THE BOOK AND THE SCREEN. A NEW PARADIGM OF READING AND A NEW TYPE OF CULTURE

Sorin IVAN[1]

Abstract

The new technologies determine a paradigm shift at the level of reading, through the transition from book to the electronic screen, from the classical reading to the digital reading. The option for reading on the screen, in the context of the universal fascination of technology, is associated with the even more clearer departure from the book. Beyond its technological advantages and attractions, digital reading could determine a surface culture, of information, not of substance, of quantity, not of quality. The risk of the digital reading is the virtual culture, in its negative sense, of possibility, not of reality. This kind of reading, exclussively practiced, can lead to the failure of the act of knowledge. The solution is provided by the complementarity of paradigms and by the comprehensive culture. Book and technology should be viewed as complementary instruments of culture and knowledge, which act synergistically and creatively. The Borgesian Library is an endless Babel, populated by books and by digital devices too, which open together a large window to knowledge and culture.

Keywords: technology, paradigm shift, digital reading, virtual culture, Borgesian library, complementarity

1.The digitization of human existence

Humanity is presently living under the strong and complex influence of digital technology. Started in the second half of the last century, the technologizing process of civilization has been speeding up during the last two decades and is now passing through an overwhelming expansion. From a historical point of view, this period marks the entrance of mankind to the Digital Era. Digital technology has comprised all areas of existence and the whole civilization following its fast spreading character. Today, human existence is offering technology a place of development and manifestation while, in return, technology is offering a comprehensive support to the human existence. It has come to the point where one can hardly imagine human existence without information technology. Technology has determined such complex changes and stages of evolution that we can nowadays speak of a paradigm shift in human existence both at individual and collective level. It has revolutionized life itself. It is remarkable that this fundamental change happened during two-three decades only, which is a very short period of time compared to the slow processes of the previous centuries. The quick evolution of the technological and technologized civilization is determined by technology itself. Considering the fast pace it entails, it is hard to foresee how and in which direction the world and human existence will evolve during the following decades. It is for certain yet that, without the contribution of information technology, a general crisis would appear and the world would collapse. We can talk about a cyber-addiction of mankind, a technologized existence developed by means of cyber databases. From individuals to

[1] Associate Professor PhD, Faculty of Social, Political and Humanistic Sciences, Titu Maiorescu University; Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest

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world organizations, from interpersonal to global communication, technology has comprised and dominates the entire existence of humanity. The planet itself has become a cyber-planet, wrapped into a bit network and endless synapses.

In the present paradigm of human existence, which is generated by these fast paced evolutions, technology plays a major part. One can say that man and today's humanity live in the empire of technology. Digital technology is omnipresent in individual and collective existence, in private and public life, in every domain of activity. The computer, the laptop, the tablet, the iphone, the smartphone, the e-book etc. are not only necessary devices, but most of them are indispensable. They must be associated with the greatest invention of the 20th century, the internet. In this association formula, they are multifunctional devices, used mainly as information and communication tools to accomplish complex tasks, the support of the professional activity in all areas, and of the daily life. At the same time, they represent ways of escaping into ludic and fictional universes, into utopias or dystopias unfolded on an endless thematic scale. Digital technology creates parallel worlds and access gates to parallel lives. Moreover, it tends to become an alternative to the real existence, an alternative way of life in the virtual space.

All these evolutions have a great influence on the individual. The impact of digital technology on today's man is so strong that he has come to depend on it. Forced by circumstances and by his own choice, man spends more and more of his time, both professional and private, staying connected with the digital technology, in the virtual space. As a support of professional activity, as a means of information, communication, relation and socialization, of relaxation and play etc., digital technology is part of the existence of the man of today. It even begins to overlap this existence and be confounded with it. Through technology, through computer and internet, the nowadays individual isolates himself more and more from the others, gains autonomy in some kind of technological autism, gets lonely through the cohabitation and communication between man and machine. Thus, interhuman communication comes to be mediated by the computer and the other digital devices. A sort of alienation and de-humanization of the human being. On the other hand, the magic of the new technologies leads to the loss of human freedom, through the extinction of distances in communication. In this context, it is needed the "de-technologization of communication", for recovering the "symbolic distances" between people and a degree of their freedom, and for the humanization and socialization of communication. (Wolton 2012a: 200)

2.A new paradigm of reading

The book is the material support of classical, traditional reading. From immemorial time, the spiritual and cultural evolution of mankind was achieved with the help of the written word. The word was objectified in all possible ways: inscriptions on clay slates, on rock or on metal, writings on leather or parchment, manuscripts copied by scribes, papers printed by Gutenberg's press, and eventually the book which evolved along with the

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modernization of the print. Knowledge has always been the fundamental means of evolution of man, of mankind, of civilization.

Ever since the beginning, man had been ceaselessly competing with himself to overcome his limits. Knowledge was his means of rising above ignorance, of evolving and becoming a spiritual and cultural being, the force that propelled the man towards new gnoseological horizons. Knowledge is a characteristic of the being endowed with reason, the ontological way in a noetic universe which can only be understood with the help of the spirit and of intelligence. "Knowledge is power", as Francis Bacon asserted, is a truth which philosophers knew from the ancient times and which, since Socrates, has been like a red string, crossing all times and the evolution of mankind. Throughout this gnoseological and epistemological adventure, the book was the means, the way, the gate to the universe of knowledge.

The library, as the headquarters of knowledge, is the fundamental institution in the history of mankind and symbolises the human spirit and civilization. Through its symbolic importance, the Library of Alexandria, which gathered a great part of the knowledge possessed by mankind in antiquity, has remained an iconic symbol in history. Its burning was a tragedy for humanity. Throughout time, human civilisation amassed knowledge concentrated in books and libraries. Great libraries of all times, such as the Library of Ebla (2500 B.C.-2250 B.C., Syria), the oldest discovered so far, the Library of Ugarit (1200 B.C., Syria), the Library of Ashurbanipal (668 B.C.-627 BC., Iraq), the Library of Pergamum (197 B.C.-159 B.C.), the Libraries of the Forum (Rome), the Library of Celsus (135 A.D.), the Imperial Library of Constantinople (330 A.D.) or the Vatican Apostolic Library (Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana), the British Library (170 million of items) or the Library of Congress (151,8 million), all these and all the libraries in the world, from the smallest, personal ones, to bigger libraries, prove that humanity is thirsty for knowledge and that the library has always been the basis of knowledge and civilization.

Throughout time, man would comprehend the world and the Universe through knowledge. Wanting to know as much as possible, man developed, by reading assiduously, by studying, reflecting and researching, a comprehensive knowledge. The model of encyclopaedic knowledge is defining for the European Renaissance, for the Renaissance humanism in which the man, *homo universalis*, is in the centre of the world, around whom everything evolves. This model was perpetuated throughout centuries until the encyclopaedic knowledge became an ever distant and difficult to attain goal due to the increasing volume of information. In time, it was replaced by the model of specialized knowledge, divided into domains, areas and specializations, practised to this day. Even in this context, covering, through knowledge, areas as broad as possible has remained a perpetual objective, a necessary frame for specialized knowledge.

Digital technology has generated the revolution of human existence in all its fields. Within this revolutionary context, the ICT also changes the way of reading of the today's man. The new technologies cause a paradigm shift in reading, a moment of revolution of

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knowledge and culture in human history. Reading on digital media (computer, laptop, tablet, ebook, iphone, smartphone) imposes itself, increasingly, as a technological mode of the access to the written word. The *digital reading* is a parallel form of reading, an alternative to the classic reading, in full expansion today. Often a humble object, almost insignificant as material value or, on the contrary, a splendid and valuable material, graphic and artistic accomplishment, with inestimable spiritual and cultural value, the book now has a formidable rival in the ebook and other electronic media. Digital reading tends to substitute, slowly but surely, the book and classic reading.

This is more than just a risk. The process has already begun. Given the general access to technology and internet, more and more people, especially the young and very young generations, mostly the children, become increasingly attached to information and communication technology. In a spiritual and cultural order, the new technologies and the Internet cause a ”cultural rift” between generations, building a world defined by cyber-culture and cyberspace. The ”Internet Generation” lives the illusion of a ”new kind of universality”, ”the dream of the immaterial utopia”, i.e. time and space domination through information technology. (Wolton 2012b: 303-304)

Technology has advantages unsurpassed by any other information support: technological and aesthetical attraction, operability, the multi-tasking ability, work speed, storage capacity, extensive access to information sources and enormous databases. A memory stick can store thousands of books, which would otherwise fill large spaces and volumes. This is also the case with the ebook, which, in addition, imitates, through its technological abilities, the book, offering countless additional operational advantages. The Internet is an open gate to an almost endless world of data and information, an expanding Universe of knowledge. The internet, accessible to everyone today, represents an enormous library of mankind, a noetic labyrinth, an endless Borgesian Babel in the virtual universe. The screens of the laptop, the smartphone or of the ebook have thus come to replace tens of thousands of books, whole libraries, synthesizing millennia of human knowledge, space and time on the ever smaller and clearer multiple-choice screen of the digital device.

Computer technology has massively influenced the education area and generated a paradigm shift in teaching and learning. A relevant example of the involvement of digital technology in the educational process is *elearning*. A new form of education, developed on technological basis, elearning is a highly effective learning support, which transfers education from the classic mode into the digital age. The use of digital technology in education launches permanent challenges both to the didactic staff and to the target-group of the teaching and learning process, to which they should respond innovatively. (Catelly 2013)

In this information framework, digital reading is gaining more and more adherents, by the benefits it offers. Younger generations are more attached to the digital screen than to the paper book. *Homo digitalis*, the new human type, iconic for the present and future humanity, is much easier to represent reading an ebook than a book. The very young

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today or tomorrow will probably get to see the book as an outdated object of history, placed in the museum of civilization. Almost, mutatis mutandis, the way we look at the ancient papyruses or manuscripts copied by monks in medieval monasteries.

3.The new type of culture and its risks

Computer technology creates a paradigm shift in reading, by the transfer from the classical reading to the digital reading. In a causal determination, there appears a paradigm shift in the culture area too: from the "classical" culture, gained through the reading and study of books, to the *virtual culture,* generated by the digital reading. The critical approach of the new model of culture and knowledge reveals, in addition to its benefits, some risks, of paramount importance.

It is indisputable that information technology offers access to a large amount of information in a given time and space. Traditional reading would offer access to the same amount of information in a much larger period of time: the objective time of access and the subjective time of study and reflection. In the new formula, we benefit from the reduction of the objective time because technology facilitates access. But, at the same time, there is the disadvantage of reduction of the subjective time for reflection and ideational creativity. The information technology, through its wide coverage and its access speed, favours the information, the data, pushing to the secondary level the proper intellectual experience, the complex processing of data and the profound and subtle mechanisms of reason. The user falls prey to the data, to the information, being tempted by volume, by quantity, and not by ideas, substance and depth. The effortless access to information brings quantity to the limelight. On-line reading offers information, but not substance. The reader is more like a navigator on the expansive ocean of information, a surfer on its more or less versatile surfaces rather than an explorer of the depths. Hence the "pragmatic" dimension of the on-screen reading, be it for informative or cultural purpose. Hence, too, the superficiality of such an experience.

Some are afraid – it might be a simple prejudice, but, at the same time, it may be based on real grounds – that virtual reading on the screen of the computer, laptop, tablet, smartphone, ebook etc. does not request the same intensity and depth of reflection and spiritual and cultural experience like classical reading. In other words, the screen does not live up to the high cultural standards of the book. This may be only a subjective perception, an impression of those who have been educated in the paradigm of the book and are attached to this instrument of knowledge. At the same time, psychological studies show that reading on the screen is more physically and psychically challenging for the reader than the actual book. On the other hand, it is a much more complex intellectual and spiritual experience to read a book, given its nature, the constraints it presupposes – solitude, silence, a space and time to reflect, to study etc. –, and has more powerful effects on the intellectual level.

Basically, it is not the sources of culture and the paths one must cross to find knowledge that are important, if the spirit reaches the aims of knowledge. Therefore, if

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the reader has reached the light of understanding and knowing, what matters is where he has got and not what paths he has travelled. But it is hard to imagine that a philosophy student can study on-line the works of Platon, Kant or Hegel, without reading the book, line by line, page by page, stopping, meditating, renewing his activity, taking notes etc. It is also difficult to conceive that Dante, Shakespeare or James Joyce could be read online or on an ebook etc. The same goes for any domain. Apart from this, we can also talk about the poise, the altitude and the *dignity of knowledge* – but this is perhaps an entirely subjective argument.

In summary, digital reading is an experience of the surfaces, not of the depths, of heterogeneous and eclectic information, not of substance and knowledge. From this point of view, the new mod d of culture that *virtual culture* generates reveals a critical sense, hidden behind the first, referential meaning, defining the IT support of expression. The critical sense of the virtual culture is: culture as a possibility, not as a reality, the possible culture, in the virtual horizon, not the real culture. Since the digital reading, in the unlimited framework of the internet universe and not only, calls for a superficial reading, an easy, insufficient, *at a glance* experience, therefore to the failure of the act of knowledge, virtual culture may mean, ultimately, the failure of the cultural accumulation at individual level. The digital reading conceals many traps underneath its endless surfaces lit by chimeras. The navigator on these infinite spaces may become an eternal wanderer, the victim of the fantasies generated by the digital universe. This is a danger we should reflect upon against the background of the unprecedented expansion of digital technology and of its fascination on most of the people. Knowledge and culture define our very humanity.

Conclusions

The nowadays people should not give up books. The object which represents, beyond space and time, the human spirit and genius, which has built the civilization step by step and has enlightened mankind remains and must remain the fundamental element in this process at individual and collective level. The book should never get "obsolete". But the actuality of the book should not signify the refusal of information technology, which is also the expression of the human genius and is, after all, built on the foundation of books, university treatises, research, studies and libraries. The book and the digital technology can complete each other, as means of access in the space of the word, in the noetic universe of knowledge and culture. Neither one of them should be aprioristically rejected, each one should be accepted in this complex and comprehensive formula of knowledge and culture, at this time of humankind. The two paradigms of reading, far from being in opposition, are, in fact, complementary: each comes with its own specific benefits and they complement each other in this exercise of knowledge of exceptional importance for the human being, for the man of the third millennium.

In the lifelong learning process, learning seen as a continuous process, throughout the entire life, reading, study, research, combined with creativity and innovation, remain the fundamental elements of the human development and becoming. The book and

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digital technology, in its various metamorphoses, are the media of information, education, accumulation of knowledge and culture of the learner, working in perfect synergy. The library remains the symbolic environment of lecture and knowledge: the classical and, at the same time, digitized library, with tens of thousands of books, and digital terminals everywhere, which open countless windows in the endless universe of knowledge. The Library of Alexandria, with millions of volumes, but connected to the cybersphere of the holistic information, in a universal openness to knowledge, unprecedented in the history of humanity. Or the Borgesian library, the universe seen as a vast library, updated through the digital technology, in the Age of Knowledge and Globalisation.

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