



## Network Society: The Impact of Virtual Relationships on Traditional Culture

**Charef Imad**

Echahid cheikh Larbi Tebessi university, Tébessa, Algeria.

[Imad.charef@univ-tebessa.dz](mailto:Imad.charef@univ-tebessa.dz)

**Benazouz Hatem**

Echahid cheikh Larbi Tebessi university, Tébessa, Algeria.

[Hatem.benazouz@univ-tebessa.dz](mailto:Hatem.benazouz@univ-tebessa.dz)

**Abstract :** This paper discusses the various challenges associated with the network society or post-society, an offshoot of post-modernity, which seeks to restructure the social system through universal principles of cognitive and technical rationality or instrumentalism. The social actor linked to the matrix of space and time transforms into a virtual identity that constantly seeks to change its cognitive scheme for harmony, symmetry, and redefining the meanings of things, away from emotions and face-to-face relationships. This causes a reconsideration of sociological analyses of reflexivity because what the individuals see in the mirror that constructs them may not be a social actor in the traditional sense but virtual entities reflecting a set of intertwined and sometimes contradictory global values.

**Keywords:** Network society, postmodernity, weak ties, reflexivity, traditional culture

**Société en réseau : L'impact des relations virtuelles sur la culture traditionnelle.**

**Résumé :** Cet article examine les diverses problématiques liées à la société en réseau ou post-société, une production du postmodernisme, visant à restructurer le système social à travers des principes universels de perception et de rationalité technique ou instrumentale. L'acteur social lié à la matrice espace/temps se transforme en une identité virtuelle cherchant à modifier continuellement ses schémas cognitifs pour s'harmoniser, se synchroniser et réajuster les significations des choses, loin des émotions et des relations en face-à-face. Cela nécessite une réévaluation des analyses sociologiques de la réflexivité, car ce que l'individu voit dans le miroir qui le façonne peut ne pas être un acteur social au sens traditionnel, mais des entités virtuelles reflétant un ensemble de valeurs mondiales interconnectées et parfois contradictoires.

**Mot-clés :** Société en réseau, postmodernité, liens faibles, réflexivité, culture traditionnelle

### **Introduction:**

The network society, also called by Knorr-Cetina post-society, Ritzer (2011, p. 233) and described by Castells, Gustavo as informational capitalism or the information society (2005, p. 04), is a product of postmodern society. Through it, attempts have been made to exert control over individuals and institutions and expand their influence, transforming the social actor—a sociological concept linked to the matrix of space and time—into a virtual identity that exchanges information and creates relationships within a virtual society surpassing continents, not governed by any political, economic, cultural framework, or even traditional physical space.

The impact of network society can be seen in social interactions, exchanges, consumption patterns, and social/professional relationships, where genuine emotional connections are replaced by networked relationships shaping an individual's identity. Currently, there is a tendency towards enforced individualistic identities, leading to increased isolation and alienation in a society where a greater socialization and connection in virtual spaces and digital relationships has been shown.

Restructuring societies today, economically, politically, and culturally, according to various rapidly changing factors, aims to integrate social groups, and increase their strength and control at the expense of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, mainly by controlling and distributing information according to specific goals. Societies have become globally oriented after being local and traditional, with all the political and economic events and changes that distinguish Western societies affecting “under-analyzed societies”.

Throughout history, societies have undergone transformations, century after century, and the traditional structures of primitive societies have been dissolved by the state. Today's new media has affected the traditional structures of our societies, including social relationships, and has produced a range of phenomena that were previously ignored: such as gaming culture, digital consumption, cybercrimes, digital marketing, and the risks it poses to societies that have not yet prepared mechanisms to control the virtual space.

One of the most important challenges facing cultures today, especially traditional ones, is socialization. Virtual spaces, as entirely different social structures, produce a set of phenomena that cannot be analyzed according to traditional mechanisms, such as the emergence of information communities based on shared interests or the rapid spread of misinformation.

For example, socialization is used to be lectured at the macro-sociological level in traditional societies, focusing on community norms, familial values, and intergenerational transmission of cultural practices. Today, the analysis goes

beyond the local level to the cosmic one, encompassing global interconnectedness, intercultural dynamics, and the impact on humanity. Significant others who are in charge of socialization, Berger, Luckman (1967, p.151), have shifted from being linked to specific institutions to virtual and multiple cultures identities crossing continents, posing challenges such as symmetry between the real and the virtual.

According to Bronner (2016) the situation we find ourselves in derives from a double process of "deregulation": the liberalization of the information market (the media, whatever their relationships, can start competing) and the offer revolution in this same market (anyone can propose a "product" on the information market). Based on that, it is indeed quite challenging to maintain a consistent sense of self in the digital realm.

Based on this proposal, the research paper has attempted to provide an analytical reading of the various challenges of network society and its impact on traditional culture, especially a reconsideration of sociological analyses of reflexivity.

### **1. Family and socialization:**

The family is considered a fundamental kinship unit, whether extended or nuclear, and it is a social institution or group of interests that affords its members a range of services not easily obtained in the market. As discussed by Bertrand, these services can include material support, such as financial assistance, and moral guidance, like affection, security and so on (1988, p.19). Additionally, the family plays a role in transmitting values and ideals to children through the process of primary socialization. This process is not only the focus of analysis but also represents a significant challenge facing families in a rapidly changing world, particularly for those with single parents.

Capitalism, particularly in Western countries, has weakened emotional ties within families and inculcated individualistic values. Luckas thought and many works which are called "romantic movement " opposed to capitalism and modern society, argue that individuals in modern industrial societies are seen as isolated and lost. According to the Frankfurt School, the social world has become an electronic monster that feeds on its members and manipulates their destinies. Craib (1992, p.208).

Most structural sociological analyses in the field of crime, deviance, and re-socialization tend to link deviant factors to the family. Various studies attribute the causes of deviance to dysfunction in socializing institutions, like family breakdown and divorce, parental maltreatment, poverty, addiction by one or both parents or even their deviance, Sheldon, Eleanor (1950). However, some

studies, especially comparative ones, argue that these factors have a ripple effect and an indirect impact.

Lebanc (2003, p.19) explains that these factors affect the individual when conveyed by other psychological factors, lack of supervision, and conformity through multiple functional identities. One of the main challenges facing families and socializing institutions in our societies is how to perform socialization that combines preserving cultural heritage with social reality. In other words, it involves balancing the ideal models upheld by families with the demands of the evolving reality in the era of network society and the world of universal culture.

### 1.1. *The institutional objective aspect of education:*

Macro-sociological analyses of family, education, and learning present us with a set of frameworks that call for discussions on the structure of society and the socio-cultural models within this structure. In this context, Marxist and functional analyses diverge; the latter places family positions towards children within social frameworks that have an objective significance, exerting coercive power over its members. The future of socialization depends on conforming to these constructs without taking for granted the psycho-cultural models taught by the family within the general societal system.

Marxist analyses derive their analytical strength from history and the evolution of societies, placing socialization and learning within a framework of conflictual relations among forces that combine control, dominance, and even normalization. Reznick and Wollf (2006, p.120). The socialization process yields outcomes vastly different from its predecessors when we consider the three elements of anthropological analyses that distinguish class-based societies and their connection to the state as a political organization: power, wealth, and social welfare, Kottak (2011). This standpoint introduces complexities in discussing the asymmetry between the objective institutional structure and subjective one.

It may be emphasized, however, that success is being linked with a process rather than the objective social structures associated with marginalization and alienation because of the inequalities created by capitalism, whether within the school or the family. The school, as a secondary socialization institution, is perceived to offer consistent education and socialization to all groups without considering individual differences. These educational frameworks reflect the dominant class culture and its perception of social reality and interactions among them. Conversely, families work on instilling values and standards as internally perceived based on the three mentioned active elements.

According to Mehan (1978), most sociological studies in education treat social structures as coercive and objective realities, as demonstrated by Coulon

(1988, p.67) through causal relationships and educational outcomes. However, what is often overlooked is the significance of being unable to demonstrate the construction of these social realities.

The state operates as a socio-historical entity by organizing and shaping social life through its legitimate institutions, such as socialization institutions and even the family. This is accomplished through enacting compulsory education laws, teaching methods, curricula, and programs, among other things. The legitimacy of the family in modern societies is reinforced by the state's regulation through laws, social systems, healthcare, civil marriage contracts, and education René, Françoise, (1995, p.12).

The emergence of patriarchal authority and the nuclear family is intertwined with the historical development of the state as a political entity, and the rise of capitalism, with its social transformations driven by industrialization, technology, and the shift of traditional social structures, leading to gender conflicts.

We have approached the subject by presenting a set of concepts that contribute to building the individual and instilling certain social values through socialization and learning from the family to the school as two institutions, based on classic sociological analyses. The individual constructs social reality through interactions with others, even if we acknowledge the obligatory and coercive aspects exerted by social structures on this individual.

However, we believe that the information society, as a product of the modern era or beyond, presents challenges that hinder the use of historical or functional analyses, as well as the dual spatial/temporal analyses perceived by individuals. From this standpoint, we face the dilemma of the universal versus the local, the virtual versus the contextual.

Our focus on socialization and its institutions stems from the fact that the individual is the primary unit of analysis in sociological studies with a dual polarity: as a key actor in shaping social reality and reacting through a reflective image, often with limitations. In other words, the exploration of how this individual is shaped and perceives reality goes beyond the objective aspect because what they see in the mirror, they create may not be a social actor in the traditional sense, but rather virtual entities reflecting a set of intertwined and sometimes contradictory global values.

## **2. Transformation of social word cognitive schemes:**

The cognitive and learning scheme in the virtual world is formed in a completely different way from ordinary reality. Therefore, things and identities acquire their meanings through their relationship with other identities, the latter of which can be referred to as the linguistic term "Actant" the one performing the action in contrast to the social actor. In this context, the cognitive schema of an individual is determined not by reflexive action within a cultural context but through material semiotics, moving away from historical connotations.

The social reality, according to Goffman, is formed by three essential elements that distinguish contemporary societies. These elements include the fact that individuals sleep, play, and work in different areas, with different people, and under different authorities, without this diversity in belonging being part of a comprehensive plan, Goffman (1968, p. 47). Goffman proposed three elements of activity, which distinguish the life of modern societies and branch out into various sub-activities that further elaborate on the complexities of social interactions. These elements hold significant theoretical and cognitive importance within network society and knowledge society, shaping the dynamics of contemporary social structures. Therefore, accepting Goffman's designation prompts a reevaluation of the epistemological positioning of sociological studies, leading us to transcend traditional frameworks in analyzing social theory.

The three activities can occur in one location in the network society, like corporate entities, but the physical space for these activities may not be defined or could be more expansive virtually than physically. Work, as one of these crucial activities, can be heavily influenced by technology, shifting away from reliance on basic resources and the traditional social division of labor. Expertise is the key factor determining access to capital and wealth. Additionally, time, as a variable in this activity within the traditional space, may be considered dispensable.

Regarding play, the virtual space facilitated by technology provides more psychological freedom than the physical space, where a child is not bound by peers during play as in the traditional space and can assume multiple-dimensional identities through avatars. The virtual space is constantly changing and pragmatically linked. Swingle (2016, p.123) discusses how early attachment to technology in childhood modifies interactive attachment, influences growth, and affects children's ability to focus on school and household tasks.

### 3. Social network and social order:

The modernist standard is aimed at constructing an organized social structure through human cooperation, to rebuild the social system beyond the reflexive notion of the emptiness of human existence. This required a random equilibrium to guarantee predictability, utilizing the tools of knowledge and power (Morrisson, 1995, p.455). Despite Giddens's view on increasing reflexivity through the expert system, Habermas argues for restructuring the social system based on universal principles of perception and technical rationality, extending the abstract system's influence on daily life (Cetina, 1999, p.06). The latter cannot be considered as a society according to Latour but rather a field of invisible forces through a set of interactions via various mediums, Ritzer (2011, p.659).

The most distinctive feature of actor-network theory is its emphasis on material or artifacts identities over social actors. These identities are connected by weak ties, according to Granovetter's idea. These emotionally distant ties are effective in a network society as they link identities without the need to share the same perspectives, Turow, Tsui (2008, p.250).

Today, someone who has an account on a social network can directly challenge, for example, a professor from the National Academy of Medicine on the issue of vaccines. The former can even boast a larger audience than the latter, Bronner (2021). Radical epistemology argues that humans cannot access the ultimate truth through rational knowledge. Perspectives formed by actors may be valid when compared to accepted cultural standards, Derry (1996, p.166). However, we cannot fully accept this constructivist premise in a network society for several reasons. Hofstede's cross-cultural studies revealed that the software of the mind, developed through research on values, is not globally fixed but influenced by national culture, shaped by history, language, religion, and law, Basáñez (2016, p.45). Levi-Strauss argues that, while modern and primitive societies share structural similarities, modern societies have evolved distorted and biased perceptual models. However, these standard patterns are not indispensable because cultural standards do not inherently embody structures themselves, (1967, p.274).

The focus on the human mind and its productions, considered similar worldwide, was central to structuralism, with Judith noticing the radical separation of symbols from the material world. This separation of the mind from the body aligns with the Western idea by emphasizing a concept deeply rooted in Western philosophical traditions. In this analysis, we introduce the concept of "Representative economy" and the semiotic ideologies proposed by Keane (2003, p.410).

These ideologies mediate human products (Artifacts), representing the material aspect as historical products with symbolic or semiotic significance in specific contexts. Network theory emphasizes the participation of non-human elements in the network. It considers material products (Actants) as active participants, attributing them agency similar to social actors such as art, drawing, and decoration. These elements play a role in generating information and influencing both objective and subjective power relations, Ritzer, (2011, p. 659).

The network society represents a cognitive product characterized by high technology. Habermas depicts a form of social system reconstruction, similar to a laboratory in studies conducted by Latour and Cetina, where they sought to reconfigure nature and the social system outside its productive context. The challenges of knowledge and network societies, which are a reflection of late modernity or post-modernity, is their denial of responsibility towards their space. In other words, they refute the idea that the social space and the actor are socially productive and act socially, Morrisson (1995, p.459).

Expanding on this, we adopt Latour's concept of "The empty space" which symbolizes an unexplored realm offering transformative possibilities and novel avenues for change. Regarding reflexivity in Giddens as a concept representing a complex awareness of late modernity's developments, it can be seen as preceding the network and its agency at the level of analysis and study, Giddens (1991).

### **Conclusion:**

The principle of reflexivity in Western societies and network society should be abolished to reconstruct a social system with global values. This system influences all social institutions that regulate people's responses in any societal culture. For example, it forces them to constantly adjust their cognitive schemes for harmony and correspondence and to redefine the meanings of things according to the global cognitive scheme and the various controlling powers.

Therefore, it is impossible to discuss a cosmic culture or universal values, since they do not adhere to the framework of space/time because of their abstract and transcendent nature. These changes can be observed through two distinct characteristics: the societal discourse is shifting towards more pragmatism and technology over emotional rhetoric in reality. The second characteristic is the liberation and fusion of individual identity in virtual space.



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<sup>i</sup> The word "actant," derived from semiotics, encompasses not just human social agents but also non-human entities that play active roles in specific situations. This inclusive definition applies to all actors in the network society, requiring a unified interpretive framework for both human and non-human entities.