The Place of Human Beings in Cyberspace

Alexandre Hamel (Master's – Sherbrooke University)

July 2013 – article n° II.2

Cyberspace is a universal network connecting individuals from all over the planet[1]. Some people, for example, call it the "worldwide brain"[2]; others speak of "collective intelligence"[3]. Thanks to these names it is possible to glimpse its essential synergy with human beings. Indeed, Man lives in a social network, and cyberspace is part of his daily life almost everywhere on the planet. He depends on it because he uses cyberspace to exchange his knowledge on it, uses it to communicate with other users beyond the borders, or for important economic purposes. In addition, a human being cannot be separated from cyberspace, since one does not function without the other. Whether it is due to his "participative, collaborative character, open and favorable to the constitution of social networks"[4], Man "makes" cyberspace but also "is" cyberspace. In their relationship, these two participants form a single entity. In this dependence and inseparability, Man finds a fundamental place, among others, because he intervenes directly in the content of cyberspace. He is therefore present as an onlooker, since he cannot totally control the action. And he can be unwillingly subjected by other users to the consequences of his use of cyberspace, which puts him in a vulnerable position.

The question of the place of human beings in cyberspace becomes imperative. It needs to be analysed first in terms of the roles human beings play as actors, as onlookers and as vulnerable persons, and subsequently, from a more philosophical point of view, in order to discover the perspectives which cyberspace can have on Man's existence.

1 –Man : actor, onlooker and vulnerable passivity

Man is first of all an actor, since he enters upon the scene as a creator, a regulator and an active participant in content. When he creates the content of cyberspace, he provides information and places it in different ways, so that it can be available everywhere in the world[5]. In a word, he is the essential link in the interconnection which cyberspace represents, since all its content is the reflection of human knowledge[6]. In addition, he also acts in order to orient and frame the sharing of information with the help of different techniques for the protection of intellectual property, censoring, antivirus software, etc. This is the case with, among others, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act which,

1 Pierre Musso, « Le cyberespace, figure de l'utopie technologique réticulaire » (2000) 32 Sociologie et sociétés 31, à la p 31.

2 Ibid.

3Pierre Lévy, L'intelligence collective – Pour une anthropologie du cyberespace, Paris, La Découverte, 1994.

4 Pierre Lévy, « Internet : de quel séisme parle-t-on? » (2008) 32 Cairn 189, à la p 190.

5 Mary Lou Maher, « What People Talk About in Virtual Worlds » dans John Karat, Human-Computer Interaction Series, Springer, à la p 203.

6 Gérard Ayache, Homo sapiens 2.0, Introduction à une histoire naturelle de l'hyperinformation, Paris, Max Milo Éditions, 2008.

in the United States, has worked to fight IT pirating since 1998[7]. It also works to protect human rights, in the use of cyberspace, concerning, among other things, privacy and freedom of expression.

Next, Man appears as onlooker in cyberspace, since he does not control the circulation of the information contained therein. For example, by making personal information available on social networks such as Facebook, humans also play a passive role of onlookers because they cannot limit the spread of this information. Furthermore, a musician may see his or her work pirated, put up on the internet and shared everywhere on the planet, by means of illegal downloading. This phenomenon also occurs in the creation of collaborative work in which "the author [of a work] becomes the user of the works of others, the spectator becoming the author."[8] In addition, the question of intellectual property rights and governmental intervention arises in a context of information "held in common with others."

Finally, Man is also a *subjected* being in cyberspace, because he is, among other things, subject to all sorts of cyberattacks, cyberterrorism, cyberespionnage, etc. Man plays a vulnerable role when he is "subjected" to the creations of other users of cyberspace. Stealing personal information is an excellent example of cyberespionnage. Also, the Wikileaks case clearly shows this duality, which represents transparence vs access to information, as opposed to the danger of threat to national security, which can result from borderless access to cyberspace and its content. The human is also subjected to cyberterrorism, to (among other things) the "hacktivism" represented by Anonymous[9]. From all of these different angles, the user "makes", "is" and is "vulnerable to" content.

2 – Cyberspace and transhumanism

The place of Man in cyberspace, but more exactly the perspectives concerning his place in the future, can be represented by transhumanism. This philosophical branch in fact represents a humanist conception by which a human being is perceived as a Being with no limits to its perfectibility. His or her amelioration can be obtained through "the convergence of the nanotechnologies, the biotechnologies, the information technologies and the cognitive sciences."[10]

More specifically, extropianism, derived from transhumanism, attempts to demonstrate that Man's capacities are infinite, and that the political, cultural and biological limits of each human being can be transcended. Cyberspace, then, consists of a programmed reality, an extension of Man's memory and a mixture of the human being and various networks[11]. William Gibson's[12] science fiction novel Neuromancer[12?] is an excellent example of extropian argument.

Nonetheless, the place of Man in this category of thought gives rise to ethical and identity problems. Among other things, these concern the positive, but especially the negative, consequences of the desire to go beyond the human condition. In addition, the question of human rights and fundamental guarantees of respecting life, liberty and physical integrity can

7 The Digital Millennium Copyright Act, Pub L No 105-304, 112 Stat 2860 (1998).

8 Pierre Lévy, « Internet : de quel séisme parle-t-on? » (2008) 32 Cairn 189.

9 Maxime Pinard, « L'hacktivisme dans le cyberespace : quelles réalités ? » (2012) 87 Revue internationale et stratégique 93.

10 Mojgan Tavangarrizi, Analyse de la problématique des arguments moraux entre le transhumanisme et l'humanisme au sujet de l'amélioration humaine par la convergence des NBIC (nanotechnologies, biotechnologies, technologies de l'information et sciences cognitives), mémoire de MA, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, 2011 [non publié].

11Antonio A Casilli, « Le débat sur le nouveau corps dans la cyberculture : le cas des Extropiens » dans O Sirost, Le corps extrême dans les sociétés occidentales, Paris, L'Harmattan, 297.

12 William Gibson, Neuromancien, , Paris, J'ai Lu, 1988.

come into conflict with transhumanism. In such a case, what is the proper place for justice and equity, as well as human dignity?[13]

Conclusion

The proper place of Man is often forgotten in favor of technology and technological advances. Man as an actor, a overlooker and a vulnerable figure is often neglected in the analysis of cyberspace. Certainly, through constant improvements, cyberspace can benefit humans, if only in the elimination of political and cultural frontiers, but constant seeking for improved performance can result in technological "challenge to the natural condition of man." [14]In my opinion, technology must therefore maintain its essential role, while remembering, among other things, that human rights exist on the basis of a morality inherent in human nature. This nature must be respected.

_____

References

- Ayache, Gérard, Homo sapiens 2.0, Introduction à une histoire naturelle de l'hyperinformation, Paris, Max Milo Éditions, 2008.

- Casilli, Antonio A, « Le débat sur le nouveau corps dans la cyberculture : le cas des Extropiens » in O Sirost, Le corps extrême dans les sociétés occidentales, Paris, L'Harmattan, 297.

- Desforges, Alix, Frédérick Douzet et Jean-Loup Samaan, « Les pirates du cyberespace » (2009) 134 Hérédote 176.

- Dumont, Jean-Marc et Nina Testut, Facebook Et moi! Et moi! Et moi!, Paris, Hoebeke, 2009.

Harle, Robert F, « Cyborgs, uploading and immortality – Some serious concerns » (2002) 41 Sophia 73.

- Huyghe, François-Bernard, « Le cyberespace, nouvel enjeu stratégique » (2012) 87 Revue internationale et stratégique 176.

- Lévy, Pierre, L'intelligence collective – Pour une anthropologie du cyberespace, Paris, La Découverte, 1994.

- Musso, Pierre, « Le cyberespace, figure de l'utopie technologique réticulaire » (2000) 32 Sociologie et sociétés 31.

- Pinard, Maxime, « L'hacktivisme dans le cyberespace : quelles réalités ? » (2012) 87 Revue internationale et stratégique 93.

- Tavangarrizi, Mojgan, Analyse de la problématique des arguments moraux entre le transhumanisme et l'humanisme au sujet de l'amélioration humaine par la convergence des NBIC (nanotechnologies, biotechnologies, technologies de l'information et sciences cognitives), mémoire de MA, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, 2011

____

13 Mojgan Tavangarrizi, Analyse de la problématique des arguments moraux entre le transhumanisme etl'humanisme au sujet de l'amélioration humaine par la convergence des NBIC (nanotechnologies,biotechnologies, technologies de l'information et sciences cognitives), mémoire de MA, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, 2011 [non publié].

14 Gérard Ayache, Homo sapiens 2.0, Introduction à une histoire naturelle de l'hyperinformation, Paris, Max Milo Éditions, 2008.