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Facebook as a Catalyst for Beneficial Participation in Culture

Abstract: The article considers how Facebook service impacts its users' patterns of experiencing and co-creating culture. The discussion is based on the results of the 2010 research regarding Facebook activity of Warsaw cultural institutions conducted by the authors. The text attempts to answer the question whether Facebook has a positive effect on the cultural life of a specific local community and whether Facebook activity can be interpreted as beneficial participation in culture, as defined by Andrzej Tyszka.

Keywords: Facebook, culture, beneficial participation in culture, free time, Warsaw.

Facebook is currently the most influential Internet community with more than 850 million users worldwide (including more than 12 million in Poland). As a global phenomenon of enormous reach, the service obviously inspires interest of social scientists. However, Facebook is a social networking service and as such it is based predominantly on recreating the real world relations which usually have a local reach. Therefore, it is possible to research thousands of local Facebooks—specific cities or regions. Monitoring small and medium range phenomena occurring in the World Wide Web (WWW), e.g. on Facebook, are most instructive for the study of urban culture, its specific needs and participation forms. The service can be treated as a lens focusing on contemporary transformations of the models of experiencing and co-creating culture.

Andrzej Tyszka believed that beneficial cultural participation does not entail making maximum use of all cultural opportunities, but using them in an appropriate way, according to individual needs, perceptive abilities and lifestyle. Benefits of this type of participation include:

- broadening and organizing acquired knowledge thus increasing awareness of the experienced world and consequently—understanding one's own situation
- access to existential values which make life attractive and facilitate self-fulfillment, self-celebration, and self-expression
- establishing one's social standing by reference to the symbolic meaning of "cultural objects" and the prestigious role of producers of cultural behaviors (Tyszka 1971).

We believe it is worth to study whether Facebook is a positive mediator in the cultural life of a specific local community helping to meet its cultural needs and to what extent it supports culture creators.

This article considers new forms of cultural participation and transformations of cultural needs we observed while conducting the study “How did culture end up on Facebook?” The research focuses on Facebook activity of Warsaw cultural institutions. The service features profiles of such facilities as Zachęta Gallery, Grand Theater, Rozmaitości Theater, Modern Art Museum, Chłodna 25 coffee bar club and Powiększenie club. At present, nearly all Warsaw cultural institutions, both state- and private-owned, “exist” on Facebook, however this was not the case when the service was launched in Poland. This trend has been observed for the past two years, therefore the majority of facilities (apart from pioneers such as e.g. Rozmaitości Theatre) joined Facebook when it already had many users both in Poland and in Warsaw. Cultural institutions decided to enter virtual reality which became part of everyday life and therefore—a sphere of cultural participation for Warsaw citizens. This makes the current Facebook activity of cultural institutions a particularly interesting research problem.

The discussed phenomenon is connected with a new cultural experience model described by Wojciech Burszta—culture mediated by mass media, omnipresent, producing an *insert* type personality. This personality type is characterized by constant openness to new suggestions and willingness to include all available data, coming from both personal and media experiences, if they can compose a coherent whole for a specific amount of time (Burszta et al. 2010).

The media are also subject to crucial transformations which, according to Henry Jenkins, derive from the onset of a convergence culture. This type of culture is based on a continual flow between old and new media, broadcasters and consumers (recipients), which increases the possibilities of potential participation and consequently increases cultural diversity (Jenkins 2007). Moreover, around the world we are observing a phenomenon called by Chris Anderson the “long tail” of culture, in which the mass market is transformed into a mass of niches. The Internet era provides a broad access to various cultural goods, therefore people can choose things that are seemingly unpopular and strange—niche products of culture. According to Anderson, we are witnessing a change of focus from mass culture to a massively parallel culture (Anderson 2008).

These processes are connected with increasingly common Internet use. Internet reality serves as a superstructure, a tie between incidental interactions, as well as a method of recording real processes and assigning them additional meanings. Internet is not a parallel reality, it is inseparably linked with our everyday life. Not only does Internet allow us to exchange information, contact various offices, shop and manage our accounts, but also it is a space for public, social and cultural life.

A recent study of the Polish Internet universe proves that “For respondents, the Internet became a technology that is a nearly ‘transparent’ part of their everyday life” (Krejtz et al. 2010). Results of our research indicated that possible ways of using Facebook coincide to a high degree with the functions of Internet identified in the report *Mobilność 2010* [Mobility 2010]. These include communication, socialization, and access to information, in particular—to cultural content (referred to by the authors as entertainment). Facebook is hyper-functional, transparent—just like the World Wide

Web. This relationship between the WWW and Facebook reveals the distinct role of content “poured” into the medium, allowing a new reading of McLuhan’s famous thesis: “medium is the message” (McLuhan 2003). Now, in recipient’s mind, medium becomes the transmitted content and it is this content that becomes crucial (neither the particular mechanism, i.e. the Internet, nor a specific service defined through its specific application). Medium is the message in the sense that it disappears from view, becomes dissolved in the message and turns into a lens, through which we decipher meanings. Perhaps the relative permanence of Facebook results from this peculiar perspective which connects it with the Internet. More and more people become familiar with the Internet and move about it freely. As a result, these two steps—connecting with the Internet and connecting with Facebook—become an unnoticed step taken several, or several dozen times per day.

At this point, one might ask why study Facebook promotional strategies of cultural institutions, when social networking services are temporary and it is impossible to judge how long it will serve the same function as today. We are deeply convinced that it is worth to observe Facebook activity of cultural institutions/facilities, predominantly due to their interactions with users and with each other. These contacts bring a new quality to communication and event promotion. In his description of Trobrianders’ customs, Bronisław Malinowski quoted a rule regarding the ritual “Kula” exchange: “once in Kula, always in Kula” (Malinowski 1972). This means that a Trobriander who even once participates in this exchange which serves as a social institution for the local peoples, will take part in it for the rest of his life. The specific example of “Kula” ritual can be interpreted metaphorically. In other words, after indulging in certain behavioral patterns once, we indulge in them on every occasion. Skills acquired by using Facebook will not be erased if the service loses popularity. Even if Facebook becomes less common and useful with time, we believe it had a significant impact on the standards of informing and being informed about cultural events.

Analyzing Facebook as a sphere of cultural participation requires the adoption of a specific view of culture. Following Wojciech Burszta’s definition, we include within the range of culture everyday practices, ways of spending free time, media, advertising, culture industry as well as all forms of existence and consumption (Burszta 2008). In his book Burszta writes that the meaning of culture “not only continues to evolve, expand or narrow down, but also is permanently ‘inseminated’ by various other domains of social activity“ (Burszta 2008). Facebook is a symptom of a social practice which is currently very popular in Warsaw. The discussed practice definitely “inseminates” culture, influencing both artists and recipients, their relationship as well as forms of cultural participation and contact with various manifestations of culture.

While planning the research, we decided to not only observe cultural institutions’ activity on their Facebook profiles, but also interact with profile users (participant observation) in order to learn how they put to use cultural information obtained through the portal. Moreover, we recognized the need to step outside virtual reality and talk about Facebook directly to people who host the profiles of cultural institutions. Their view of Facebook is a perspective of specialists who use the portal for clearly defined purposes—to inform the public about cultural events and manage the image of their

cultural institution. This allowed us to frame two major perspectives of the research: observational perspective and specialist perspective.

In the course of our research, we observed Facebook profiles and talked with people responsible for managing them both in traditional large budget-funded institutions, new cultural organizations, and private local initiatives operating in various domains (theatre, visual arts, museum-exhibition activity, literature, cultural-social management, music and entertainment). In total, the research included 15 free-form interviews (Konecki 2000: 169–188) and the observation of 17 profiles of cultural institutions. The conclusions presented in this article refer to all facilities and institutions included in the research. Consequently, for simplification purposes, we decided to construct a general definition of our research sample, encompassing its full scope, so that it is not necessary to point out every time that we refer both to a large cultural institution and a small café bar club with cultural aspirations. Therefore in the below discussion we will use the term—cultural unit.

A cultural unit is an entity gathering people who participate in cultural practices more or less deliberately and intentionally through the options of spending free time offered in the cultural unit and everyday life practices falling within the scope of the broad definition of culture. Consequently, a cultural unit may undertake various kinds of activities (see above).

As a result, a cultural unit falls in the range of a lifestyle whose important element is the practice of going out and socializing, often serving as a catalyst for contacts with cultural products. This form of participation is part of the process of developing one's personality by choosing places and events she or he wants to be associated with. This development is also achieved by acquiring skills which allow denoting places and institutions as cultural units and using their characteristic code.

In the course of analyzing interviews conducted as part of the study, we created definitions of Facebook based on Regine Robin's (1980) method of semantic field analysis.

One of those definitions is a very systematic characteristics of the service. We discovered that respondents had a lot to say about this aspect of Facebook. They were able to reconstruct the structure of the service from memory, starting at the level of one screw and ending with a general view of the whole machinery. Moreover, they expressed both purely functional and meta-level opinions on the subject. This is a counter argument for people who view the Internet as a fleeting universe where various creations have a short lifespan and can be discussed mainly from the emotional perspective.

The Facebook emerging from this definition is a domesticated, tamed universe/machine every user can utilize in his individual way. It is an important domain for cultural units as it allows them to get noticed and settle into social consciousness.

A more abstract Facebook definition involved expressions and thought chains reminiscent of Marquez's magic realism narration. It bore resemblance to Marquez's description of the world and inhabitants of Macondo. The history of Facebook emerging from this definition refers to the service's recent past, approximately two or three years ago, however at times it sounds like a mythical tale of ancient times and the

beginning of creation. The story revolves around the themes of building an order, establishing rules and forming bonds and describes development of the service as well as its specific “time flow.”

In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published the book *Metaphors we Live By* where they stated that the metaphors present in our everyday life manifest themselves not only in our language, but also in our thoughts and actions. The system of terms that underlies our thoughts and actions is metaphorical in its essence (Lakoff, Johnson 1980). Moreover, metaphors pervade our everyday communication and facilitate mutual understanding. When it comes to Facebook definitions, metaphors concerning time and space proved crucial.

The universe of Facebook fills with content and meaning only as a result of users’ actions (as a matter of fact, this was the assumption for its construction). Respondents often described the portal as a *space, open space, large hall, space where something happens*.

The history of Facebook construed the service as a phenomenon which developed very rapidly. At first it gathered a narrow circle of people, but it became instantly popular. A Facebook account used to be a kind of a symbol distinguishing members of an exclusive Warsaw club of “people in the know.” For us, the most fascinating aspect is the fact that even though Facebook became widespread, the above pattern is still valid in the “Warsaw elite” circles. Facebook reflects the actual network of relationships and, in a way, it acquired a status of a social obligation, as people who do not use the service may be treated by their acquaintances as “non-existent” and “out of it.” With time our research subject, i.e. the “Warsaw Facebook,” developed specific customs and characteristic style—being aware of them is a symbol of status and often becomes the basis for fun and games with the adopted convention. Of course, the service provides means for self-presentation, but more than that, it is also a “discreet” way of building social capital.

Especially young people treat Facebook as a fixed element of everyday life, rooted so deeply it became a constant. Here it is worth to recall the “Google generation” report (<http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf>) which talks about an increasingly numerous generation of young people who move within the Internet space intuitively and treat this ability as part of the basic set of skills allowing to function in the world.

During our research, we regularly visited Facebook profiles of selected cultural institutions. Observations noted down in the research journal regarded the profiles’ dynamics. After concluding the observation, we conducted content analysis (Silverman 2007: 54) of the profiles, focusing on the posted information and comments, their style and layout.

In the course of our study we noticed that time on Facebook is treated in a specific manner combining both sequence and stability. The service continuously displays new information which scrolls down every user’s dynamic main page. In this respect Facebook resembles the media, such as radio broadcasts, or TV news programs, where current information replaces the one appearing earlier, as the TV operates within the regimen of time sequence. At the same time, old information can be accessed at any given moment. It disappears only seemingly (i.e. it is present there at a given moment

or is not instantly visible on the main page), while in fact it is always “within reach.” Every user with basic knowledge of the service knows how to access this information (just as a magazine reader can access the article he read this morning or the one published one week earlier). In this respect, Facebook is eternal. Regardless of when a user finds time to spend in the service, he or she may discover information adopted to his or her taste. Information substitution is not complete (when one exists, the other can still be accessed) and depending on his or her willingness to become involved, the user is able to influence to a certain extent the order in which he or she receives messages (as in the case of newspapers where the editorial team determines content’s form and layout but it is for the reader to decide what he reads and in what order).

While observing Facebook we noticed that its construction does not refer only to traditional media in the way described above. The service uses also communication forms successfully promoted by the Internet, such as blogs and micro blogging. Generally speaking, blogs consist of separate posts concerning various subjects and in their micro-version they are limited to one or two sentences. On Facebook, this is the function of users’ status updates and other kinds of posts which constitute the main content of the service. Audio, photo, and video content published on Facebook also fit in the blog framework. Reference to blogs can also be seen in the specific temporal order which combines the already mentioned time sequence and stability: the adopted rule for publishing posts states that a new message appears on top of the page, not so much replacing as bumping down the earlier posts. According to the classic approach, the content of the blog reflects personal experiences or opinions of its owner. In this perspective, Facebook users become co-owners of the created media space. When we crosscheck this opinion-forming perspective against the view of Facebook as a social networking service linking people through a net of acquaintances, the resulting vision becomes a model and a tale about a real place. Consequently, when interpreted without reference to aggregate statistics but from the point of view of single clusters of human relationships, Facebook reflects the traits of a specific local community in its social—and therefore also cultural—dimension. Looking closer at the thesis that in a certain way Facebook users become media owners, we notice that some of them, regarded as esteemed experts, adopt the role of journalists and reviewers who suggest cultural choices in the traditional mass media. Even though these users are not universally known and cannot compete with their traditional counterparts in terms of reach, within a certain network of social contacts they are treated with equal respect.

Research conducted on Facebook also brought to our attention that the service constitutes a very interesting combination of socializing and cultural activity. In his essay on sociability, Simmel wrote that it is a fun-oriented form of socialization, attractive in its own right (Simmel 2005: 35). Facebook users who lead their social life in the service and follow their friends’ activity see what cultural events they are planning to attend, therefore they learn about these events and consequently often decide to take part in them. When the friend is a cultural unit, or when a user is a fan of such a unit, users are automatically informed about its every profile activity, which means they not only have current information concerning cultural events, but also, by following an active profile, they can find links to interesting articles, discussions,

websites, photographs, and videos. Therefore Facebook is a market with offers for spending free time. One of the options is browsing the service itself and spending time there. Even following messages and events on the profiles of cultural units can create an illusion of participation. You do not need to take part in a specific event in order to have enough knowledge about it to be able to discuss it.

Alfred Schütz (2008) said that every interpretation of the world that surrounds us is based on a “stock of knowledge” comprising both our own experiences and experiences conveyed to us by others. This stock is a continuous and fluent process subject to changes. Some of the knowledge it includes is based to a large extent on trusting others, since it concerns experiences of other people (Schütz 2008: 194). Facebook is an extremely interesting example of the “stock of knowledge,” different every time, depending on who uses it and in what way. The process of composing this stock of knowledge is very valuable in itself and constitutes the most active and perhaps most creative method of cultural participation. Being “in the know” of what is happening in the culture of a city such as Warsaw is a challenge that requires a considerable amount of time. However, it is much easier to find that time than to actually attend a given event. People can “get a grasp of culture” at work or at night, while smartphones enable them to do it on public transport and virtually everywhere they wait for something.

It is also worth to consider Facebook from the perspective of the “free time” category. In the report about Polish urban culture, Tomasz Szlendak noticed that for people working in big cities

free time no longer exists, it exploded and after the explosion it fell apart into tiny pieces in the course of the day and the week (...) as a result, cultural participation, especially in the case of working middle-aged citizens, is chaotic, incidental, unpredictable even for them (Burszta et al. 2010).

If using this approach we look at the free time of Warsaw inhabitants it should not come as a surprise that Facebook became rooted in everyday life of many users who visit it during the day both at work and outside of work. We believe it is possible to go one step further and say that Facebook steals the “tiny pieces” of free time from a busy day. In the summer of 1943 Andrzej Bobkowski noted a very valuable thought in his *Szkice piórkami*—“Everyone can work, but only few can rest and do nothing. Meanwhile culture is also the ability of ‘doing nothing’.” (Bobkowski 2007) Following this outstanding thinker we can declare that in our opinion Facebook cannot be treated as a mindless time-killer (as some call it), since the way we use it is entirely up to us. People who mastered the culturally valuable skill of “doing nothing” can use Facebook as a moment of rest, often devoted to cultural participation, which the service enables in a powerful way. We are certain that Facebook’s huge popularity comes from the fact that its functionality and content ideally respond to the needs of busy inhabitants of large cities.

The presented diagnosis produces a vision where many analyzed units of culture decide to stimulate a boom for a certain free time activity which later becomes their field of operation. The goal is not to promote visiting one specific place, but rather “going out” in general. Cultural units also develop relationships of various kinds, creating

a reference grid. As a result coffee houses and theatres do not operate in isolation, but within a certain context. This produces a model of cruising between different locations, a cultural participation pattern beneficial for all parties. The emphasis is not placed on the market model of competing to create the best offer, but rather on popularizing cultural participation in itself so that cultural units can find recipients for their services. Importantly, effectiveness of such model was developed and tested in grass-root, uninstitutional units. At the same time, research results indicate that trends started by this kind of initiatives are picked up by more institutionalized units. Therefore the cultural offering of the city seems more effective and functional when it offers a model granting people the freedom to adapt to cultural space then when the focus is on “encouraging” people to take part in one specific event. Facebook plays a significant part in devising this model of cultural information which continues to develop and is definitely worth further investigation of all researchers focusing on the current state of culture.

Facebook gathers in one place the many processes occurring in the contemporary urban culture and highlighted their meaning. The service saw the modern nature of Internet sociability as a potential for developing the atomized free time. Even though it is global and virtual, Facebook became an important element of the local social reality. The merger of sociability and culture—so symptomatic for large cities—in its new Internet form facilitated recreating and stabilizing cultural participation. Considering the described forms of cultural presence and the process of creating and satisfying needs in this field, one may wonder whether these phenomena ought to be construed in the framework of corrosion and disintegration or development and enrichment. We strongly believe the second framework is more compelling. Therefore, in conclusion of the above discussion, we moved on to verify how the researched issues relate to Tyszka’s concept of beneficial participation in culture.

Undoubtedly Facebook is a means to a special kind of self-expression since it allows users to identify with cultural units and include them in their social network in the service. By definition, social network provides users with various methods of creating their image (i.e. posting photographs, creating narrations about themselves and building social capital of relations). In this context, self-affirmation acquires a special meaning as it becomes based on controlling the received and sent information stream. Both cultural units and users attach a lot of weight to the service’s egalitarianism which ensures that the subjective value and importance of a given entity in the cultural tissue is determined by the message and its evaluation of the supporting acquaintances. All relationships and operations are based on proximity in its various interpretations. Users include local cultural entities in their personal networks, reflect their sympathies and preferences and bond with friends from their surroundings.

Unquestionably, Facebook meets the condition of spreading and consolidating knowledge. In comparison with other media, Facebook constitutes an endless and constantly accessible information universe. Awareness of the experienced world takes the form of “being in the know” of the cultural landscape of the city (which combines the real and virtual component). This activity, characteristic for urban circulation of culture, reflects not only assimilation of knowledge and keen perception, but also

constant improvement of one's skills and finding new events and trends. Of course, these processes occur to a various extent depending on the kind of the user.

Facebook experts in the form of acquaintances—cultural experts or cultural units—become a kind of sociometric stars (Malikowski, Niezgodna 1997) which have a significant impact on the service universe due to the intensity and content saturation of interactions they participate in. This way, Facebook acquaintances are granted the position of producers of the current patterns of participation in the cultural discourse.

Therefore, we may conclude that Facebook fully meets the criteria of beneficial participation in culture described by Tyszka. The service can be treated as a significant universe which motivated many people to “be in the know” of cultural events and, as a result, to participate in them both virtually and in person.

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