

## Challenges of Expressing the Self in Cyberspace

Marius Popescu\*

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine the possibilities of person manifestation within the context of virtual communication, the transformations and the challenges involved by such a means of communication with reference to the personal identity. We emphasize that we could speak about an Identity of the individual that is not subject to change, as well as its many identities that can be assumed in accordance with the variety of roles displayed either in the real world, or in the virtual one. The personal dimension is the one through which we can relate to others, the person being the human instance by which we affect and we, in our turn, are affected by the other; and as a result we consider necessary to settle the concept and to envisage it within the virtual world. At the time when we consider the manifestation of the person on the internet, we implicitly speak about relational structures existing in this environment. On the internet, similar to the real world, humans manifest in relation to the others – even if we speak about the connection among the avatars, and at the other end about the connection another human being or its virtual substitute will be always identified as constituted by an artificial intelligence seeking to imitate the human being.

**Keywords:** persona, personal identity, virtual identity, virtual communication, avatar, cyberspace

### INTRODUCTION

The online space, either virtual or cyberspace, is essentially a global network of electronic devices connected by wires or different wave frequencies, servers and other similar technologies that are able to exchange information by means of the electric impulses which is actually information based on a binary number system. For most people the codes on which the internet is based are not very significant, and they interact in the online environment by means of peripherals that allow them to access and transfer information in an accessible

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\* Marius Popescu (✉)

Department of Philosophy, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania  
e-mail: mpopescu75@gmail.com

user-friendly manner. As far as the ordinary people are concerned, doing by means of the internet technology becomes more important than the way in which it functions; and our main goal consists in analyzing the manner through which the virtual communication affects human and his relationships towards himself, towards the others and the whole world.

We are now capable of asserting that the internet dominates the present world inasmuch as it can be accessed by people all over the world, but the approach towards the outside reality and even to ourselves has been affected. Therefore, we are able to escape the daily reality and to become involved in a new, ambiguous world, in which we seek to assert ourselves.

Cyberspace interposes between us and reality as a “glamorous fog” in which we are not allowed to perceive the world by means of its own categories (Borgmann 2013, 15), but as an interruption from the motionless time of the internet. In this context, it is important to analyze the way in which the human structure has been altered by the interactions in the virtual environment. From our point of view, the strongest impact of the cyberspace mediated communication is defined in terms of the personal identity and the social relationships. The internet consists of instruments that allow the individuals to introduce or to represent as being different from what they actually are, as to borrow and create new identities in order to bring fulfillment of their inner desires or to gain a reputation in different social environments. Consequently, the ego created an outer self by which it alienates from the inner self and that could turn into a danger by the fact that it can be bound to this new form, in which it cannot express freely, and mainly because it tries to become a projection built upon the avatars created in the virtual world.

#### PERSONAL IDENTITY / VIRTUAL IDENTITY

It is widely acknowledged that human identity consists of the fact that it participates at the same life; the identity being grounded on the own physical body. This identity should be linked to a *personal identity* that is based on the coherence of the thought and the self consciousness. By personal identity, the individual’s ability to recognize himself as being identical is asserted, and not just in his physical dimension. Different philosophical perspectives relating to this term are being involved. For example, Paul Ricoeur (1990) speaks about *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity. We can acknowledge that identity is endowed with a “strong”

sense, of self-consciousness and self-preservation, but there is another “weak” sense by which the identity is regarded as self-assuming a role in relation to the inner self or to the external world.

When a complex being, such as a human being is concerned, it is thus necessary to talk about many perspectives to deal with. Just remember that the human being is awarded a personal identity, which is maintained regardless the changes that occur as regards the body and, consequently, a basic identity that indicates the individual’s “prevailed existence” (Locke 1998) needs to be approached; but this fact does not prevent us from outlining the different aspects of this identity, such as *idem* and *ipse*. The individual identifies himself as being, *that* exists, but also *the way* he is, the manner in which the self existence is intelligible. This intelligibility becomes overt from the self-identity towards the many identities the human being assumes in this world, by undertaking different roles determined by the individual’s inner self or by the individual’s outer self, by the external world. Therefore, we can talk about the Identity of the Inner Self which involves the individual’s coherence with himself and the individual’s different identities awarded by the external world, or which are necessary to represent the Ego in the world and in society.

Raffaele Rodogno (2012) speaks about 5 types of identities with which the human being can be endowed: *the passport identity* (which is awarded by a document that states who we are for the state), *numerical identity* (which identifies us as being the same in time), *the attribution identity* (represented by the self characterization or considering us the same), *social identity* (defining the self as related to the others) and *the attachment identity* (indicating the fact that we are what we consider to be important to us). It is created a typology of identity that underlines the differences between the strong and the weak senses of the term under discussion.

So, if the individual can be provided with many identities, identifying him as such, there are many approaches of individual’s being. We take into account the manner in which an identity is attributed to a person. Such an identity can arise outside the individual, and there is an indisputable example in the case of the names’ of newborn babies. The attributed name is in fact the first identity by which he/she is recognized as a member in society. Similarly, the individual receives different identities because the roles played in society, accepted as parts of the Self. We can also add a lack, a disappearance or a change of identity, considering the “weak” meaning

of the term. The individual will always be aware of the fact that he is the same (except the mental disorders) in relation to himself, but he will be able to play with his identity in relation to the world. The ordinary people, clinically sane, are capable to develop multiple identities adapted to each role in society, without losing the coherence of their Identity. And for this reason, the identity represents the individual's first characteristic that can be placed in the virtual environment. The person does not lose the self when, admitting as being virtually active, his/her Identity is not affected; even being connected to the digital world and becoming manifest within this new world and playing another role – it is an identity in the "weak" sense of the word.

A peculiar type is the virtual identity, occurring as the one's self in virtual worlds and opening new possible identities as related to the self and to others. The person "communicates" by the devices that transfer gestures (leading to actions) into coded information which is transmitted in the virtual networks. We are interested in what the computers display for the users, interpreted as the virtual world for the individuals. This world is divided into a multitude of micro-worlds, which are built on different platforms, and the number of the platforms used by humans to interact virtually is gigantic. Nowadays, people have multiple accounts on various platforms, depending on their needs. And these are usually connected to an email address that bears a close resemblance to a person's basic identity in the virtual reality. But there is no rule, as the human can create and use many email addresses and accounts. The unity of the person's identity is virtually dispersed, and identity as a role is no longer connected to long-term actions, as in the case of occupations, but to the platform in which it is used. In order to use this platform, the person needs to create an account to express him/her and to be recognized by the others, which is called *avatar* – a type of a person's double, but to a lesser extent, by which we can speak about an individual without mentioning his real physical features. Since the person manifests as an avatar on an online platform, he/she begins building up a virtual identity. Unlike other types of identity, this one is, at least apparently, at the individual's own command. Every person can become whoever he/she wants, mastering the avatar's physical and psychological features created in the cyberspace. Yet humans can widely act freely and unconstrained on the internet, but ethical principles and rules of conduct are to be imposed; also, the possibilities to personalize the social media

accounts are limited, and a person cannot be stopped from acting in accordance with a specific platform, but totally different on another one.

The internet provides the possibility to increase the isolation from the self than any other types of individual objectivization, such as writing, objectivizations by which the person is able to create identities (through various professional, player, romantic, etc. online accounts) to be recognized but they are very distant from the inner self. The virtual reality can be considered by humans the environment where they can develop more personalities, not only one individuality, in spite of being aware of the own real identity behind the screen. A multitude of possibilities is allowed to the individual by the internet, a reality where the individual can identify him/her with almost anything, any time and as long as he/she wants; thus, totally different 'persons' are manifested.

However, the virtual identity does not represent a new fundamental type of identity for the human being. This type of self-projecting is not very different from writing a journal or an autobiography. The virtual identity is represented as part of the implemented narrative identity, that is the same type of identity, but which is developed by means of the internet (see Ifode 2016). In the cyberspace, writing about the self becomes easier and more accessible, there is no need for much knowledge to learn how to use a device connected to the internet, and any person feels at ease finding means to express himself, as it usually occurs by Facebook experience described as a "self writing" in a digital network. It can be observed the individual search to project him in a convenient way and to become important for the others, expressing in a strange way, in a simple language desired to be universal, separated from the individuality; and thus, the distance between the self and this new identity is continuously growing, the internet persona being perceived as trapped within a permanent process of composing and re-composing scattered mixed components (Ibid, 555; 560). It seems that the self exposure and the creation of a more complicated identity on the mentioned online social network are an activity of many people. They not only seek to create an identity as perfect as it can be, but they also try to be noticed by the others and to impose this new identity, in order to create convenient relationships with them. In the cyberspace, the person can pretend to be someone that could not exist in the real life (Wood & Smith 2005, 51), and to enjoy the possibility of creating an impossible identity for this life,

exactly as writing a completely abstract narration. This type of identity is the one which becomes very distant from the person, seeing that the exhibition in the cyberspace is mediated by the electronic devices that ensure the internet access. The identity of the self in the cyberspace is characterized by the “telepresence” (Ibid.) - the person considers himself as being present in the online in which he does not actually exist. We note that present people speak about their online activity like the inner self would participate in their cyberspace activity; identifying with their avatars, they consider being a part of the avatar’s world; and thus, the connection to the reality is ruined. In spite the fact that we use the electronic devices in order to express in the cyberspace, the difference between the direct and the indirect manifestation begins to vanish in the online (Ibid, 5). If we imagine a man playing online and we try to enter his mind, we could notice the Ego’s real life actions are subordinated at a larger extent to the unconsciousness than to the self-consciousness, because the latter is interested in the experience provided by the game.

#### PERSONA AND CYBERSPACE COMMUNICATION

The term of *persona* is used in many senses, but as far as our study is concerned, the most important refers to the relationship, the persona representing an instance that designates the human’s position in the world, a world of things and of Others.

As the Christian tradition is taken into account, Christos Yannaras (2000) introduces persona as the only possibility of a relationship. Persona is thought as a reference and a relationship between the Self and the Other, and this is because the individual is accepted by other people and becomes aware of his uniqueness, that is different from the others. The concept of persona is closely related to that of identity, because it is the persona that allows the existence of the identity, being the only one to constitute the relationship. The individual will be deprived of his own Identity, if he is not able to have a connection with this Identity. The Identity is built as a Self interpretation, a characteristic of a human being, and this interpretation is only defined as the confrontation between us and our own nature (Yannaras 2000, 44). What makes us very different from any other things or animals lies in the fact that we, as people, are able to build relationships. Regardless the attributes granted to humans, but lacking the instance of persona, we could not speak about its occurrence, or about its identification in this world.

Humans can only experience their own intelligibility in relation to others and to themselves. Living means to cohabit with others like us, being aware of there is another one like me (Ricoeur 1990), and what we designate by “the others” is actually what we know about them. Thus, the Other’s relationship and existence becomes obvious. We will not dare to claim that we know every person in this world, but we appreciate the existence of other humans as those around us, based on a human typology. We may know a person, but we become aware of a human type, and it can be explained that, in the process of knowing a person, an important investment on behalf of the Self is necessary, and as a result he opens and receives availability from the Other, investing time and resources in order to become acquainted and to consolidate their relationship. Having knowledge means to know about the existence of a human category, as the passers-by in the street are, but the difference between knowledge and having knowledge lies in the distance or in the closeness to the pole of intimacy. When we have knowledge of somebody, we only relate to that one as being different from us, without granting any personal representation, as in the case of big cities crowds, where the individuality dissipates, and the humans lose their faces (Bauman 1993). Consequently, the person distances himself from the individual’s authenticity, and thus becomes acquainted, not known, because the individual’s face and the entrance to his soul are forbidden. In such a context, persona loses in terms of the relationship, which is reduced to having knowledge about a certain Other, with whom he did not have any contact, and who is known as a result of interactions with close people or by means of the unintended mass information.

As the persona’s interaction on the internet is involved, we also consider the structures belonging to this environment. On the internet, as in real life, persona interacts with other people, even if we speak about relationships among the avatars, as at the other end of the connection there is always another human being or a virtual substitute built by the artificial intelligence which seeks to imitate the human. A virtual identity is a persona that is implied/built in online communication; so being involved, the self identifies and accepts itself as the own identity within the cyberspace.

As “any social relationship comes from the Other introduction to the Self, without any intervention of an image or a sign, by the simple facial expression” (Levinas 1990), the social relationship is described as being a direct one. But if such a direct relationship is not possible,

then we are questioning about the possibility or not of a social networking in the online environment. Here is the weak sense of persona in terms of the relationship that is to have knowledge of the Other and not actually to know him, his inner self, as Levinas refers to. Obviously, there are social relationships in the online, and people communicate; but it is the so called computer mediated communication (CMC). The communication is possible and indicates a clash between the persona's physical dimensions (the firstly perceived), as the face involves persona's abstract characteristics introduced to the Other and vice versa. There is a human's virtual interaction, even if there are not physical relationships among those who are at a certain distance. Regardless the physical distance, when people communicate online, they are in the others' proximity.

Proximity is superior to intentionality (Bauman 1993) and to physical proximity, and it can be a similarity between the location and the social space in which people express their intentionality towards each other, and currently any persona is close or strange. The unknown people are not peers, nor strangers (Ibid.), they can be socially close or repulsive, but the fact that we know nothing about them makes them attractive and in the same time, reluctant towards them. The online opens a new dimension to the unknown, in which physical closeness and distancing have been rejected, and the relationships are the only important issues. The Other, being unknown, can be more attractive to the Self, by simply considering that his/her face is obscure, characterized by pseudonymity, where the Self's expectations from the Other can be fulfilled.

People's online relationships, especially the romantic ones, are between the Self and someone invisible to the self, an image which the more obscure it is, the more attractive it is; and lacking a clear line of the other's personality, the Self builds his interlocutor, mainly based on his own expectations and desires. In the cyberspace, the strength of Self introduction can be overwhelming and the control that the Self takes upon the public information is superior to the one in the real life where his expression is dominated by unconscious gestures difficult to be noticed by the Self. Writing, photos, videos and games are among the main means used by a person to express online, and they allow the individual to see himself prior to introduction to the others. The online allows a hyperpersonal communication, by which some people are much more favored than within a physical meeting of the Other (Wood & Smith 2005, 97). Nevertheless, by the online communication,

persona is reduced to some universal clichés, despite the huge advantage offered to expression. And thus, an online danger is identified, as in online our access to another person in order to better know him is limited, and the relationship with a projected instance can be an illusion, actually being unable of the Other's existence.

For online connection with the others, persona creates an avatar, by which introduces him/her to the others, ensuring the access within the cyberspace. On the other hand, the online expression is carried out, as previously mentioned, by a manifestation irrespective of a person, by means of a language and signs that belong to symbols available to all users (Iftode 2016, 9), thus providing the alienation of the self, and a strong impairment in time, for both his Identity and for the others. People try to express their emotions by writing tricks techniques, by emojis, etc.; but these are universal symbols and there is a small probability that this kind of expressions does belong to the Self. Somehow, there is a self-exposure turning to a false one, hiding the true Self.

Also, the previously mentioned hyperpersonal communication represents "a perspective on mediated communication suggesting that greater control over self-presentation by the sender, overestimations by the receiver, the asynchronicity of the channel, and confirming messages offered through feedback allow some people to express themselves better in mediated rather than in face-to-face interactions" (Wood & Smith 2005, 97). In other words, some people are able to better expose themselves online, due exactly to the distance and to the mediation between them and the others, overcoming certain emotional barriers that are present in face-to-face communication. We can agree on this fact, but this does not mean that such an interaction is necessarily more honest, because it can provide the opportunity to expose his real Self, as the distance between him and the interlocutor is trustworthy, and unveiling some personal secrets could affect the persona's integrity. But the inner protection mechanisms are still working and a closer relationship, even from an anonymous person, could activate them.

## CONCLUSION

Discussing the connection between the Self and the Other in the online communication, we tried to show some particularities of it concerning the question of Identity. The fact that we are humans taking action in this world of other individuals is defining for the human condition.

Identity depends on the relationship to the Other, as the individuality would not be meaningful in a world where the Self is isolated; even though we consider an another Self active online, respectively the avatar: a person's visual and textual representation in an online game, a conversation, etc., that involves human expression in the cyberspace. If this representation is considered to be authentic or not, there is a need to be further discussed. Firstly, within the cyberspace, the persona can seek to be real, to be represented by his image upon the self, without any external influence. On the other hand, a persona can express online, in accordance with a convenient relationship with the others, and not related to the self; thus, the authenticity becoming the persona's private matter. Online, persona is reduced to an avatar, that is somebody's projection, an actant, and the individual behind the action is the least important. This is indicative for the humans that post videos or create live-streaming events followed by many other people, without unveiling their real identity. The persona can be easily considered a shadow that the Self introduces to the Other in order to set the terms for a relationship and not to approaching mutual knowledge.

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