
CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL AND NETWORK SOCIETY: EMERGING PLACES AND SPACES OF LEARNING

*Margarita Teresevičienė, Giedrė Tamoliūnė, Justina Naujokaitienė, Danutė Pranckutė,
Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania; Ulf Daniel Ehlers, Baden-Wurtemberg Cooperative
State University, Germany*

Extended abstract for presentation

Network society is a term by Jan van Dijk which came first into being in 1991 with his book *De Netwerkmaatschappij* (1991) (The Network Society) and by Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), the first part of his trilogy *The Information Age*. It is describing the social, political, economic and cultural changes induced by the spread of networked, digital technologies. The intellectual origins of the idea can be traced back to the work of early social theorists such as Georg Simmel who analysed the effect of modernization and industrial capitalism on complex patterns of affiliation, organization, production and experience. An additional underlying theoretical perspective can be taken from system theory as Luhmann formulated it when he defined societal systems as constituted on bases of communication and interaction (Luhmann, 1996). More recently, in *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Castells (2011) takes up the subject of networked social movements with reference to the Arab Spring and other movements.

However, today almost 25 years after van Dijk's works, developments of society under the influence of networks and digital technology have to be taken into focus again to understand the changes, challenges and the potentials. There are no universal definitions for the terms *digital*, *digitalization* or *network*. Digitalization may be seen as the process of increasing integration of digital technology into every aspect of human life. It expresses e.g. in the use of human-computer interaction in order to achieve a desired objective or through integrating technologies into people's lives through digital resources (Niedzwiecka & Pan, 2017). Digitalization, also may be understood as the way of social life, reorganized around digital communication and media infrastructure (Wildemeersch & Jütte, 2017), as when technologies are involved when we shop, make bank transactions, spend our free time, communicate with our friends and co-workers, listen to favourite music, watch TV, play games and learn it affects our daily life. It remains to be defined which role the aspect of digital plays for and within society more in detail, whether as an enabler and medium of developments or an artefact of life itself with which we interact.

Changing digital and network society opens new learning opportunities. European Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2017) data indicates that 79% of Europeans go online regularly (at least once per week). 70% of Europeans read news online and 63% use social

networks. Universities across the world actively suggest possibilities of massive open online learning courses (MOOCs). Research reveals that digital learning is not restricted to the traditional students as non-traditional higher education target groups benefit from digitalization, too. The aim of this presentation is to discuss places and spaces of learning as a particular characteristics of digital and network society taking into consideration accessibility to learning and the benefits of it. The research method used to prepare for this presentation was a systemic scientific literature analysis and desktop research, covering more than 100 recent research publications.

Theoretical foundations for digital and network society are grounded by the research of Spanish sociologist Manuel Castell (2000a; 2000b; 2011) who testifies the reorganization of human activities in relation to the new dimension of time and space, shaped by the real-time communication introduced by digital technologies over great distances. The digital society is characterized by a specific social structure – the network – which functions on the basis of network logics and is empowered by digital technologies. Theoretical foundations serve as a background to analyse the impacts of spatial transformation in the network society, changing places and spaces of digital networked learning.

Places and spaces of learning as a particular characteristic of digital and network society could be summarized by:

- weakened boundaries among formal, non-formal and informal learning as knowledge and information are now widely accessible through the Internet;
- use of new technological devices such as computers, mobile phones, tablet computers, other related tools;
- use of the social networks within work or private life for informal learning;
- increasing MOOC potential to change nature of education through global contribution and new pedagogies;
- and the need for all citizens to develop and master digital skills to adopt changes and to take advantage of learning.

Physical access to the internet and the most recent information technologies does not ensure the same benefits to all members of society. Access to digital technology itself does not solve inequalities in the use of technology for learning. Yet, digitalization is one of the greatest benefits to those with a higher social status, because of the benefits they receive in various important spheres of life including learning.

The theoretical considerations of this paper will be complemented by empirical data in the further stages of a research project Open Online Learning for Digital and Networked Society (3.3-LMT-K-712-01-0189). Project is funded by the European Social Fund according to the activity “Improvement of researchers” qualification by implementing world-class R&D projects’ of Measure No. 09.3.3-LMT-K-712.

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