



Online – A New Dimension in Social and Cultural Development

Zoltán Szűts: *Az internetes kommunikáció és média története, elmélete és jelenségei*

[Online. The History, Theory, and Phenomenon of Internet Communication and Media]. Wolters Kluwer, Budapest, 2018

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As a subject of my review, I am going to introduce Zoltán Szűts's newest book, *Az internetes kommunikáció és média története, elmélete és jelenségei* [Online. The History, Theory, and Phenomenon of Internet Communication and Media], which has been published very recently by Wolters Kluwer publishing house. The author uses a lot of witty and reflective examples, which, of course, all contribute to the perception of the various effects of the online sphere and basically imply a really exciting and entertaining way to guide the reader in this subject. The 478 pages contain more than 950, basically bibliographic notes, and it can be a veritable niche. Similar writings have not been published in Hungarian yet, and we know about only a few English-language volumes that would examine online communication and media in the form of a handbook. In addition, it can be important to take into account that Zoltán Szűts approaches the phenomenon with the eyes of a Hungarian media researcher as he has a completely different cultural and social perception of the Internet here than someone from Western Europe or the USA, for example.

It could be surprising that despite this circumstance the author barely examines specific Hungarian cases and focuses only on the global picture. However, this is explained quite clearly in the *Introduction* as the Hungarian Internet history deserves a dedicated book. But if there are already several works around in this subject, then we can ask ourselves: what is so new in this book? There are several well-known Hungarian researchers in the online ecosystem, including László Z. Karvalics, György Csepeli, and László Ropolyi. At the beginning of the book, there is a significant chapter that highlights the creators of online ecosystem who

have a reference value for this actual work. *Online* is not a textbook intended strictly for education as it does meet the format requirements. It does not contain highlights, summaries, or repetitive questions – this is a stop-gap manual because it accumulates a large amount of lexical knowledge and presents it to the readers, helping them to a deeper understanding and finding the connections.

Going into details, the phenomena discussed in the volume starts in the 1960s. The author will firmly guide the reader through the process of taking the computers from the scientific sphere into the universe of culture and society, thus becoming integrated into the different layers of everyday life. The language used in the book meets all the needs of a scientific paper – one may say it is very polite with the reader. Due to the nature of the field, the author has included many technical terms, which are constantly explained, and he does not allow the reader to be lost, making it a comprehensive, highly user-friendly scientific study. The understanding of the information presented is also reinforced by the fact that the book contains back and forth references; thus, if a phenomenon has already been touched upon before, or will be dealt with at a later point, the author refers to the other occurrence, creating a link between them. Also, in the footnotes, the author gives a complete bibliography to help the reader.

I think it is interesting to note that the publisher undertook to bring out a work with quite a big amount of notes in the footer, which is special because less and less of this kind of writings are around. As you read the book, it may be surprising that it does not contain a separate bibliography. Nonetheless, the series wherein *Online* is published is one of the most serious scientific undertakings in Hungary in recent years, which has emerged from the subject of media law and has published authors such as Cass R. Sunstein, Robert W. McChesney, or Denis McQuail, whose works on mass communication theory are well-known at universities all around the world. In terms of its physical appearance, *Online* is a “finely cut” piece of work in terms of the size and type of the fonts, which – from a technical aspect – also helps the readers. Its cover features the structure of a building, and there is no specific reference to its source in the book itself, but I had the impression that it represents networks and links, how things are connected – and perhaps the author’s intention was to achieve this impression.

I highly appreciated that there are many cultural references in the text such as a quote from the movie *Blade Runner* in connection with passing away or the “Page Not Found” Easter-egg hidden in Footnote 404. It pretty much shows that while retaining the requirements of science Zoltán Szűts tried to make his work more colourful, and he used infotainment instead of the boring traditional explanations. Compared to most books, this volume is slightly unusual but not because it consists of five main parts – rather, we can say, because all of the parts are closed by an X chapter, which has to be rewritten by the author in the future due to the rapidly changing environment of this topic; so, all that is mentioned

will be already the past, wherefore the author will have to rewrite this chapter in the possible expanded edition of the book.

Moving to the brief introduction of the different parts, in the first section titled *Zero*, the book introduces the science and history of networks and computers to the readers. This section is abound with technical description. The author tried to keep the attention of the audience during the presentation of this large amount of details, which is quite a bit of a challenge, but he surely succeeds in the continuous demonstration of the impact of new technologies on culture and society. Reading this section, I felt that although it was meant to support the topic, the world of computers in this form is a bit lacking socio-cultural connections. In an expanded or rewritten edition, it would be worth presenting this section more thoroughly in terms of what changes have computers and smart devices had on culture and society.

The first part is about the story of the old ARPANET, while some new forms of communication, such as e-mail or chat, are also presented. The author highlights that the appearance of multimedia, for example, has brought a significant change in content adoption, and the Apple Hypercard system – although it is a failure after all – may be considered as a forerunner of today's hypertext. From this section, it is already clear that the struggle of printed press for a new ground has been on the agenda since the emergence of online media. It is because of the lack of profit-making strategy. According to Szűts, publishers felt that they were having a disadvantage if they had not made the content available free online. However, nobody expected that the readers would not pay for the printed content as reading habits had changed a lot since before. For many readers, the book may carry novelties as the author also found the tracks of online media, which are absolutely not part of today's ecosystem. One example is Minitel, which has France as its birthplace and was in service for a long time in parallel with the World Wide Web. It has delivered a significant amount of content to the public, but in other countries this technology was not successful at all. Likewise, the Cybersyn in Chile is also an example for this, and researchers have even considered it to be a network for strengthening social communication.

In my opinion, the second and third chapters are the closest to the reader because they present some phenomena which many people may already have experience with. With the introduction of the World Wide Web, the author tried to place a number of communication theories into a new context – this will be the case with Web 2.0. Several phenomena are explained in detail in the book such as flow experience generated by media content, digital dementia, 15 clicks of fame, or activism. Practical examples include the timeline of online newspapers, the presentation of several vloggers' career, the role of influencers, the use of augmented reality, or the emoticons and memes. These are such up-to-date topics which the reader meets every day.

The fourth chapter examines the current phenomena of information society. Here we can read a discussion about fake news, which is also interesting because the author refers back to the fact that it is related to the basis of Web 2.0 and social media. According to this, the eroding of the gate-keeper system caused uncertainty, and the condition of credibility has disappeared. The book does not deal with communication between machines but touches a bit upon human-machine interaction with chatbots. This interaction is also extremely exciting as the machine masks itself and tries to look like a real human being. The chapter entitled *Big Data*, which I found highly useful for my MA thesis, points out that analysing databases has many potentials. Thus, for example, machines may notice patterns that the human eye is unable to focus on. Messages posted on Twitter can easily identify the mood of a particular community. *Online* can be also an exciting reading for anyone who is interested in Internet communication and media because the author blends techno-optimism and pessimism into reality. He points out at the same time that many authors are concerned about the unauthorized disclosure of data but also celebrates the fact that the online world contributes to a high level of cultural diversity.

Last but not least, the author makes it clear several times that he is aware of the fact that he presents “only” a few dozen from hundreds of phenomena in details and that it is a story what he can tell from his own point of view. Based on that, my suggestion would be to have a bigger role in an expanded edition for *Big Data* systems, which are only mentioned partly despite that it is absolutely reinventing the online world and emphasizing digital opportunities of the online sphere with other disciplines such as marketing – it would be really interesting to see that. If you remember, at the beginning, I raised the question as to what sort of novelties the book can bring. I think the answer is quite obvious: being able to present a scientific topic in a readable way in addition to a high degree of professionalism while not forgetting the presentation of theories and concrete examples – in science, this is what we can call a work of art. This work by Zoltán Szűts will soon become a fundamental piece in the great puzzle of online media and communication.