

## THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE

L. PETRILA, F.-A. POPESCU, L. BENCHEA

Laurentiu Petrila<sup>1</sup>, Felix-Angel Popescu<sup>2</sup>, Lucian Benchea<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Juridical and Administrative Sciences, Agora University of Oradea & Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Sciences & Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, Romania. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8415-3327>, E-mail: [lauren.petrila@gmail.com](mailto:lauren.petrila@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Economic Sciences, Agora University of Oradea, Romania.  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3020-2098>, E-mail: [felixangelpopescu@gmail.com](mailto:felixangelpopescu@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Sciences & Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [luci\\_benchea@yahoo.com](mailto:luci_benchea@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *Currently, the importance and essential place that digital culture occupies in the lives of Romanian adolescents is undeniable. Statistics regarding access to and use of the virtual environment and new technologies have recorded rapid increases, especially among this demographic category. Advancement and evolution in this field are expected to continue, not only by virtue of a strong and natural trend, but also as a result of the international strategies and policies that Romania has undertaken. The Internet contributes greatly to socialization processes (Institute of Education Sciences, 2017), interaction and formation of adolescents' identity. The educational process in today's society is also marked by the use of new information and communication technologies. The potential brought by them represents a permanent challenge for education, which must adapt to new realities on the fly.*

**Keywords:** *digital, environment, new, social, space, internet.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although omnipresent, the digital-virtual phenomenon is not fully understood in terms of consequences and effects, and quantitative analyses on large databases provide important and relevant information regarding its scale and complexity, but elude causality and decision-making relationships. In order to understand the impact of this phenomenon, as well as the behaviors, motivations and reasoning that accompany it, the qualitative research approach is fundamental. Digital culture profoundly influences the identity and social development of adolescents, and to fully understand its impact, both quantitative analyses and qualitative research are needed to explore the complex motivations and effects of technology use. Internet communication represents a set of actions and processes mediated by computers through which interlocutors transmit information through messages that can take various forms (Fârte, 2004). Communication is an absolutely indispensable process for humanity, and over time messages have been transmitted through various means, thus taking on various forms and being used in various environments (Thurlow, 2004). Research on CMC largely focuses on the social effects of various computer-supported communication technologies. Many recent studies involve Internet-based social networks supported by social software.

"Digital media" refers to the set of technologies and platforms that enable the creation, sharing and consumption of digital content. It includes various components such as the internet,

social networks, mobile applications, streaming platforms, websites and other communication and information technologies. The digital media has transformed the way we communicate, work, learn and spend our leisure time, with a profound impact on society and the economy.

The digital media has created a new social space that is redefining the way people interact, communicate and organize themselves. This transformation has been facilitated by communication technologies and online platforms, which allow for rapid and global social interactions.

## **2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE**

Global Connectivity: The digital environment allows people around the world to connect and communicate instantly, regardless of geographical distances. This facilitates the exchange of ideas and cultures and creates global communities (<https://www.edu.ro>).

Technologically Mediated Interactions: In the new social space, interactions are often mediated by technology, such as social networks, messaging platforms, and video conferencing applications. These technologies allow for both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (delayed) communication. Technology is not just a trend, it has revolutionized the way we communicate. From Skype or Twitter used on a computer or laptop to today's smartphones, technology makes communication more efficient, effective, and in some cases instantaneous (<https://www.droot.ro/>).

Virtual Communities: An online community is a variable group of people who communicate (maintain connections) frequently with each other through correspondence, telephone, internet network, etc., for reasons of personal, social, educational interest, etc. The term "virtual" emphasizes the fact that it is not a society with "face to face" communication, with personal contacts "in sight". There are pure virtual communities and virtual communities that nevertheless extend towards personal communication "face to/in face", that is, they activate from time to time and through direct meetings, scheduled reunions. If the communication takes place in the form of an interconnected social network that serves as a support for the mutual exchange of opinions, impressions, lived experiences, etc., then we speak of a social environment (<https://creativecommons.org>). Online platforms allow the formation of communities based on shared interests, hobbies, professions or social causes. These communities can be very influential and can mobilize collective action.

Digital Identity: Digital identity is an electronic means of identifying someone. It consists of a certificate containing a "public key" that can be viewed and a "private key" that must be kept secret (<https://support.apple.com>). Users have the ability to build and manage their digital identities, which can be different from their physical identities. This includes social media profiles, online game avatars, and personal blogs.

Participation and Civic Engagement: Civic engagement has been defined by various authors, who agree in highlighting the relationship between this concept and the way in which people, exercising their citizenship, get involved in political and apolitical issues in their environment. In this context, being a citizen means being a member of a community, with equal rights with others and with the same opportunities to influence the fate of the community (<https://www.yubrain.com>). The digital environment facilitates civic and political engagement through access to information, discussion platforms, and the ability to organize and participate in online petitions, protests, and campaigns.

### **3. THE IMPACT OF THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE**

#### Communication Transformation:

Communication through language is essential to functioning in society, whether it is formal or informal discussions, with friends and family, negotiations at work or business meetings. Through language we incorporate information and experiences into our minds and express our ideas, thoughts, feelings and perceptions. As a result, communication is more than an exchange of information, it is an influence (<https://static.wixstatic.com>).

The way we communicate has been revolutionized, becoming faster and more diverse. Social platforms allow the sharing of multimedia content (images, video, audio) and create new forms of expression. Communication is a highly complex process, difficult to decipher, which requires its simplification in order to be understood. This sensitive process is carried out in two significant stages:

- the first stage is the transfer of a thought, idea or order by the sender to the receiver. This involves: expressing the idea to be transmitted; encoding it in the form of a symbol, capable of expressing a message; transmitting the encoded message from the sender to the receiver through the chosen channel (visual, auditory, tactile, electronic).
- the second stage consists of the receiver transforming the received message. This involves decoding the message, i.e. deciphering the transmitted symbol, and interpreting it, i.e. explaining its meaning (<https://www.didactic.ro>).

Effects on Personal Relationships: Interactions that occur since childhood and the way they are formed and evolve influence the relationships of the future adult. Attachment style is a specific behavior in relationships between people, from an emotional and psychological point of view. The attachment style that an adult has is learned in childhood, cultivated throughout life and reproduced for their own family. Interpersonal relationships are influenced by online interactions, which can strengthen or, conversely, weaken social bonds. Sometimes, digital communication can lead to feelings of isolation or a lack of authentic connection.

Social and Political Mobilization: Social media has become a powerful tool for social and political mobilization. It has played a crucial role in major social movements and election campaigns. Social mobilization is the process of bringing together all interested social partners to raise awareness of a group about a common problem, identify their needs, and provide support in identifying the resources and services needed to find ways to cope independently and take control of their own lives. “Through community mobilization, members of a community become aware of a problem, recognize that it is important to their lives, and decide together on the steps needed to solve it and take action together” (Thompson and Pertschuk 1992) (<https://www.asociatianoulval.ro/>).

Digital Economy: The digital economy is considered to be the fourth industrial revolution, characterized by its ability to transform economies, jobs and even society as a whole, through the introduction of new technologies and processes. It is expected that the digital economy will contribute to social and economic equalization. At the same time, technology will contribute to increasing access to education, jobs and financing, even if, in the short term, it could lead to the reduction of jobs with repetitive and non-value-added activities in almost all economic sectors, whether we are talking about industry, agriculture or services. In Romania, we estimate that approximately 60% of existing jobs could be affected by the digital economy: the main causes are the development of the concept of e-government,

robotization and automation in industrial sectors and the transfer of services from the traditional area to the digital area. If previous industrial revolutions produced changes over several generations, the digital economy produces significant effects over much shorter periods. The new social space has created economic opportunities, including for digital marketing, influencers and e-commerce. Companies can reach their target audiences more effectively and personalize user experiences.

In the digital age, data protection has become an interdisciplinary area of law, which is gradually but surely making its way into all other areas of law. If future technologies will bring new risks to human rights, society must catch the wave of digitalization without sacrificing fundamental rights. Categorically, the manipulation of digital identities determines the diversification and increase in the complexity of security risks and threats, such as hostile/influence actions carried out in the public space, disinformation, the spread of fake/fabricated news and possible, generating new security challenges.

#### **4. CHALLENGES IN THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE - THE USE OF MASS MEDIA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF HYBRID CONFLICT**

In recent years, taking as a temporary reference the referendum that took place in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union and, especially, after the presidential elections in the United States, which took place in November 2016, the media has focused a large part of its international information on warning about the danger that false news – popularized by the name of fake news – represents for Western democracies.

In recent years, especially after the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election, the phenomenon of fake news has been widely discussed as a major threat to Western democracies. Disinformation campaigns, often orchestrated through social media and supported by state or private actors, have aimed to manipulate public opinion and undermine trust in democratic institutions. A notable example is the use by the UK Leave campaign of the false claim that “£350 million a week” could be redirected to the NHS, a claim that was later debunked but which influenced public perception. Also, in the 2016 US presidential election, social bot networks amplified content with low credibility, contributing to the polarisation of the electorate. These practices have been facilitated by algorithms that create “information bubbles”, in which users are predominantly exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs, thereby reducing diversity of opinion and democratic dialogue. In this context, the European Union has recognized disinformation as a serious threat to democracy, underlining the need for concerted measures to combat it.

In its information objective, the media used all kinds of concepts, new to a large part of the public, such as cyberspace, cyberattack, cyberwarfare or hybrid warfare, to explain the events taking place through what we commonly call the internet, in which a state, in this case the Russian Federation, would use the digital sphere to interfere with the internal processes of another, with the aim of destabilizing its democratic systems.

Although Brexit is currently considered an example of Russian interference in the election campaign (BBC News UK, 2024) we found few references in the media, both during the campaign and in the post-referendum period, to accusing Vladimir Putin's government of trying to influence the referendum vote and defining these activities as hybrid warfare. For the most part, post-election analyses focused on the uncertainty generated by the United Kingdom's

exit from the European Union, the economic, political and social consequences that might follow, as well as the new role of the European Union itself at that time.

It was not until the 2016 US presidential election that the media largely reported on Moscow's alleged cyberattacks against Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton and orchestrated disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion. At this time, the focus was on cyberspace and the vulnerabilities it presents to Western democracies. Despite this, it was only months later that reports began to emerge of the Kremlin's possible interference in the British referendum, through the spread of fake news and the use of social media.

These events marked the role that a foreign power would have played in trying to influence a domestic electoral process. They were a warning signal to European countries that, months later, they would be organizing different electoral processes. In this context, the Guardian newspaper mentioned, in a headline, that the EU is stepping up its campaign against Russian propaganda (Adam et al., 2017) due to the fear that would have generated possible Russian influence in the US elections, as this could spread to Europe. It is worth emphasizing here that the European Union will increase its efforts to counter Russia's hybrid warfare campaign after the election of Donald Trump (Baqués, 2015:41). The news refers to the East Stratcom working group, an organization created in 2015 by the EU's European External Action Service, and therefore ahead of the processes presented here, to counter Russian disinformation campaigns during the Ukraine crisis.

In this international context of disinformation, fake news, Russian influence in electoral processes, cyberattacks and alleged hybrid warfare, Spain was plunged into a major political and social crisis due to the convening of a referendum by the regional government of Catalonia in early October 2017. The government's intention was to decide, through consultation, on the possibility of independence from the Spanish state, without the consent of the Spanish government. These activities were quickly incorporated into the information language. Thus, the concept of cyberwar was used in a generic way, regardless of its meaning and possible implications, simply because certain activities were carried out through networks.

The concept of cyberwar has been one of the most widely used in journalism to refer to activities that take place on the Internet, but it has also generated confusion. Richard A. Clarke, former National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism of the United States and Special Advisor to the President for Cybersecurity, defines cyberwar as those actions taken by a nation-state to penetrate computers or other networks of states with the aim of causing damage or changes (Clarke et al., 2010). With the exception of the cyberattacks against the Democratic Party, for which they had access, in the campaign, to the data and information of the Party's members, the propaganda activities that took place in Brexit and the Catalan conflict cannot be described as cyberwar, according to Clarke's definition, as they would not have led to illegitimate access to the systems or networks of other states, with the aim of causing damage or changes, but, rather, would be categorized as influential and manipulative activities through networks.

This new doctrine, developed in Russia, seeks to weaken democracies by interfering in their electoral processes and fueling their internal conflicts, whether ideological or territorial, using tools such as fake news or manipulation of social media. Instead, it is only stated that we are in a conflict (hybrid warfare) promoted by a state actor (Russia), by spreading fake news via the internet and social media, with the ultimate goal of weakening Western democratic

governments. Also, the news reports regarding these activities present hybrid warfare as something new, which is part of the military doctrine of Russian origin – the Gerasimov doctrine.

The origin of the Gerasimov concept dates back to February 2013, with the publication of the article "The Value of Science in Anticipation" by the Chief of the Defense Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, in the magazine *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer*. For much of the Western media and analysts, the article represents the foundational document of what, in the West, is known as the Gerasimov doctrine. It is interpreted as a proposal for a new Russian way of warfare that combines conventional and unconventional warfare with aspects of national power (Gerasimov, 2013), which refers to indirect and asymmetric methods. With the events in Crimea and Ukraine, some of the elements set out in Gerasimov's 2013 document were identified and the idea spread that it set out a new way of acting. Then, hybrid crossed the border of strategic debate to become a word with common usage and was used to define the whole range of informational, destabilizing and subversive activities that the Kremlin could carry out in a covert, semi-covert or clandestine manner, below the threshold of conflict.

In short, Gerasimov refers to hybrid warfare methods because he believes that Russia should face these types of wars and therefore needs to know and adapt to them. In addition, it should be noted that Gerasimov presents it in a scenario of armed war, while disinformation campaigns and fake news in the West would take place in a context of political and social tension and confrontation, but in the absence of an armed conflict.

## **5. THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE TARGET OF A CYBER ATTACK – RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN THE FRENCH ELECTIONS (2017)**

Every day we are exposed, both at home and at work, to threats that originate in the virtual space. In most cases we are not even aware of this, or if we do realize it, we do not react to these threats in an appropriate manner. Articles about security incidents appear daily in the media. These reported incidents are actually just the tip of the iceberg, in reality we are much more exposed than we think we are, considering that, unfortunately, the risks associated with the virtual environment are constantly increasing.

Anyone can be the target of a cyber attack. A cyber attack on an industrial control system can cause loss of control, shutdown, damage to facilities or alteration of the final product. These incidents are often accompanied by serious consequences in terms of security, economic and financial losses, and damage to the organization's image. The online environment has more and more connections with the physical space (Romanian Intelligence Services). Online identity theft is no longer an urban legend. Third-party access to confidential data creates strategic advantages, and blocking users from accessing a set of data can cause considerable financial damage.

In 2017, several European countries were due to hold elections, whether local, parliamentary or even presidential, as in the case of France. EU and NATO leaders have taken into account the possibility that Russia could intervene and manipulate the elections, in order to achieve certain strategic goals. The case of Russian interference in the presidential elections in France is one of the textbook cases both in terms of the techniques used in the attack and the response given by France.

The aim of the attack was to undermine Emmanuel Macron's candidacy in the 2017 presidential election, so there were three main dimensions of the information operation:

- disinformation campaign consisting of fake documents, rumors and fake news;
- a cyberattack on the computers of Macron's campaign organizers;
- information leak of approximately 15 GB of information extracted from campaign computers, as well as 21,075 emails.

The information was distributed on Twitter (using the hashtag #MacronLeaks) through fake accounts (bots) and an army of trolls (Russia often uses troll armies online to increase pro-Russian propaganda); these fake accounts distributed fake news branded as Sputnik, RT, NewsFront and amplified it on social networks. However, the attack was not directly attributed to Moscow, but it seems that the Russians received help in carrying out the attack from the American alt-right and the French far-right, as both factions are pro-Russian. The cyberattack was carried out using fake web domains and phishing. Trend Micro, a Japanese cybersecurity company, identified the March 15, 2017 phishing attack as being orchestrated by the APT28 group, which is known for its cyber espionage activities and is affiliated with the GRU. One of the domains had an IP address similar to another identified by the US State Department in a report on Russian malicious cyber activity in the context of the 2016 US presidential election.

Most of the IPs indicated that the attacks originated from Ukraine, which is also a buffer state for cyber operations. Facebook also said that 24 accounts were created on the platform to conduct surveillance operations on members of Macron's entourage during the election campaign; the Russian agents who created the accounts posed as friends of friends of Macron's associates; the agents' main goal was to get Macron's associates to download malicious software that could provide hackers with their login details, thus giving them access to private conversations or classified documents. The attack failed to have the desired effects, as France, expecting possible interference in the elections, took preventive measures, such as: deliberately planting false documents to create confusion among hackers; ANSSI (National Association for Information Systems Security) organized cybersecurity workshops for presidential candidates; collaborated with Facebook to automatically close the fake accounts created; limited access to Russian media in the second round of elections, etc. Consequently, preventive measures and functional administrative instruments in France on the cyber dimension, along with the existence of international cooperation in the field of Intelligence, especially between NATO members, managed to diminish the effects of the cyber attack, as well as ensure an optimal climate for the presidential elections, in the end, to take place adequately.

More specifically, in a world in the midst of globalization, cyber and communications infrastructures are developing at an accelerated pace, thus forming a dependence of state actors on digitalization; with these, both new threats and security vulnerabilities appear, thus creating a true cyber arms race. Cyberspace offers the necessary opening for both conducting physical attacks on infrastructures (kinetic military actions, electronic warfare, etc.), as well as cognitive attacks (psychological operations, disinformation, propaganda, etc.) with the aim of inoculating various ideas to the population and distorting the way people perceive certain domestic or international events, as the case may be. More simply, we can say that cyberspace does not really know borders or if it does, they are not very well delimited, the main limitation from this point of view being the lack of clear and concrete jurisprudence on this segment at the international level (<https://adevarul.ro>).

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The new social space created by the digital environment offers significant opportunities for connection and innovation, but also brings challenges that require careful management. It is important that users, institutions and society as a whole navigate this space responsibly, promoting safe and ethical practices in the use of digital technology.

It is common to find news related to disinformation campaigns of Russian origin that claim to be recorded in a context of hybrid warfare against the West. The main problem with the journalistic information presented here is that, for the most part, the authors do not expose even a brief approximation to the concepts used, their meaning and implications, such as disinformation, fake news, cyberwar or hybrid warfare. Sometimes this leads to the use of some of these concepts as synonyms. Possibly, one of the reasons for the confusion is the mixing of the use of recent concepts, in this case, those related to cyberspace, with others, which are traditionally located in a military and academic field, in an attempt to want to inform about changes occurring on the international scene. This is also due to the spiral that the media has entered, driven by a constant demand for information from citizens, wanting to inform, almost minute by minute, about the latest news, which implies a quantity of information rather than the quality of the messages transmitted.

Undoubtedly, Russia's use of cyber and intelligence has been the focus of attention in the news about hybrid warfare. But while it is true that this country has encouraged the use of information operations and has taken advantage of the potential of the digital environment in favor of its interests, the development of disinformation campaigns and the use of information and communication technologies cannot be identified exclusively with hybrid warfare. One of the characteristics of hybrid conflicts is the combination of various conventional and asymmetric elements, but the news has focused almost exclusively on the digital element, through which disinformation campaigns, fake news and the massive use of social networks have been developed. Although they may be part of hybrid conflicts, given that, in recent years, the cyber element has gained enormous importance within conflicts, we cannot, however, say that these activities are movements of hybrid warfare. Terms such as 'disinformation', 'fake news', 'cyberwar' or 'hybrid warfare' are often used vaguely and interchangeably in the media, which can lead to confusion about the nature and implications of these phenomena in the current geopolitical context. A rigorous delineation is essential for a correct understanding and effective approach to these challenges.

Therefore, if I were to conclude that the events that took place during Brexit, the US elections and the Catalan conflict cannot be described as hybrid warfare, a meaningful analytical framework for understanding the novelties of cyberspace and its impact on international relations in these scenarios could nevertheless be developed from the concept of the grey area. The concept defines those activities below the threshold of conflict, which take place in peacetime, as opposed to hybrid warfare, and which include cyberattacks or disinformation and propaganda campaigns that would have as a common feature the difficulty of determining their attribution. This concept would therefore allow for an analysis of activities that are not specifically described as acts of war but could become as decisive as a military conflict. The concept of the 'gray zone' describes strategic actions that remain below the threshold of open conflict, being characterized by ambiguity and difficulty in attribution, and includes cyber operations and disinformation campaigns conducted in peacetime.



The analysis presented in this essay has focused on the importance of conceptualizing and contextualizing the reported facts. It is clear that the practice of journalism differs from the academic field, but it is equally true that news should convey information with the greatest possible rigor and expose the reader to what is happening in their specific context, trying to use appropriate concepts in each case. We are still at an early stage in analyzing the capabilities of cyberspace, and reducing it to the use that a single state can make for the dissemination of propaganda campaigns would be to misunderstand its potential in international relations. In the digital age, rigor in the presentation of information becomes essential to understand the complex phenomena of cyberspace, which should not be reduced solely to propaganda tools used by certain states, but analyzed in the broad context of international relations.

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