

POSTMODERN VIEW OF THE NATURE OF THE INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION

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Abstract

Above all, the Internet is perceived as a consequence of information tools development. Its image, however, is also a result of socio-economic changes that are of greatest importance when it comes to behaviour represented by the Web users. This wide context of analysis makes the nature of the Internet complex and characteristic for postmodern description of reality. The objective of this article is to present the contemporary nature of this medium and to define behavioral tendencies of its users. The attempt that has been made to describe all the problems mentioned appears to be valuable also from the point of view of entrepreneurs, both in the context of the way of running business and understanding the conduct of other market participants.

Key words: postmodernism, Internet, information

1 INTRODUCTION

The notion of postmodernism is present both in social sciences and in the humanities, for example in art. In case of the latter one experts often use such terms as "decentration" or "antistructure" while referring to the construction of a piece of art which is an example of this trend. However, as it is often pointed out, none of these possibly used terms fully reflects the essence of the discussed issue [Zalewski 1998].

On management ground A.K. Koźmiński speaks clearly about the range of problems connected with postmodernism in social sciences by stating that the lack of "clearly marked up ways to distinctly defined targets, obvious rules and great, monolithic structures, in which everyone may and should find a place for themselves" is characteristic for postmodernism [Koźmiński (Foreword); Kostera 1996].

The notion "nature" used in the title of the article becomes the key element for the postmodern perspective of the described problem. Encyclopaedic explanation of this notion states first of all that it is "a kind, an essence of a given object or phenomenon, being the principle of its activity", and secondly, it is "objective and tangible reality" [Podręczna encyklopedia PWN 2002]. On the one hand, as it will be outlined in the article, this very nature of the Internet is a consequence of complexity of contemporary reality. Therefore, it is impossible to explain lucidly this fundamental principle which shapes its face. On the other hand, the Internet is commonly referred to as virtual reality, thus at first it seems paradoxical to accept this explanation. Obviously, the problem here is the understanding of the notion "virtual" which contrary to general understanding does not mean anything "unreal", but rather elusive, generating however most perceptible results of its own influence. As a consequence, it leads

to the problem presented in the first place: how to describe the cause when it is ephemeral, and in this connection the relation between the cause and effect is vague.

Previous issues become fundamental for the attempt made in this paper to describe the Internet as a consequence of specific conditionings of contemporaneity which together constitute the notion of postmodernism that may be considered by adopting characteristic reference points/ areas of interests. It is worth highlighting that in connection with the above mentioned this very attempt to define the Internet as well as to treat it as a source of information will take specific composition of description of the so called Web (i.e. the Internet – note). It is worth highlighting that in case of the Internet it is not the architecture of technical infrastructure that becomes the most important aspect for social sciences but the ways in which it is harnessed by users, and as a result the roles users assume in the course of their activity in the Web.

2 ISSUES OF POSTMODERNITY

In literature there are several synonymous terms referring to postmodernism. Among them there are for example postindustrialism or postmodernity. This problem arises from various references to the description of reality. There are two main areas distinguished here, these are: ideas, i.e. opinions, attitudes or the so called infrastructure, i.e. people themselves and manifestations of their lifestyle [Morawski 1999]. A distinct issue which complicates this matter is the formation of descriptions independently from one another, out of which not every single one becomes basic for the current standard of reference to reality.

For the purpose of the article the author assumes that the notion of postmodernity is synonymous to postmodernism. The notion of postindustrialism, however, is a specific view of postmodernism and it reflects the first perspective presented in table 1. The table contains questions that may possibly be asked in order to define the gist of postmodernity. At the same time, it becomes clear that in fact there are many possible perspectives in its description. It is also worth noticing that since they present the same reality from different points of view they are to some extent convergent.

The existence of many perspectives of reference to the problem of postmodernity itself may prove its potential attributes. They seem to be of basic importance for cognitive processes. Firstly, it may be assumed that there is not a single one commonly binding narration of description of reality, in this connection methods of description vary. It also leads to the conclusion that description of local conditionings and individual cases becomes equally or even more important than recognizing currently binding tendencies. Secondly, postmodernity rejects the possibility of impartial observation of the researched reality, assuming that each observer constitutes its part and therefore cannot provide an objective description. Thirdly, attention is paid to processes, flexibility, "the becoming", and not to static relationship of data (the aim is to recognize why something becomes important, and not to what extent it is important). Fourthly, the individual perspective, individual understanding of the world, individual paths of solving problems become outlined [McBride, Lander, McRobb 2011].

Considering the content of table 1 it may be concluded that perceiving knowledge or information as widespread resources is characteristic for postmodernism. They are available via all kinds of electronical media or in the form of qualified employees' feature. It is worth highlighting that knowledge therefore has rather become a commodity and lost its importance as a source of self-fulfillment. Simultaneously, internationalization as well as globalization of all socio-economic aspects of life give an impulse for further acceleration of knowledge popularization. However, the existence of many perspectives of reference to reality causes that the popularized knowledge is unlimited in interpretation [Marinescu, Constantin 2009] – this is where the postmodern attributes come from.

Tab.1. Understanding the essence of postmodernism

Perspective	Description
What constitutes the basic good?	Information as a basic good; rapid technological development and its connection with current trends; emergence of signs-goods (decisions concerning purchase of a product do not depend on assessment of its functionality [Chien-Hsiung 2010]).
How is reality experienced?	Lack of constant values; temporary moment attitude; writing being forced out by multimedia communication; blending of positive experiences of fast and intensive life with constant fear.
Where does the social burden lie?	Shifting the social burden from employees hired in production plants onto intermediaries-managers; forming of communities based on temporary idols, common actions, succumbing to pressure of opinion.
What is the key form of capital?	Key role in contemporary banking and finance corporation economy; market globalization, constant flexibility in the choice of investment areas.
What is the nature of contemporary societies?	Consumption as a life motto ("consumption for the sake of consumption"); consumption as a constantly repeated ritual.

Source: study based on S. Morawski, *Niewdzięczne rysowanie mapy... O postmodernie(izmie) i kryzysie kultury*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu, Toruń 1999

The aspects of the essence of postmodernism are also reflected in economics and management. Searching for sources of postmodernity in this scientific area, one may quote, following M. Kostera, trends which were the basis of contemporary descriptions of economic phenomena [Kostera 1996]: change of ownership structure (above all progressive separation of ownership from direct running of business); formation of social corporate responsibility (aims of various stakeholder groups of enterprises become important); necessity to redefine efficiency measurement of enterprise functioning (categories that are not classified as financial profit ones are also included here); significant share of services in national income (decreasing share of industry; increase in importance of services connected with information processing); active and strategic role of state on the market; globalization.

Tendencies in economic development mentioned above, which have been present for many years, indicate the importance of changing roles performed by particular subjects/representatives of society, as well as objectives they want to reach. On the one hand, these objectives are common in certain areas, whereas in others they differ. Moreover, noticing this conformity or antagonism may depend on the arrangement of subjects in question. Therefore practically, while making the attempt to reconcile them, cooperation between various subjects takes place and in this way the Web structures appear. They are an expression of description of postmodernism in management presented by A.K. Koźmiński. There are no monolithic structures in which subjects are supposed to find their own place. They strive after finding a place that suits them and guarantees realisation of their objectives. What is more, the defined goals as well as relations between subjects may undergo conversion

and consequently the content of subjective cooperation system itself may change, too. It is characteristic for the concept of reality in which certain groups emerge with regard to, among others, convergence of motivation at a given time.

This potential configuration of system of subjects seems even easier and more obvious if progressive informatization and virtualization of activity are to be distinguished in trends that shape contemporary reality [Żukowska 2009]. It is also worth highlighting that constant information and knowledge exchange takes place among members of social groups and economic subjects parallel to the trends characteristic for postmodernity.

It is worth emphasizing that specific attitude towards the issue of space-time in analysing reality is typical for postmodernism. It may be stated that the adopted configuration of the notion of time and space becomes significant (also in the economic aspect of postmodernity). Space itself becomes capacious in terms of the scope of notion, whereas time category is connected with aiming at establishing why a particular phenomenon becomes important- for this reason postmodernity banks on the analysis of the course of the past, presence and future [Rahman, Mostaq 2011].

3 MANIFESTATIONS OF POSTMODERNITY ON THE INTERNET

The Internet may be presented as space defined by architecture of interactions undertaken by the Web users in the communication process. However, the users very often define themselves while making and maintaining relations, which is characteristic for postmodernistic conditionings. It results in the possibility of becoming whoever they want to become on the Internet and to harness informatics infrastructure in a way that suits them with the aid of certain communication tools that it offers [Markham 2004].

Therefore there is no possibility to directly and precisely explain motivation and methods of activity of users on the Internet. It may be attempted by analysing course of actions of a given virtual community as well as characteristics of the Web place/space in which they are active. There is also another reason for the significance of this problem, which is so characteristic for postmodernism,. As it has been emphasized, users' activity consists in communicating and exchanging information in various forms. Information often becomes the basis of knowledge regarding a particular problem discussed in the virtual reality. It seems that it does not matter whether information is published by individual Internet users (private person) or sole proprietors running their business on a given website (institutionalized kind of virtual community members). Private opinions and judgements become egalitarian in reference to facts made known by information portals or they are the basis of the functioning of services. Moreover, it may be observed that there is a connection between content presented by Internet users and electronical media. For the media it is common that comments of Internet users are equal to facts presented in services or that special services presenting comments of virtual community emerge (e.g. *Publiczna.tv* programme on Polish TV channel TVN24; or publishing the so called readers' letters in official local information services *Gazeta.pl*; it is also characteristic to show entries on blogs made by politicians or publicists as information, which are nothing but their personal views). These opinions of readers/viewers/Internet users/media experts become also the basis of taking up by them particular plots in their journalistic work.

It is worth highlighting here that the Internet is strongly integrated with other kinds of media. Each information television in Poland has its own portal which complements and supports the TV programme. Similar situation concerns many headlines in the press. What is more, one may observe the increasing role of the portal in comparison to TV channel/newspaper. It is also worth noticing that Internet users have, owing to mobile telephony, mobile access to the Web and they may modify its information resources from anywhere.

Disorientation as an element which is surprising and incoherent with the reference context is also characteristic for the Internet [Zalewski 1998]. It results both from the users' activity and sole proprietors running their official business activity in the Web. On the part of these disorientation consists above all in drawing Internet users' attention by using "catchwords" that while analyzing the content that is hidden behind them turn out to be false. Making articles or press notes headlines more attractive by formulating radical and scandalizing statements in order to draw the attention of Web users is a typical and notorious practice. After having become familiar with the content hidden by a given headline it often turns out that it is completely disconnected from the context and the sense of the text is totally different. On the other hand, Internet users themselves can create references to particular matters/facts that are incomprehensible and unexpected by other users, for example on portals edited by virtual community (e.g. Wikipedia).

Disorientation on the Internet may also refer to the architecture of relation of information constituting its resources. It is possible that particular link hides content or website that is different from the one it suggests. There is also a problem with the form of advertisements and other contents presented on the website parallel to information desired by the Internet user which may influence the scope and level of information absorption.

The appearance of factoids is a consequence of disorientation and lack of possibility to recognize motives which are followed by users undertaking their activities (including institutionalized Web participants). This notion stands for "lie or half-truth accepted as truth due to the very fact of its emergence" [dictionary of the Polish language: sjp.pwn.pl 2011]. This emergence is connected with publishing information on the Internet and/or in other media [Charmaz 2009]. Popularization of this kind of information leads to the situation in which facts that never took place are treated as true ones, but also in consequence and which is not often taken into consideration, real facts (though rather unlikely) e.g. due to lack of wide popularization may be regarded as false. The problem is even more serious since, as it has been already stated, the Internet is integrated with other media and the common popularization may take place, and as with this connection authentication of information may occur. Therefore postmodern reality requires searching for confirmation of the published information, and the level of its certainty appears to depend not only on assessment of its likelihood but also on assessment of reliability of its sources. The assessment is in turn the result of subjective process of their evaluation which is done by the Internet users.

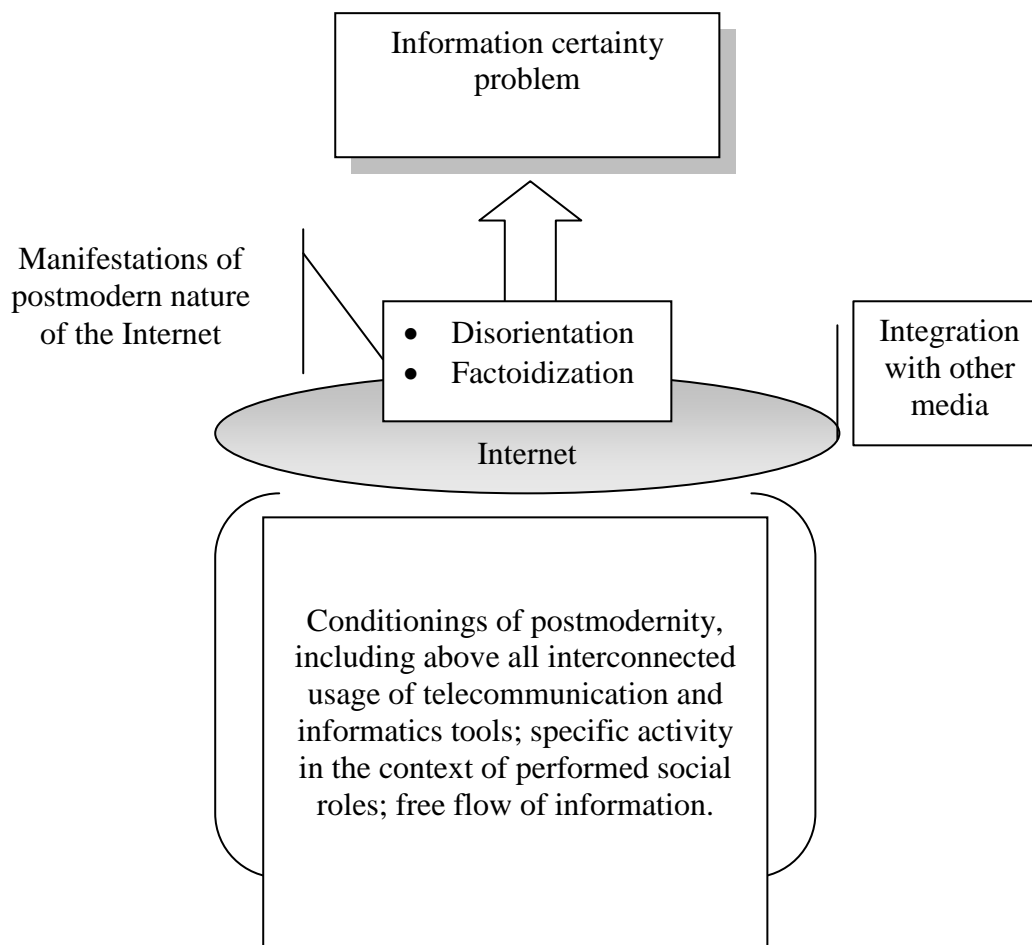


Figure 1. Conditionings of postmodernism and the Internet as a source of information.
Source: own study.

4 SUMMARY

The Internet has already become an important area of interests in the middle of the 1990's. At that time, that is at the dawn of commercial usage of the Internet, many analysts announced the emergence of medium which guaranteed market participants the access to perfect information. However, soon after that it was estimated that a great part of information resources of the Web is not true.

Nowadays, it seems impossible to evaluate the truthfulness of all information resources on the Internet since their interpretative context appears to be too complex. Apart from that, there is ever greater belief among the Web users that information which does not appear in the Web resources cannot be true.

Development of information technology as well as changes in behaviour of the society became the basis of postmodern nature of the Internet. At the same time, it is worth noticing that mutually conditioned transformation of relations on the ground of technical studies and society (tools used in the context – social activity) exemplify relatively fully the Internet as a source of information only when they are analyzed at least in the context of the past and the presence.

Postmodernity as a view of nature of the Internet leads then to two basic aspects that shape contemporary attitudes of the Internet users. Firstly, they often treat the Web as a main

dimension of reality and therefore as a main source of information. Secondly, users of the Internet should browse through information resources in order to confirm them by confronting various sources and to catch unreflective copying of content in various places in the Web. These attitudes (or lack of them) seem to have basic influence on socio-economic activity that is actually conducted by the Internet users.

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