involves the need to simultaneously utilize terms such as 'cultural participation' as research guidelines (as observation without a theoretical background misses the point), but also to modify, and even occasionally abandon these terms when they obscure the understanding or articulation of a problem. This is why this report uses the term 'cultural participation' sparingly, while, at the same time, it is a voice in the discussion of changes occurring in the field which is often described by this very phrase. We did not go into the field, to study if, and how, young people participate in culture. (One of the issues with "cultural participation" is that it is used both as a tool of exploration, but also to classify individuals as either participants or non-participants, as well as to impose normative distinctions between cultural and non-cultural events.).

We went into the field to observe social practices remediated by new media (while ethnographically participating in some of them), to consider whether it is productive to continue to think of culture as a separate, and usually institutionalized, sphere where individuals must be classified as either participants or non-participants. In our research, we found out that culture continues to escape from the influence of institutions, and that it is increasingly difficult to separate it from other spheres of our lives. **In the process of remediation, the question of "cultural participation" is less and less analytically and politically useful, while questions about forms of cooperation in the production of cultural texts, aesthetic, hermeneutic or social competencies associated with functioning among the flood of information, images and narratives, or the creation of conditions for the development of networked communities around cultural practices or cultural texts become ever more significant.**

In the report we used ethnographic tools to problematize everyday life in a world filled with new communication technologies, and to create a field for posing just such questions. The field experiences of ethnographers working on "Youth and Media," the discussions carried out for this project, and the directly relevant voices of Wojciech J. Burszta (181), Wiesław Godzic (178) and Marek Krajewski (185) convinced us that the search for a new language and categories of discussing culture, the relations between individuals and cultural texts and among individuals remediated by these texts is the most pressing matter.

Problematization

The matter of problematizing the evolving use of new media was a primary concern during the preparation, execution and writing of this report. We wanted to see what types of problems arise out of the social practices which the new media create. When referring to problematization – both as a process occurring in the world we are describing as well as our method of describing it for this report – we do not want to simply represent the world as we found it. (The report does not aspire to be an exhaustive description of the current "ways of the youth") We are also not interested in formulating "problems" which are removed from the practices we observed. (This is a limitation of the ethnographic method, as there are many potential topics which we do not discuss because our fieldwork and discussions did not lead us to consider them.) By problematization, we mean "the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)." (Foucault, 2001) One of the main work methods during this project was posing such problems and observing, how, in the context of social practices, do problems viewed as significant get addressed in people's everyday practices. In this report we pose problems based on social practices in which we co-participated, and which we attempted to theorize, while also observing how actors "in the field" posed problems (deemed something a topic of discussion or thought). In this sense, the ethnographic method of problematizing reduces the traditional distance between the observer and the observed, and between scientific and popular knowledge. For example, the issue of anonymity and privacy is not only a topic for journalists' inquiries about "Nasza-klasa" or academic articles about the sociological aspects of the internet. This problem comes into play in common social practices when our participant Marianna has to choose which of her Paris trip photos to post on Nasza-klasa and which not to, or when another participant is deciding whether to accept a new friend request. Similar issues arise around cultural participation or non-participation.

Rather than directly studying "cultural participation," this report looks at the problems which come into play when we focus on relationships between people and cultural texts or interpersonal relations remediated by these texts. If we agree that we are dealing with a process in which life's cultural dimensions are remediated, the problems which develop will be different and can be articulated using new categories. In this sense, the best answers to questions of cultural participation will be the answers to other, yet to be articulated questions or problem sets, which will come into play in a new, networked cultural environment. Among those discussed in this report, are:

- **Digitalization:** most cultural objects are stored as computer files, and are thus free from physical limitations – they are easily copied, moved and altered. For

people who grew up surrounded by digital media, analog forms appear to be "flawed," they resist, they are not easily shared or circulated, this is why books, movies and other relicts of an analog past, while still utilized, are increasingly remediated and transformed into digital forms. The old media can still exist from an aesthetic point of view, but the logic behind today's cultural circulation is digital. In this report, we discuss the practices of sharing these texts, which are, in fact, multiplications of them, and the resulting overload of culture, which is increasingly difficult to characterize and sort.

- **Networked:** connected with the digitalization of cultural texts' circulation is the constant growth of commentary paratexts and metadata. In the internet era, culture is constantly on the move – it cannot be thought of as a static depository, a separate life sphere, as it is interlinked with other activities. Particularly significant is the fact that information networks retrace social networks (people scale the networks down using them mostly for reinforcement of face-to-face interactions). The internet allows the exchange of photos, music and films, but the reasons behind sending these files are variously motivated, with a high positive value placed on the desire to exchange, share, and gift links or files which reflect one's own passions, explorations and discoveries.

- **De-institutionalization:** institutions which traditionally determined cultural hierarchies and access to them are less and less significant as actors in the circulation of cultural texts. This freedom from institutional constraints which controlled access to culture has often led to a freedom from legal constraints as well. The digital networked culture is one of excess, most texts are stored on internet servers and hard drives belonging to friends and strangers, and the crucial problem is no longer access to culture but rather filtering it. These filters are often groups without institutionalized identities, with a status equal to that of their users. The divisions between professionals and amateurs, experts and consumers relying on the experts' knowledge are being redefined. Official canons are disappearing, hierarchies of goods are developed within groups connected by social interactions or shared interests. Connected to this phenomenon, is the rise of "closeness" and "authenticity" as the basic modalities of cultural-based togetherness.

- **(De)individualization and (de)linearization:** The technologies used by the youth we met during this project have a large potential for individualization: they allow personalization while providing access to a cultural database whose size allows nearly infinite individual choices. However, these technologies are also used to establish group identities and the making of shared choices which allow a scattered database to become a group-based narrative. This does not mean that these technologies are obstacles – they allow choices, letting subjects oscillate between the separate/individualized and group-based/shared. Two opposite social practices connected to audiovisual texts can serve as examples

of these trends. TV shows are frequently pulled out of the context of the broadcaster's schedule and downloaded from the internet, played on the computer – thus the theoretically linear TV show form is transformed into an element of the database of cultural texts, with decisions regarding it shifting from the broadcaster to the consumer. At the same time, YouTube videos which number in the millions, become 'televised' and through Gadu-Gadu links become part of the cultural landscape of groups of friends.

- **Openness:** in reference to Henry Jenkins' category of 'participatory culture' category (2006; see also p. 177 in this report), we should pay attention to culture's openness which, thanks to new media, lowers the barriers to artistic expression, while offering access to informal community practices and enhancing bonds between the participants. In this context, 'participation' is the result of users' activities and the capabilities offered to them by new technologies. Among them, Web 2.0 internet services in which various activities, including primarily communicative ones, are recorded and archived, effectively becoming creative in nature.

- **Reflectiveness:** Digital media's ability to record nearly all events remediated by technology enhances individuals' tendency to reflect on their actions. For example, the Last.fm service allows individuals to externalize and "see" their taste in music, reducing the previously nebulous category of taste into a material realm. Because of this, cultural texts which circulate (and leave multiple traces behind) and the choices associated with their consumption become visible to both the individual and their social surroundings. Thus creating critical elements in the establishing of a personal identity. In this sense, "culture," "lifestyle" and "atmosphere" emerge as problems of reflection and self-knowledge, as well as subjects of creative efforts.

- **Visuality:** the new media culture is a visual one, taking place on, and in front of, screens. Images – not just perceived, but also produced on a mass scale by 'plugged-in' individuals armed with cell phones and cameras – are becoming the primary tools of conveying meanings. While combining a photo's status as a cultural artifact with the deeply emotional social realm of shared exploration and experiencing the world.

The problem with cultural participation (2): Anka

Posing these problems in an area usually classified as "cultural participation," we are examining two meanings of 'cultural.' First, we are looking at culture as texts which are intentionally cultural in nature. It is with this meaning in mind that we usually pose questions about hierarchy (high/low), form (aesthetics), method of circulation, and institutions which create, spread and store culture. Second, we observe culture in the realm of everyday practices. In this, more anthropological approach, we usually

pose questions regarding the purposing of experiences by individuals, the creation of a communal imagination and structures for experiencing, as well as the establishment of creative cultural identities and models.

These two approaches are obviously intertwined. In the process of forming identities, cultural texts play an important role, while at the same time these texts are products of a specific cultural environment. Much of the discussion surrounding cultural participation is closer to the first approach, posing questions such as which cultural texts are, and which are not, received by the public, while posing questions about what happens with these texts in an individual or collective identity contexts much less frequently. In choosing an ethnographic approach – both at the research level and in decisions about presenting our findings – we are trying to valuate questions connected with the forms of socialization and the mechanisms of identity creation and not, the sociology of using cultural institutions.

The change highlighted by the remediation process, touches upon both of these meanings of culture. The content changes because hierarchies are toppled, new aesthetic forms are developing, new methods of circulating are growing and the role of institutions is evolving. The practices of being together and existing individually are changing – as they are remediated by new types of technologies, which, as we will see, are becoming technologies of the self and co-create new types of subjectivity. The fact that remediation reaches both the problem sets associated with interest in culture as a collection of texts and institutions, as well as culture as historically specific cultural practices of being together and the self, further reinforces the primacy of finding new categories of understanding modernity. "Cultural participation," as postulated by individual participants in a culture seems inadequate as a category, as the process of social change accelerated by remediation is producing new individuals who create their identities differently, while culture, at the textual level, means something else as well.

For example, in carrying out the ethnography of a remediated world we met Anka, a 17 year old resident of Parna (all names of research sites and informants, as well as details that might identify them, have been changed to protect the anonymity of our collaborators) - a large city in central Poland.

Anka loves Werner Herzog's films. In itself, this is not that striking. However, her path to discovering the German director's oeuvre is rather surprising. It all started with music: Anka intensely listens to David Bowie. Reading up on the artist online, she noticed his so-called 'Berlin era,' a period when the artist lived in West Germany and recorded three albums inspired by local electronic music: *Low*, *Heroes*, and *Lodger*. Anka downloaded the three albums as mp3 files. Looking at her idol's sources of inspiration, she noticed the band Popol Vuh - a CD of which she borrowed from her uncle. It made a strong impression, and she began reading about the band online, where she learned that the German group recorded music for Herzog's films.

She is now a cinephile, but does not spend much time at movie theaters. (Besides, Parna does not host many Herzog festivals.) Instead, she is active in the discussion forums of a large movie portal, where she interacts with moviegoers who watch more and better films than her friends. It is these online acquaintances who suggest other Herzog films to her, and the names of several other directors, whose films she downloaded, watched on her computer screen and saved to her hard drive. Today, Herzog is her favorite filmmaker.

Anka's example illustrates the various processes now entangled with what is commonly known as "cultural participation." Regardless of the perspective we assume, the category would include her interactions with Herzog's movies, but, the manner in which Anka discovered his films, and how she watches them – less so. The model of cultural participation as a matter of practices turns out to be a mixture of various orders: the tips and suggestions for new movies is "crowd-sourced," the knowledge of anonymous or nickname-disguised forum members, who do not represent any cultural institution (unless the forum can be considered a 'cultural institution'). These are movie lovers who write about cinema, but they are not subject to any hierarchical verification. The knowledge and recommendations come from people like Anka, who are removed from hierarchical relations (where an individual with knowledge is above others), and from the teacher-student model (where the transmission of knowledge is built on a school-like basis, between an institution-teacher and receiver-student).

These people do not work at cultural institutions, cinemas or respected magazines (or, at least, Anka does not know if they do, as such an affiliation is not significant for her). Her interest in Herzog was also not a conscious choice of a "work of art," but rather the result of following the path of a music idol – a very simple practice for anyone moderately comfortable using the Web. The method of reaching the text is also far removed from traditional cultural patterns – the fact that Herzog's movies were not shown in any of Parna's cinemas was no obstacle for Anka, as she has unlimited access to cultural output thanks to the internet. (The movie subtitles are the work of anonymous internet users who share their work on a dedicated website, similar to the one attacked in 2005 by film distributor Gutek Film.)

Anka does not analyze whether what she is doing is legal. (Many of her cultural participation practices listed here, amount to crimes under Polish criminal law. Which is why we've changed her name and the name of the city in which this September 2009 narrative takes place. There is another reason for this anonymity, and this topic is much broader than Anka herself. There are tens of thousands such people in Poland -- this is how cultural participation looks in Poland.) Copyrights and the legality of copies do not come up as significant in discussions with Anka. The ease of access to digitized culture on the internet suspends discussions about ownership. As the father of one of Anka's friends said: "the young think that whatever is online is just theirs."