The Technological Advent and Dynamics of the Network Society. The "Middle-Aged Approach"

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Abstract

Nowadays, scholars have become interested in the ways new media influence young people, but its influence on middle-aged people have not been thoroughly examined. This age category is often ignored as most of the online activities are performed by young persons. New media gathers a wide range of phenomena which may become concepts of the network society through their diversity, knowledge and novelty. Interactivity is the most important characteristic, turning the user into a content creator, not just into a receiver. Moreover, what was once considered to be a personal state of mind tends to become a part of the public domain. Starting from these premises, the article advances the idea that the Internet can be beneficial not just for teenagers, but also for the middle-aged group oriented towards keeping in touch with relatives and friends and towards finding online useful information. At this level, the present paper aims to discover directions given by network society in the lives of middle-aged people. To this end, the research relies on an interview-based survey which addresses the way people may adapt to communication technology and to its particularities, exploring advantages or discovering potential drawbacks.

Keywords: network society, new media, middle-aged people.

1. Introduction

At present, new media do not unfold a genuine substitution of face-to-face communication, but a "potentially fruitful interplay" emerges between the two frames of reference (van Dijk, 2012). Nevertheless, online communities - perceived as groups composed of persons who populate the Internet and all the inherent applications – have become an important part of the contemporary culture and their influence is still growing (Vătămănescu & Pană, 2010; Vătămănescu, 2014; Wiest & Eltantawy, 2015; Vătămănescu et al., 2016). The awareness of others' presence and the knowledge gained are essential in online communication. On the other hand, using online communication may not turn out to be very efficient in promoting social relationships if one merges with his computer and forgets face-to-face communication (Katz & Rice, 2002). When trying to stay in touch with someone, other people, physically approached to the Internet user, might be ignored. In this way, it may be experienced a lack of social compatibility or a lack of proper discussions, the online discussion taking advantage. Therefore, social relationships are weak on the one side and become powerful on the other side, marked by technology. Continuing this line of argumentation, van Dijk (2012) deems that face-to-face communication may be totally substituted by mediate communication, causing the decrease of communication quality.

The online model alters by age, most of the users being young. However, technology becomes one way or another, indispensable for middle-aged people when their labor imposes disposing of new media in different ways: electronic mail, blogs, instant messaging, specialized forums or even social networks. Beyond daily events, there are trends among middle-aged individuals to give a new trajectory to social practices, changing cultural patterns. Focusing on the practices developed online, this paper supports the theory that strong social online relations tend to adopt the image of social relationships born and developed offline.

In this light, the present study discloses the participation of middle-aged people in the development of the network society, by considering the concept of "bonding" (Putnam, 2000). New media are being used among closely related factions to communicate and keep personal relations alive. Along with bonding, the usage of the Internet responds to the work-related agenda.

Thus, the study fathoms a specific dimension of the network society, focusing on individuals aged between 50 and 65, considering the respondents' availability for engaging in this research. Peacock and Künemund (2007) integrated people between 55 and 64 years old in middle-aged group.

2. Literature review: new media and the network society

To all the lifelines we already had, a new one is being added. Not only roads, electricity cables, water pipes, gas lines, sewers, post-boxes, telephone wires and cable television are part of human beings lives, but the Internet advent becomes a case of dependence, as well (van Dijk, 2012, Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella, & Connell, 2014). Young people's lives are dominated by networks, using chat-boxes, email conversations, instant messaging and blogging. Per a contrario, for people who are older, the digital world seems like a place of hardship and of a certain level of technological ability (Szabo, 2014). To control one's own power of learning, one requires personal autonomy, benevolence and the most important thing, a formal support (Hargittai, 2002, Lahtiranta & Kimppa, 2006, Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010). Older adults have different concerns and requirements than young adults because of physical and cognitive changes, which become relevant after 45 years old (Hawthorn, 2007). Learning and understanding become new constructs for middle-aged people who have to obtain performance in their professional field. Usually, the Internet is used by older people who have an interest in obtaining knowledge from the online environment and the usage is a consequence of the possibility to develop technological skills (Sourbati, 2004). After gaining some skills in using new media, older people are able to make a choice (van Brakel, 2011), at least in their personal lives: offer attention to online world and spend time online or leave the Internet experience behind, in the indoors or their professional space. Jan van Dijk (2012, p.2) has buttressed that almost every organization in the developed world "has become completely dependent on economic networks reach into the farthest corners and edges of the world". The management of all infrastructures of society is more effective when having online communication. Networks have more influence on the entire society, including social systems and personal lives. As van Dijk (2012) admits, networks are becoming an enthusiastic part of society. Approaching the same concept of influence, Rice (1999) insisted that new media provide more ways to choose desired information, which augments the influence of culture on people's mind. In this respect, Castells (2009, p.120) underlined that individuals use ''virtual reality" to expand their world according to their preferences.

With the arrival of new media in the 1980s, the interference for the social environment was considered by some people "pollution", according to Kubicek (as cited in van Dijk, 2012). Face-to-face communication was affected in its quality because of the Internet. New media are responsible for the diminishing of direct communication, as posited by van Dijk (2012) – the "dystopians" metaphor described in his publication, The Network Society. In the 1990s, these dystopian views were replaced by utopian views which uphold the idea that, in essence, new media improved the quality of communication, the concept of freedom and online communication dominating the new era of democracy (Dahlgren, 2005, Downey & Fenton, 2003, van Dijk, 2012).

In the first decade of the 21st century, a so-named "syntopian" view arises (Katz & Rice, 2002), as a calibrated view of the previous ones. Nevertheless, middle-aged clusters, without inherited or already developed skills, seem to enjoy learning about new technological devices and using new media channels instead of traditional media (Freedman & Schlosberg, 2011). Even for middle-aged persons, the online area requires competence improvement (Bernatowicz & Iwanski, 2012), and the adaptation of new media to their professional lives is necessary for developing a competitive spirit or more, for fulfilling the desire not to be left outside the professional circle.

The trend of the 21st century is virtual mobilization (Díaz Romero, 2013), a concept seen as a modality for achieving goals, a new version for civic action – exchanging knowledge, submitting or creating petitions-, fortifies participation and civic engagement, and restores collective action, regardless of age.

An interesting area in the digital space is participation considering that the networked public is different from other type of audience; its properties are persistence, the power of replicating, searching and invisibility (Graber, 2012; Stroeker, van der Graaf, & Buiskool, 2014). Making something public on the Internet might damage or, on the contrary, might improve someone's situation. The new participatory relations can even help the process of learning and of creating communities of informal learning (Lewis, Pea, & Rosen, 2010). The audiences have an outcome as participants and gainers of a new democracy or as preys of a new manipulation area (Livingstone, 1999, Pavlik, 1999). Even so, the highest level of thinking -ethical thinking- is the rarest used in online communication because it implies reflection about the exposure of one's mind, which can help or harm another person (Davis, Katz, James, & Santo, 2010). Assuming a social role is the most significant and the most intricate endeavor.

The Internet is used to communicate and socialize, to find information, to be entertained, generate income and run a business (Bachmann et al., 2010; Mittal & Mittal, 2013; Wiest & Eltantawy, 2015; Vătămănescu et al., 2015, 2016). Similar interests and views allow the creation of groups that share the same perspectives. Still, the research made by Mittal and Mittal (2013) highlights the criticism on the reliability of the information, time consuming and cyber bullying. Old media did not entail computer technology as a procedure, but new media require the presence of a computer or a smart phone. Our coeval network society presumes consumption, some even militate that life is made only of acquiring products and services (Loos & Ekström, 2014) that help people entertain themselves, as for older individuals, they help them maintain a good health among other interests. The number of elderly consumers who use electronic communication and online services is growing faster whereas new media sustain two main aspects of middle-aged people's concerns nowadays: health-care treatment and disease prevention (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010, p.27; Hall, Stellefson, & Bernhardt, 2012). Loos and Ekström (2014) enforce that new media are a potential market enlargement taking into consideration that older people can express, almost instantaneous, through forums and organized digital campaigns, their opinions, their needs and their requirements about any kind of health care product available online. Friemel (2014, p.13) talks about a "pre-retirement computer use", sustaining that if people get used to computers from their working periods, they will probably continue using the Internet even after quitting their jobs. Certainly, this expected effect is likely to happen to middle-aged people and not to old seniors, whose physical abilities become weaker.

Notwithstanding, all media are social frames, many of the characteristics of new media dwell on the ideal of interpersonal communication (Rice, 1999). The credibility of the ideas released on the Internet is questionable because of the real interests that exist behind them. As an example, new media are populated by people who have made up their identity (Andrei et al., 2010) and this way the receiver cannot really trust the opinions exposed. As Rice (1999) sustains, accountability may be difficult to settle. One paradox of the increased accessibility is that individuals must choose, have pre-determined learning and make efforts to give sense to communication. Interconnectivity generates immediate answering, but these instant messages, as feedback, may harm communication in some aspects because sometimes it is better that a message be very well considered and a suitable

answer take some time. This is another paradox spotlighted by the author. Becoming known by others, it is congruent to learning more about personal potential and about making a difference since the Internet tends to promote "commonality" and leave behind uniqueness (Rice, 1999; Turner, 2009; Vătămănescu et al., 2015, 2016). Once technology has thrived as a consumer product, ruling groups were concerned about media reception with reference to behavior, affection and cognition (Rakow, 1999).

The choices offered by new media are important not just for active users, but also for the less experienced ones. Gaining information, having contacts with people all over the world, playing games, transform a simple human being into a very complex one, acting at multiple levels. In this process, the user chooses paths to follow, elements to display, creating a unique work (Manovich, 2001). The externalization of mind has become a new desire. Pursuant to Manovich, interactive computer media suits a new trend to objectify the mind's operations. Mental processes of reflection, problem solving and association are materialized by following a certain Internet page, moving to another link and choosing the desired scenes. Interactive media demands individuals to identify with someone else's mental structure; the demand for standardization requires the sharing of undeveloped impressions.

An interesting view was brought into light by Poster (1999), who considered novelty in media as well as organization and technology "a matter of content". The Internet exceeds the limits of usual print and broadcasts models by "enabling many-to-many communications…; providing instantaneous global contact and inserting the modern subject into a machine that is networked" (Poster, 1999, p.15). . He advances the term "underdetermination" through which certain social objects (virtual) are overdetermined in such a manner that their complexity increases. These objects need social construction and cultural creation. After a person downloads an image of a painting from the Internet, that image may be modified in a special program and used again without restrictions, for personal joy. Conversely, if that image could have only been admired in an art gallery, the installation of a modified picture would not have been able to emerge.

Even so, many have opposing conceits, considering that the Internet is a real market of point of views, sustaining that it embraces adopting the ideas of others and limits social trysts (Benkler, 2006). Benkler (2006) argues that individuals are invaded with information because different people talk about different matters and it becomes more difficult for messages to be read and adapted. The reflection on the inherent potential is that new information and communication technologies cultivate and amplify human cognition. Lévy (1997) deems that there has been a quantitative technological revolution in human knowledge, which has produced a new relation to mastery. Knowledge is deemed as being in conjunction with modernity.

Via internet there has been introduced a new relation between human and knowledge. As a reaction to this new relation, society records new changes and if these changes are considered as being essential and innovator, the situation is marked as social revolution. In cyberspace, knowledge has become a manifestation of the individuals who populate it (Lévy, 1997). Cyberspace may be described as a world of communities liable to share knowledge and increase the potential for collective intelligence (Thackeray et al., 2008). The conversation produced by Web users turns into collective knowledge because even if no one is omniscient, everyone detains information and shares it using the Internet.

In the virtual world, the knowledge area is based on social harmonization; "global compatibility and interoperability" erase the division of society and conflicts (Lévy, 1997). A new foundation, based on cultural harmonization appeared through new media, at this level, Lévy (1997) concluded that cyberspace, with its virtual communities, its interactive simulations (Logan, 2010), its abundance of texts and images will be the mediator of collective intelligence. The vision of virtual society consists in the transformation of civilization and the creation of collective intelligence. The congregations developing in the electronic space, which guarantee the revival of the political and social life, are, in reality, products of network capitalism and are not in contrariety with its interests.

The network culture is an "out-of-territory and an out-of-time culture"; it has its own terms and has no limits in space and in time (Robins, 1999). Abolishing borders has been one aspect of global change. Another aspect was creating communities in which different knowledge and cultures could be joined, considering that all the mandatory steps were taken to achieve a new context. This new structure has to convince all its inhabitants that time and space are no longer imposed limits and that their beliefs, gospels, rules and needs can be applied and satisfied in this new dimension. Middle-aged Internet users continue to resort to new media for managing their daily communication system and seem more and more enthusiastic in turning to new technological devices which ensure communication and other social activities (Madden, 2010).

In the information society, some individuals obtain advantages while others are deprived (van Brakel, 2011, van Dijk, 2012). The complexity and costs of technology may intensify existing social inequalities or even produce categories of people who do not match with the information society. New media promote well-informed citizens, employees and consumers and the communication between these social spheres and the organizations or institutions they are involved with. In this way, democracy would be intensified (Vătămănescu, Gorgos, & Andrei, 2015); reaching the conclusion that capitalism thrives. Still, Jan van Dick (2012) asserts that technology is susceptible to control from above and democracy could be damaged. In this line of thought, some would argue that even freedom is affected by the decrease of privacy, for the individual is supposed to be registered, to be transparent and examined for personal characteristics.

Middle-aged people do not contribute to the reconfiguration of online media, they are not interested in being digital product providers; they are simply users, who in some cases consume the services distributed by new media (Bachmann et al., 2010). The reinforcement of the democratic area, lead by new media, might take place for the middle-age stage, if this category of people decides to involve more in the public zone their personal, cultural, political and economical aspects, for the community's benefit.

New media are the opportunity for middle-aged people to learn about self-determination. Pursuant to Fabiś and Tomczyk (2013) this chance of self-improvement, given by new media, involves three functions: (1) the egotic function, defined through spiritual development; (2) the altruistic function, thinking not just about self-benefit, but about helping others with the acquired knowledge, and (3) the emancipation function, which directs the process of learning to leave behind oppressive rules and fight for discovering ways of making life more qualitative. In line with the previous positive arguments for new media to be used by middle-aged persons, I convey the assertion of Madden (2010) who stated that the generational divide could be surpassed by the virtue of sharing skills and encouraging participation towards progress. The interest of every manager is to achieve, through communication and support, a more balanced intergenerational formula in order to improve the offered services, the quality of work, and to avoid potential conflicts between workers coming from different age cohorts.

Age is one dimension when trying to understand the capacity of the society to adopt new ways of communicating and of challenging humans' own possibilities to admit that technological evolution is a realization and not a depreciation of self-retrieval. Still, Hope, Schwaba and Piper (2014) affirm in their study that older people value deeper communications that are conducted by telephones and written letters by reason of privacy settings, information credibility and content significance. Even if online communications are created to help older persons to keep social connectivity, especially with younger people, most of the older people do not appeal very often and for a very long time to social media. Although older people manifest desire social contact, few of them dedicate their time to spending it in the virtual world; their general opinion is that social media harms language and destroys, in many ways, real interactions (Hope, Schwaba, & Piper, 2014). Katz (2009) deems about cultural aging, a concept that is used as a contrast to the concept of chronological age.

Our research objectives consist not only of investigating the theoretical perspective of new media, with direct reference to the fact that the 21st century is dominated by applied technology, but

also investigating a profound issue that epitomize actual lives – network society. Theoretical background helps researchers build the research methods and techniques and can help reveal the reasons and the ways new media are adopted and maintained by middle-aged people.

Research questions

The research questions envisage the following directions: 1) Does the use of new media influence the behaviors of middle-aged people in the offline environment? 2) What are the main drivers for online participation in case of middle-aged people? These questions serve to enlighten aspects which mark the psychic and the societal area of living in a network society from the middle-aged people standpoint: not too old to learn and not too young to abide more as different researchers posit (Bachmann, Kaufhold, Lewis, & de Zuñiga, 2010; Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010).

3. Methodology

In order to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences, the paper resorted to phenomenological interviews. The phenomenological approach has as purpose to elucidate the specific. The personal perspective and interpretation are ways of gaining insights into people's motivations and actions; the respondents are asked to describe their perception of the phenomenon in different situations. In this phenomenological study, we focused our research on discovering the meaning of this phenomenon: living in a network society (Englander, 2012). Online participation is seen differently through the lenses of middle-aged people: as a mean to stay in touch with persons living at long distances, a way to gain new acquaintances from health perspectives or receiving news, all together enjoying communicative space or handling job requirements, less a possibility to examine others or to waste time.

The interviewees' observations, perceptions and understandings were investigated by employing a semi-structured in-depth based, mainly, on open-ended questions (Vătămănescu, Pînzaru, & Anghel, 2014). This option catalyzed the opportunity to discuss some topics in a more detailed manner and the descriptions were further explored through probes.

We considered individual interviews more appropriate to provide detailed information about the meaning of the situations and of the social contexts to each participant in the setting. In line with this objective we resorted to face-to-face interviews as the best procedure to collect high quality data and of granting a greater degree of flexibility. Resorting to a qualitative research method was driven by the intention to investigate the varied concerns and expectations of the interviewees.

The participants were selected by using a snowball sampling. They were also selected taking into account their seniority; two main criteria of selection being followed: 1) respondents should have been between 50 and 65 years old and 2) respondents should have been employed and have had a high level of education (bachelor's degree). The active generation now situates midlife between people's 40s and 60s and this is an extension because traditionally speaking, the concept of middle life started with the age of 35 and did not close at 60 years old, but much earlier (Kleyman, as cited in Dahmen & Cozma, 2009).

The interviews were conducted in two different cities from Romania: Iasi and Bacau, with 16 individuals: 8 women and 8 men. We preferred choosing equal numbers to avoid the bias of gender. The interviews took place at respondents' offices and proceeded in March of 2015; the time of the interview being established in accordance with the respondents' desire, with a view to avoid hyperactivity and time pressure. The time dedicated by the interviewees for our research varied between 40 minutes and 70 minutes, having as delimitation factors their perceptiveness and their proper canvass availability.

Questions were posed in an informal manner and after the completion of the sociological inquiry we considered ourselves satisfied by the received answers and we did not consider a possible iteration. The objective was to uncover the widest range of meanings held by the participants.

The structure of the interview followed the three-phase qualitative interview: focused life story (the respondents' experiences were put in context by asking them to provide as much information as possible about themselves in relation to the topic of the study); the details of experience (concrete details of their experience in the research topic area); reflection on the meaning (how they make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences that are the subject of the research topic) (Seidman, as cited in Vătămănescu et al., 2014).

4. Findings

The interview questions were received naturally by all the respondents who were open to discuss in detail the advanced topics. To start with the common aspects of having or not an individual contract for Internet services, the 16 interviewees declared they have signed one and they are interested in keeping it available for at least another 2 years. We considered 2 years of online activity enough for the respondents to be able to express opinions and subscribe to a certain group of users, according to interests, necessity and time dedicated to the virtual world.

Focusing on the respondents' reasons to use the Internet, the examples gathered were: information, public relations and keeping in touch with the beloved ones. As Valerian (50 y.o.) asserts: "I need the Internet for staying informed and for receiving and conveying information [...] I don't need it only during my spare time, but in my office time, too. It is extremely important for my work priorities." Accordingly, other respondents (Daniel, 50 y.o., Ariston, 56 y.o.) said they were interested in using the online environment for obtaining more details from different service areas and to improve their knowledge. Yet, for most of the respondents, using new media is not just a self-disposed option, it has become a daily work routine. On this aspect, some sustained that Internet's usage was an obligation and highlighted the importance of showing feedback to the demands expressed on formal online channels during work hours. Public organizations and, in some cases, private institutions, offer online services or at least have a public office which stays in contact with the beneficiaries of their services.

The discussion about the benefits brought about by the new media gathered multiple opinions, both convergent and divergent. Victor (58 y.o.) clearly states: "Even from the first time I entered the virtual world, I was amazed by all the opportunities that you can take advantage of […] such as finding different services, accessing news online and searching for organizations' programs, activities and functions". Similar opinions were embraced by other respondents (Maria, 56 y.o., Daniel, 50 y.o.) who stated that the usage of new media helps them evolve, the time dedicated to the virtual space being perceived as an aid towards receiving solutions to common problems and developing a spirit of community, new for their background in digital space. The fact that new media help people enrich their knowledge and their personal status is also mentioned as an opportunity to strengthen life prospects and to provide, in some cases, specialized advice without paying the expert, as it happens in the offline environment.

An opposite approach to the aforementioned opinion is brought to the fore by Ilie (62 y.o.) who still believes that new media are just a path to remember that mediated communication cannot supply an appropriate and genuine interaction: *For me, it is obvious that new media is just an excellent device which replaces other old communication devices like phoning or sending letters. I am not evolving as a human being or as a professional if I just have some conversations online. I have my own thoughts, tasks and demands that I am able to order and solve alone*.

Other interviewees (Tiberiu, 58 y.o., Elena F., 51 y.o.) believe new media can be helpful as an addition to the already formed behavior and furniture of one's mind, the rise of new media being appreciated as a new nature of understanding personal self and professional knowledge: *The Internet can be very useful as a completion after some specialized courses and read books. A virtual environment is not a base. Information is not the same thing as knowledge. For example, you can get certain information that cannot be applied in practice or you can get a professional advice which is wrong or unreal and if you don't have the basic data, you might very easily make a mistake. So, we have to distinguish: to know, to understand, to realize and to do.*

The issue regarding the gains of new media was underlined by Elena V. (53 y.o.) who speaks about the promotion of different programs on social sites, which may bring the enrichment of students' participation and co-action: *I find new media a source of promoting social programs and international studies exchanges for students. I usually promote these kind of activities via e-mail and Facebook because I know for sure that my students are more attracted by reading news on their smart phones, tablets or laptops than reading it on a paper displayed at the University. Technology thrives and I have to adapt, professionally speaking!*

Following the aforementioned idea, most of the interviewees suggested that even though accessing and practicing on the Internet is not entirely benefic for them, it is considered many times fruitful for what they have to achieve and the disappearing of the Internet would be a problem. In contrast, from other participants' standpoint, new media are not a source of making friends or changing lives. A few of them argue that new media are beneficial just for getting prime-time news, but not as a development of mind or soul. The intensification of feelings and enhancing common knowledge could be reached just through real dates: face-to-face interactions.

Still, most of the interviewees insisted on the fact that new media offer a new perspective on personal development whereas accessing social sites, e-mail, and different political, social, medical or touristic blogs has the power of transferring thoughts, images, places, recipes in their minds and souls. Nevertheless, these respondents strongly agreed that however interesting new media are, the participation to direct courses and conferences is more consistent in creating real connections and vivid relations over time. Online connections are not a powerful bond with other people; they are fleeting whereas they are grounded on momentary needs such as receiving an advice in a certain domain or receiving information for the accomplishment of different activities. The exception applies to members of the same family or to pre-established relationships in offline area.

Conversely, Ariston (56 y.o.) describes new media as an artifact: *When spending my time in a virtual mode, I really learn something extra, but, on the other hand, I think it is an artificial mode of having conversations and of getting information. Maybe it would be better if I talked with a specialist face-to-face and if I gave a call instead of typing at the computer. For me, new media do not provide an enlargement.*

As theory describes, new media influence the conduct of users and people are very easily influenced by the information driven online. Still, this issue was elucidated by the respondents, the majority claiming that they surely are not influenced by new media because they do not spend online a lot of time. The respondents talked about dependence at a "lower level". They pointed out that they experienced situations when their children admitted that they couldn't pass a day without logging on their Twitter and Facebook accounts, though the question about new media's influence was addressed personally to the middle-aged, they also found it properly to talk about their children's subjection to new media.

Even though the interviewees have not personally acknowledged the influence of new media, the answers to another item revealed that they do not realize the latent influence. When they were asked if they felt an impact on their family life due to the use of new media, almost all of them answered that sometimes they felt disconnected from the real world. In this manner, the response of Valerian (50 y.o.) is enlightening: "*Because I do not use new media so often, I have always believed my family doesn't notice my absence in their spare time. But more recently my wife has complained to me that I am different, I have changed my behavior and I do not spend enough time with her. I was perplexed inasmuch as I dedicated 3 hours per day for Twitter, YouTube and an online sports newspaper. It is not so much time".* As we can notice from the previous quotation, chosen as a representative answer for many users, the respondents do not see themselves in the situation of being influenced in their behavior by new media's usage, however resentful they appear they state that other people physically close to them claim the lack of their offline presence.

Another important topic for debate has been the transformation created by the usage of new media in the organizations where the respondents work. Approximately all the respondents indicated the same conversion in their work place: *human computerization". Ilie (62 y.o.) claims: "I am not*

able to understand my boss why he prefers to e-mail daily tasks to me instead of entering my office and tell them to me directly. From my point of view, it is wrong to adopt this attitude as a manager. It's incomprehensible to me! We have to discuss freely, if we have this chance, not computer-based!". In the same manner is given the response of Marieta (56 y.o.): "I am sure that using e-mails is easier, faster and with no cost, but I have to admit I am really annoyed by the ones who send documents on e-mail instead of communicating via fax and phone. I have a lot of papers and I do not have the extra time to stay and read 100 e-mails per day! On the other hand, the application we use for registering all the received documents is online and is nationally networked. For this, I am really content. Contrariwise, other respondents (Nina, 55 y.o., Victor, 58 y.o., Mariana, 56 y.o.) mentioned that their job would be impossible without online applications inasmuch as the online environment creates a better ground for instant messaging and for synchronous communication, saving time and effort. They also consider that new media influence the development of institutions in a good manner. A given example is the system of online booking for different services or making online petitions to public institutions, which denotes institutional modernization and an easier way to public access. We can draw the main idea that online applications and specialized sites can speed up communication and getting information, but the workers still have a limited time for solving assignments. The introduction and usage of new media help the organizations perform, but the workers' capacity and reliability must not be ignored.

All the participants to this study have declared they were not able to give up using new media or getting information online. For instance, Marieta (56 y.o.) stresses: "*I think it would be benefic for my friends and family if I give up new media, but I started to get used to being online, chatting, getting recipes, receiving comments on my photos on Facebook and I do not feel like abandoning this. What about work? Even if I want to give it up, my boss doesn't allow it!".* At the same time, other respondents claim that new media are important to them because they are better informed and they receive the desired information or news from different fields of activity before seeing them on mass media channels and they consider this possibility as a move for leadership in their formed social space (especially at work).

Still, gathering all the respondents' opinions, it can be concluded that the new media's relinquishment is facile for the persons who use it just for keeping in touch because distance may be surpassed, but for those whose work is inefficient or whose obligations or addiction require Internet usage, it is almost impossible to think of quitting it.

Unraveling that most of the participants use new media for communication, several questions addressed the consequences of new media on direct communication. The items brought to the fore a significant issue about the potential substitution of face-to-face communication for computer-mediated communication. First of all, the respondents mentioned the arguable nature of the quality of the communication. Secondly, the accuracy of the communication is at stake along with the perceived emotions and the open discussions between people.

In this respect, almost all the respondents expressed their absolute and inalterable view that nothing can be compared with having a real conversation, without a suitable device for assuring the visualization and voice or without technical interruptions. Physical interrelation is undeniable the most favorite one, even if it is not always the most greeted. As Gheorghe (59 y.o.) highlights "*in spite of our predilection of choosing more often technological devices, I sustain face-to-face communication which implies seeing perfectly face expressions, body gestures, eye contact. It is true that there are social sites and mobile applications which provide visual contact, not just voice call or texting, but I still think direct gestures happening in front of you are more cogent than those seen through a system. They are not totally synchronous".* Accordingly, interviewees sanctioned the trend of using social media in some situations where distance was not an obstacle for face-to-face meetings such as living in the same town.

The inconvenience of speaking virtually with physically approached persons was pointed out by a lot of participants. As Mariana (56 y.o.) posits, *"I perfectly understand persons who communicate via Internet when they are separated by long distances, but I cannot approve of*

Internet usage for communicating with people who live in the same area. It is more pleasant to talk to a friend or acquaintance face-to-face, not through superficial surroundings". Speaking about the proliferation of computer-mediated communication, some of the respondents accused the duality in individuals' behaviors; the online public sphere permits users to remain anonymous or to declare another identity than their own. They said loyalty and soul's configuration could not be perceived without face-to-face meetings.

Another idea marked the essence of the majority of the answers, helping us configure the way new media reality is conceptualized by middle-aged people. Thus, Maria (56 y.o.) buttressed that "*in a battlefield between direct communication and mediated communication, surely the winner would be direct communication because nothing compares with direct connection; feelings are deeper and emotions flood"*. Conversely, Marieta (56 y.o.) considers new media are a very good replacement of face-to-face communication, taking into account the fact that they ensure visual and not only voice contact. She often uses Yahoo Messenger for establishing meetings with her friends and changing recipes and advice. In the same tone, others declare new media as a perfectly rooted reflection of face-to-face communication, a new kind of relation with other people, a way of creating new social circles, and a source of entertainment at low cost.

The respondents appreciated conducting a direct interview and they assured me they would not have enjoyed an online interview via SkypeTM or another online application. Still, Marieta (56 y.o.) and Florentina (59 y.o.) declared they enjoyed talking face-to-face to the interviewer, but they would not have been disturbed if the interviews had taken place online.

Some questions were designed to make hidden thoughts rise. At this point, Teodor (59 y.o.) pertinently concludes: *we witness a decay of ethical values. Security services sustain that by recording all conversations they can discover villains. I do not entirely agree. What about our privacy? I do not have something to hide from the law system, however I do not want that strangers hear my private conversations and make me a sketch. Is this democracy? Is this permanent watch a proof of democracy? Or it is a return to the past?*

The respondents asserted that the last items were a real challenge. A common perspective on the issues emerged as almost all the interviewees marked out online communication as an expression of new democracy and new age. Still, they do not perceive new media as a perfect replacement of face-to-face communication because people cannot feel things genuinely when conversations are mediated by computers or other technological devices.

Even if a lot of people often pretend being led by technology, this way of thinking should change. As some respondents posit, the main concern is the future of the world. In this respect, some respondents manifested the desire of sharing their concern about forthcoming communication. Their children dedicate too much time to new media and less to own family and this situation will affect the entire community.

Considering the obtained answers from the participants, it can be asserted that direct speech is imperious for the existence of a real society and face-to-face communication means quality time, certainly, without ignoring positive things brought in the lives of middle-aged people by digital communication, which fulfills people's needs, mostly for long-distanced communication.

5. Discussion and conclusions

As it is stated by the respondents, from their points of view the behaviors of middle-aged people are undeniable influenced by the use of new media, both professionally and personally.

New media influence middle-aged demeanors because of the stress they feel about having to adopt new technologies at their work place, which sometimes requires formal support. In terms of personal usage of new media, in the spare time, indirectly, the contribution in families' obligations tends to diminish. On one hand, new media create for middle-aged people benefits and a minimum addiction, especially in receiving information and talking with persons abroad, and on the other hand, physically closed people feel neglected because of the virtual world in which their relatives immerse. The main reasons for the online participation of middle-aged people are work liabilities,

talking to relatives who live in other countries, news report and getting information. Most of the interviewees admitted that if one of the factors that are responsible for the apparition of these motives disappears, they would easily give up on the online participation. This computer mediated communication is just another way of unfolding the transmitter-receiver relationship: two-way communication is the common agreed communication for middle-aged people; they do not show interest in many-to-many communication or three-way communication. Their prime desire for adopting new media (online news channels, e-mail, Social sites, official institutional blogs, SkypeTM etc.) is maintaining a strictly social and professional form of linking to the network society so that they do not feel excluded.

The way the networked society influences middle-aged people to relate, form opinions and act in a continuously changing climate stands for a milestone nowadays. Society brings about a constant transformation in terms of technology and lifestyle. At present, the work routine encompasses Internet usage, whether it implies special platforms or different applications.

In this new framework, middle-aged people are forced to mold the new practices and adapt to the produced modifications in order to continue working and fulfilling their tasks. Furthermore, people get professional training and attend special courses when new assignments are introduced. Technological change should alleviate work. For all that, a new issue arises: computers have been made to be used by people; instead people cannot become themselves "computerized". Although the Internet has reached a bright and positive phase, easing work and reducing the period of solving a work-related problem, contrariwise other factors intervene, leading to the overestimation of human's vigorousness. An illustrative example is the situation when someone receives 100 e-mails in 100 minutes.

This network society persuades middle-aged people to seize an opportunity for documentation, urgent conversation and long distance communication. Nevertheless, it is practically impossible to replace face-to-face communication with computer-mediated communication. At most, one can speak about a beginning or completion of face-to-face communication through new media. Nevertheless, the network society is perceived by middle-aged people as a new configuration of immediate relations and a new way to tackle societal strategies and develop new practices in conversation and in acquiring services or mainly information, from a double perspective: for job activities and for the personal area. The dimension of the network society is not paramount to interviewees, but the fact that they are part of it and they have benefits and not only difficulties in adapting, is quite relevant. What springs in the minds of the participants is that real life, social partners and authentic commitment are put into place in the online environment as an effect of digitalization and extended offline relations.

Another aspect draws attention in this study. Even if the participants have not been asked about the influence of new media on their children, middle-aged people found occasion to complain about the predilection of their youngsters to "live" online. They expressed concern about the exceptional attention given to virtual space. These statements emphasize an intermediate influence of new media on middle-aged individuals. They feel neglected by their children and also indignant at these new situations. This impression of presuming Internet influence on others is called "influence of presumed media influence" because while thinking to be intelligent enough to resist the media influence, individuals assume a simple draft (Chia, 2010). Without admitting to it, they are in the same position although they sustain that new media do not influence them in their behavior thanks to minimal exposure and stringent interest. Nevertheless, they mention that their family members accuse them of spending enough time on the Internet. As a future perspective, we consider it would be very interesting to conduct a research in order to reveal the relations of communication between middle-aged-parents and their children. The differences in perceiving new media by this age stages, which always have to interact, would be a first step in solving communication deadlocks. The literature review helped building the base of the interview and structuring issues. As it can be extracted from the empirical research, middle-aged people are not an accustomed category of users, meaning those who develop an addiction to the new media and who

submit to its dominance; on the contrary, middle-aged persons usually feel neglected as human beings because of the aforementioned technological space. The network society is the actual and still evolving community; it means that the present time and future perspectives and its denial can only lead to a self-outsourcing. The concept enlarged by middle-aged people remains that of Putnam (2000) - "bonding"-, whereas phenomenological interviews inferred that middle-aged people acknowledged new media as being just a path to keep alive human relationships when space is a dividing factor.

From a eye view of a bird, the present study may be seen as a step forward to the understanding of new media in the lives of middle-aged people. As an exploratory endeavor, it relies solely on a qualitative perspective without statistical significance. The findings reflect the viewpoints of 16 interviewees, aged between 50 and 65 years. The qualitative approach offered the possibility of a better understanding of the interviewees' ideas, perspectives and feelings, but the research would be more valuable if followed by a quantitative questionnaire-based survey, covering a larger population.

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APPENDIX

Interview guide

1. Do you have an Internet contract in progress? Are you interested in maintaining it?
2. Do you need the Internet? In what situations do you use it?
3. Does your work require the Internet usage or is the Internet just an option?
4. In your opinion, what are the main reasons for using new media (e-mail, forums, blogs, instant messaging, social sites etc.)?
5. How much time do you spend virtually?
6. Do you consider that the time spent virtually yields benefits for your personal or professional development?
7. It is often said that new media influences users' behavior. Do you find yourself in this situation? If yes, how?
8. Researchers assert that new media can lead to business or organization development. Do you agree?
9. Can new media replace face-to-face communication?
10. Would you have enjoyed more this interview if it were conducted online? For example, via SkypeTM?
11. Could you give up using new media in your personal or professional environment?
12. How is new media affecting your relationships with close people (colleagues, friends, relatives)?
13. Do you consider that new media changes the way you work or interact at work?