

# HOW HUMAN ARE WE STILL AFTER THE NEW CORONAVIRUS SHOCK?

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered the individual's sudden shift from the status of a free being able to travel wherever, whenever and however he or she wants - *homo viator* - to the status of a being exposed to extremely powerless dangers that one noticed the need to completely isolate the individual at home and turn him into *homo claustratus*. Social life was able to move forward and interpersonal relationships were able to continue only with the help of computer aids: laptops and various internet connected electronic tools. Expelled indefinitely from the agora, communication has suddenly and almost exclusively moved towards the virtual environment. The consequences of this phenomenon are still difficult to estimate. Certain events emphasized the need to adapt to the new technologies, as a life environment without which one can no longer live. If we ignore the strictness of definitions, we can state that we already live in posthumanism.

**Keywords:** *homo viator, homo claustratus, pandemic, Covid-19, posthumanism.*

## 1. FROM HOMO VIATOR TO HOMO CLAUSTRATUS

One of the most amazing changes which occurred in the world starting with the beginning of the third millennium was, without doubt, the opening of the skies. We do not refer to the biblical meaning of the phrase, but to the creation of the possibility for the large majority of Terra's inhabitants to travel from one place to the other by air. Icarus's mythological dream - the rising to the sun had become reality even for those who had extremely little money. People who for a century had longed for the extremely thin elite who could afford to travel by air have crowded for more than two decades from the world's most extravagant airports to the most insignificant ones. This was the era of *homo viator*, the travelling individual, the murmurs who broke the barriers of his yard to live the adventure of knowing the world. Without contesting Ulysses' quality as a symbol for the desire of the human being to

travel (CIOCOI, 2015), we contrast the epics of Icarus and Delar in mythology or, the more Romanian struggle through the skies of the master Manole. Because, in our view, Marco Polo's trampling of old Gheea is much less exposed to the adventure of knowledge than the sea route (which even Ulysses used, didn't he?) and, even less, than the air one. Mankind did not stop in place and nobody stopped to wonder *How* and *Why* did this unexpected opening of the skies took place? Nobody has ever aimed at finding out which are the economic reasons of low cost companies for the amorphous mass of mankind. And people, regardless of their skin colour and the power of their pockets starting choosing the air route. Farther and farther away and more and more often. And all this despite the global economic crisis! At the same time, millions of emigrants, in more primitive boats than those of the world's great explorers, chose the risky path of the sea to reach the West. For at least two decades, the technology developed in the last half a century represented the constant answer to these miracles. It facilitated the staggering drop in prices from half a million dollars for a computer in the early 1970s (COMEN, 2018), to the almost ridiculous prices of today. That is when the most powerful signs regarding paradigm shift which had already began appeared: the individual had overpassed the central position which he had held of millennia and, slowly-slowly, was forced to share his hegemonic position with computers (explosively developed), with the environment (the ecological crisis), or with the climate (global warming).

On this background, an amazing prolonging of the temporal limits in which the human being exists occurred, together with an undreamed enlargement of the space in which he can move. People were satisfied observing them and they

were happy with these gifts that they regarded as a normal reward for the efforts made by those members of the society with a penchant for scientific research. There were few people who understood right from the beginning that we are both the heroes and spectators of a new industrial revolution – the fourth one, if we are to take into account the chronology suggested by Klaus Schwab – a completely different industrial revolution from everything that mankind had previously experienced (SCHWAB, 2016).

Basically, we witness the merging of physical, digital and biological technologies which now makes it possible, through smart mobile devices, to simultaneously connect billions of people in the most diverse parts of the planet. This means an immense data volume, a huge processing power, enormous storage capacity and access to an unprecedented knowledge volume. The scientific explosion relentlessly follows its course: the new technological discoveries highlight areas that up to now seemed to be in the field of science fiction: artificial intelligence, robotics, the internet of things, including those in industry, autonomous vehicles, 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science, quantum computing. And the enumeration may continue. From one day to the other we notice the appearance of some new business models, the restructuring of the production, consumption, transport and distribution systems. The entire society is changing its working, communication and expression manner, its means of information, and also its manner of relaxation. Governments and institutions are reformulated, as well as the education, medical assistance, transport, defence and security systems. The new ways of using technology change our behaviour, we become more comfortable, we go out less and the production and consumption systems seem to now offer the possibility to support regeneration and the conservation of the natural environment.

We still don't know which way will the changes triggered by the development and adoptions of emergent technologies go. Their profoundness is now unimaginable and their complexity and interconnection force the decision making factors of the global society – governments, businesses and the civil society – to work together for a better understanding of emergent tendencies. The future

can only be collective and it has to reflect common goals and values. Whichever these will be, it remains to be seen. A global vision on the way in which technology changes the life of our generation and of the future ones is absolutely necessary. We look around us and notice that the economic, social, cultural and human context in which we live is completely different.

The simultaneous embrittlement of the position of *homo vitruvianus* in relationship to the *others* (alive or not alive) *doomed to existence* and to an increasing deterioration of the margins of error in which it is allowed to move was difficult to observe. This logarithmic slope was so accentuated that, at the appearance of the new coronavirus, the whole world became paralyzed. Encapsulated and stuck in the home which he was no longer allowed to leave, *homo pandemicus* collapsed suddenly and indefinitely in *homo claustratus*. A dramatic rhythm break marks the paradigm shift that we experience. From the philosophy exercised in punctual academic centres and without a very large resonance, posthumanism became overnight a *modus vivendi*. Everything that the great classic threats to humanity did not achieve (natural calamities, terrorism etc. – which even though they were difficult to predict, they had at least three visible sequels), was achieved by the microscopic Covid-19. It occurred when nobody expected and when mankind seemed capable of using technology in order to succeed in any situation. This appreciation is not far from reality because, without the massive passing of most of the vital activities in the duty of the robots and of artificial intelligence, the appearance of the new virus would have caught humanity completely unprepared. The internet replaced highways as the society's interconnection network, but also of the means of transport.

The steps already taken with the help of technology encouraged the international power structures to shift the balance of research even more in the direction of digitalization. This is also the case of the European Commission who, at the beginning of 2021, launched an ample study programmed, entitled CHANSE. It represents the decision of supporting new and innovative research regarding the functioning, significance and consequences of the changes

and innovations in the present digital era, looked at on the basis of the social changes and of the changes in the cultural dynamics. As it was expected, the programme has an important European dimension and aims at investigating the changes which take place or influence Europe as a whole or at the level of a country, city or European community. This approach does not hinder the comparative study or the investigation of other regions outside the European Union.

The starting point is represented by the technic and social landscape of our times. Scientists are challenged to resume the path traveled by the inquisitive mind of the human being which, over the centuries, led to great technological changes. These, in their turn, influenced and continue to influence all the spheres of human activity. Society itself was modelled by these renewals and, through subsequent actions, triggered other technological changes up to the digital technologies of today. The climax reached by human intelligence takes the form of used or disseminated information via a computed and mainly directed towards the development of intelligent processes.

This chain of actions and reactions is now extremely important, as present-day social, economic, politic, technologic and cultural changes generate new opportunities, but also some major challenges. It is true that digitalization which refers to the cultural and social changes generated by the omnipresent usage of binary technologies leads to economic opportunities and progress, but it also proliferates new threats, accentuates social anxiety and intensifies the feeling of uncertainty. The process produces new forms of communication, expresses emotions and creativity, but it also opens new ways of gaining knowledge and distributing information. On the other hand, digital changes raise questions regarding values and identities, individuality versus public interest and solidarity, social justice and inclusion. However, the setting is chaotic, changes do not appear simultaneously or uniformly in all countries and at every social layer. Therefore, the temporal and spatial gaps in turn generate new social divisions and differences between different social groups and communities.

Preoccupied by all these aspects, the European and international community focuses simultaneously on investigating the functioning,

significance and consequences triggered by these changes and also on the need for some new innovations required by the digital era. The aim is to understand how new digital solutions give rise to social and cultural change and are also influenced by society and culture. At the same time, the historical trend, the comparative analyses between the present and the evolutions that preceded the new reality are followed. In order to do so, research emphasis is placed on two of the fundamental fields of this great topic: the cultural and social transformations.

## **2. CONFUSED CULTURES IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

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The cultural transformations represent the first research direction of a never-ending phenomenon in the history of mankind. If, for thousands of years the rhythm was almost constant, the binary tools, the digitalization of processes and the processes of digitalization nowadays contribute to the acceleration of these metamorphoses. Without pretending that these explanations are beyond any doubt, we shall remember the definition offered by the Gartner Glossary according to which, digitalization represents the process of turning the analogical form into a digital one, also known as digital activation. In other words, the digitization takes an analogical database or an analogic process and turns it into a digital form, without changing the nature of the process in itself. This is what happens when, for example, a piece of music is copied from an analog medium such as a vinyl record or from the magnetic tape of an old tape recorder and, after processing it on a computer, it is transformed into a written file encoded in a binary format.

For computer scientists the term *digitalization* is clear. The Gartner Dictionary refers to this concept as the process of changing towards a digital business or the use of digital technologies in order to change a business model and to offer new incomes and value production opportunities. More interested in the way in which binary technology influences social relationships, Bloomberg considers that this definition is ambiguous and confusing (BLOOMBERG, 2018). He adheres more to the perspective of J. Scott

Brennen and Daniel Kreiss, who refer to digitalization as “a model in which many fields of social life are restructured around the digital and media communication infrastructures.”

Regardless of the preciseness of the definition, reality shows that we are getting closer to a culture of algorithms which influence our everyday life, behaviour, cultural practices, judgements and values. The questions which today bother the decision-making factors and for which they turn to scientists are numerous and difficult: Which is the impact that such processes have on us and on our cultures? How radical are these new processes connected to the innovations of the past (alphabetization, the print, the railway, the telegraph, the radio or the television)? What is the influence of the different cultural traditions on the technological changes?

*A different preoccupation is represented by the identity, values and visions of the world*, because, as stated above, the digital tools enter basically into every aspect of our lives. Billions of human beings are connected by devices that constantly provide data obtained from us, analyzed and returned to us in processed forms (personalised commercials, recommendations etc.). How does this reality influence our identity and the individual sovereignty? How does it model our meetings and our understanding of the other? Digital communication preserves the promise of social interaction, global integration and human solidarity. But this promise is not fulfilled for everybody at the same time and to the same extent. The inequalities become more and more visible, isolate individuals and groups in echo rooms, compromising the existence of a common space for public debate and allowing the spread of fake news, hate discourses, populism and xenophobia. How do we create secure environments for free and creative thoughts in a digitalized world? How are freedom and creativity defined, as algorithms learn and use our communication models? How do we approach the issues related to responsibility, trust and transparency? How do the legal and ethical standards develop in order to face these challenges? And, last but not least, to what extent does the historical comparison help understand these processes and problems?

### **3. NEW STORIES, NEW AESTHETICS. REMAINING A HUMAN BEING**

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The subtitle is taken from the call of the above-mentioned Chansé international project on European cooperation. I propose it as it reflects an undisputable reality. Noting the more and more rapid shift of the society towards posthumanism and accepting the more ample role of robotics and of artificial intelligence in social life, the European community seems to make extraordinary efforts to preserve the human being in the centre of the universe. Something that at another time was a reason of exaltations, is nowadays, due to the extraordinary digitalization, a major preoccupation: to what extent does the individual remain...human? Over time, the science fiction world, arts, literature, philosophy and others became a fundamental source of imagination and of inspirational images, technological inventions and attempts to foresee their social, cultural and linguistic consequences. Today, the utopic and dystopic understandings of the technological and digital developments appear in the different trends of posthumanism and in what becomes known as posthumanity. Digital visualization, machine learning, robotics and artificial intelligence are major innovations developing rapidly in the fields of technical and natural sciences, while constantly interacting with emotions, creativity and imagination. New aesthetics and discourses appear in such situations. Either we want it or not, we more and more often ask ourselves: how do we want to live and how can we live together? On the one hand, people and other beings, including the insignificant (in terms of size) and the almighty Covid-19, on the other side, the non-living world (the artificial intelligence) with huge influence on the living world. What are the cultural, aesthetic and futurist accounts of a digitalized world? How do they interact with the processes of digitalization? To what extent are the technological transformations responsible for remodeling the world of our imagination and to what extent does technology give shape to the already anticipated transformations in the prior imaginative thinking – utopic or

dystopic? Here is a set of questions which refer to the dilemma of the Israeli author Yuav Noah Harari. The following questions should preoccupy us: *What do we want to turn ourselves into?* or *What do we want to desire?* (HARARI, n.d.)

#### **4. THE HUMAN SEEN BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. IT HAS GOT A PAST, IT HAS GOT A PRESENT, BUT HAS IT GOT ANY FUTURE?**

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Introduced by Donna Haraway's "the socialist feminism", at the middle of 1980s, posthumanism was so shocking that a large part of the scientific community regarded it as fanciful and preferred to ignore it (HARAWAY, n.d.). There was this opinion that, over the course of its history, mankind had experienced numerous other inventions, some of which triggered some major technical transformations without the human being having been indexed. Scientists have always reflected on the relationships between people and their cultural environments, investigating the impact of technological changes on the generation, the hoarding and transmission of knowledge. For example, a representative number of humanists from the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed a thorough critic of modernity and of the technological progress, the very exact humanist fundamentals of cultures and of the European societies. The questions keep coming. What was, is and might continue to be the humanist role in the assessment of the major systemic transformations? Can we compare the present-day developments from the digital era with the historical phenomena? How can we change the passive observation and the critical distancing in the active participation in the development of the digitalization processes, reflecting on human usage and the adoption of new technologies in order to attain a more equal and democratic access, based on knowledge and its usage? Taking all these into account, will there still be a place for Humanism or will it be replaced by a completely non-anthropocentric vision regarding humanity and its interaction with the non-human?

#### **5. A SOCIETY REDUCED TO 0 (ZERO) AND 1 (ONE)?**

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A second research direction aimed at arousing the imagination of researchers and making them be more attentive to the terrestrial landscape generated by the massive shift of classical activities towards the binary form refers to the changing relationship between technology and social potential. We speak about the relations which transform life's social, political, judicial, economic and psychological conditions and raise questions regarding the technological role of innovation in the progress of the society. We start from the observation of the realities in which technological innovations significantly contribute to sparing the time dedicated to classical daily activities and which offers us a larger action spectrum for social and cultural activities. But, is this a real win or, on the contrary, the new preoccupations generated by the ease with which we can find a solution to a large number of problems distracts us, basically driving away creativity and innovation and jeopardizing education and productive work? This question is legitimate as long as the solutions offered by the digital patterns make the new approaches seem derisory. There are also some other questions: What is the result of the digitalization balance of the social processes? Does it represent a threat for the individual or common freedom or does it lead to the changing of the citizens? How can one use a robust empirical research in order to optimize the positive results of the technological transformations, at the same time understanding and reducing the potential disadvantage for individuals, communities, organisations, institutions and the society as a whole?

#### **6. SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS DESCRIBED IN BITES**

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The initiators of the Chansé project agree that the debate on digitalization is no different from the prior controversies generate by the large scale social transformations, such as modernization, industrialization and globalization. On the one

hand, enthusiasts praise the enormous potential of innovations for growth and enhanced social progress. On the other side, sceptics are afraid that technology will be a doom point for the essential human qualities. Observatories noticed that shifting the specific homo sapiens activities towards a binary format changes social life and the usage of time. They noticed the need for a more rigorous research in order to facilitate the understanding of the antecedents and effects of the technological innovation on social relationships and on the rhythm of life. Did digitalization lead to a new form of temporality? What kind of effects does this process have for understanding time and space? What is its impact in terms of the quantity and quality of the time spent with family and friends? How does digitalization influence communication between generations? How do digital innovations influence social inequality? Do they reduce it and create a generous social convergence space or, on the contrary, do they deepen it? This problem is even more present in the conservatory societies interested in the way in which technical innovations model the gender differences, the balance between professional and personal life and the ways in which we shall use the free time generated by the new technologies. Will we relax more or will we become workaholics? Because, either we want it or not, we end up viewing our work or organisation in binary terms. The new technologies also created new challenges for the labour market. They offer a new advantage to the present debates on the changes triggered by the technological improvements. Digitalization significantly influences organisations, both from the public and from the corporatist sphere. The changing nature of labour has already become a significant public matter triggered by the increase of externalisation and by the concert economy, those individual tasks (concerts) performed by independent contractors (such as artists) to the benefit of the gigantic companies. For the posthumanism accelerate by the Covid-19 pandemic this phenomenon appeared exactly at the right time. Employed and connected through Internet applications, even without knowing each other, the “actors” of the concert economy were able to work remotely.

The present technological transformations more and more influence our perceptions on the

quality of labour and productivity. They change the spatial and temporal dimensions of work and collaboration. The new realities force us to find answers to the fundamental questions which approach the meaning and the productive potential of labour in the digital era. Another question is being added here: Does this new technology always and efficiently lead to an improved efficiency or does digitalization have unintended counterproductive secondary effects? Because, at a glance, while contract workers enjoy great scheduling flexibility and additional income, participants in the concert economy have relatively low wages, few benefits, and a high degree of stress.

And the questions keep coming: What kind of effects does the massive introduction of computers have on the public policies, on institutions and on the economy? Which is the impact of the digital transformations when it comes to changing the workplace, or how do salaries and the new distribution map of wealth and poverty influence? How can we understand the new forms of organisational memory in the massive data generation era? Which are the main driving forces behind digitalization and which are the actors who promote it via public policies?

## **7. KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

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The ease of access to the most diverse information in extremely varied fields can induce the feeling that study is no longer necessary, that the effort of knowledge tends to zero. One thing is for certain. Digitalization affects not only the production of data, but also the accessibility and the consumption of information and therefore, the nature of knowledge production. Innovations such as the high speed internet, electronic books, digital newspaper and mobile devices fundamentally change the way in which knowledge is gained and consumed. The broadcasting of the “content” takes place immediately and basically anyone has the power to influence public opinion with the help of social networks. The knowledge manipulation potential via the new technologies is high, as well as the political questions, such as the impact of

digitalization on choices, justice and ethics. From a legal standpoint, in the digital era, new questions appeared, starting with the definition of the human being (DOBOZI, 2020) and the accelerated passing towards the computer aided assistance. (DOBROGEA NEWS, 2021) Beyond these there are all the other aspects of the law, including the copyright law and the freedom of expression.

It is clear that the new technology generated some new challenges for education. How do educational systems adapt in order to satisfy the emergent skills? What and how do we teach? We, as society, what do we consider important to protect ourselves against? Do the new technologies help us gain knowledge faster? At what cost? Because, if we relate to the easiness of accessing information, we cannot avoid noticing that, in time, with all information being handed to the brain, it becomes lazy and the exercise of memorizing disappears, that our attention is more and more distracted by the vein of the interest from which we start investigating. Therefore, which are the effects of the technological transformations on attention, memory and on the cognitive and emotional skills? Research is also necessary in order to identify the potential negative impact of digital innovations. This line of research can interrogate the property of the huge digital information platforms which control the access to the new world of knowledge and learning and models the way in which information regarding ourselves are interpreted and transformed into knowledge accepted in the society.

Finally, the unimaginable appearance and development of artificial intelligence and of data exploitation also affected the epistemological and methodological basis of social science research in itself. The new studies are expected to shed light on the ways in which the production of scientific knowledge influences the new forms of interaction between the individual and the computer (TĂNASE & PARASCHIV, 2018).

It remains to be seen to what extent will social sciences manage to reduce the handicap

generated by the explosive development of technology. On the new world map painted in binary aesthetic terms, preserving the status of homo sapiens with the instruments of classical humanism seem a bridge too far away.

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