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NEGATIVE MEANINGS OF THE INTERNET:
THE NET REGULATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER'S STRONG PROGRAM
IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Jeffrey C. Alexander, the founder of the strong program of cultural sociology, has described cultural meanings connected with the computer. Using the concepts of this prominent theoretician, this article relates his theories to the Internet. Perceiving the Net through a lens of cultural meanings, one must consider code and narrations. At the code level, the Internet falls within the sacral (sacred) sphere because it is believed to completely change social life. There are two narrations related to the Net, the positive and the negative one. In the case of the negative narration, many various motives may be identified. They are linked with the necessity to control both the very technology and its users. Although regulation of technology is primarily concerned with watching over the operations of large Internet firms, users must also develop appropriate habits in using the Net. The article is aimed at characterizing this regulation through qualitative analysis of publications by selected writers. The author argues that today the negative narration is connected with highlighting the misfortunes which are supposed to result from the lack of Internet regulations.

Key words: cultural sociology; Jeffrey C. Alexander; Internet studies; regulation of the Internet; cyberoptimism; cyberpessimism.

Cultural Sociology and Information Machine

Jeffrey C. Alexander, one of the most prominent modern American sociologists and the founder of the strong program in cultural sociology, perceives culture as an independent subject (Alexander 2010b; Alexander and Smith 2003; Bartmański 2010; Emirbayer 2004; Eyerman 2004). At later phases of his career, the American theoretician developed the concept that social actors are able to systematize their lives by means of cultural signs and symbols. They do this by referring all encountered phenomena to the sacral (*sacred*) sphere, which determines the shape of the social world. People generally want to be closer to

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the sacred and not necessarily to follow a path of behavior that leads toward the profane, which is considered not worth our focus and contradicts the "true" nature of social life.

The "strong program" presented by Alexander is a proposition that differs from the currently applied ideas. Other concepts view culture as a dependent variable, culture is perceived as determined by fixed features of the social system (the social structure). It is implied that the set of meanings that make up culture depends on the qualities of the social groups studied. In other words, cultural meanings are always deciphered from social structure or reduced to the descriptions of norms of particular groups of people. Opposing such an approach, Alexander chose to treat culture as an independent variable that coexists "next to" the social system. In this sense, meanings may be studied as separate from those components of the society the shape of which they define. In the presented approach, culture is dramatically detached from social structure (from the social system).

The strong program assumes firm reliance on hermeneutic reconstruction of meanings. It is necessary to employ the mental process that is present in Geertz's "thick description" of symbols and interpersonal relations (see Smith 2008). To Geertz's analysis, Alexander introduces the concept of pure cultural text (that is, pure meaning), which should be analyzed as if it was a literary text. Formal models of literary texts are useful, as, for example, in the theory of literary genres. One may therefore perceive cultural meanings, which have developed around a particular phenomenon that has its own code. War is a good example, because it is always based on the opposition of "us" (which is presumed to be good) against "them" (which is presume to be bad). Regarding cultural meanings, it seems relevant to discuss narration as the setting of an element of social life within a continuous story that legitimizes it. Referring again to the example of war, it may be argued that narration may be either "saving" (war as the way leading to common happiness) or "apocalyptical" (war as sacrifice).

Cultural sociology (some call this trend the "Alexander's paradigm") is studied by a considerable number of scientists, and the strong program is currently being developed in various directions (see Bartmański and Alexander 2012). Alexander himself has described many various social phenomena, using theoretical assumptions he has developed. The list of his publications includes studies on celebrities (2010a), the Holocaust (2003: 27–84), or civil society (2003: 155–178).

In *The Meanings of Social Life*, Alexander considered the issue of technology and wrote:

Considered in its social reference – its economic and scientific forms – technology is a thing that can be touched, observed, interacted with, and calculated in an objectively

rational way. Analytically, however, technology is also part of the cultural order. It is a sign, both a signifier and a signified, in relation to which actors cannot entirely separate their subjective states of mind (2003: 180).

To illustrate that technology belongs to the arena of arbitrary cultural signs (just as it is also a material item), Alexander indicated some positive and negative meanings related to this "information machine", that is, the computer which has become both the object of the sacred as well as the profane.

Alexander's analysis of press materials from *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and other magazines (Alexander analyzed ten different magazines), published between 1945 and 1975, showed that the information machine has undergone "sacralization." The study of the articles revealed a clear code based on the binary opposition of the "sacred" versus the "everyday." The meanings that have developed about the computer present it as a mysterious object of a divine power that changes the world to such a degree that nothing will ever be the same. The change occurs because of specific "priests," that is, engineers, able to mediate between what is divine (the computer) and what is lay (ordinary, everyday life). Thanks to knowledge—sometimes gained with huge effort and over a long period of time—engineers are able to lead humanity into the new era.

There are two "narrations" that have emerged around the development of the computer; from the selected periodicals, two views are clearly observable: the salvation rhetoric (the positive narration) and the apocalyptical rhetoric (the negative narration). After World War II many believed technology would eliminate many weaknesses of humanity (the positive narration). For example, technology would liberate humans from strenuous work, free people, enable creative pursuits, and allow anyone to know anything at any time. Simultaneously there have been many reports on the disastrous influence of computers (the negative narration). According to the critical journalists, computers can objectify people who are becoming helpless under the power of machines. Impersonal relationships between people, manipulations by computers that can be more intelligent than people, and even rebellion of computers and complete degradation of humankind caused by them are argued to be the effects of the information boom.

Narrations of the Internet

Currently, the main issue for scientific consideration in not the computer itself as much as it is the technology related to the computer, namely, the Internet. It must be stressed that there is still no analysis of meanings having grown around this medium, which would use the categories developed by the strong program in cultural sociology. Inspired by this concept, however, I shall indicate

cultural meanings connected with the Net, and I shall be particularly interested not in the positive rhetoric as much as in the rhetoric that draws our attention to the darker sides of the Internet. I argue that nowadays the negative rhetoric developed around the Internet is connected with highlighting the misfortunes which are the result of lack of Net regulation. I attempt to prove that in the case of negative rhetoric viewed in this way many various motives may be identified; they shall be indicated and described.

The importance of meanings surrounding the Net has been noticed by Evgeny Morozov in his latest book *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2013). I shall return to Morozov's opinions later; here, I only intend to point out that he has written about *Internet-centrism*, a specific way of perceiving the Web. According to this theory, one needs to discuss "the Internet" (in quotation marks), which is understood not as the infrastructure but a product detached from it and existing independently. Morozov highlights that the Net ought to be treated as "postmodernistic metanarration". The Internet is like religion because we yield to the myths related to it, which implies that the Net is for us either sacred or evil.

Obviously, Morozov does not consider "the Internet" from the angle of cultural sociology: mostly, he fails to observe any superior code, and his postulates focus too much on social structure. Morozov criticizes both the supporters and the opponents of the described medium for being stuck in a world of meanings and for their unwillingness to concentrate on how the Internet *actually* functions at the level of social system. According to the author, the material (which is an objectively cognizable structure connected with the Net) may be—and has to be—discovered only through reliable empirical research after one is liberated from the vicious circle of meanings.

Unlike Morozov, I accept the thesis of the autonomic nature of signs referring to the Internet. I neither focus on social structure, nor consider the influence of the meanings on people's lives. I exclusively focus on the meanings. The consequence of the assumption I have accepted, that meanings are autonomic, is that it is not necessary to answer the question of which views reflect the objective reality of social systems. The key issue is to describe the meanings, regardless of what the Net infrastructure looks like and how it has been changing over the years. According to Alexander and his followers, social structure is always connected with a system of arbitrary cultural signs in the sense that dominant meanings determine the ways in which people act (see Reed 2008). Culture, however, is in the autonomic sphere, and, for this reason, I find the intellectual measure used by Morozov a rather irrelevant one; I consider the way in which the views about the Internet shape the world of social facts as rather insignificant.

Similar to the above-mentioned information machine, in the case of the Net, there is also the binary code, which pertains to both the divinity and the everyday. The Internet, like the computer, is perceived as a sacred object, and

therefore is one that it is capable of transforming reality like no other medium before. Morozov is right to argue that we are fascinated by the Net and we view it as revolutionizing all domains of life. Looking at the Internet from this perspective, we can also identify engineers ("priests") of the new religion of the Net. They are representatives of Silicon Valley, persons professionally dealing in information technologies, prophets of new mobile technologies, managers of large Internet firms, and people who are commonly referred to as "geeks," to name a few. They constantly improve the Internet and struggle to popularize it, which naturally requires thorough preparation through proper education and knowledge. Moreover, the Internet partners with particular features of character, such as "enterprise" (Mark Zuckerberg), "vision" (Sergey Brin, Larry Page), or "creativity" (Steve Jobs).

Various narrations emerge around the Internet. It is my belief that two basic types of discourse should be observed. They are related to that side of the code that has been defined as the sacred (capable of transforming the reality). The first narration is "openness," which implies a lack of any regulations or control (characteristic of the Net), guarantee people bright futures. The other narration is quite different—the narration of regulation—because some control is necessary. Without control, the Internet is a source of multiple dangers.

The aim of the article is to characterize this narration of regulation. I describe the meanings that are related to it through the analysis of books by known publicists. The works which I analyze have been selected based on publicity they have received (all the analyzed books may be considered as those which have gained much popularity). My procedure is different from Alexander's who, presenting his description of views linked with the information machine, relied on press reports. Although I use other sources, similar to the investigations by Alexander, my sample of analyzed materials is not representative. Like Alexander, I am not concerned with quantitative analysis of content; instead, I use a qualitative analysis. I rely primarily on the analysis and interpretation of the presented works, some of which are discussed in a more detailed way, whereas others are referred to only briefly. The justification for such a selective approach is the recurrence of issues discussed in the books; instead of listing and summarizing all of the sources one by one, I simply distinguish between their common motives. It has to be emphasized that the ‚innovativeness' of the article results from this very ordering of those sources. It is not that the presented opinions of publicists are something completely new – my aim is to clearly order those opinions and describe them in the light of the strong program in cultural sociology by Alexander. This is where the added value of the presented article should be sought.

It is worth stressing that characterizing the rhetoric of regulation is also reporting something about the rhetoric of openness (because the discourse related to control very often simply negates the discourse of openness). Therefore, to

provide the reader with an idea of how those two kinds of discourse contrast, it is worth looking at the narration of openness (even though my objective is not to precisely discuss the positive meanings grown around the Internet).

The story about the advantages of lack of regulation is told by people who perceive the free (not controlled) Internet as the reason for a series of phenomena which are significant for the improvement of human life. Thanks to the Net, we can simply shape our own media environment, unrestricted by any external factors. The Internet should not be controlled in any way (for example, by any authorities). Regulation fails to foster particular individuals' interests, including their intellectual, social, and cultural development. It is the individual social actors that should determine the shape of the Internet; and, therefore, it should be shaped bottom-up.

Various authors (Benkler 2008; Negroponte 1995) praise the openness and flexibility of the Internet that promotes community activities undertaken on an unparalleled scale. The power of the Net is said to result from the fact that, because of it, every person is able to play a much more active role than was possible before its development. The open architecture of the Internet translates into citizen freedoms and democratic participation (Östman 2012; Petray 2011).

Lack of control over the cyberspace is believed to result in an impressive creative activity which changes the consumer landscape. Because of the Internet, consumers are becoming "prosumers" as they can now participate in the act of product creation (Beer and Burrows 2010; Cole 2011; Napoli 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Siuda 2012a; 2012b). Prosumers are—for example—users of portals like Facebook or fans of the cinema, television series, books, comics, and other productions of popular culture, and they participate in various bulletin boards, micro-blogs, or repositories of amateur works. For them, the Internet is a venue for meetings, discussions and exchange of objects related to their passions (see Beer 2008; Green and Jenkins 2009; Lee 2011). "Prosumption," however, cannot occur by itself; it happens within the open architecture of the Net. If we begin to excessively control the Internet, for example, by prohibiting fans from creating amateur productions to protect the copyright, then the users will be frightened and abandon their efforts. At the core of "prosumption" lies its very lack of control; to allow the bottom-up content generation, everyone must be free to submit the content they wish (see Brabham 2008; Surowiecki 2004).

User activity should also be fostered by the heterogeneity of the Net. It is argued (see Ellison et al. 2007) that the continuous and uncontrolled accumulation of content (as the Internet should be) promotes people's development by broadening their mental horizons. The masses of information, presentations of all possible points of view, or incessant discussions are conditions of an online existence that leads to the development of the valued diversity of thought. Participation in various virtual communities enriches the individuals' social and

cultural capital. It is worth stressing that in the case of the narration of openness, the users are treated as responsible people, that is those who get involved only in such activities which are to their advantage. The occurrence of pathological behaviors, that is harmful to particular individuals, is excluded. This cannot be otherwise since the Net has these specific positive qualities.

The Internet also fosters learning and acquiring information. With the Net, we are simply liberated from our intellectual weaknesses, for example, from the limitations of our memory, because data storing in the "cloud" eliminates the necessity to remember everything (see Van Dijck 2005).

Narration of Regulation – Characteristics of Various Motives

The meanings connected with the narration of openness show that it is necessary to avoid any regulation of the Internet. Moving away from the architecture of openness is argued to have serious consequences of ruining all that has already been achieved because of the Net. "Control" means returning to the terrible pre-Internet era when it was impossible to shape our media environment ourselves, to be an involved citizen, or to creatively or intellectually fulfill oneself.

A completely different picture appears if we look at the discourse related to regulation. Here, the necessity to control the Net is stressed. If we allow openness to develop further, it will be a disaster for particular individuals and for societies in general. For the purpose of organizing the meanings of the narration of regulation, I distinguish its two basic motives: (1) the motive of regulating the technology, and (2) the motive of regulating the users. With regard to regulating the technology, the need to control the Internet results from the fact that the Internet is not as advantageous of an environment as it was previously expected. The Net is governed by powerful mechanisms, hidden from the ordinary person's view, which fail to guarantee freedom or development of creativity. It is important to discover those mechanisms, discuss them, and—most importantly—control them so that they will not lead to any serious and irreversible negative social consequences. Technology regulation primarily depends on keeping an eye on the entities that establish new mechanisms, that is, the "priests" of the new information technologies.

The rhetoric of regulating is not only directed at the mechanisms governing the Internet, but also shows that it is necessary to control the practices of the users themselves. The motive of user regulation most of all stresses the necessity to "self-control," that is, to develop habits of proper use of the Net. This motive usually highlights the role of external social controls (a school, for example). Most importantly, users have to be perceived both as individuals (particular persons) and as larger entities (nation states) as users of the Internet.

These two motives are—in my opinion—two main motives to understand; but there are still several other motives to be recognized within these two main categories. The regulation narrative may be divided, for example, into proactive measures or reactive measures. That is, whether one wishes to control the Internet before or after a negative effect has occurred. Another way of categorizing the meanings related to the rhetoric of regulating is to identify the informal activities (undertaken by individuals or informal groups) and the formal activities (for example the activities of various institutions) of Internet users. Although some other motives may also be discussed, these two (the motive of regulating the technology, and the motive of regulating the users) are the most clearly visible and they are the most suitable for organizing the narration of regulation. In the following sections of this article, I briefly characterize these two motives and then attempt to offer a short systematization of my considerations.

Technology Regulation Motive: Behavioral Advertising and Privacy

Controlling technology is argued (see MacKinnon 2012; Vaidhyanathan 2011; Zittrain 2008) to be the controlling of its engineers, because they are developing an information monopoly in such a way that searching for information on the Internet without the participation of large companies is becoming impossible. The engineers are thus said to have great power over how our knowledge is built, or over the values we follow. As a final result, we are becoming too incapacitated and lose our independence because of the way the large companies "shape" the Internet.

The representatives of regulation ridicule the common view (voiced by the Internet engineers) that Net users are captains of their own "new-media ships," that they are sailing freely on the immense ocean of Internet transmissions. Those who believe this are thought to be shortsighted because they fail to take into consideration the monstrosities that are lurking inside the Internet but are invisible at first glance: the mechanisms of algorithmization and user segregation and profiling. These mechanisms provide Internet users with content that is supposed to match their interests in the best way and be in accordance with their browser history. The aim of "spying" is most often commercial—to provide such advertisements that will arouse one's desire to possess new things. The carefully collected data are sold to marketing specialists and sellers. However, behavioral advertising influences not only what advertisements we see but also determines the types of services offered to us, the kind of news reaching us, or the entertainment offered, which results in numerous negative consequences (see Keen 2012).

Joseph Turow, in his book *The Daily You* argues that those consequences are related to the discriminatory potential of the new ways of collecting and providing knowledge on consumers. Dividing consumers into particular types,

depending on their online behavior is said to cause specific inequality. Only some consumers—those assigned to a higher economic segment—are offered luxurious products, price reductions, or bigger loans. Such a situation may result in lowering the self-esteem of those who fail to get such bargains. Additionally, in the future, it will even be possible to consider the emergence of a specific sub-class of Internet losers.

Turow postulates a bigger control over the new media enterprises because, without it, we are bound to experience a downward spiral very soon. Govern-mental regulations that restrict the negative activities described here are needed. If the information monopoly gained by the large enterprises was also ham-pered by proper governmental measures, the situation would not be that bad. Without proper regulations, the Net is said to cease being the public good (see McChesney 2013). These processes have to be stopped by means of legislature; and some less formal control is also necessary, which means that academics and activists have to write more on the effects of profiling, thereby making Internet users more and more aware.

In her book *I Know Who You Are and I Saw What You Did*, Lori Andrews (2011) demonstrated that we need to restrict behavioral advertising as it contrib-utes to a series of negative Internet practices related to invasions of privacy. The question is no longer the very suiting of advertisements to consumers, but the consequent, too thoughtless attitude to privacy that is frequently ignored.

According to the author, to secure our privacy, we must care for it ourselves, for example by switching off cookies in the browser. Andrews is not a supporter of opting out of behavioral advertising mechanisms, but considers it obligatory to provide complete information about them and to obtain the users' consent to use them (opting in). In short, after entering a site, users should be informed about possible invasions of privacy and be asked to give permission. The opponents of such solutions are giants, like Facebook, and Andrews criticizes them ruthlessly.

The author does not blame Internet users for not caring for their own privacy, for example, for publishing inappropriate photos on Facebook. Even such care-less people should be protected, and the best solution is various kinds of legal regulations to ensure that nobody will be harmed by their online image (which is often distorted and simplified). The message coming from Andrew's book is clear: to develop individuals' rights to privacy, greater legal regulation of the In-ternet – perhaps an "Internet constitution" as the author suggests – seems obliga-tory. Previous legal regulations are insufficient because they are unclear, they concern the offline sphere more than the online arena, or they protect the inter-ests of the wrong party (those who invade privacy). Regarding its protection, the division of the Internet's public sphere (what is visible for all users) and the private one (what is visible only for friends) is very important, but both must be protected.

Technology Regulation Motive: Decline of Creativity

Eli Pariser (2011) indicated the dangers of personalization and profiling. The author focused more on the "soft" face of those phenomena, showing not their economic side, but the one connected with our intellectual horizons, that narrow as a result of locking ourselves in the so-called filter bubble (see Sunstein 2002). On the personalized information Web sites, news on similar topics are displayed non-stop, browsers continuously show the same results (on the basis of our previous search history), and dating Web sites recommend partners who are specifically matched to us (based on a series of tests).

According to Pariser, the consequences of personalization are both individual and cultural. First, the "bubble" is degrading us intellectually because the redundant content reaching us fails to contribute to our development. We fail to learn many new things, and fail to come up with innovative, original ideas; in short, we are becoming intellectually impoverished. In a world of continuously repeating transmissions, there is little that could surprise us. We are seldom able to get beyond our narrow group of Internet friends. According to the publicist, the positive forecasts of how the Net will develop our social capital have proven incorrect.

The information we are absorbing is not only redundant, it is also often idiotic. Nothing can more easily permeate our bubbles than content, which promotes sex and violence or is gossip-related or simple entertainment. It is simply easier for us to click the "like" button for the new video of a music star, a perfectly shot goal in a soccer match, or for news that our friend has just broken their life record running a marathon, than for some more serious content. By this, Pariser means "hard" transmissions that may be emotionally bothering, such as news about hungry children in Africa, or news related to complex social problems, such as homelessness. If we are not activists fighting for aid to Africa or social workers involved in issues related to homelessness, we may be cut off from news related to these topics on the Net. Reading about these topics from time to time is important to becoming an "aware" citizen who participates and has their own opinion.

According to Pariser, not everything is lost. The author argues that "the Internet isn't doomed, for a simple reason: This new medium is nothing if not plastic. Its great strength, in fact, is its capacity for change. Through a combination of individual action, corporate responsibility, and governmental regulation, it's still possible to shift course" (201). Additionally, Pariser notes that there is no purpose for counting on corporate responsibility as all self-regulation practices accepted by firms are only profit-oriented (see Fernback and Papacharissi 2007). All hope lies in the development of proper laws that will impose on entrepreneurs the obligation to care for users (for example, by limiting personalization and making intentions transparent).

Viewpoints, like that of Pariser, may be easily interpreted as doubting the power of "prosumption." People cannot be productive and creative because the Net degrades them intellectually and fails to provide the inflow of new, inspiring content. Additionally, because we keep ourselves within our circles of the same Internet friends, any large-scale collaboration is out of question.

Some publicists point out that some large online firms are acting hypocritically when they stress that they are consumer good-oriented, but they are, in fact, concerned about their own interest. This is the opinion of Jaron Lanier (2013), the author of the book *Who Owns the Future?*, who very strongly underlines the necessity to control Net giants, like Google or Facebook. Lanier believes that users are the fundamental asset for those firms because users generate the content of the Web sites. Unfortunately, no one receives any payment for such activities, which is said to also undermine the economy as a larger and larger number of the unemployed work to the benefit of only a couple of people administering the Net (see Andrejevic 2008; Fox et al. 2006; Teurlings 2010; Zwick et al. 2008).

Completing the prosumption issue, it is worth noticing that there is a group of publicists who would like to regulate the amateur grassroots creation with its quantitative limitation and evaluation by professionals. Such a control is thought to be necessary because the Internet's openness in the cultural production sphere results in a degradation that is identified as lowering of the quality of culture. When professionals stop controlling culture and amateurs begin to, we ought to do everything to cut their rule short. We can do that by protecting copyrights, an idea that is encouraged by Andrew Keen in *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), Mark Helprin in *Digital Barbarism* (2010), or Lee Siegel in *Against the Machine* (2008).

User Regulation Motive: Particular Persons

The second main motive of the narration of regulation assumes that using the Internet entails numerous dangers for the users, including individual peoples. To illustrate these dangers, it is worth mentioning, for example, the viewpoint of Nicolas Carr (2012) who argues that, as a consequence of intensive use of the Net, people are becoming more and more stupid. The communication patterns typical of the Internet rely on a continuous distracting of attention. For example, while we work we take little breaks every now and again to look at what our favorite Web sites are reporting; nearly every minute there is a notice that we have received a new email or another important thing happening at Facebook or Twitter. The more actions we are doing at the same time, the less we are focusing on our work, which results in a decrease in effectiveness related to multitasking. At every moment, we are bombarded with a series of audio-visual messages: advertisements, articles, news from friends. To each of these messages we

are expected to react. According to Carr, using the Internet reprograms our brain in such a way that, even when we are offline, we are not able to focus our attention at something for longer than five minutes.

Naturally, we should react to these messages but in a different way than we have been reacting. Meanings connected with the narration of regulation require us to control the Net, and more specifically, to control our behaviors connected with it. In the discussed discourse, there are reputable publicists—they may be said to be like mentors—who advise on how to act. We should assume the main responsibility for regulating our own behavior because we should refrain from negative habits or refrain from undertaking a series of activities that are not advantageous for us.

Clay A. Johnson (2012) advises that we should endeavor to make our Net information consumption more similar to healthy eating habits, that is, to eating vegetables or fruits instead of sweets and fatty meat. Our communication-information behavior is to be aimed at taking good care of our intellectual health like eating natural and healthy food is to improve our physical well-being. Johnson means that each of us should both develop the ability to recognize those messages that help cultivate our mental health and acquire our own rules of the so-called crap-detection (not letting the harmful information "reach" us). For some, these are texts related to celebrities and advertisements; for others, the "crap" is anything that distracts them from their work. What each of us will consume and what we will become as a result of it is said to depend solely on each of us.

According to Johnson, the key is to gain competences of filtering information, which is not worth our attention. In fact, it would be best if we stayed away from the online areas that are haunted by disinformation and insignificant transmissions. We should eliminate all Internet distractors (for instance, getting rid of signals for incoming mail or Facebook posts). It could help to install software to facilitate managing a mail box (to filter out useless and unimportant messages). It would be good to work for longer periods disconnected from the Internet (thereby avoiding the desire to ignore the work and click the browser icon). In his book, *The Information Diet*, Johnson offers many similar pieces of advice for how to improve the way we use the Internet.

In his latest work, Howard Rheingold (2012) advises on how to be Net smart, adding several other security measures to the above list of information selectiveness. First, Rheingold argues that we should develop our ability to focus our attention on one thing for a longer period of time. To improve our concentration, we may, for example, meditate every day, using concentration techniques and proper breathing. Another piece of advice from the author relates to participating and collaborating with others via social media. Each online connection we make has to be beneficial from the social capital angle; people from our online circles should provide us with information, offer support, and all kinds of help.

The rhetoric of control brings the message that it is becoming necessary to acquire certain competences connected with using the Internet. The skills should be learned through self-education, although the narration of regulation often include various propositions that draw attention to the role of social control in developing the described competences. Media education, which instills proper habits in young people, seems indispensable. The role of the schools and parents controlling what their children are doing online is also significant (see Livingstone 2009; Rosen 2007). Appropriate education prevents cybercrimes, including those that can lead to sexual abuse, hate speeche, cyberbullying, and political activism outside the democratic tradition. These concerns ought to be restricted and regulated at all costs.

It is worth emphasizing that if in the case of the motive of regulating Internet users' behavior the issue in question is self-control, then it is actually always referred to in the context of educating. People should be instructed on self-control; thus it should be treated as a skill to acquire. This is the reason why self-control is a form of regulation.

User Regulation Motive: States

It is worth stressing that user regulation refers not only to individuals. The use of the Net should also be self-regulated by such entities like nation states. This is the opinion of, for example, Morozov who, in his book *The Net Delusion* (2011), convinces the readers that academics, Internet business representatives, journalists, and, most of all, politicians who perceive the Net as an effective tool to fight authoritarianism are wrong. The conviction that Internet communication undermines the fundamentals that the nondemocratic states are based on is argued to be a manifestation of wishful thinking (this is the belief that the Net enables one to overcome the information barrier, diminishes the effects of propaganda, fosters political mobilization, effectively restricts the control over citizens, etc.). Therefore, the foreign policy of the United States, which to a greater and greater extent is based on activities of the so-called Internet freedom, may bring catastrophic results.

People in charge of this policy are said to treat all authoritarian states in the same way, claiming that Facebook and Twitter are sources of revolution in every nondemocratic country of the globe. Such an approach fails to promote a deep and reliable analysis of the situation as in every place in the world (including every authoritarian state) the Internet may have a different impact. Due to the rejection of this fact, the people who promote democracy will not learn to use the Net in a productive way and most certainly will not be able to recognize its various antidemocratic uses. Morozov provided many examples of these, mentioning the Iranian units proved to be to fight crimes in cyberspace and established proved to be considerably successful in fighting the revolutionary

element. According to the author, in many autocratic states we can observe the worsening of the position of political opponents who are Internet users as well as increased and extreme censorship of the Net and tightening of control (see MacKinnon 2012).

According to Morozov, a free and open Internet does not automatically lead to democratization. This is not at all directly facilitated by the possibility of freely setting up online groups; much more significant are the local economic, cultural, social, and political conditions that influence the shape of those groups. They determine to what extent social media promote democratization. That is the reason why people in charge of shaping foreign policy ought to develop specific self-controls related to Internet use. Before they claim that it is the cure-all for the authoritarian states, they should thoroughly learn the local context and adjust their foreign policy to particular regions. Doing that, the politicians may draw the conclusion that the power of the state in controlling the Internet should not be diminished everywhere. The state may simply help eliminate many negative phenomena. The Net cannot be left to its own devices, but should instead be pushed onto the route of appropriate development by means of carefully defined regulation.

Interestingly, the narration of regulation also generates other meanings that may as well be considered a call for self-control. That is, Western democracies have to regulate the tendencies related to using the Net to spy on their citizens. In his book, *Digital Disconnect* (2013), Robert W. McChesney claims that the actions of the United States governmental agencies pertaining to such surveillance may be a serious threat for democracy. The author calls on the governments to self-control with regard to the described practices. The control is to consist in, among other things, developing the laws for restricting spying and guaranteeing citizens' protection against it (see MacKinnon 2012).

Conclusions

Narration of regulation stresses the necessity to control the Net in two ways. First, what is meant here is the control of the technology, i.e the regulation of the operations of its engineers, namely large Internet firms like Facebook and Google. Secondly, the way in which users utilize the Net should be controlled but an important element of this motive is identifying the need for self-limiting and not yielding to the numerous temptations and distractions the Internet offers. The need to regulate refers both to the individual users (particular persons) and larger groups of users, such as entire countries.

The narration of regulation has been characterized from the perspective of cultural sociology's strong program (defined by Alexander). In this approach, it does not matter to what extent the presented views reflect the world of social

facts. Are there actually cases of invasion of privacy, intellectual confusion, cultural degradation, prosumption deficiencies, loss of ability to concentrate, or lack of proper measures at the level of foreign policy that require regulation? In the article, I do not answer these questions, and I do not even pose them; I simply analyze the meanings developed around the Net that is perceived as cultural text. I have put aside the broad non-symbolic social relations.

Partly, this has resulted from the fact that my intention is to avoid the mistake that Morozov made in *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2013). Morozov is not at all such an impartial observer of the idea of "the Internet" as he would like to be; he fails to proceed like somebody who is aware of the myths developed around the Net and like an investigator into them. His description of the Internet meanings is also—paradoxically—the creation of those meanings because, in the book, one may feel the author's normative bias. He simply points out a specific path for using the Internet, a path that depends on refraining from various social experiments of the criticized Silicon Valley. Morozov fails to demythologize the Internet, but instead gets entangled in the meanings and seems not to recognize that his opinions are also arbitrary and are revealing tones of Internet-centrism.

In this article, I have characterized cultural meanings employing the metaphors of the code and narration used by Alexander, I have similarly applied the analysis of written works. In the case of Alexander, these were articles from the main American magazines; in my case, these were the books by renowned publicists. It is worth stressing that, like Alexander, I have used an unrepresentative sample.

The code of the Internet is located at a higher level than its narrations. Both the positive discourse (that is, of openness) and the negative discourse (regulation) define the Internet as an instrument of the cosmic power able to transform our social life. The Net significantly influences our social life in such a way that nothing can be the same as it was before the genesis of the Internet galaxy. It has to be noted that the analysis allows me to conclude that the meanings grown around the Net are a highly flexible and changeable issue. Two extremely dissimilar narrations are not assigned once and forever; the Internet can very easily be covered with new meanings. And, if there are more publications that criticize the Net's open architecture, then we may witness a change even at the code level. Perhaps, the sacred will signify the regulated Net, and the ideal will develop a controlled Internet environment that guarantees both safety and creative fulfillment.

To conclude, I have to point out that adopting the methodology by Alexander pertaining to distinguishing social facts from culture, I am aware of the limitations of this methodology. Alexander himself noted (2010b: 115) that although social systems are perceived as cultural meanings, still they are also spaces in the case of which cultural forces connect or clash with material conditions and

rational interests producing some concrete results. This is the reason why the above presented opinion on the complete separation of the world of social facts from the world of cultural meanings should be treated as a specific analytical technique. In short – it is not that the Internet „ends" in cultural meanings. The Internet is a social environment and contains elements of social structure. Therefore, the adoption of the division into positive and negative meanings that grow around the Internet, proposed by me, could be complemented by many interesting considerations moving towards the world of social facts – social structure, social conflicts, social interests. What is the impact of the produced meanings on social structure, and what is its influence on the shape of the meanings? Do the meanings change because of the change of structure, or perhaps the thing is that different „conflicting" „fragments" of the structure produce dissimilar meanings? Perhaps, we are witnessing an incredible multitude of meanings that change very quickly? Moving the considerations in order to begin answering these questions would be a further and further moving away from the ‚pure' methodology of the strong program in cultural sociology, proposed in this text, but it would be extremely productive intellectually. Perhaps, it would help discover whether – and how – the meanings of the Internet, understood as cultural metatexts, will change in the future.

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Negatywne znaczenia Internetu: regulacja sieci w świetle mocnego programu socjologii kulturowej Jeffreya C. Alexandra

Streszczenie

Jeffrey C. Alexander, twórca tak zwanego mocnego programu w socjologii kulturowej, opisał znaczenia kulturowe związane z komputerem. Bazując na pomyśle prominentnego teoretyka, artykuł przedstawia znaczenia związane z internetem. W wypadku sieci pojmowanej jako tekst kulturowy wyróżnić możemy kod oraz narracje. Na poziomie kodu internet przynależy do sfery *sacrum*, bowiem kojarzony jest z narzędziem całkowicie zmieniającym życie społeczne. Jeśli chodzi o narracje, można wyróżnić dwie, odnoszące się do regulowania sieci – pozytywną oraz negatywną. W wypadku drugiej wyróżnić można wiele motywów, przy czym podkreślają one konieczność kontroli zarówno samej technologii, jak i jej użytkowników. Regulowanie technologii utożsamia się przede wszystkim z czuwaniem nad działalnością wielkich internetowych firm; użytkownicy mają natomiast wykształcać odpowiednie nawyki związane z korzystaniem z sieci. Celem artykułu jest scharakteryzowanie narracji regulowania, co czyni się przez jakościową analizę książek wybranych badaczy. Autor pokazuje, że dzisiaj narracja negatywna oznacza przede wszystkim podkreślanie nieszczęść, jakie mają wynikać z braku regulacji internetu.

Główne pojęcia: socjologia kulturowa; Jeffrey C. Alexander; badania internetu; regulowanie internetu; cyberoptymizm; cyberpesymizm.