

THE LOCALITY OF THE “GLOBAL VILLAGE” IN THE ASPECT OF COMMUNICATION: *PRO ET CONTRA* M. McLUHAN

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The article deals with the concept of a “global village” in the aspect of communication. In the first part of the article this concept is introduced without undertaking any judgments and following a position of a judicial researcher. In the second part the conditions of the possibility of a “global village”, regarding the crucial differences of globality and villagicity and their incompatibility, are questioned. A thought is raised whether M. McLuhan’s “global village”, which is constituted by contemporary information and communication technologies and treated as new media, should be assessed as a “global city”, attaching to globality some essentially new and unaccustomed meanings, inspired by the traditional socio-cultural structural transformations to the networkful non-structural systems.

Keywords: city, contemporary information and communication technologies (new media), “global village”, global totality, network.

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Introduction

The emergence of contemporary information and communication technologies, treated as new media, in the second half of the 20th century conspicuously changes the socio-cultural reality. Culturologists, sociologists, politologists, philosophers and the representators of the other humanities and social sciences more and more often utter about the globalizing influence of these technologies. The rise of the information networks constitutes auspicious conditions for the rapid movement of information, which connects all the continents, states, cities and individuals of the world into one system. The character of that system is not traditional hierarchical but untraditional anarchical because it is made of interdependently intertwining equal information networks, connecting people all over the world. In the globalizing character of the world, the socio-cultural differences vanish, the borders of the states transform, the obstacles of different languages decrease, the meaning of a place is no more actual – such a view of the socio-cultural reality is drawn by many social scientists and humanitarians. One of the most famous descriptions of the globalizing world belongs to Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), who suggested the concept of a “global village”. Even though this concept, developed in his books *The Gutenberg*

Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (first edition in 1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (first edition in 1964), attracted big attention of the researchers since the publication of these works, it has not lost its actuality until today. On the contrary, when contemporary information and communication technologies increasingly become rooted into the human existence and form the character and the structure of that existence in the 21st century, the concept of a “global village” is investigated on a broad scale in various academic spheres and contexts, attaching some new meanings to it. That is why this concept demands a new analysis and interpretation, evaluating the urgently and broadly declared tendencies of the growing closeness and vanishing distance.

In this article we will focus on the introduction not of the concept of a “global village”, but of the description and explanation of its essence. We will concentrate on the possibility of this phenomenon or, much more, on the reflection of the conditions of the non-possibility, arguing that the McLuhan’s idea of a “global village” does not correspond to the features of the village in many ways. Investigating this concept, we will reflect, what the globality and villagicity mean, why their relationship is problematic as well as the idea of a “global village” is questioned.

“Global village”: what is it?

Before the introduction and the reflection of the concept of McLuhan’s “global village”, let us examine the origins of this notion. Very often it is maintained that the notion of a “global village” belongs not to McLuhan, but to some another author. If we explained its sources, let us use a short text, which is written by McLuhan’s son Eric McLuhan. There it is noticed that the authorship of the notion of a “global village” is ascribed to some representatives of humanities and social sciences, writers or philosophers and it is affirmed, that these claims have no foundation. As one of the authors of this notion French philosopher and theologian Pierre de Chardin and Irish writer and poet James Joyce, who had written the *Finnegan’s Wake* (first edition in 1939), are mentioned. In this work, according to McLuhan Jr., there are used two phrases, which can be understood as the allusions to the congratulations to the “City and the World” (Latin *Urbi et orbi*). Here the city is Rome and the world is the churchgoers who pervaded the whole terrestrial globe. In one part of his work, James rewrites the Latin phrase *Urbi et orbi* as its English interpretation *urban and orbal* and in another one – as *the urb, it orbs*. McLuhan Jr., also mentions the British painter and writer Wyndham Lewis and his book *America and Cosmic Man* (first edition in 1948), where due to the telephones and air transport, connecting even the most distant geographical places, the whole Earth is treated as “one big village”. According to McLuhan Jr., even his father read Joyce’s oeuvre, admiring it and even if he was a good Lewis’ friend, but the most importantly it should be noticed, that even all the notions, which belong to these authors, McLuhan knew very well, his notion of a “global village” was created much earlier than others used it in their works (see McLuhan 1996). Despite the McLuhanian authorship of this notion, such discussions reveal that the tendencies

of the globalizing world were envisaged by the intellectuals from various spheres, even all these authors were interpreting it differently. In the thinking perspective of McLuhan, the "global village" emerges as the result of a rise of electric and electromagnetic technologies and of their intensive consumption. In his interpretation the emergence of these technologies and their later developments, such as contemporary wireless communications, patently diminished the importance of geographical distances in the processes of communication. Electric technologies have provided great opportunities to communicate through longer or shorter distances, almost not considering the factors neither of the space, nor of the time and with the principle of a network connected millions of people from all the parts of the world, increasing their mobility. That is why these technologies are treated as telecommunications, taking into consideration the Greek prefix *tele-*, which means *afar, far off, at a distance*. Here should be noticed, that the communication participants, without changing the location in the geographical territory, virtually not only approach one another, but also form the communities in the virtual space, which is not taken of traditional measurements. But, most importantly it means, that such virtual communication changes the quality of previous communication, establishing new forms of proximity, community and intimacy (for more about mediated communication and its types, see Tomlinson 2002: 157–186). Reading the texts by McLuhan, it seems that these technologies connect people all over the world and the Earth becomes one overwhelming system, composed of the networkfully extending channels which make the flows of information available for everybody on-line. The "global village" emerges as a result of functioning of the above-mentioned technologies and, of course, of the World Wide Web¹, demanding for an exhaustive explanation. Here, in the first part of the article we will analyze the essence of the "global village"; then, in the second part, we will reflect whether it is a fact that under conditions of contemporary information and communication technologies the world becomes one huge village or, on the contrary, it needs some assigned connotations of locality.

The insight of a "global village" is deeply concerned with the McLuhanian reflections about the character of information and communication technologies. Gradually the spoken word was ghettoized by the pre-literal writing; then the literal, i.e. phonetic writing ghettoized in turn the pre-literal word. In the 15th century, when Johannes Gutenberg has invented a printing press, phonetic writing assumed a printed form and various texts, edited on a mass scale, became available for the multitude. In turn from the second half of the 20th century to nowadays alongside the typography, modern electric technologies are used; they emerged at the end of 19th century when Thomas Edison invented the light-bulb. Exactly this invention had a great impact on contemporary information and communication products and the change of their material basis into the electronic one. In the interpretation of McLuhan all these technologies and

¹ The World Wide Web should not be confused with the Internet: the Web is only one part of the Internet, i.e. the subset of the Internet. This subset is composed of those resources, which are available from the Internet, using the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) (see *Wikipedia* 2010).

their development encourage the tendencies of the globalized world and, finally, the emergence processes of a “global village”.

How a “global village” is possible in the interpretation of McLuhan? Why, due to the above-mentioned technologies, the world overlooks as a global, i.e. as one whole, connecting people all over the world and linking them together? This situation McLuhan relates with high speed, which is typical of electric and electromagnetic technologies and which was not characteristic of their predecessors. He states, that “<...> sovereignties have melted away <...> under conditions of electric speed. <...> Electricity does not centralize, but decentralizes. <...> Electric power <...> permits any place to be a center <...>” (McLuhan 2003: 53), because since the 20th century till nowadays it has reached nearly every home and office. This means that the consumption of electricity gives a new quality to information and communication technologies. Trying to interchange important information or communicate even with people located in the most distant places, we can do this at virtual level, where the importance of the categories of space and time reduce to a minimum. Meanwhile, the speed of spreading information and communication grows to the maximum, i.e. it becomes instantaneous: information and communication can occur *here and now*, or, in other words, *in any place and in any time*. This means that the communication with people on the other side of the world occurs instantaneously, i.e. as rapidly as with the people in the same physical space (see Symes 1995). Due to such high speed, the traditional structures, which are composed of the centre and the periphery, transform into “<...> multiple small centers” (McLuhan 2003: 84), in various ways interacting with each other and constituting a network without any hierarchy and divisions, typical of the above-mentioned structures. The network emerges as the result of the connection of different functions and as the combination of the disjunctions, i.e. as the plane, not divided into separate sections or as the one-piece formation, not distributed into the levels. In this way the network corresponds with the rhizome².

The metaphor of a rhizome as a rootstock or as a root-web illustrates extended, interconnected, intertwined communication channels, spreading the data flows. These interconnected communication channels constitute electronic networks of connection, which do not compose any structure, but constitute the complexes of technological embranchments, extending to the modern cities as well as to the remote villages. According to McLuhan, those embranchments are media, treating them not only as the extensions of the human body and the senses, but also as the extensions of the

² Rhizome (Greek *rhizōma* – root; French *rhizome* – rootstock) – rootstock, root-crop. The thinking structure, characteristic to contemporary Western metaphysical thinking rather often is compared with a rooted tree. This thinking structure characterizes the concept of rhizome, which is suggested by contemporary French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Rhizome is a web of the roots with a stalk (a sprout), which can sprout up in any-place. The system of a rhizome can be composed of not only one “centre”, but of thousands of such “centres”. The stalk is fed by the surrounding roots – if the roots are well provided for the stalk with the nourishment, it grows up; if the nourishment is scanty, the stalk withers. The system of rhizome is anarchical, in contrast to the structure of traditional Western metaphysical thinking, where the entirety of hierarchical levels regulates and controls the relationship between its separate elements. The roots of a rhizome combine with each other anyhow and its rootstocks locate incoherently, so this system has no structure.

central nervous system (see McLuhan 1962: 31; McLuhan 2003), which unite separate individuals into one huge family, i.e. into a mankind and has a general collective consciousness (see McLuhan 2003: 76, 91–92). Such collectivity here is understandable as globality, closely related with two subjects: firstly, electronic media not only transmit information as mediators, but also change its content³; secondly, those transmitting information increasingly becomes not textual, but visual and is directed much more to the visual and tactile senses than to the auditory and kinesthetic ones. Or, strictly speaking, all five senses will be subordinated to the tactile ones (see Šliogeris 2005: 298). Instantaneously spreading visual information and communication transfuse all the contemporary culture and this means that it rapidly transforms from the textual into visual culture⁴.

In McLuhan's interpretation the electronic media and the visual information, spreading through them, are in character with globality because the consumers perceive visual information much faster than the textual one. Textual information should be read over and realized or, in other words, its object should be defined; whereas the visual one invades them involuntarily and unconsciously, without any necessity to define its object. In this way physical space is expanded to the maximum and coalesces with the virtual one, and the Husserlian "life-world" gets some essentially new qualitative dimensions. Exactly the high speed of information spread determines its globality and rhizomity, i.e. anti-structurality, destroying the separations and autonomies of various spheres. McLuhan uses a term of implosion⁵, trying to define the decay of traditional structures: implosion means the amalgamation of the functions of space and time due to the acceleration of visual information spreading and the combination of different parts of the structure into one organic entirety, treated as a "global village" (see McLuhan 2003: 103), where the "global interdependence" (see McLuhan 1962: 21) establishes in all the spheres of cultural activity. The "global interdependence" can be interpreted both as interspherality and interdisciplinarity, also as intercontextuality. Here the question arises, what does the emergence of such a "global village" mean and what does it determine – the overwhelming collectivity or the overwhelming individuality as the decomposition of the mankind? Also, this question can be formulated otherwise: what does the globalizing mankind mean – the tendencies of interdependency as indiscreteness, promoting the overwhelming uniformity or interdependency as multiplicity, evoking the overwhelming dissimilarity?

³ Media of some kinds of environments, transforming the contents of information are investigated by Tomas Sodeika in his article "Introduction to Media Philosophy" (see Sodeika 2009).

⁴ The transformations of the textual into the visual culture and the transformations of the material into the postmaterial civilization are exhaustively investigated by Antanas Andrijauskas in his article "Technogenic Civilization, Media and Cultural Globalization" (see Andrijauskas 2006).

⁵ Implosion (Latin *implosio*) – the plosion, reverse (inverse, converse) plosion. English noun *implosion* is derived from the English verb *implode*, which means *elicit avalanche / plosion inside* or *demolish / unbuild (a building), eliciting avalanche / plosion inside*. An avalanche / plosion inside occurs in the process of implosion due to pressure on the outside. For example, a submarine pressed of water on all sides, can collapse / plode inside, i.e. tumble / plode into itself.

The problem of the concept of a “global village”

McLuhan treats contemporary world as a “global village” and means contemporary information and communication technologies to be the tools in a broad sense, which empower the wide and rapid communication possibilities, annihilating the longest spatial distances between people all over the world at the virtual level. In his interpretation these technologies capacitate to reach out the virtual interdependent relationships in the principle of a network extend the world over and absolutely shorten even the longest distances between its parts. In this way, according to McLuhan, the world contracts, that is to say, it halves and, through media, becomes a “global village”. Here the polemic questions arise, a notion of a “global village” is *contradictio in adjecto*, isn't it? Can a village as such be global? Trying to answer these questions, we should explain what is essential for a village and villagicity.

One of the most important features of a village are communicity and collectivity, actualizing as permanent togetherness and familicity. Village is as one big family, and all the members of a family know well about the events, their becoming, trickle out the news and all together make decisions in complicated situations. That is why a village is inseparable from specific familicity, i.e. familicity in a broad sense, which distinguishes for the connotations of locality and sedentarity, taking place in a concrete place or territory. Considering that in a village all its inhabitants know each other very well, it should be noticed, that they are the homeys, but not strangers. This means, that the inhabitants of a village draw a bright red line between the homeys and strangers, because a stranger is the *Other* in essence, i.e. different, incomparable and incommensurable with the homeys, in some ways being different from them. Every village has its own different and peculiar moral principles and ethics, their own proprieties and superstitions as well as habitudes and customs. The individual, who does not know, what is characteristic of one or another village or is not in a fit state trying to conform to its socio-cultural environment and become one of its part, is treated as a stranger or an enemy. The homeys cannot place confidence in strangers or enemies, being sure they must be ousted from a village and repudated as the source of unsuccessful internal communication.

The stranger in any case makes a fear because he is unknown, unpredictable and extraneous, endangering group interests, destroying and disturbing the own and peculiar social microclimate of a village. It follows that, as it was mentioned above, a village is local, closed and obvious territorially defined unit, incompatible with the essence of the other totality. Global totality, that McLuhanian interpreted contemporary world, intertwined by electronic networks of connection as distinct from a local village, is multidimensional and multiple, so multi-aspectic and plural. Meanwhile, the village cannot be characterized as plural unit under the influence of various trends, movements and factors of every description. Every village has its single and united order, which requires that every stranger, trying to become a homey, should conform and submit to it.

In any case, village is understandable as a local place or home environment as a clearly defined private space, marked off from the public one. Private area is treated as

a home environment in contradiction to the public space, comprehensible as the area of the strangers. These two areas or spaces are opposite to each other. In the global totality as distinct from a village public and private spaces intertwines and intervenes into each other, constituting a new hybrid, flourishing essentially new experiences composed of private and public areas. This means, that private space through media is inserted into the public one, assuming the forms of social events and news. In this way, according to John Tomlinson, communicational interconnectivity of the network of worldwide mass media and communications determines the differences between the private and the public spheres: our home environment is not a fortress anymore (see Tomlinson 2002: 124), a closed rural home environment space, sheltered from any outward influences. This means, that communication technologies reshape home environment as social space and transform the experience of private space: physical environment constantly becomes non-physical world of connection (see Gumpert, Drucker 1998). It follows that in a case of global totality home environment becomes some specific space where two areas converge: the public area, mediated and transformed by information and communication technologies and the closed private one.

In this case we should notice, that global totality is impossible without interspherical, inter-institutional and intercontextual plurality and under these conditions various interactions and connections establish and co-exist, enabling the openness of that totality to every human being. There are neither homeys, nor strangers in the global totality – therein constantly somebody arrives and departures; the idea of McLuhan, that due to emergence of electric and electromagnetic technologies the world became a "brothel-without-walls" (McLuhan 2003: 187) confirms this situation. That is why the experiences of the global totality generated by a free-walless, are incomparable and disparate with the experiences, which define the collectivity of the village-life (see Miller 1971: 124). Besides, if in a village as in a some kind of social structure everybody goes his respective place and takes an adequate social standing, then the global totality in the interpretation of McLuhan characterizes not traditional hierarchical structure, but rhizomic system⁶, which is networkful, plain and in this way one-leveled. So, in this case globality is inseparable from networkness and the members of a global totality are connected to each other absolutely differently than in the traditional socio-cultural hierarchical structure: their interconnectivity can be multiversional and create various communicational combinations.

The information spreading through communication channels is of unequal importance in regard to different parts of the world, different states and different cities demonstrates the locality of a "global village", speaking about contemporary information and communication. Even if the Earth inhabitants are interconnected and intertwined with each other at the virtual level, it does not mean, that the geographical territories disappear and what is more that already have disappeared; that the Earth inhabitants estimate the events of equal importance wherever they happen. Nowadays, despite the

⁶ The words *structure* and *system* are not used as synonyms. According to the structuralistic attitude of the author of this article, a structure must have a system, but a system can be non-structural.

emergence and consumption of innovative technologies, geographical territories remain as well as they have existed for long centuries and for their inhabitants the most important information was coherence with their own lives. In a case of a global totality, information connected even to the most distanced territories, should be estimated as actual; actual not only in a sense of curiosity but most importantly, in regard to the quality of life because that information would be overwhelming and actual for everybody. However, not all information spreading through communication channels and, to be specific, not every message is important for the global totality or for the whole mankind, even if it broadens the horizon of Husserlian “life-world”. Such a statement would be not only too pretentious but also inaccurate in essence (for more about the influence of the mediated events on the subjective experience, see Tomlinson 2002: 178–186).

Meanwhile, a village as a local territory appreciates exactly one or another information or a message spreaded between its inhabitants. That message often becomes the news which is shared among everybody; the inhabitants of a concrete village supplement it with their own rumours. Due to those local geographical territories, remained during long centuries till nowadays and inserted into the global totalities, the phenomenon of locality cannot be overcome in essence, even it can be transformed in so many ways. That is why, opposing to McLuhan, the world cannot become a “global village” as one collective and domestic place, where there no strangers and information of different importance. Besides, locality is inseparable from the ontological constitution of a human being because we cannot be in several places at the same time. And the contemporary information and communication technologies, opposing to McLuhan once again, can extend our consciousness not in the virtual space but interconnect it with the local physical place and with the close but departed people who belong to that place (see Meyrowitz 2004). This means, that due to the increasing media influence are adjusted traditional concepts of locality and globality, they are newly estimated and for their definitions new criteria are invoked.

It appears from this that a village has particular general discourse while in the case of the global totality separate discourses co-exist and have influence on each other. In the global totality there is not only one community or collective; there co-exist many different and often interdependently even incomparable socially alienated communities and collectives. This means that the communicity and collectivity, characteristic to traditional village due to Gutenbergian and electric technologies, unifying and homogenizing social space, contrary to McLuhan, is absolutely unrepresentative of the global totality. Any global totality is a very multiplex system and the networkness, the interactions of various spheres, disciplines, institutions, contexts, their interconnectivity and amalgamation but not a strictly defined structure with its single and united order. So, we should notice that McLuhan, while interpreting the contemporary world as a “global village”, in many ways deviates from the essence of traditional village approaches to a base of a city.

If we appeal to McLuhan, we should say that multicentrality, wide possibilities to spread information and communication, the wallness of virtual communication characterize the city itself. And contemporary city is very multiplex, plural communication

system with multiple communication channels, which has no traditional hierarchical structure, characteristic to the cities from 1950s to 2000s and disappearing till nowadays under conditions of rapidly communication processes⁷. Contemporary city is unrepresentative of a village and villagicity in essence because a village is too simple and too closed hierarchical structure while a city is multiplex and open networkful system. The cities are the places of intensive communication, social, political, cultural, economic, demographic processes. A city as a global totality with the characteristic networkness or, in other words, as a network system unites the centre and the periphery; in a city as in a rhizome a "centre" or many "centres" can emerge in anytime in anyplace. And what is more under conditions of a city the centre can transform into a periphery and in turn a periphery – into a centre because there can become possible all the unexpected interactions, connections and interdependent influences of the rapid and miscellaneous processes – such is an essence of a rhizome. This means, that the global totality as a network interconnects various types territories and regions into one space, its economically developed and underdeveloped districts but even they are self-divided into several parts of a city in regard to territory, they are linked up to each other by streets, roads, highways or skyways. Besides, a very important fact is that the cities but not in the villages there are the places where people of all shades of ages, races, ethnicities, cultures, calibres, incomparable convictions, attitudes, opinions, values and propagating various lifestyles get along. This means that in the cities infinite various people get along whereas in the village live one and the only community, not tolerating and trying to supplant all the innovations and unaccustomed things.

It follows that under conditions of rhizomic system of a city locality and globality cannot be opposed to each other, because globality does not destroy locality but enables locality of various types or, strictly speaking, it empowers localities, co-existing and interconnecting interdependently. That is why not the villages but the cities are those centres, emerged all over the world, which McLuhan mentions in his books, become sources of miscellaneous attraction. The cities under conditions of rapid processes of urbanization emerge in unaccustomed geographical territories and attract newcomers from remote recesses. That is why rapid and obvious processes of urbanization, disputing against McLuhan, militate that the world increasingly becomes not a "global village" but a "global city". In this case the concept of globality assumes not traditional but absolutely new, exceptive meanings and inspires new treatments and interpretations.

Conclusions

The concept of a "global village" of McLuhan is internally contradictory. In any case globality is that phenomenon which is overwhelming, complex and plural; any global

⁷ In 1950s about 30 percent people all over the world lived in the cities. In 2000s the cities accommodated 47 percent people. According to a prognosis, in the short run the processes of urbanization will be much more rapid and the number of cities will increase; in 2030s the cities would settle even 60 percent people.

totality is a formation of multiplex interactions, connections and relationships. That is why contemporary world under conditions of electronic connection networks, constituted by information and communication technologies, should be treated not as a “global village” but as a “global city” without any features of a village and villagicity such as communicity, collectivity and familicity. These features are characteristic to simple, hierarchical and strictly defined traditional structures, which were a basis for the cities till the beginning of 21st century. Nowadays, rapid processes of urbanization are inseparable from contemporary information and communication technologies, which have influence on the emergence of the cities with a networkful system; about five or even more million people accommodate in such cities. A networkful system, which can be treated as an anti-structure is characteristic to contemporary cities, where all the people are interconnected with each other. Such a system is global; and globality is understandable not in traditional sense, emphasizing the difference between globality and locality but in untraditional one, when globality is treated as the openness to locality relating that openness not to the villages but to the cities.

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„GLOBALIOJO KAIMO“ LOKALUMAS
KOMUNIKACINIŲ ASPEKTU: *PRO ET CONTRA*
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Santrauka

Straipsnyje komunikaciniu aspektu tiriama M. McLuhano „globaliojo kaimo“ samprata. Pirmoje jo dalyje ši samprata pristatoma nesiimant jokių jos vertinimų ir laikantis bešališkos tyrėjo pozicijos. Antroje straipsnio dalyje kvestionuojamos „globaliojo kaimo“ galimybės sąlygos dėl esminių globalumo ir kaimiškumo skirtumų bei jų tarpusavio nesuderinamumo. Išsakoma mintis, kad McLuhano išvelgiamas „globalusis kaimas“, kurį jo mąstymo perspektyvoje steigia dabartinės informacijos ir komunikacijos technologijos, traktuojamos kaip naujosios medijos, turėtų būti traktuojamas kaip „globalusis didmiestis“, globalumui suteikiant iš esmės naujų ir neįprastų konotacijų, inspiruotų tradicinių sociokultūrinių struktūrų transformacijų į tam tikras tinkliškas bestruktūres sistemas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: dabartinės informacijos ir komunikacijos technologijos (medijos), didmiestis, „globalusis kaimas“, globalusis višetas, tinklas.

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