SUMMARY

To orient oneself in both the physical and social world, we need certain reference points, guidelines that help us to position oneself and our movements in relation to the surrounding environment – without such guidelines our survival would simply be impossible. For instance, it is proved experimentally that human being cannot bear the absolute silence even for an hour since the elimination of sensorial landmarks makes balancing and maneuvering extremely difficult, which causes huge stress for human body leading even to hallucinations and panic attacks. While it is not known exactly why sound is so important for self-localization, what processes occur in the human body when this landmark is lost, it is not in doubt that it is very significant. Similarly, in complete darkness, with no reference points to help determine their environmental position, people lose their sense of the trajectory of movement – thinking that they are going straight, they are actually moving in circles. Scientists still do not have a clear answer as to why this is happening, but agree on one thing: human orientation in space requires certain reference points that allow them to constantly 'recalibrate' as they move. Suppose, in an open ocean that has no landmarks perceivable by a human, one uses celestial bodies as his guides because without them a person risks to loose a sense of place and not to reach the final destination.

Since human being is a social animal, similar guidelines are needed to smoothly maneuver in the social environment as well. They are related to such questions as who I am from my own perspective, from the perspective of those around me and my community members, what is my role in the community, and so on. An important point of reference for person's being and acting in the social world is his or her identity which helps one to assess own location with regard to other members of one's community as well as to other communities, to set out goals, to choose

the direction and pattern of action, etc. Even though it remains unclear how identity affects human attitudes, daily routines, and fundamental life choices, its importance is not questioned. Moreover, the importance of identity as the basis for perceiving oneself and surrounding environment increases incredibly in the contemporary world of rapid change, where other previously significant reference points lose their importance or disappear altogether.

Recently there has been much debate about whether the internet, in creating new forms of communication and culture, becomes a powerful tool in the formation of individual identity. The internet is important not only as a new channel of socialization that allows people to communicate those who otherwise would be unreachable (while at the same time widening the experience of social variety), but also as an excellent new space for interaction, where formed identity is supported and re-created. It seems that electronic communication creates a new dimension of personal identity. It is this that encouraged a new wave of identity analysis in sociological research in the late 20th century. One can confidently say that we live in the society undergoing substantial cultural changes in which computer technology has become part of everyday life, but there is still lack of standards, norms and rules of how to use them. In other words, the culture of interpersonal communication in the new platforms still is at its embryonic stage. The present study raises questions what is interpersonal communication, when it is accomplished through the digital mass media? How does it affect the self-awareness and self-presentation of communication participants? And are the users of modern communication technology sufficiently aware of the communication features when compared to the traditional interpersonal communication?

A much-debated question in sociological and psychological literature is whether the experience of virtual communication creates a new quality in the process of identity formation and whether virtual groups and communities can become a source of identity for its members. These discussions emphasize the importance of individual choice. As is observed, the Internet, unlike earlier modes of communication, does not provide people with a clear path, but instead requires a certain dimension of personal choice and creativity. Therefore, the Internet is open to the constant restructuring of information and new symbolic implications. At the same

time, it provides users with the ability to appear and disappear in a number of spaces, times, social roles, characters, etc. Therein lies the issue – how does one manage not to lose oneself in this abundance of choices?

Although the concept of personal identity is considered as one of the most significant 'discoveries' in social sciences, it has never been clearly defined. Commonly, identity is associated with certain self-concept, or self-understanding. However, identity creation never happens in social isolation. Rather, this process is multi-layered: identity establishes as self-understanding which develops in human interactions taking place in the context of certain social structures and cultural norms. During the last century's gradual liberalization of social structures, a person acquires more and more opportunities to escape from their clutches and to decide upon own fate; consequently, the component of communal relations of the identity concept losses in import, meanwhile the focus on individual self-determination is strengthening. Thus, personal identity is increasingly perceived not as predefined by given social structure, and in this sense almost inborn, but as emerging during the process of personality maturation through important personal choices.

In the society of rapid changes, globalization and networking traditional signs for identity development gradually disappear. Moreover, networked communication creates new types of communication spaces, where people can newly create and strengthen their existing identities through interpersonal interaction. The present study addresses the question what is the impact of fundamentally changing ways of communication, its depth, content, scope and means on personal self-awareness. Participation in virtual groups becomes increasingly widespread among modern publics worldwide and often taken for granted, which leaves its imprint in various spheres of human life: starting from private and most intimate relationships, leisure pursuits, business communication with the customers, distant education, science and technology groups. At the same communication in virtual networks is becoming a powerful tool of identity formation and brightly lit scene of self-presentation to others. Presenting oneself to others – through appearance, clothing, communication style and so on – always used to be an important element of identity formation and maintenance but modern electronic technologies provide it an unprecedented scale.

It seems that the dissemination of personal data is the new value in contemporary society, as people on social networks come together exactly to share their information with the widest range of people. One can argue if it is good or bad; the consequences (advantages and disadvantages, norms and values) of nowadays fashionable communication in social networks will become explicit only after a few decades when the generation of it's most ardent followers, current teenagers, will mature and live through their lives. However, it can already be stated that this is not just another alternative means of human communication, as it is quite often believed without deeper thought about the motives that lead people to spread the details of their life for tens, hundreds or even thousands of 'friends' with whom they have no possibility to maintain consistent communication in real life. Virtual social networks are a fundamentally new type of communication platform, where mass and interpersonal communication become intricately intertwined. On the one hand, communication becomes disconnected from the context: the mobility of the new means of communications determines that private conversations can and do take place in public spaces. On the other hand, they enable personal interactions among the members of groups of previously unimaginable size, which blurs the line between public and private communication.

As a result, the concept of identity becomes even more problematic. In the traditional conception of identity, the key element is person's awareness that at the sight of ongoing significant changes in one's physical and social environment person's identity is not disrupted or terminated; rather, identity is evolving as it is an integral and continuous awareness of self. However, recently the idea of fragmented or decentralized identity emerges as a response to the reality of rapid social changes. According to it, a person, who previously conceived oneself as having a coherent and stable identity, begins to feel dispersed among different social realities, with not one but several identities that sometimes are hardly compatible with each other. It is argued that self-identification, through which a person associates himself with a certain cultural environment becomes increasingly uncertain, flexible and problematic process, and identity becomes a variable, flexibly adapting to specific social situations. A postmodern person is conceptualized as having no essential, continuous and relatively stable identity: at different times, in different

situations, performing different social roles a person is 'wearing' different identities which are not merged into a single identity. These different and sometimes conflicting identities pull a person in different directions, which makes the self-identification process inconsistent. The belief enters into force that a unified identity is only an illusion that stems from the desire of a person to create a reasonable and appropriate self-narrative.

The recently heated academic discussions over the issue of personal identity, its essence and development lead to one obvious conclusion: electronic communication environment is fundamentally changing the awareness of the context of interpersonal communication and therefore encourages people to seek for the new ways of managing self-presentations and handling one's personal information, which forces social researches to look for new conceptualizations of identity, better reflecting the diversity of contemporary world, people's mobility (both geographical and social) and aspiration for the freedom of personal choice formed by individualistic culture.

When speaking of personal identity, it is inevitable to also raise the question of community since individual identities are firmly rooted in the communal identities. In the world of advanced communication technologies, the nature of the community is changing: qualitatively new spaces of sociability are being created, whose importance in communication, creating one's public image and presenting it to a wide audience is constantly increasing. New communication technologies are creating new ways of interpersonal communication and, at the same time, a new form of co-existence, the so-called 'virtual community', where the dimension of territorial proximity loses its importance as the common interests, beliefs, worldviews and values become more crucial. Probably no one questions nowadays that virtual space can become an alternative 'place' where various forms of communal activities rise and are supported. Technological innovation enables social relationships to be transferred to the virtual space, helping to maintain close relationships with geographically distant but important people, and also forging completely new relationships that would otherwise not be possible. But there remain doubts as to whether this 'networked' communality can be grasped and considered by analogy with the communal spirit in the traditional sense, which bases itself on direct interpersonal relationships and is territorially defined, with community members sharing a common cultural heritage.

There are those who argue that digitized local social networks can properly serve for the sake of maintaining already existing community identities: by enriching direct contacts of community members with virtual communication experience, the community feels more focused and in solidarity. On the other side, there are those who believe that ephemeral virtual communication environment poses significant obstacles to build and maintain the spirit of confidence and mutual trust among people, which is the basis for the formation of any community. It is exactly the lack of trust which is recognized as the major reason for the decreasing spirit of traditional community. Special attention is drawn to the fact that the increasing numbers of narcissistic personalities use social networks to maintain their *ego* fed, to expose their lives and not to sustain the communal spirit of cooperation, and these people are those who fashion the culture of online communication.

So how the social networks that are setting up in cyberspace should be treated: as a new form of communal life, more responsive for the challenges of modern world, or rather as networked publics, as certain platform for masspersonal communication? One cannot deny the fact that social networking platforms are used by many people for sharing relevant information with those living in the neighborhood or for maintaining close relationships with family members and friends, which means that there are some apparent expressions of communal spirit in these networks. However, it is necessary to take into account the research data that show it is not the Internet that encourages people to organize themselves into communities but the contrary: people actively involved in the life of traditional communities and happy about it are more inclined to use the Internet for communication with other members of the communities. In order for a virtual community to last, a consistent involvement of community members is required, a certain interest and motivation that spring of values and aspirations of people gathering in the virtual space. Without them, these gatherings will be short-lived, and communication – superficial. It is therefore important that neither Internet users nor social observers overestimate the potential of community in cyberspace.

Over the past couple of decades the continuous growth of Internet penetration has already reached the massive level in terms of both the public and the domestic sector, at least in the Western world, new

channels and dissemination of information and interpersonal communication are entering in force. New spaces of sociability are setting up whose significance for the maintenance of interpersonal relations, for the formation of the public image of the person and for the promotion of self-presentation to wide publics is gradually increasing. When trying to understand this significance, a clear distinction should be made between self-presentation in anonymous and non-anonymous Internet environments because personal presence and performance in these environments is influenced by fundamentally different reasons and different communication logic. In anonymous environments, a person can introduce oneself to the audience as being anyone and can freely experiment with different social roles – both realistic and fully imagined, even fantastic. Meanwhile in non-anonymous environments the information presented by a person about oneself has at least partially meet the reality because these communication platforms take on the nature of communal gatherings where their members usually try to establish and maintain authentic social relationships, therefore here a real-life accepted norms and values prevail, sincerity and openness being amongst them. Therefore, the questions inevitably arise what personal information is usually made public and in what ways; to what extent these virtual self-portraits are authentic; and whether they can be considered as a kind of personal identity expressions. Answering them unequivocally is not easy, which makes the conceptualization of identity in contemporary society even more difficult. Hence, when discussing identity formation, it becomes fashionable these days to use the concept of multiple identities: person becomes treated as having no essential, continuous and relatively stable identity – it becomes a variable, flexibly adapting to specific social situations. Others still offer to conceptualize personal identity as comprising of a core, which is rather stable substance resistant to change, and a number of mobile personal identities that relate to those aspects of personality that are easily refused under changing circumstances, when it becomes more interesting or more profitable to be someone else. But here it is worth stopping and considering once again if, in principal, identity may have something to do with accidental? How, in such case, mobile identities differ from social roles which an individual really takes more or less consciously?

There is no doubt that people living in the modern world are facing more difficulties consistently aligning their different experience into one whole, if only because they have much broader spectrum of possible life styles and projects to choose from. But this is hardly a sufficient basis to talk about personal identity as if it was an amalgamation of unrelated selves: we can talk about the various manifestations of the individual self, but not about his/her multiple identities. Therefore, a radically new conceptualization of identity notion is needed.

Identity is an ongoing process, because it renews itself in every situation of social interaction. The fact that self-perception is evolving and changing by no means entails that it is bound to lose integrity, coherence. To employ an analogy with the physical body, which is also visibly changing over the years while moving through the stages of growth, development and aging and is nonetheless perceived as the same body, we can see that change does not necessarily mean fragmentation or dispersing as it can organically embrace the whole entity. It is meaningful to conceptualize personal identity as continuing aggregation of different personality facets as well as their associated meanings, obligations and expectations into a coherent entity, as a process of internal integration of different identities, rather than as a result of this process. However, there remains the question of what enables the consolidation of even conflicting identities into an organic entity, what is the organizing principle of the constant process of identity creation? These are the fundamental human values since they facilitate consolidation of different, even conflicting, identities into an organic entity. Values assure the unified sense of personal identity detached from specific life situations and volatile behaviors. These values, in their turn, are expressed and embodied in specific situations through the identities rising from various affiliations to social roles and groups. Hence the relationship between personal identity and fundamental values is mutual.

Once treating values as a nucleus of self, we can understand self-perception and performance models of a person as a member of certain social groups without depreciating one's uniqueness and importance: even though all members of a particular social group can be predisposed to prioritize certain values, their configuration of self-perception relevant values and identities can be very distinct since social characteristics of a

person do not strictly determine one's value system. Thus, both personal identity and its founding basic values are a complex combination of individuality and sociability. However, it should be noted that the virtual environment is even more favorable than traditional communication spaces for the advance of personal identity grounded in values, since here identity is more easily liberated from the constraints of social roles that a person perceives as accidental or undesirable.

The proposed conceptualization of identity as a permanent process of self-affirmation through internalized values allows to reconcile two contradictory theories: a long-existing concept of a homogeneous identity (that social theory tends to refuse as losing its relevance for the realities of dynamic modern society) and increasingly dominating concept of multiple, fragmented identity (that relates identity too closely with specific situations of interpersonal interactions and thus faces challenges when trying to explain how these identities coexist with each other in one person and one body). Linking the concept of personal identity with the structure of basic personal values allows to explain how different social roles conducted by an individual or personages played in virtual space as well as other identities connect to each other in one human. The concept of identity as an endless process of self-affirmation through values, formulated in this monograph, allows us to respond to the challenges posed by the contemporary fragmenting world without losing the essential aspect of identity – an inner coherence to oneself.

It seems that the world has changed not so much, but the rapid expansion of new information technology has created entirely new spaces and forms of sociability that require social researchers to rethink the basic concepts of social sciences, and not only that of identity or community, but also of publicity, privacy, intimacy and similar. Technology is not an independent determinant of social situations as it is rooted in these situations – therefore, one might say that every technology is socialized (Crang et al. 1991). Thus, in the virtual world, as in others, people strive to fulfill one of their basic needs – to build meaningful interpersonal relationships, emotionally rich relationships, to foster authenticity, to establish their identity through communion with other people. The realization of this endeavor is somewhat hindered by the physical distance between the fellows, precluding the experience of the spirit of an imme-

diate of communication, as well as the fragmentation and uncertainty of the relationship. This leads to such forms of sociality being seen more as a temporary experience of communion than as authentic communality. Doubtlessly, no community has ever been or is ideal – neither primitive nor postmodern: each of them faces their own problems and needs to solve them. Therefore, it would be perverse to expect virtual communities to meet a certain standard of perfect human coexistence. However, the real and fundamental problem with most virtual gatherings is that they focus exclusively on the needs, interests, experiences of individual users without finding, or even seeking, a more sustainable approach to joining them together, and thus not evolving into a new communal quality. In order for the digital community to have a more sustainable prospect, it needs to build a stronger foundation based on its members' common values, beliefs and worldviews. Moreover, as the bioethics expert Erich H. Loewy points out, "in true communities members share a common belief in community itself as a uniting value" (Loewy 1993: 234). Only this kind of belief could foster the feeling of members of the digital public that they are not just a group of people meeting randomly in the realms of the virtual world, but rather engaging in deeper connections and, most importantly, would help them to understand themselves as a community. If a community as such is not the value, the duty, and the purpose of every it's member, it has no vitality.