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Personal identity in media society: Approaches from a socio-psychological and Christian social-ethical perspective

I. Introduction

According to the well-known dictum of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann "Whatever *we know* about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, *we know* through the *mass media*" (Luhmann 2000, p. 1 [4]). Medialization is acknowledged to be a central development of current social modernization processes, even a "total social phenomenon" (Saxer 2012, p. 839). In sociology, therefore, there has been much talk of media society as a basic theory. Personal, individual identity and formation of this identity in such a society is induced by the media to a large extent. And it is certainly true that both Germany and South Korea, can be classified as such media societies.

   This paper, therefore, begins with a brief outline of the characteristics of media society as a hermeneutic framework theory based on the comprehensive sociological social theory of communication by the communication scientist Ulrich Saxer (1). When it comes to methodological preliminary considerations as to identity against the background of media society, the question then is how the category of identity can be connected to the principle of personality as the basic principle of Christian social ethics. It is assumed that the principle of personality is also of fundamental importance for questions of media ethics from a Christian-social ethical perspective, which are of interest here. In close alignment with the theological ethicist and psychologist Jochen Sautermeister the thesis is presented that a social-psychologically informed concept of identity is able to define the abstract principle of personality in more detail in order to be able to empirically deal with questions of media ethics as applied ethical questions (2). It follows on the basis of this empirical understanding of the subject, the reflections on how identity formation takes place under the social, structural and institutional conditions of media society and how people can shape their personal identity with and through the media (3). In a final step, the theoretical considerations in the practical field of computer games will be briefly outlined as examples, since these media are ultimately enjoying great and growing popularity in Germany and in South Korea (4).

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[4] Translation by the author of the article.

II. Characteristics of a media society

The Media as "transporters of content of meaning" (Bohrmann 2018, p. 305) guarantee public communication in systems-theoretical terms in the form of the mass media subsystem (Scholl 2010). Journalists from radio, television, newspapers and the Internet have the main functional responsibility. The mass media constitute a media public. Medialization as deep structural infection of society and all its subsystems with the logic of the mass media (Ziemann 2018, p. 65) identifies such society as media society (Bohrmann 2018, p. 309). Media-based communication as well as the media's own logic and functions are therefore structurally indispensable for media society (Ziemann 2018, p. 57). The concept of media society is, however, more like a heuristic one that serves to reduce the complexity of medialized modern, highly functionally differentiated societies.

Accordingly, the search of a clear definition does not necessarily lead to a precise definition, but some of its characteristics can be noted: In media society, the mass media are 'the central nervous system', because of their omnipresence (Bergsdorf 2005, p. 9). According to Ulrich Saxer, complexity management is a central function of medialization processes in society (Saxer 2012, p. 831). It can be both functional and dysfunctional, when complexity is reduced in a distorting way for example (Saxer 2012, p. 842). Medialization operates "on the micro, meso, macro and global level, it interacts with systems of interaction, organization and function, the institutional structure as well as the world in which we live, and dissolves and mixes previously defined social spheres and constellations" (Saxer 2012, p. 833). With regard to the Internet and the digital media, Saxer ultimately speaks of an almost "unleashed mediality" (Saxer 2012, p. 157).

III. Information and entertainment media

Nevertheless, the increasing medialization goes hand in hand with the paradox, which the political scientist Wolfgang Bergsdorf summarizes as follows: "Never before have the possibilities for citizens in industrialized countries to obtain good information on political, economic and cultural issues been as comprehensive as they are today; at the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to find orientation, to gain an overview, to form their own opinion" (Bergsdorf 2005, p. 9). In this sense, the journalist Wolf Schneider put it aptly as early as 1984: "The news agencies do not report most of what happens in the world. Most of what the agencies report is not printed and not broadcast. Most of what is printed and broadcast is not heard and not read. And most of what is heard and read is not understood" (Schneider 1984, pp. 11–12). How much more has this become the case in the age of the Internet?

Media society is not only shaped by the journalistic information media, but the entertainment media also have a high relevance for many people's lifestyle. This also applies increasingly to computer games as an entertainment medium. In fact, what most

media offer is entertainment. Both the information and the entertainment media, with their influence that should not be underestimated, offer a broad field of ethical research (see for instance Funiok 2011, pp. 141–143). When it comes to media society, the question of the influence of media on the identity of society and its members is also of interest. Here, the concept of identity is understood as a hermeneutical meta norm, which must be defined more precisely to apply it in the light of Christian social ethics and related personalism. Therefore, we will now move on to present a specific identity-theoretical approach towards an empirically based research on normative aspects of media use in the context of media society.

IV. Identity and the principle of personality

The theoretical starting point for the following considerations is the theological-ethical basic principle of personality (see for example Filipović 2010). It is also the central social principle of the Catholic social doctrine (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, pp. 96–139). The classical formulation of this personal approach in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes 25), is as follows: "For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person".

The concept of person also goes hand in hand with a special emphasis on personal responsibility. In the Christian-theological horizon of interpretation such personal action in responsibility corresponds to the image of God and dignity of man. The basic normative orientations corresponding to the Christian personality principle, however, remain rather general. The person principle remains too abstract as a principle to deal with concrete questions of media ethics "as applied ethical questions in a practice-oriented way" (Sautermeister 2014, p. 172; Filipović 2015). Therefore, the argumentation with the person principle requires an ethical foundation theory based on the current state of empirically founded social and human science theory (Sautermeister 2014, p. 172).

This is where the identity category will be introduced. But the meanings and definitions of the concept of identity are so diverse that there can be no question of a clarified concept. Following on from the theological ethicist and psychologist Jochen Sautermeister as well as from the social psychologist Heiner Keupp, a social-psychologically determined understanding of personal identity will be presented here.

According to Keupp identity unfolds through a subjective construction process in which individuals seek a "fit between the subjective 'inside' and the social 'outside'" (Keupp 2017, p. 201). This understanding of process-based identity can be regarded as "fitting work" (Keupp 2017, p. 201) since in the course of a person's various phases of life, it contributes to the shaping of identity by the respective complex conditions and contextual preconditions and even limitations. In interactions with other people, an attempt is usually made unconsciously to maintain a balance of identity (Krappmann

2005, p. 9). On the one hand, the person tries to keep up with other people's socially mediated expectations and demands, but, on the other hand, they also want to bring out their own singularity as a person (Sautermeister 2007, pp. 17–18). Identity is, thus, formed dynamically in social interactions and socialization processes (Sautermeister 2007, p. 17). It is dependent on social recognition. Identity formation is, therefore, a significant and conflictive mental integration achievement (Bohleber 1996, p. 298).

If the person succeeds in this procedural act of balance and integration, the deformity of an uncertain, fragile, diffuse identity as well as that of a rigid, supposedly unchangeable identity is equally avoided (Sautermeister 2017, p. 51). As a personal identity that is updated in communication and action, it is, nevertheless, also often precarious and permanently fragmentary (Luther 1992). Each personal identity is also transformed to varying degrees by a social identity depending on the context of interaction. According to Erving Goffman stigma management is needed on account of this distinction between social and personal identity of the individual. By this kind of self-management of personal identity as the respective concrete singularity of the person can duly unfold despite all the attributions, categorizations and expectations that are usually considered natural and can have a stigmatizing effect (Goffman 1975, p. 160; see also recently Fukuyama 2019, p. 26: "Identity arises above all from a distinction between the true inner self and an outer world with social rules and norms that do not adequately recognize the value or dignity of the inner self"). Therefore, "identity formation and identity work aimed at maturity and responsibility, thus, become a complex and lifelong task that affects both the individual and society. Identity formation is indispensable not only for individual life, but also for social interaction, community and, last not least, for democracy" (Sautermeister 2017, p. 48).

In the end, prefabricated identity concepts and patterns can no longer be taken for granted in the individualized and pluralized social world of post-modern media society. What is needed, especially from the perspective of Christian ethics, is a normative understanding of personal identity that promotes responsibility. This also applies to the subject of media action. The social-psychologically specified category of identity, thus, offers a reference concept with which the human person comes into view as such a concrete and responsible subject of action. This is accompanied by an increased "sensitivity for individuality, social interdependence and biography" (Sautermeister 2013, p. 103) of that person. Particularly in rule-ethical approaches, however, the individual remains a generalized and thus largely stenciled subject (Sautermeister 2013, p. 103). The social-psychological category of identity refers to the mediation of internal and external perspectives that is necessary for the ethical appreciation of moral subjectivity and self-awareness (Sautermeister 2014, pp. 176–177). But Sautermeister also emphasizes, against the possible suspicion of a relativist-subjectivist understanding of ethics, that the theologically received identity category can also be linked to the tradition of natural law approaches (Sautermeister 2014, p. 181). Natural law is characterized by the fact that it cultivates the central idea of the universalization of the moral claim (Anzenbacher 2002, p. 24). It, thus, refers to the ineluctably objective preconditions and limitations of free formation and development of identity and its

social-structural condition factors. Accordingly, natural law in this context can be more aptly described as personal law (Schallenberg 2013).

A structural approach to media ethics can be connected to this concept. It takes media recipients, distributors and producers into account as subjects of action and actors of responsibility in the context of the systemic framework conditions. This approach is a context-sensitive and complex "tightrope walk between subject and structure" (Heimbach-Steins 2002, p. 50; see also Heimbach-Steins 2011). In this sense, the concept of identity represented here closely intertwines social and individual ethical perspectives. This also applies to questions of media ethics against the background of media society.

V. Identity formation with and through media

On the basis of the outlined understanding of identity, the task of Christian social ethics is to take into account the contextual and structural conditions (Heimbach-Steins 2002) in a person-oriented way in order to give orientation for action in social challenges as well as in the respective questions of justice. In this respect, theological media ethics is concerned with the promotion of people's ability to work responsibly on identity within the sphere of influence of and in dealing with the media (Schäfers & Sautermeister 2018, p. 12).

For identity formation to succeed, a person needs psychological, social, cultural and religious resources. In today's media society, the media are among the most important mediators of a not insignificant part of these resources. In this respect, the media function as a significant space of experience and orientation for identity constructions (Bonfadelli & Bucher 2008, p. 27). But, with regard to the information media, it should be noted that, especially in the mediatized multi-option society with its massive oversupply of information up to the consequences of a new disinformation economy in times of fake news and alternative facts (Ruß-Mohl 2017), conflicts of values, orientation and identity can intensify. This makes it considerably more difficult to deal responsibly with the media. The immense wealth of information often leads the recipient of the media to a fade-out effect, to cognitive dissonance (Hunold 1994, p. 38), which leads to the "moral devaluation of the mediated reality and the knowledge associated with it" (Hunold 1994, p. 38). On the one hand, recipients switch off inwardly and consciously receive only what corresponds to their own convictions and, thus, strengthens their identity. There is a tendency towards the conviction 'I only listen to my inner being, to my feelings when judging things', which is often also conveyed by the media. On the other hand, the phenomenon of the transition "from internally to externally guided sociality" (Hunold 1994, p. 44), which characterizes media society, is rather contrary to the personal identity balance: One's own actions and also the development of one's own identity are increasingly influenced and determined by actions from outside, by public opinion and the views of others, and thus to the detriment of the intimate, inner

experience of man (Hunold 1994, p. 44). The starting point is initially the fact that, thanks to the Internet and social media, the roles of the media producer and the media consumer coincide to form the 'prosumer': everyone can long since be their own 'program director' (Bergsdorf 2006, p. 354). From the point of view of media ethics, we are looking for identities that cultivate a responsible approach to the media. "It is, therefore, a matter of a normative understanding of identity as a model for educational and empowerment processes" (Sautermeister 2017, p. 49).

In view of the rapid development and transformation processes, it is all the more important that media ethics not only appears reactively, but that it is attentively observed and prospectively considered as to which media society we would like to live in and how responsibility can be promoted by people (Schäfers & Sautermeister 2018, pp. 12–14). The challenge for the subject of action as well as for the design of just structures and framework conditions is big, especially in the face of a polarized and polarizing conflict culture that is pointedly aimed at unification and tends to eliminate ambivalences and ambiguities for the sake of a clear, unambiguous message. Successful identity formation also always means being able to live with openness, incompleteness and ambiguities in social coexistence. Tolerance of ambiguity (Bauer 2018) and self-criticism, thus, become values and virtues of media ethics.

Ulrich Saxer draws the following conclusions from his socio-communication theory of the media society, with regard to the relationship between identity and the media: "Identity establishment thanks to medialization or at least assistance can only succeed (…) on a case-by-case basis: temporarily, situation-, person- and system-specifically. In general, media functionality operates subsidiarily, and although the identity-constitutive significance of mediality grows with the development of media society, it is regularly combined with other factors. The highly ideologized debate about the impairment of continental, national or group-specific cultural identity by external media overpowering is often based more on media-political problem projection than on the issue itself. After all, to a considerable extent, media communication helps young people establish temporary personal identities, and habitual media use has long since become an integral part of the biographies of members of modernized societies" (Saxer 2012, p. 850). More than ever before, people are developing, using and changing the media, but the media are also shaping and changing their human users (Ziemann 2018, p. 58).

In view of the increasing unease about the destructive effects of a consciously as well as unintentionally short-sighted or irresponsible handling of the media and the dissemination of media 'information', calls for a strengthening of media competence and personality development from various professions such as communication scientists, therapists and others are becoming increasingly louder. In addition to the controversially discussed question of the possibilities of reasonable and legally compliant regulations, it has become clear that media practice and media ethics must not underestimate the importance of the acting subjects in media society if the positive possibilities of media development are to be used fruitfully and meaningfully.

Ultimately, because of the intention of the journalistic media professionals to direct attention for commercial reasons, which is based on the supposed needs of the audience

(Meyen 2015), the question of orientation and perspectives of meaning for a conscious handling of the media also arises from the perspective of the media user. However, according to Dolf Zillmann, starting from a hedonistic basic premise, mood management (Zillmann 1988) is initially dominated by a mostly unconscious and significant factor: positive feelings should be maximized and negative feelings minimized by the correspondingly consciously selective use of media (Batinic 2008, p. 117). This applies in particular to all types of entertainment media according to their function, but even beyond them.

However, if we remain stuck with this mere management of emotions, this means a reduced understanding of the potential of media, because "in media practice, too, the question of their meaningful objectives cannot be suppressed or excluded in the long run by those who have to achieve them" (Pfürtner 2004, p. 101). For journalists and media recipients alike, the basic question 'to what end?' (Pfürtner 2004, p. 102) arises.

Ultimately, the perspective of theological media ethics can contribute fundamentally to the discussion of the meaningfulness of communicative action (Kos 1997, pp. 252–253). The Christian horizon of meaning and hope is the foundation of this. The latter seeks to convey that the fragmentary and perishable identity of man "always from God as a uniquely affirmed identity will finally eschatologically complete itself in the presence of God" (Sautermeister 2018, p. 28).

VI. Application example: the medium 'games'

To illustrate in brief, a possible application of the social-psych on logical category of identity presented here. This paper ends by focusing on the world of computer games, i.e. entertainment media that are becoming increasingly popular worldwide, not only among young people. And in South Korea gaming is a branch of entertainment that appeals not only to players but to millions of viewers. For example, e-sports are already as accepted and established as football or tennis there.

In games, media users can slip into their very own leading role. They can try out quite different identities and turn special game experiences into identity fragments. Basically, an identity building process influenced by games is also related to the gamer's socio-structural embedding and impact on the social dimension of their identity. Computer games can, thus, even become an ethical fitness and reflection center that playfully enables identity formation based on responsibility. This training effect is particularly evident in those games in which players repeatedly find themselves in moral dilemmas (for details see Wimmer 2014) for example in the games "The Witcher 3", "Mass Effect" or "Dragon Age Origins". No matter how players decide in such a situation, they will always violate an ethical principle. Games also have their disadvantages: There is potential for addiction, there is explicit violence in games. One particularly striking example is the "Grand Theft Auto" series: in this game players can move freely in a virtual big city. What is more, players can use a lot of violence and massacre innocent

people. Games can also have a damaging effect on the identity formation of adolescents. But this depends above all on how immersive gamers get into their game and how intensively they actually 'identify' with their violent character and how intensively they 'slips into' their identity. This example only briefly touched on here shows the necessity of a normative understanding of identity that implies responsible and ethically reflected media action, not only but especially in the way violent games are used for entertainment purposes. A gamer's identity also demands responsible action, and, thus, require a certain degree of integrity, not least, with regard to the personal and social identity of the media subject of action. The focus can, thus, be put on the question of the specific gamer identity of individuals and their integration into social playing cultures. The offer of strong social inclusion, for example in e-sports and massively multiplayer online role-playing games, can be an important part of identity formation. Games, thus, become contexts of social recognition (Keupp 2017, p. 209). They are ultimately reflecting society to a certain extent (Jöckel 2018, pp. 45–76). All in all, social and individual (media-)ethical perspectives are closely intertwined based on identity theory.

Computer games turn out to have long since arrived at the heart of media society. With this medium, however, there is still a great need for ethical reflection. Here, the socio-psychological identity category can also be meaningfully worked with and researched. However, the increasing "dissolution of traditional dividing lines between mass and individual communication, and even their multimedia and interactivity" (Wimmer 2013, p. 44) distinguish computer games not only as a theoretical object of identity and media ethics, but also as a multi-perspective interesting research object "that enables a look into the future of media society" (Wimmer 2013, p. 44).

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