

# BEYOND PARADIGMATIC SHIFT: MAPPING CULTURE AND SOCIETY OF DIGITAL AGE

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Global paradigmatic shift is triggered by advances in digital and network technologies. New, Inherited, enhanced, and discarded features of this paradigm are presented. Digital Age is synthetic with features from modernism, postmodernism and earlier paradigms. The argument is supported by referencing modern, postmodern and contemporary theoreticians. Neo-Marxist criticisms are used to identify the distinctive points of the new paradigm.

## Introduction

Making sense of one's own contemporary society and history, forming a coherent holistic image is a complex task, as one is situated "inside the box" of their timeframe, blurring the boundaries of perception and evaluation. Present day individual, however, is faced with an even more difficult condition: that of living at an early stage of an entirely new paradigm. Neither modern, nor anymore postmodern, yet bearing traits of both, our age is evasive of classification and not apparently structured and definable. Precluding the possible postmodern criticism of the need for 'constraining' definition and structuring, one may only point out that we have to establish a system of shared signs and signifiers embedded into a coherent framework to rationalize the principles determining global and local processes surrounding us, even if not fully accurate or all-encompassing. While no theory will likely ever be the universal solution, only through understanding and by now at large reconstruction of post-postmodern reality, will we be able to make conscious effective improvements and take full advantage of social, scientific, cultural and technological progress.

## Multiple New Paradigms

Having the advantage of retrospective makes it easier to structure and comprehend previous paradigms, making them appear more coherent, holistic and identifiable, though not in simplistic static homogeneous terms. Like the Renaissance or Enlightenment, present Age already has several names, signifying its core elements, its catalysts: 'Digital' Age, 'Information' Age, 'Computer' Age or 'Network' Age. This equivocal yet evident paradigmatic shift leads academicians to generate possible interpretative post-postmodern frameworks coming with a range of neologisms like "digimodernism, pseudomodernism" (Kirby), "remodernism" (Childish & Thomson), "altermodernism" (Bourriaud), "third wave" (Toffler), "neomodernism" (Heller, Grauer), "new sincerity" (Epstein), "posthumanism/transhumanism" (More), "hypermodernity/supermodernity" (Eagleton, Augé). Combination of the stronger sides of these hypotheses is one of the better strategies to develop a solid holistic paradigmatic framework. For instance, Kirby's digimodernism (skeptical, media, culture and society-focused) combined with the third wave of Toffler (holistic, positivist, economics-focused idealistic image of further individualized 'hypercapitalism') [1] can be used in mutually supplementary fashion.

Digimodernism has decisively displaced postmodernism to establish itself as the twenty-first century's new cultural paradigm. It owes its emergence and preeminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized (...) by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and

anonymous, social and multiple authorship. These in turn become the hallmarks of a group of texts in new and established modes, which also manifest the digimodernist traits of infantilism, earnestness, endlessness, and apparent reality. [2]

“In a Third Wave economy, the central resource – a single word broadly encompassing data, information, images, symbols, culture, ideology, and values – is actionable knowledge.” [3] He further emphasizes extreme decentralization penetrating the production and consumption, national identity, state structure, government and even family institute.

Most theoreticians place ‘the digital’ and ‘information’ at the centre of the new paradigm readily offering a set of very clear fulcrums for such shift: Internet, Digital Technologies and Networks. Those are the necessary information transport and dissemination arteries, that basis allowing for a formation of new society with distinct features reflected in global and local scale of existence involving politics, commerce, society and culture. Furthermore, the paradigmatic formation follows in part ancient principles, representing a synthetic (‘organic’ as opposed to postmodern ‘eclectic’) Hegelian evolutionary process merging modern and postmodern principles and ideas into a complex multisystem structure. Such synthesis is conceding with postmodern critical skeptical stance on monolithic structuralism, yet upholding the principle of multiple resilient potent empowered structures, essentially a pluralized networked version of modern structure concept. As the new paradigm changes the very basics of reality evaluation, its nature appears paradoxical from earlier perspectives with such features as globalization and interconnectedness as well as nearly unlimited information access coexisting with unprecedented growth of distinct subcultures and glocal communities, interpersonal alienation (computer mediated contacts as opposed to direct ones) as well as grotesque phenomenon of global misinformation and possible reduction of factual knowledge through information overload, manipulation and falsification (e.g. Wikipedia and Wikileaks): virtual becomes more wholesome, detailed, real.

Reversing Baudrillard’s negative concept of simulacra, digital virtual reality instead becomes a transformative, revolutionary expansion and informative improvement on predigital reality. Internet is therefore providing space for dialogue and a platform for creating new products, which are real, yet within a different framework not necessarily requiring a physical equivalent (in the same way a novel is real, but more complex), illustrating the key element of the new paradigm: shift of value system from physical to virtual, digital, the information pure.

## Tetrad and Digital Age

To identify and understand the new paradigm one needs to establish the points of its distinction, to which adapted McLuhan’s tetrad concept, originally dealing with medium evolution, but transformed into paradigmatic evolution model might be of aid.

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### NEW TRAITS

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Global interconnected digitized society completely redefined concepts of time, space and identity (an impact comparable to that of the public railroad transportation emergence for Industrial Revolution), forming multiple new value systems within localized social clusters embedded in globalized conglomerate system. Neither local isolated ‘tribes’, nor global monolithic culture and ideology. Memory becomes externalized, brain and sensory apparatus extended. [4]

Valid illustrations include international academic, research, religious or subcultural communities. They are interconnected through Internet (or only existing online), sharing own value systems, interests, goals. Sometimes such are largely coinciding with mainstream, other times are unorthodox, even radical. The members do not anymore need to be connected geographically or even know each other's real identity. The communication process (not limited to interaction, results in joint creation of virtual or even physical products and services) may follow an arbitrarily established strict or flexible timeline or even be of a sporadic nature (online forum posts). Specific examples would be gamers waking up in the middle of the night to participate in an on-line in-game event, possibly taking place during the day in another time zone. A now frequent situation that can be compared to a late night business phone call to another continent, or a heart surgery procedure broadcast online for education and consulting purposes, or an entirely online accredited international university e-education with over 5000 degrees, all of which illustrate the creation of new value systems and social structures based on virtual space and identity, often more important to their participants than daily routine and in more radical cases basic human health needs.

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## INHERITED & IMPROVED TRAITS

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From media and entertainment domination to the virtual reality hegemony.

With the shift towards virtual space, media reality, as the main venue of infotainment, socialization and trade, World Wide Web becomes a place of value creation, not anymore wholly based on physical reality external to it, not unlike contemporary stock market. This gradually takes global economic structures further beyond post-industrial into global e-commerce with individuals and small companies offering local customized goods and services worldwide [5], using Internet as the marketing platform. As the digital requires constant research and innovation, quaternary sector becomes more important and profitable with originally smaller software and hardware innovators becoming world-leading multinational corporations such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook and Apple, all forerunners of the Digital Age, skipping the relatively brief postmodernity in their successful development.

Now digital, media goes in what might be described as 'overdrive', shifting the already immersive experience of a movie theatre into portable entertainment-information-communication products (tablets, smartphones, netbooks), while interactive, personalized, customized, individualized and yet pseudonymous news reporters and bloggers are reaching the audience through even more information channels, creating a complete complex system of (not infrequently misguiding, purposefully and otherwise) worldview. Such worldview becomes a custom-tailored massive digital prism, through which reality is perceived and evaluated. One may argue both for and against this prism, as it might either enhance one's knowledge and understanding, or completely distort it. [6]

Extreme customization of supply and demand becomes one of vital features of contemporary information supply and mining with the suppliers struggling to tailor user profiles to serve the kind of information (in simplest cases – direct advertisement) that will influence the audience. The "prosumers," [7] however, gain the power of manually or semi-automatically filtering out the bulk of undesirable information, thus both shaping the supply and demand structure of virtual reality and its products, and gaining a new kind of control over information production, intake and processing. This situation reestablishes the core principles of reality perception and validation arguably reducing influence of sensationalism and misinformation, as contemporary generation is born into reality (not just online) which is by de-

fault virtual, constructed, relative, fostering and necessitating development of new information selection, filtering, processing and validation mechanisms. Such environment fosters exploration and renegotiation of values, facilitating new forms of creativity and consciousness, shaped by the logic of code, as well as confusion inherited from postmodern explosion of nihilism.

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## DISCARDED TRAITS

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Materiality (of information, identity, wealth, property and entertainment), privacy (contrary to the mainstream media-suggested spreading of democracy), copyright & ownership (due to combination of pseudonymity, remote ownership, digitization and piracy) and memorization.

Material reality has most certainly not vanished and global wars for territory and resources are raging at the same or even greater pace (coexisting struggling global corporate capitalism paradigm described by Toffler as the second wave). For the general globalized population, unless personally affected, they directly translate into local oil prices, (un)available vacation spots. What Digital Age adds or rather alters is the virtual presence and virtual active participation: immersive Video Games “recreating” the hot-spot events, blogging and live feed from the hot spot: real and fake so indistinguishable that one cannot anymore take either for reality. In effect, the actions, events in themselves become important beyond earlier more simplistic good versus bad framework. The audience becomes aware of watching or participating in a created narrative, globally pragmatic, rather than locally dramatic, being forced to ask *cui prodest?* On a less political note, one could consider timeless classics of multiplayer ego shooters, Counter Strike, where terrorists and police forces are equally popular with players, stripped of their ideological connotation.

Furthermore, digitized and digital video, audio and textual products can now be created, copied, advertised and distributed manually at virtually no cost via Internet, placing both publishing and distribution houses in a dubious position of trying to survive in a new pervasive global socio-economic system, which has little real need for their dated services. Most obvious examples point to McLuhan’s medium tetrad concept with paper-print and DVDs slowly, but surly becoming obsolete, with portable e-tablets (consider clay ‘tablets’ as ironic reference to antiquity), smartphones and e-readers gradually making books and printouts a thing of the past. Paper-based text is surviving on conservative medium loyalty, multitude of existing production hardware and routines, as well as through the pressure (economic, political, legal and otherwise) of gigantic non- and semi-digital manufacture, publishing and distribution giants inherited from the pre-digital age.

The very notions of materiality and the means of production are taken to such a different level, that one may consider material world to be chasing after the virtual one, curiously reviving and reworking antique debate on mimesis. An ironic illustration is digital cartoons, films or video games, where living actors and scenery are being digitized into animated characters, enhanced and then inhabiting the new better-than-real diegesis of “Avatar” or “L.A. Noire”. One can look further into the way contemporary blockbuster movies are structured and presented, as if molded after videogames, which follow almost immediately.

Remote and outsource jobs number increased dramatically both in material and digital/virtual sector (software, finances, IT support). The former, child of industrial age, is becoming ever more mechanized and self-sustaining via digital control systems or imported, while the latter, the new, is locationless in its

core principle: information (now in itself a product) is likely located on a server in some specific geolocation, however, its identical up-to-date copy is likely backed up elsewhere or even distributed among multiple computers world-wide.

Pseudonymity becomes the new identity with customizable optional gender, race, class, location and visual representation (avatar). On a more global level, potent hacktivist groups are formed. The “Anonymous” can serve as the most notorious example: ambivalent global hackers-activists group, networked, decentralized, yet organized (multiple cells and individuals worldwide), effective (able to bring down websites for government security companies, i.e. HBGary Federal and global credit card systems, i.e. Visa and MasterCard), with own moral principles system, e-anarchic.

Lastly, Internet has already integrated itself into the core processes of human mental activity beyond simplifying communication, but acting as a gigantic “External hard drive for the brain”. [8]

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## RETURNING TRAITS

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Dialectical, ‘textoral’ in its earlier phase culture of “global village” becoming “global theatre,” [9] community, holistic thinking, social responsibility, layman philosophizing.

While Internet communication seems to alienate people from their direct physical environment, it at the same time facilitates and intensifies communication with a much wider audience based on interest, rather than random chance. Multiple blogs, forums, social networks demonstrate rebirth of, now online, communities, which become centers of heated debates on global and local issues, suggesting growing popularization of dialectics. Members of online communities are responsible to abide by the rules set out in the said communities, fostering a new sense of social responsibility, usually without harsh consequences, providing a safer environment for personal growth (or leading to infantilization in young adults due to lack of harsh consequences). At an early stage of digimodernism the main bulk of communication is textual, though the nature of communication could be seen as a multivocal enhanced oral one, only written down. There is, however, no reason to assume that with further advance in audio-video digitization technologies text will not once again give in to the oral and visual communication.

Even the family institute goes through a similar transformation with a curious rebirth of arranged marriage institute moving from the hands of the parents into organized or automated virtual matching sites and portals offering any kind of partnership pairing.

## Marxist Angles

Marxist and Neo-Marxists are notable for the skeptical angle frequently downplaying the role and magnitude of change in their eternal struggle with capitalism. Gramsci further develops Marx’s theory of hegemony, presenting his contemporary world order and class-culture-production system as an adapting self-sustaining flexible construct, maintaining that social order by making subjugated classes internalize value system of the ruling elite. His theory permits one to see a contrast of new hegemony (paradigm) of networked digital reality: classless virtual space; own tastes (signified by Bourdieu), values and morals system, not involving monetary capital, but information cultural capital; the “new intellectuals” born out of Internet “habitus”, establishing themselves through skills, abilities and effort inside the virtual environment; use of hi-tech equipment previously reserved to and class-sustaining for bourgeoisie.

Chomsky criticizes contemporary media with introduction of five filters: ownership, funding, sourcing, flak, ideology. Schiller and Lovink further criticize online polyphony of active audience as confusing cacophony of confused impotent audience. Online blogging journalism, social networks coordinated events, political and cultural discussions on forums, hacktivism, pseudonymity and the new values system negate the issues of ownership (free), funding (inexpensive or free), sourcing (more diverse), flak (pseudonym as security, safety in numbers), ideology attack (online always contained multiple ideologies flourishing through lack of censorship and higher anonymity).

## Conclusion

The article in a very compressed form confirms and describes the paradigmatic shift, highlighting its advantages, providing references to its conglomerate synthetic nature including beneficial elements of earlier paradigms dating as far back as antiquity, yet forming its own distinct and unique system of values, classes and tastes, made possible with the aid of digital technology and networking. Although this paradigm is growing in parallel with global corporate capitalist framework, it bears sufficient distinct features to be seen as a complete society-based hegemonic structure undermining the evolving invasive preceding global hegemony through passive rejection and active substitution of its incentives and values, while making use of its technological advances.

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