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Essay on Validity of Stuart Hall's Theory in the Context of Blogosphere Studies

Key words: theory, validity, blogosphere, Stuart Hall, application

Abstract: The paper contains a discussion on the validity of Stuart Hall's theory. The thesis put forward by the author was presentation of arguments in favour of utility of the above-mentioned set of theoretical premises in the studies on blogosphere.

The text refers to the concept of the British culture expert and introduces and discusses terms related to blogosphere. Its' features are enumerated. First and foremost, a speculative application of the theory to the studies on Internet diaries is made. The paper also highlights potential hypotheses that should be adopted by scientists who apply the described paradigm in their studies.

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The dispute about validity of theories is not new. It is as old as science and its' capacity for the development of new theories. Obsolete theoretical assumptions are discussed bearing in mind the time of their creation and the social background; however, in some cases ostensibly changing reality is overlooked. In the case of Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/ decoding one can speak about such a change. Why? The concept derives from Antonio Gramsci, who transferred Karl Marx's theory to cultural science. Hall discusses hegemony, which is rooted in culture and in social relations and becomes manifest in television messages. In this place, a question about validity of such theory emerges. However, it is necessary to signal in this place that the author of this essay acknowledges its' validity. The theory is applicable in the analysis on who and how creates the Internet space. Its' validity is also perceptible in the type of messages that are communicated. Even though

the Internet abounds in communication, its' forms are disordered and there is no hierarchy in them. Nevertheless, if such factor as the number is taken into account, it may be claimed that blogs form the largest group. Blogosphere is the hegemon. It is the hegemon in the arithmetic and broadcasting sense. An individual Internet diarist seems to dominate over his/ her readers, organising his/ her own space of narrative about a given subject and creating own ideology. Thus, it is possible to find initial arguments that confirm the validity of Hall's theory.

S. Hall's Encoding/ Decoding Theory

Hall's encoding/ decoding theory describes the possibilities of content decoding by an audience. When starting the discussion on the receipt of a message, attention should be drawn to the television programme that becomes the beginning of a meaningful discourse. It is encoded on the level of meaningful linguistic structures, originating from senders¹. On the other hand, the recipients decode such structures with the use of their knowledge and competence attributed to them and resulting from their life experience or familiarity with culture. After decoding the message, they create its' own image based on previously mentioned factors. In this manner, they may adopt various recipient positions: dominant, negotiated and oppositional². Hall notices that "the first of these hypothetical approaches is the dominant-hegemonic standpoint [...]. If the viewer [...] takes the connoted meaning full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, then we can say that the recipients operates in the dominant code. The second described approach is the negotiated position or code. [...] decoding in a negotiated version is a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements. It acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes it own ground rules. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions', to its own more corporate positions. [...] it is characterised by varied and non-uniform approach to discourses [...]. Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary

¹ Cf. S. Hall, *Kodowanie i dekodowanie*, translated by W. Lipnik, I. Siwiński, "Przekazy i opinie" 1987, No. 1-2, p. 58-71.

² Cf. *Ibidem*..

way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. [...] He/ she is operating with what we must call an oppositional code.”³.

Blogosphere as the Study Object

Providing a single universal definition of a blog is difficult. Almost every researcher dealing with the blogosphere or, more broadly, examination of the Internet, conceptualises an Internet diary according to own criteria⁴. Marta Więckiewicz explains that a blog is determined as “personal document, consisting of dated posts presented in a sequence reverse to chronological, published by the blogger on the website”⁵.

In a further part of her discussion, M. Więckiewicz shows other important features of the discussed Internet genre: “Dated posts arranged in an order reverse to chronological are an easily recognisable feature of a blog referring to its’ structure (the dominance of anti-chronology over the thematic division is characteristic for an Internet diary). The term “document” indicates that a blog is a non-fictional genre. A personal character of an Internet diary is combined with the author’s subjectivism. Furthermore, the term “personal document” suggests that blogs may be included in the category of a personal document. Continuation of the process of publication, i.e. adding subsequent entries, is important in blogging. The fact of publication on a website is related to the interactive feature. [...] In the case of this genre, it is important to offer the readers the possibility of expressing their opinions about the posts”⁶.

The blog definition proposed by Dave Winer slightly differs from Marta Więckiewicz’s. “In line with Dave Winer’s criterion [...] a blog has to be personal, which means that it is written by a private person or a group of private individuals (e.g. friends). It cannot be written by a company or any other institution. An Internet diary, as the name suggests, is posted on the web and exists exclusively there, i.e. it is virtual. There are rare publications of blogs, yet these cases are few and far between and it happens most often at a moment when the blogger ceases to write the blog”⁷. Another criterion is posting and publication, i.e. frequent updates, most

³ Ibidem, p. 69-71.

⁴ M. Więckiewicz, “Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej”, Toruń 2012, p. 51-65.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 64-65.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ It is necessary to draw attention to the fact that these days, blogs are published traditionally. An example may be provided by the book of Paulina Stępień entitled “Mała wielka uczta” published

often once a day and making the posts available to readers on the Internet. The last condition that a website has to comply with in order to call it a blog is the audience, which is deemed one of the most important features of a blog, differentiating an Internet diary from an ordinary one. Blog is a part of a community. It cannot exist separately”⁸.

When looking for a definition of a blog, sufficient to understand not only the idea of Internet diaries, but also the phenomenon of blog websites or platforms, it is necessary to combine both of the above-listed explanations. They are complementary with respect to certain issues, offering a broader research perspective.

Thus, a blog may be defined in the following manner: a non-fictional personal document edited by a private person or a group of private individuals⁹. It is characterised by anti-chronology of entries, which dominates over the thematic division. An Internet diary is also characterised by its’ virtual nature, i.e. its availability on a website. Updates are continuous, i.e. they are made at least once a day, a week or a month. The blogger decides about the frequency of posting entries. Posting entries is understood as a form of interaction between the blogger and the readers. With the use of a structure that allows for receipt of information from users and for reacting to the content, it is possible for a blogger and the users to hold a dialogue, which subsequently leads to the building of a community between them.

Every blog published on the Internet has its’ name, referring directly to the author or to texts presented in it. Apart from the title of the Internet diary, a dominant part is the main text¹⁰. The main text includes the author’s posts in an order reverse to chronological. Every post has a separate title and content in a traditional or multi-media form. The homepage of an Internet diary also features tabs, which the recipients can use to browse the archives and the guest book. The elements

y MUZA. The publication relies on P. Stępień’s food blog. In reference to further portion of Dave Winer’s discussion, it should be added that Paulina Stępień’s blog did not expire, it is edited on an ongoing basis.

⁸ Definition quoted according to Marta Bańczarowska It derives from article entitled *Blogi współczesne pamiętniki* [in:] *Język a komunikacja 12. Oblicza komunikacji. Perspektywy badań nad tekstem, dyskursem i komunikacją*, I. Kamińska– Szmaj, T. Piekota, H. Zaśko – Zielińska (ed.), Kraków 2006, p. 663.

⁹ Thus, it is worth determining whether politicians’ blogs, bearing this thesis in mind, can still be classified as blogs? It would be necessary to analyse their content with respect to the views contained in them and determine whether they belong to a given politician or the entire political party.

¹⁰ In article entitled *Blog jako dokument osobisty – specyfika dziennika prowadzonego w Internecie*, Marta Olcoń calls the place where posts are published the main text. Following the terminology of M. Olcoń, the author of this paper uses the term main text. The article is available at the following address: http://www.depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/1442/Blog%20jako%20dokument%20osobisty_Olco%C5%84_Marta.pdf?sequence=1; access: 04.07.2017, p. 4.

of a blog may also include: space for comments from the readers, hyper-links to other blogs, favoured or recommended by the author, personal data of the Internet diary author; photos, a motto guiding the blogger and, less frequently, the visit statistics¹¹.

The outline and the structure of a blog is determined by the graphic design made available by blog servers¹², thus Internet diaries located on them are similar to one another with respect to the graphic design. Some servers that make space available for writing an Internet diary allow the users to introduce slight changes in the so-called skins¹³. With respect to the structure and the form of the blog, the bloggers who design their own websites and publish their posts there have the greatest freedom.

Precise determination of problems discussed in Internet diaries may be performed by preparing a blog typology with respect to the content. It is possible to distinguish five blog categories divided in line with such criterion¹⁴. The first one encompasses private life as the main theme¹⁵. "Bloggers use [the Internet] to present their private lives: they describe the growth of their children, they talk about the functioning of families, they analyse emotional problems"¹⁶; persons who write Internet diaries also discuss problems at work, intimate life or the current mental condition. Authors of blogs classified in the second category, namely cultural issues¹⁷, deal with broadly-understood culture. Thus, they write reviews of novels, poems and short-stories. Bloggers may be writers and¹⁸ the Internet diary allows them to find an audience¹⁹. Another type of Internet diaries are "blogs devoted to politics"²⁰, which contain entries discussing the current political affairs. Their authors are politicians, journalists and persons interested in such subject matter. Blogs from this group show the plurality of ideas in the society and offer a space for the exchange of opinions. "Blogs related to new technologies [...] usually focus on such issues as: Internet (programming, coding, website design in compli-

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 4-5.

¹² It is worth looking at several or several dozen blogs located on popular servers (e.g. blox.pl or bloog.pl) in order to observe the discussed issue.

¹³ Skins are graphic designs made available as part of ready-made templates.

¹⁴ M. Więckiewicz, "Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej", Toruń 2012, p.125.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 126.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 136.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 137.

¹⁸ An example of such use of the blog is provided by the diary of Katarzyna Michalak, who reviews novels of other authors and describes her own. Cf. <http://katarzynamichalak.blogspot.com/>, access: 07.07.2016.

¹⁹ M. Więckiewicz, "Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej", Toruń 2012, p. 144.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 145.

ance with utility and availability standards, website positioning in search engines, browsers, Internet domains), computers (computer programmes, operating systems, hardware, computer network administration); less frequently, issues related to mobile telephony and digital photography appear there. [...] What characterises a substantial group of Internet diaries devoted to such technologies is the hermetic language, incomprehensible for other readers”²¹. The last group of blogs in the typology include multi-thematic blogs²². It is impossible to indicate a single theme discussed by the authors in their diaries. To make it easier for the readers to get their bearings in such diary, the author categorises the posts according to the thematic criteria discussed by him/ her. A person writing a blog is frequently unable to assign the post to a specific category. Multi-thematic diaries may constitute a reflection on the social roles of people and experiences that accompany them²³.

It is also worth noting that a blog is a reflection of the author’s world-view. Thus, the subject matter depends on the author’s likings and the classification of blogs may indicate the paths that are followed by persons who create the blogosphere.

Predominantly, blogs are a generally available space to express one’s opinions and to hold dialogue on the Internet²⁴. Communication of this type determines the choice of a relevant code. Posts of a blog’s author should be normative in character, and in justified cases, they have to comply with the custom. It is also desired that the discussions among recipients of an Internet diary and between the readers and the blogger take place in line with the convention adopted in the real world, requiring them to be restrained and to observe etiquette, and, in electronic communication, netiquette. The language as such, apart from the above-mentioned convention, may be diverse on account of the blogger’s and his/ her recipients’ linguistic competence.

Interactivity of blogs facilitates contact between the sender of the message and the recipient. They usually communicate with the use of comments posted under the entry and possibility of receiving responses to the remarks that were posted. Thanks to the possibility of adding comments, readers may influence the author, e.g. by suggesting the subject matter of a subsequent post or requesting a post

²¹ Ibidem, p. 156. Subsequently, the author notices that such blogs help solve IT problems or promote knowledge about IT.

²² Ibidem, p. 159.

²³ Ibidem, p. 159 – 166.

²⁴ Not all blogs are generally available. Some bloggers may set up and deliver access passwords to their blogs to recipients. More about it in: M. Więckiewicz, “Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej”, Toruń 2012.

devoted to a specific issue. Such influence results in the fact that the reader may assume the role of the author. The border between them becomes blurred, which results in the fact that such roles may be, in theory, reversed. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that the blogger dominates over the reader, as he is the creator of the diary²⁵.

In order to ensure any relation between the blog's author and his/ her readers, it is necessary to indicate the probable psychological causes for the emergence of blogs, namely self-presentation and exhibitionism²⁶. Self-presentation accompanies people in every private and public situation, basically from birth to death. "Self-presentation is the process of an individual's control of the manner in which the individual is perceived by the environment"²⁷. The definition proposed by Mark Leary may be simply "transferred" to the realm of blogosphere. An individual, i.e. a blogger who publishes his/ her posts in an Internet diary, is revealed to the environment, i.e. other authors and readers, via a post. The subject matter of posts may refer to family, intimate or professional life and is freely determined by the author. With the use of entries and a special tab – About Me/ About Author – the blogger makes a self-presentation. Similarly, the name of the blog or the author's nick²⁸ may be a form of self-presentation²⁹. In the case of a blog and its' tools, self-presentation may be a phenomenon with a broad impact on two levels: conscious and sub-conscious. It is impossible to separate the conscious and sub-conscious self-presentation of a blogger. However, it is possible to indicate a type of blog where the authors perform a conscious self-presentation in the Emo-culture style. At the present moment, it is a no longer updated blog called emomarynka³⁰. The authors of the above-mentioned Internet diary presented themselves as a fifteen-year-old girl who belongs to the Emo sub-culture. The blog was created in a graphic and linguistic style which referred to the subculture, yet its' authors were adults.

The other possible motive for writing a blog is exhibitionism³¹. In this case, if one wishes to use this term in a proper context, it is necessary to refer to the common meaning of this term. In line with Encyklopedia PWN, exhibitionism

²⁵ M. Więckiewicz, "Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej", Toruń 2012, p. 23-255.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ M. Leary, "Wywieranie wrażenia na innych. O sztuce autoprezentacji", translated by A. Kamcior, M. Kamcior, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2012, p 27.

²⁸ Nick, i.e. the Internet pseudonym of the author of an Internet diary.

²⁹ M. Więckiewicz, "Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej", Toruń 2012, p. 200.

³⁰ Cf. <http://emo-martynka.blog.onet.pl>.

³¹ M. Więckiewicz, "Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej", Toruń 2012, p. 216-217.

colloquially means a tendency for disclosing own feelings and problems³². In line with such definition, it is possible to conclude that a blogger is predisposed to externalising his/ her experiences and problems in life.

Blog Coding/ Encoding

A brief return to the discussion from the beginning of the article is necessary: it was noted that an Internet diarist, posting his/ her entries, may become a hegemon with respect to his/ her recipient, expressing and decoding his/ her message in the comments. Thus, it is necessary to discuss the mode in which Hall's theory is still valid.

First of all, it has to be noted that certain changes are required for the discussed platform, i.e. the Internet. When discussing a message, Hall had television programmes in mind. For the needs of blog studies, the role of the message is to be taken up by blog posts. They initiate the meaningful discourse. The diarist's encoding may have, similarly to the theory of the British scholar, linguistic, visual or auditory nature (or all of them together). Thus, it may have meaningful structures, such as: general availability on the Internet, interaction, wish for self-presentation or exhibitionism – which result from the structure of a blog and the blogger's attitude. Proper competence in the sense of knowledge possessed by an Internet diarist is of lesser importance, similarly to the communication potential. It is assumed in advance that the author of the post describes his/ her life experiences or thoughts on a given subject and, in this manner, it is assumed *a priori* that he/ she is authorised to make judgements. In his theory, the British scholar talks about the relations of production³³ understood as ideology. In the case of a blog, and in line with the definition of the term "ideology"³⁴, these are ideas or remarks contained in posts. It is also necessary to remember about the infrastructure which, for the needs of this theoretical modification, is understood as the use of the editing possibilities offered by the network, the graphic design and the option to post comments.

Thus, it follows from the discussion above that an Internet blog fulfils all the criteria listed by S. Hall. It has an audience, i.e. persons reading and commenting on its' content. Therefore, it is possible to perform a study which would characterise the relations between the sender – blogger and the recipient – reader/ commentator.

³² <http://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo.php?id=4008135>, access: 09.07.2016.

³³ Hall S., *Kodowanie i dekodowanie*, translated by W. Lipnik, I. Siwiński, "Przekazy i opinie" 1987, No. 1-2, p. 61.

³⁴ Cf. <http://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/ideologia;2465523.html>, access: 09.07.2016.

However, before embarking on a study with the use of a modified encoding/decoding theory, it is necessary to choose such Internet diaries that are commented on. This statement should be treated as an initial assumption. Nevertheless, it does not reduce the value of the conducted studies due to the fact that by adopting certain theoretical assumptions and using them, a scientist acknowledges solutions of this type.

Secondly, a blog that has its' readers also becomes a place for the decoding of posts, as well as makes the space available where the stance of the addressee of the content may be revealed. The commentator may accept the content of the message, negotiate its' meaning or completely oppose it. In this sphere, the Internet offers similar possibilities to the ones offered by television. Furthermore, it has one more advantage due to the fact that the researcher has all the recipients' opinions collected in one place, and is not required to look for them and to create additional focus groups, perform in-depth interviews, etc.

Recapitulation

A modern methodological analysis of the theory of S. Hall allows for introducing certain modifications and adjusting it to the needs of the study on the relations between a blogger and his/ her readers, similarly to the broadcaster of a television programme and its' recipients. Introduction of such changes indicates that Hall's theory is still valid and may be used in studies conducted on-line. Having accepted the proposed initial assumption, it is also necessary to note the ease of its' application.

Analysis of the blogosphere as part of the reflection on the validity of encoding/ decoding theory poses additional questions. Namely, it is necessary to determine whether in the studies on the hegemonic message, the changes are sufficiently advanced to talk about invalidity of such theory? It is also necessary to discuss the modern hegemon (hegemons) and its (their) roles. Additionally, it is also possible to note the compatibility of the British scholar's theory with respect to the new area of studies. Such compatibility gives rise to the question about the nature and the degree of advancement of changes, which took place from the first application until now.

There are many more similar questions, at least with respect to the ones listed above; nevertheless, they will not be the subject matter of this paper. The assumption of the work was presentation of arguments in favour of the validity of Hall's encoding/ decoding theory.

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