

**Thoughts on an appropriate understanding of the relationship between
cyberspace and "real life"**
by Béla Pokol

Abstract

Society moving into cyberspace began almost a quarter of a century ago with the emergence of e-mail. Today, accelerated by the need for pandemic-induced closure, it has created a range of social activities in cyberspace. And if we read the reports of the information science research laboratories on the already developed developments of the Internet of Things, smart homes and smart cities, in 15 to 20 years we can assume that most of the social activities will move from physical space to cyberspace. In addition to the many benefits, the resulting problems (e.g., from the sovereignty concerns of states organized in physical space, to the dramatic concerns of children's socialization inextricably linked to physical spatial contact, to the disintegration of local cultures) have already been voiced in research. The magnitude of the shift, however, suggests that our old familiar concepts of physical-spatial society are inadequate to describe the phenomena of the new cyberspace society. However, because of the rapid changes, we cannot help using the concepts we have developed over the past hundred years to express the new phenomena in cyberspace society.

Society moving into cyberspace began almost a quarter of a century ago with the emergence of e-mail. Today, accelerated by the need for pandemic-induced closure, it has created a range of social activities in cyberspace. And if we read the reports of the information science research laboratories on the already developed developments of the Internet of Things, smart homes and smart cities, in 15 to 20 years we can assume that most of the social activities will move from physical space to cyberspace. In addition to the many benefits, the resulting problems (e.g., from the sovereignty concerns of states organized in physical space, to the dramatic concerns of children's socialization inextricably linked to physical spatial contact, to the disintegration of local cultures) have already been voiced in research. The magnitude of the shift, however, suggests that our old familiar concepts of physical-spatial society are inadequate to describe the phenomena of the new cyberspace society. However, because of the rapid changes, we cannot help using the concepts we have developed over the past hundred years to express the new phenomena in cyberspace society. For example, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and a number of such tech giants have spontaneously received the name of "social media", of which they are presented as their simple expansion in addition to the existing mass media. The colorful activities of more than three billion Facebook users and the functional services for science, entertainment, political organizing, artistic self-expression and many other functions make Facebook as well as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube the "continents" of cyberspace society. Thus, Google and other such tech giants cannot be perceived as simple additions to the mass media. They are complemented by sectoral global cyberspace platforms such as "akademia.edu", which encompass hundreds of thousands of

university people and researchers on every continent and, like internal scientific Facebook, enable scientific debates on published studies within minutes.

But they not only gather masses of people from a distance, they also shift the previously physical spatial contacts of intimate small communities into cyberspace, creating intimacy between them without face-to-face contact. And the basis of all this is the Internet, from which cyberspace connects with the physical layer of being of the comprehensive reality and the remnants of the physical-spatial society.

Thus, the emergence of the cyberspace society at a stormy pace represents a new level compared to the social changes of many thousands of years, and the concepts we have developed so far become misleading when we use them for this new society. Of course, conceptual attempts to capture the new social reality started in narrow social science circles, and *Manuel Castells*, for example, coined the concept of a "network society" in 1996, when the Internet was spreading more widely. Later, some countries mainly used the term "Internet society", and more recently the term "digital society" has been used for it. In the latter case, it is worth pointing out a common mistake that makes it difficult to grasp the specifics of cyberspace society.

In her book „Digital Sociology”, *Deborah Lupton* recommends avoiding the name "cyberspace," arguing that it was still widely used at the turn of the millennium, but it is better to reject it because it associates this perception very strongly with science fiction, and this interferes with unbiased scientific analysis.¹ The reason for the more recent avoidance of its use emerges more clearly in a 2020 study by *Pete Fussey and Silke Roth*, and it consists of seeing the world of the Internet as juxtaposed with real life under the term cyberspace: "Whereas early analyses separated 'cyberspace' from 'real' life, it is now recognized that the ubiquity of digital technology and the growing inseparability of online and offline interactions renders this bifurcation obsolete (if ever adequate)." ²

This notion of juxtaposition of cyberspace and real life also appears in the widespread naming, in which communication communities created on Facebook and other Internet contacts are considered „virtual communities” and part of „virtual reality”, and only the human communities in the physical-geographical space are called 'real' community. However, this represents a philosophical-ontological misunderstanding of reality and is also based on the fact that the new Internet reality is mainly researched by computer scientists and sociologists and philosophical research with ontological foundations is rare in this field. But, for example, according to Nicolai Hartmann's ontological layer theory, the spread of Internet contact in its social activity only means that the weight of the topmost of the four levels of reality, the intellectual layer of being, increases above the other layers of being. In parallel, the hitherto stronger dependence of the intellectual organizations of society on the physical and biological layers of reality decreases, although this dependence ultimately remains. Let us first take a closer look at Hartmann's ontological theory of layers and then return to the question of the correct ontological understanding of cyberspace.

1) Hartmann's theses about the four layers of being of reality

¹ “The cyber focus of cultural studies emphasises the futuristic ,science-fiction dimensions of computerized technologies.” *Deborah Lupton: Digital Sociology*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. London and New York. 2015. 13. p.

² *Pete Fussey and Silke Roth: Digitizing Sociology: Continuity and Change in the Internet Era. (E-special Issue Introduction) Sociology (Vol. 54 (4)) 660.p.*

That "human" proper to man includes the intellectual layer of being and its gradual dominance over the physical, biological and psychical layers of being signifies the evolution of human life, but at every moment man is governed by the laws of the four layers of being simultaneously. Man is a multi-layered being and human communities can unfold only within the cumulative framework of the laws of the four layers of being. The higher layers of being can develop only if the laws of the lower ones are respected, but this is not an obstacle to the autonomy of the laws of the higher layer of being in relation to the laws of the lower layers of being.³ The construction of the higher layer of being means first the over-formation of the categories of the lower layer of being, but the still higher layer no longer mean such over-formation, but they are over-formed with their own categories about the lower layer of being. While the essential elements of the physical world are used by the biological layer of being - only overformed by the laws of its own layer of being - no essential elements of the lower layers are determined by the mental and then the spiritual layer of being.

Hartmann described these connections as follows: "In order to comprehend multi-layeredness, it is sufficient to stick to what is generally known. Nobody doubts that organic life is essentially different from the physical-material. But it does not exist independently of the latter: it contains it in itself, is based on it, indeed the laws of the physical extend deeply into the organism. This does not prevent the organism from having its own laws beyond them, which do not merge into them. Such self-legislation then over-shapes the lower, general physical legality. It is similar with the relation of the spiritual being to the organic life. The soul is, as the phenomena of consciousness prove, quite dissimilar to the organic, it obviously forms its own layer of being above it. But it exists everywhere, where we meet it, in dependence on it, as carried being. (...) Thus, the mental being is indeed carried being, but in its peculiarity it is autonomous in spite of all dependence. Finally, since the overcoming of psychologism, it is a well-known fact that the realm of intellectual being is not absorbed in that of psychical being and its laws. Neither the logical laws nor the peculiarity of cognition and knowledge could be exploited psychologically. Much less the sphere of will and action, of valuation, of law, of ethos, of religion, of art. These areas all reach far beyond the realm of psychic phenomena, if only in terms of their phenomenal content. As intellectual life they form a layer of being of their own and higher kind, with whose richness and variety the lower ones cannot remotely measure up. But also here the same relation to the lower being prevails. The spirit does not float in the air, we know it only as carried intellectual life - carried by the intellectual being, not differently than this is carried by the organism and further by the material. Here, too, then, and here more than ever, it is a question of autonomy of the higher layer in relation to the lower, precisely in dependence on it."⁴ So man is the unity of four layers of being, and human reason can only exert effects constructively over the lower layers of being - over the biological basis of the human body. In particular, pure intellectual activity is the terrain of the intellectual layer of being and Hartmann distinguishes three internal domains of this layer: the domain of the individual spirit, the domain of the objective spirit, and the domain of the objectified spirit. The first two are the living spirit and the objectified spirit means the terrain of the dead spirit, but remarkably, it can only ever be referred back to the contents of the objectified spirit, and only in this way can these contents be brought back into the living spirit. The individual spirit lives together with the contents of the objective spirit of its time, and more or less it carries a multiplicity of individual spirits to the objective spirit and its inner forms as the folk spirit and other collective spiritual forms of the epoch.

³ See Nicolai Hartmann: *Der Aufbau der realen Welt*. Walter de Gruyter. Berlin. 1940; N. Hartmann: *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften*. 3. unveränderte Auflage. Walter de Gruyter. Berlin. 1962.

⁴ N. Hartmann: *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften*. 3. unveränderte Auflage. Walter de Gruyter. Berlin. 1962. 16-17. p.

But also the individual spirit has to a large extent such contents that the objective spirit contains, and thus their relation can be described as mutual carriers of each other. The third form - that of the objectified spirit - always multiplies with the enrichment of the fixation of the spiritual contents due to the writing and other forms of fixation. In this way the individual spirits can use in addition to the contents of the objective spirit of their epoch the intellectual contents of each era and as a reaction in this way the contents and form of the objective spirit of the epoch can enrich themselves. On the level of the intellectual layer of being the living collectivity arises in this way, while on the biological level the frame of common existence is carried only by the community of the species over its always disappearing individuals and likewise the mental life can always be isolated only for the single individuals and it is not transferable. As Hartmann writes: "Each one has his spiritual being for himself. It is the esoteric being of the individual, non-transferable, with which one can have contact, but into which one cannot enter. One can indeed suffer and rejoice with it, but it is and remains a second suffering and a second rejoicing next to the original, and it remains, even with all its intimacy, qualitatively different from it. The thought, however, that one has, can be thought as the same when it is grasped; it is indeed a second act of thought, act of another consciousness, but it is the same thought." ⁵

Hartmann makes another distinction within the intellectual layer of being, which appears in the boundary between the objective (living) mind and the objectified (dead) mind. According to this distinction, the fixed mental contents of the past - beliefs, behavioral patterns, moral and cultural values, etc. - may appear in the present as routinely followed standards. But it means another kind of carrying into the past, if it is fixed only as a purely objectified intellectual content for reaching the individuals, but no longer appears on the level of the mass committed beliefs, knowledge and prejudices. Then only the individual individual spirit can consciously fall back on this dead objectified intellectual content and only he can bring it into the living objective spirit: "This is the being-in-force or still being-alive (of a custom, view), thus the power of the "thing" to hold on to the continuing spirit with a certain steadiness, even there, where it otherwise changes visibly (...). ...) In the case of the perceptible carrying in, it is different everywhere where the thing itself no longer lives on, the immediate tradition is torn off." ⁶

A high degree of independence of cyberspace as part of spiritual being layer of reality.

According to Hartmann's layer theory, the new addition of machine thinking and artificial intelligence to the human sense by which society has been hitherto organized can be seen as a radical increase in the weight of the intellectual layer of being above the physical and biological layers of being. In parallel, its independence has also grown to a qualitatively new level through its rise. ⁷ Although the physical structures of the Internet reconnect the new cyberspace society to the physical layer of reality, the new society is constantly being built and organized above the physical layer of being beyond this mere "one-point" connection. And when Internet proliferation by Elon Musk and his competitors' satellites allows the Internet to be directly accessible worldwide, today's physical reconnection infrastructure will also be diluted and transferred to space. Of course, billions of individuals are tied to their

⁵ Hartmann 1962, 71. p.

⁶ Hartmann 1962, 38. p.

⁷ See in detail my earlier study, Béla Pokol: Philosophical ontology, artificial intelligence and moral. *Jogelméleti Szemle* 2021 No. 1.

biological layer of being in addition to this single point of reconnection. Compared to the past, however, this means only a lesser degree of reconnection, as we can see today in the lifestyles of all people who are more involved in intellectual activities.

The peculiarity of the society above the layers of being of the natural reality has always been its organization as an intellectual layer of being, and therefore the cyberspace society, which has formed through the Internet, can be understood as a communicative-sensual connection, which is purified from physical-biological influences. In this connection, the billions of meaningful communications are already organized in such a way that the geographical distances of physical space and the biological details of the communication participants are set aside. However, in order for them to be organized in this way, the cyberspace platforms based on the already established Internet are needed to connect and bridge the oral, written and video contact of millions and billions of people in the shortest possible time. The next prerequisite for this is that the emergence of one or two world languages as a common language can promote communicative connectivity, or at least reliable compilers can bridge the linguistic divide. In this way, for example, the DeepL translation program can translate some world languages into each other essentially error-free already in the latter years.

The cyberspace society is thus a society of direct intellectual interconnection, and the increasingly intensive interconnection of billions of people is linked by Facebook, Twitter, etc. as the continents and oceans of the new society. On these, communities of millions from science, economy, art, politics, administration, education, religion, etc. are increasingly brought together and organized in cyberspace.

In the meantime, however, the fact that people's identity is still given by national and religious cultural ideas has not changed, and there are fundamental contradictions and hostilities between them. Moreover, there are constant struggles for economic dominance and subordination among them. Therefore, physical spatial institutions and state borders are still needed by different human communities to defend themselves, while the cyberspace society seems to be pulling the ground out of them. Therefore, the great struggle led by China and Russia has just begun to build a technical Internet system that respects state sovereignty instead of the already established technical basis of the Internet as the world Internet. And since the transition of societies into cyberspace has been the biggest change in years - and will only intensify - the biggest world political battles between the proponents of the World Internet and the defenders of state sovereignty and its underlying forces are expected in the near future.

Summarizing the basic idea of this short paper, we can state that we cannot avoid correcting the views on the difference of cyberspace and real life. The tendencies of the last years, of which the physical-spatial social activities are more and more transferred to the cyberspace through the Internet, will only expand and deepen in the future. Based on Nicolai Hartmann's ontological layer theory, we can formulate this as a new form of the uppermost intellectual layer of being of reality, which consists of four layers of being. Similarly, new forms of community created in the world of the Internet cannot be seen as part of virtual reality (which unconsciously limits reality to physical and biological reality), but must also be seen as part of social reality. The terms "digital society" and "digital sociology" currently used by most studies to signal these new trends blur the broader process of digitization with the narrower scope of the rise of cyberspace over physical space. The important problem is that this blurring does not allow us to analyze in sufficient depth the specificity of cyberspace society as opposed to physical spatial society.