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Culture in the digital age

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Abstract: This paper proposes an analysis of the disinterest of the young generation in the traditional cultural approach and understanding, in relation to the multitude of socio-cultural and economic factors and the surprising evolution of technology. In a global context that is characterised by rapid change and influenced by the emergence of digital media, profound transformations are taking place in the ways in which cultural experiences are consumed and interpreted. Constant exposure to easily accessible information, which is not always controlled and verifiable, contributes to the diversification of cultural interests and preferences. For today's young people, the evolving digital age is showing a predilection for innovative forms of expression and communication that do not always align with traditional norms. The more modern education systems emphasise the development of technical and scientific skills, the more the study and appreciation of traditional forms of culture and art is overshadowed. It is certainly possible to stimulate the interest of the younger generation in cultural traditions and values if everything takes place within a modern framework of innovation.

Keywords: culture, digital, education, values, neuroplasticity, cultural crisis.

Introduction

The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language gives the following definition of culture: "The totality of material and spiritual values accumulated by mankind throughout the ages"[1]. Starting from this definition and the one given by the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor who defines in his book *Primitive Culture*, written in 1871, the term culture as "that complex which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"[2] we try to observe the way in which the digital age changes the structure or just more or less significant details of traditional culture.

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[1] https://dexonline.net/definitie-cultura
[2] Culture "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" – Edward Burnett Tylor (1871). *Primitive Culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*, John Murray, Albemarle STI, London.

The importance that certain values, beliefs, traditions and practices have for a community or group contributing to its identity and cohesion defines cultural value. Respect for traditions, diversity, innovation and sustainability play an important role in shaping collective identity and the way individuals interact with those around them and with the environment.

It is becoming clear that, as communication, relational structures and everything connected with them are constantly changing, these changes inevitably entail changes in the individual's relationship with the culture of the society in which he or she lives.

The relationship between technological change and the real values of a culture means that digitisation is merely a tool, but the changes it produces are not essential, being limited (albeit in an apparently explosive way) to the formal, without fundamentally affecting the substance.

The problems arising are complex and manifold, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. It is almost impossible to assess the impact of the changes brought about by each individual factor: radio, television, the internet, social media, the press, etc.

The information explosion, the speed at which huge amounts of data can be accessed, can bring about different rhythms and visions, both in the work of art creators and in the perception of art creators, but it (the information explosion) also entails limitations and numerous pitfalls, such as false information, taken up indiscriminately, propagated and amplified, sometimes in defiance of the most basic common sense.

One of the problems identified with digitisation is the growing gap in the assimilation of traditional culture and its perception by the new generation of adolescents. This cannot be due to technological progress alone. The mere evolution of technology could be an answer, but not enough, although some less obvious consequences of technology are also becoming very important, such as: the absence of manual skills (replacing handwriting with simple keyboard strokes), so that personalised creation is replaced by a limited selection; drawing and painting replaced by computer graphics, music with classical instruments replaced by synthesis programmes, classical films with scripts and sometimes special effects created by complex computer software, etc.

Of course, just like video games, the user is not really a creator, but merely selects and/or combines pre-recorded situations and programmes (although some critics sometimes forcibly consider that mere selection constitutes an act of creation!). So, these so-called creations or works, although they may appear to be extraordinarily complex, are in reality nothing more than sophisticated compilations in which the originality of the author is close to zero.

Let us now look at some of the pressing and potentially dangerous issues that the galloping pace of technological change is causing, with its rapid and

unpredictable changes in the behaviour of young people (and young people in general) in relation to tradition and traditional values.

What is actually changing?

In order to try to understand at a deeper level what is happening nowadays in relation to the behavioural and cognitive changes of young people, we should introduce the term "neuroplasticity".

It is very difficult to pin down the exact origin of the concept of neuroplasticity, as some researchers have made certain conceptualisations of the nervous system adapting and reorganising without using the term "neuroplasticity", and others have used the term in different senses than the one used now, but the earliest evidence comes from 1783 when the Swiss scientist Charles Bonnet corresponded with the Italian anatomist Michele Vincenzo Malacarne discussing the possibility of increasing brain size by practising training over a long period of time. Malacarne proved this by experimenting with animals - dogs and birds born on the same day - to show that animals used for long-term training had larger cerebella than those in a contro group.

Based on what the Spanish neurophysiologist Santiago Ramon y Cajal (often considered a pioneer of modern neuroscience) said : "Every man can, if he so wishes, become the sculptor of his own brain"[3], neuroplasticity, one of the most important breakthroughs in neuroscience, can be defined as: "the ability to change the structure and patterns of activity in significant ways, not only in childhood, which is not very surprising, but also in adulthood. This change can occur as a result of the experiences we have as well as purely mental activity - our thoughts"[4]. (Davidson & Begley, 2020)

Among those who defined the term neuroplasticity was the Polish neuroscientist Jerzy Konorsky, who proposed a theory that neurons activated by proximity to an active neural circuit change and integrate into that circuit. The change would be due to a continuous learning process, independent of age and socio-cultural-professional conditioning.

According to Cornelia Măirean's article "Changing the profile of individual learning in the age of digital technologies", published in the volume "Digital Education", which is based on studies by Alan Pritchard, Carol Ann Tomlinson, Elaine Hall and David Moseley, the learning styles that determine the acquisition of knowledge and the development of different ways of

[3] Vida Demarin; Sandra Morovic; Raphael Bene, (2014). *Neuroplasticity*, in "Periodicum Biologorum", Croatian Society for Natural Sciences, Zagreb.

[4] Richard J. Davidson; Sharon Begley, (2020). *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence. How its unique patterns influence the way you think, feel and live, and how you can change them*, Editura Litera, București.

knowing may be different depending on personal preferences and characteristics and contexts.

"The individual differences created on the basis of unique learning profiles blur when we talk about digital learning.... we talk about the emergence of a unique digital learning profile... and this uniformity can be explained by the neural plasticity that enabled the development of certain skills and inhibited the development of others as a result of early exposure to various digital environments" (Măirean, 2020). This is what was to be demonstrated in relation to the young generation's disinterest in traditional type culture. So, the way of assimilation of information through digital media affects relational behaviour not only formally, but also structurally, often it seems irreversible.

There are two tendencies among scientists regarding the impact of technology on the behaviour of young people – one optimistic and the other, conversely, pessimistic. Unfortunately, the most pertinent and numerous arguments favour the latter. From an optimistic point of view, it can be seen that exposure to digital media can help to develop visual skills at a higher level: visualisation, spatial scanning, hand-eye coordination, the ability to react quickly to spontaneous events and to go through a very large amount of information in a very short time.

Advantages include young people's rapid access to diverse cultural resources such as films and music from different corners of the world viewed on platforms such as Netflix, Spotify, YouTube, etc., while at the same time creating and distributing cultural content and influencing cultural trends. However, from a pessimistic point of view, exposure to digital media from a very young age may lead to overdevelopment of certain lobes of the brain, but at the same time there is decreased activity in the frontal l

obe, the part of the brain that is responsible for abstract thinking, planning and thinking ahead. Digital stimulation can hinder the development of neural pathways that are directly involved in empathy and social skills. Digitisation allows access to a wide range of cultures, but at the same time it can very easily lead to standardisation.

What is also worrying and can even cause or worsen Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) by stimulating temporal lobe activity at the expense of frontal lobe activity in children and adolescents is video games and other digital activities in which they become immersed and lose track of time. Research shows that childhood and adolescence are critical periods for the development of cognitive and social-relational skills, but the direct link between brain development and learning behaviour is still unclear, and what is already known about neural plasticity is not sufficient to explain the development of individual learning profiles as a result of exposure to technology-based learning environments.

The distance that young people have from traditional cultural values has much more complex causes, and addressing them requires an in-depth, albeit difficult, study, because each term considered entails other and other aspects that in turn compete for primacy, and ranking them in order of importance is difficult.

Recent neuroscience points to pathways in the brain that are needed to hone interpersonal skills, empathic abilities and effective personal instincts. In digital natives who have been raised in technology, these interpersonal neural pathways are often left unstimulated and underdeveloped.

Just as the brain controls our ability to search online or respond to emails, it defines our humanity - our self-awareness, creativity, social intuition, and the ability to experience empathy, trust, guilt, love, sadness, and a range of complex emotions. Neuroscientists have discovered subdiagnostic neural circuits that define these mental states and make us feel human.

Looking from a neuroscience point of view, they have noticed that in our brains there is a gland called the anterior cingulate cortex which controls our ability to recognise facial expressions and intense emotions and is responsible for attention, empathy and motivation. When we make a mistake, the anterior cingulate cortex activates and indicates its role in our experience of guilt. A child under the age of 16 who spends more than two hours a day on a tablet, mobile phone, or any gaming device containing frames manages, through this exposure to digital media, to shrink this gland, and slowly but surely, it disappears. In this case, a child who no longer has attention, no longer manages to accumulate anything to evolve. And when you no longer have empathy, you no longer manage to communicate with anyone, when you no longer have a direction, a motivation, you no longer have goals, and in the end, it means that you no longer have a destiny.

A critical aspect of what defines human behaviour is the ability to act appropriately in social situations and to experience empathy. People who lack empathy to the extreme are sometimes called sociopaths. They tend to feel no guilt and lack the capacity to love. Of course, in addition to neuroplasticity, it becomes important to take into account psychological studies of young people's behaviour, social, socio-professional, linguistic studies, sexual behaviour, the influence of psychoactive substances and many other factors. The development of these topics would be the subject of a much more comprehensive work than this one.

Is there a cultural values' crisis in the digital age?

To the question of whether we can speak of a (new) crisis in the understanding of cultural values, the answer is undoubtedly yes! We will consider both terms of cultural impact: the degree of culture, originality and sensitivity of the creator and the degree of interest of the younger generation, whom we will call the receiver of the artistic act. It is absolutely necessary to

study the extent to which these two terms, placed on the balance of a scale, can reach a balance in such a way that they communicate and resonate with each other. It becomes clear at a certain point in this analysis that, given the lack of a high level of education among young people (a worrying proportion), we can only speak of a fairly small number of subjects who show these compatibilities.

At the risk of attracting criticism, let's take a very small example of the reception of an element of classical culture by a possible young recipient today: a famous painting: "Aman apologising to Esther"[5], a masterpiece by Rembrandt in Romania's National Museum of Art, which young people pass by almost every day without paying any attention to it.

In order to resonate with this monumental work, the recipient should, in addition to an elementary knowledge of the biblical text from which the subject of the work is inspired, be familiar with important elements of the history of Dutch painting in the 17th century, details about the chiaroscuro technique, colour theory, the theory of light contrast, proportions, the significance of the attitude of the characters, etc., so that finally, by correlating all these elements, he/she can define (and possibly explain) the emotion he/she feels (or experiences) in contact with this work. Any one of these missing elements can lead to a vitiation or even a lack of genuine emotion, the result being clearly disinterest. The disinterest is obviously due to an elementary lack of culture that allows the aforementioned work to be given the same importance as any meaningless image

Another idea to be considered regarding the relationship between the digital age and cultural values is a careful analysis of the level of education of the young people to whom art creators are addressing. As they are much more receptive to any idea wrapped in the forms of digital language, it goes without saying that these forms can be and are preferable to be used in relation to them.

Another trenchant question would be: Is the creator of art at a level above or clearly above the possibilities of assimilation and interest of the younger generation? And if so, will he yield to the tastes and demands of young consumers by aligning himself with their level, or will he try (at the risk of becoming ostentatiously didactic) to raise the cultural threshold, betting (perhaps wrongly) that by inciting them he will trigger a hunger for information, an avalanche of ambitions among them?

Often a creator who is aware of these problems will take precautionary measures like the example of Umberto Ecco who, when accused that in his famous novel *The Name of the Rose* he wrote the first hundred pages less attractive than the rest of the novel, replied that it was his way of selecting his readers, so that those readers who could not pass this threshold meant that it was not worth reading the rest of the book, built on several levels of cognition.

[5] https://mnar.ro/descopera/galerii-permanente/76-galeria-de-arta-europeana/descopera-lucrarile-din-galeria-de-arta-europeana/92-aman-in-fata-esterei

This is an attitude that should be taken into account in the art creator-consumer relationship.

And with this example, I have introduced another facet of this relationship. Of course, this aspect could be considered elitist, and in reality it is. It can be summarised simply and understandably: not everything is for everyone! The explosion of information due to enormous technical progress, in addition to the advantage that everyone has of being able to access almost anything, gives rise, among other things, to a disinterest due to opulence, like a lack of appetite when faced with a lot of food.

On the other hand, as the basic element, the "building block" of a work of art is emotion, lack of self-knowledge as an essential lack of introspection in education, means that the exponent of the younger generation (the subject of this article) does not understand his emotion, sometimes does not identify it, or even does not feel it. In the absence of a minimum of self-knowledge, of an unexplored or even ignored sensitivity, the effect expected by the art creator in relation to his audience is identical to talking to the walls, or often even less so.

In the performing arts, in theatre in particular, where emotion is conveyed directly, often without requiring solid classical training on the part of the spectator, the lack of impact may be due to a lack of empathy, which is also regrettably a characteristic of young people educated by the internet and video games, as demonstrated earlier in addressing the discussion of neural plasticity.

A survey conducted in the US by the Pew Research Centre in 2024 on the use of technology and social media among teens aged 13-17 reported that YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat are the most used social media platforms among young people. Nine in ten teens say they use YouTube (down slightly from 95% in 2022). TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat remain widely used among teens, with about six in ten teens saying they use TikTok and Instagram, and 55% say the same for Snapchat, while just 32% say they use Facebook (down from years past), 17% use X .com (formerly Twitter), 23% use WhatsApp (up from 2022), 14% Reddit and just 6% use Threads (launched by Meta in 2023). The survey found that nearly half of US teens are online regularly, with 96% saying they use the internet daily. Another study by Common Sense Media shows that young people spend on average more than 7 hours a day in front of screens, which can affect social interactions and mental health.

In the book *Digital Dementia. How new technologies are clouding our minds* by one of Germany's leading neuroscientists Manfred Spitzer, he concludes from the studies and research he presents that the internet and computers not only alter our thinking, memory and attention, but also our social behaviour.

The result of this extensive research shows that above all our brain is a social brain. According to "The Social Brain: The Neural Basis of Social

Knowledge", Ralph Adolphs argues that some of the psychological processes that distinguish social cognition in humans also represent aspects of human social behaviour that are unique, such as culture and civilisation.

Some studies show that when the brain is utilised it grows and when it remains unutilised it atrophies. Social skills relate to the activity of certain areas of the brain that recent research shows increase in volume due to social activity when the corresponding brain centres are stimulated. Lack of self-control, loneliness and depression are among the most important stressors in our society, which lead to nerve cell death and in the long term may favour dementia. The disappearance of real human-to-human contacts and their replacement by online digital networks can cause the reduction of the social brain as mentioned above.

Conclusions

The problems become serious and very serious when we talk about the moral aspect of traditional values. If the aesthetic and cultural side of traditions can be subject to discussion, to analysis in which one orientation or another can be questioned, the moral side of tradition, when dissolved, can even lead to the disappearance of a culture and ultimately to the disappearance (even physical) of the group that is represented by that culture.

To conclude, we must look at the real source of the problem, the distance of the younger generation from traditional, and in particular cultural, values. Of course, the contribution of the rapid development of digital technology has, as already mentioned, a significant impact on young people's behaviour, by altering their learning capacity, reducing empathy and generally distorting perception due to information that is filtered or selectively targeted (some prefer the term manipulation) in a particular direction, as more or less obviously desired by software developers through algorithms of unprecedented complexity.

But associated with this is also the absence of traditional-style education; the young people we are talking about, having been educated by TV programmes, video games and the Internet, etc., are the ones who, instead of telling their grandparents' fairy tales, have spent hours in front of their tablets and phones, structuring their behaviour according to the models taken from there.

There is a need to encourage a balanced consumption of digital and traditional culture and to have school initiatives and programmes that include: visits to museums, collaborations with local artists who use technology to teach students, events that involve socialisation, interactivity, etc.

Otherwise, resolving the identity crisis characteristic of puberty and adolescence sometimes takes unnatural forms (although, following the whole process of lack of socialisation, direct contact, perfectly predictable). The effects can be surprising and unpleasant. For example, during the Covid-19

pandemic, in very many cases in lower education (second and third grades) after two years of online teaching, it was not without astonishment that many of the students even forgot how to write. The lack of direct contact over a long period of time has altered (sometimes irreversibly) the relationships between them and between them and adults, making them almost sociopaths. The solution would be to become aware of emotions. So, educate the emotional plane if the mental plane is compromised. Instead of the abuse of information usually practised in education, let's start to work on awareness and the development of emotional intelligence: What am I feeling? Why do I feel this way? How am I in relation to what I feel? How do I change what I feel? Who feels? What is emotion? Can I transmit it? Can I feel it in others? Can they feel mine? How does it change? Why does it change?

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