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Digital Natives Disconnected. The Qualitative Research on Mediatized Life of Polish and International Students in Rzeszow and Warsaw, Poland

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Abstract:

Studies on the mediatization of everyday life are becoming more and more important in the area of media and communication studies in the Western scientific literature. The main questions of these analyses concern the range of this phenomenon and the possible consequences for the social, cultural and psychological life of societies and individuals. Using this approach, the authors of this paper present the results of a qualitative study based on the social experiment #NoWeb (*#BezSieci*), conducted on the population of 184 students of two Polish universities. For 7 days, the participants of the experiment tried to live offline, which means

not using the Internet at all, and writing down their experiences in paper diaries. Only 8 of them were able to live offline until the last day of the project. The main research results of the study show that almost all areas of living are dependant and supported by online access, which has a strong influence on the capability to act offline among young adults. Lacking access to the Internet, the participants of the study were very often unable to deal with simple tasks. At the same time, the experiences of staying offline enabled them to discover new possibilities of everyday functioning and effective use of additional free time with benefits for their well-being and interpersonal relations.

Keywords: mediatization, students, social experiment, media effects, digital natives.

Introduction

Technology – and especially the Internet – is now a regular part of the life of young adults (18–25 years old) (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Coyne et al., 2013). It may be stated that in the 21st century, the vast majority of young people in Western countries, especially adolescents, live in the online media-saturated world. Within quite a short period, the Web, mobile tools and applications took control over their users' lives in both public and private areas of living, abolishing the distinction between virtuality and reality in the so-called “onlife” world (Florida, 2015, p. 7).

This situation led to the fast development of a theoretical approach which is called ‘the key theoretical concept in contemporary media and communication research’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 191) – mediatization. The term itself was conceptualized around the year 2000 (Kaun & Fast, 2015), but research concerning the phenomenon had been conducted earlier within the frames of many disciplines, like political studies. In recent years more researchers made some attempts to study the mediatization of culture and everyday life (Encheva et al., 2013; Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013; Hjarvard & Petersen, 2013) to ‘capture somehow the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media and, more particularly of the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 191).

Discussing the impact of the Web on people's lives, scientists started a debate on the issue whether the mentioned effects of the omnipresence of the Web are positive or negative. According to Mudhai (2004), the researchers of the impact of digital media may be divided into optimists (utopians), pessimists (dystopians) and realists (pragmatists) – who are ‘trying to bridge the rift’.

‘Optimists’ or ‘the enthusiasts’ focused on some advantages of the Internet as a medium for promoting democracy (Placek, 2020) and political participation (Bakker & Vreese, 2011), a tool for distributing high-quality news (Frijters & Velamuri, 2010), a stimulant of changes in education (Barger, 2020) and science (Kouzes et al., 1996). ‘The sceptics’ warned against the negative influence of the Web on culture (Keen, 2007; 2012), democracy (Couldry, 2017), communication or even memory processes (Naisbitt et al., 1999; Sparrow et al., 2011; Carr, 2020). A lot of research concerning the so-called ‘problematic Internet use’ show a significant and uncontrolled negative impact on people’s lives (Scherer, 1997; Young & Rogers, 1998; Turkle, 2011; Spada, 2014; Cudo et al., 2016; Anderson et al., 2017; Stead & Bibby, 2017; Jakubik, 2018; Akhtar & Khan, 2019; Mamun et al., 2019; Restrepo et al., 2019), e.g. it may influence the way children and adolescents experience learning processes based on cognitive and emotional functioning. It seems that intensive use of smartphones and social media damages cognitive capacity (Pawlikowski & Brand, 2011; Dębski, 2016; Ward et al., 2017; Carr, 2020) and people who use the Internet for long sessions can even suffer withdrawal symptoms – both psychological and physiological (Romano et al., 2013; Dębski, 2016). Recent studies show that smartphone addiction is connected to cyberloafing (‘the use of smartphones for irrelevant activities in the classroom environment’ (Gökçearsan et al., 2016; 2018)) leading to diminished academic success (Tang & Austin, 2009). Some research suggests that extended use of the Internet may also cause problems with balancing work and relaxation time (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004).

Besides numerous scientific studies within different disciplines, also some social initiatives connected to abstaining from the Internet have been undertaken. In 2009, Susan Maushart, an American author and journalist living in Australia, disconnected herself and her children from communication technologies (like cell phones, radio, television and the Internet) for six months (Maushart, 2011). Yalda T. Uhls (2015) in her own study found that children who spent five days at an outdoor camp without screens improved their social awareness. Dębski (2016) carried out a social experiment in Poland, in which participants aged 12 to 18 gave up using all the media for 72 hours. Although some similar challenges (a day or month without the Internet) were also undertaken by individuals (Lewis, 2017), there is a significant gap in the area of scientific or systematic descriptions of such attempts.

This article is an attempt to fill this gap regarding young adults. The participants of our social experiment represent the first generation which has grown up in the environment of the omnipresence of new technology, and only a minority

of them still remember the time ‘without the Internet’, which became a standard in Poland around 2003. In 2016, 87% of European 16–24-year-olds were active in social networks (Eurostat, 2016). The Polish national survey of 15–19-year-olds showed that 99,3% of them use the Internet every day and almost all the time (Tanaś et al., 2017). This data is still relevant - according to Statistics Poland (*Główny Urząd Statystyczny*) – almost 9 in 10 Poles between 16 and 24 used a smartphone to connect to the Web (Gustyn et al., 2019, p. 17), which means ‘always on’ (term used by Dębski, 2016).

However, the term and concept have been criticized among scholars and caused a wide debate. According to earlier publications on young people who do not remember the times before the omnipresence of the Internet, we call our respondents ‘digital natives’ in the meaning proposed by Wang et al. (2013), who understood ‘digital nativity’ as ‘digital fluency’ – the ‘ability to reformulate knowledge and produce information to express oneself creatively and appropriately in a digital environment’. We mean the generation which ‘has grown up with information and communication technology (ICT) as an integral part of their everyday lives’ (Bennet et al., 2008). Undoubtedly, the ‘world of interactivity and hyper-communication’ in which they were raised ‘has fundamentally changed how teenagers and young adults receive and process information’ (Barnes, 2009, p. 2). As Wang et al. (2013) stated, people who grew up in the digital era, not remembering the time before the Web, do not use the digital media instead of something (e.g. instead of traditional letters or telephone calls) – this is their natural technological environment, sometimes not replaceable by anything else.

The main goal of our research was to explore the role and the significance of the Internet in the lives of students and to observe the effects of this phenomenon. We asked two basic questions: What are the most mediatized areas of life among young adults? 2. How will the participants of the experiment manage with giving up the Internet?

Data and methods

Research approach and method

This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis of data collected during the social experiment #NoWeb (*#BezSieci*), based on voluntary living ‘offline’ for seven days of 184 students of University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow – UITM – and University of Warsaw – UoW. The source of data were handwritten observation diaries kept by the participants of

the experiment whilst staying offline – which meant not using the Internet on any devices.

We need to stress that a social experiment is an innovative **method of data collection** (Kasprowicz, 2018), which involves observing the behaviour of individuals in a situation of scientific provocation – the deliberate influence of the researcher on natural processes. Nowadays, when almost all aspects of everyday life are in some way related to the use of the Internet, it is difficult to assess its actual value for an individual. At the same time, it is impossible to select people who intentionally do not use the Internet (especially among young people).

As quantitative studies on the impact of the Web on social life are not sufficient to gain insight into the problem, and qualitative research has become increasingly popular in recent decades (Jensen, 1991; Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Denzin, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), we decided to introduce the qualitative method of analysis, which enabled us to capture the insights through the eyes of participants without preconceived opinions on a specific situation. In other words, our goal was to study the lived experience of participants and analyze the situations that “reflect the everyday life of individuals” (Miles & Huberman, 2000, p.7).

Sampling, participants and data collection

The sampling methods for qualitative research are varied, but most often they are based on deliberate selection (Miles & Huberman, 2000; Patton, 2002), as the cases selected for the sample should rather “represent various meanings that the studied phenomenon has in the awareness and life practice of the respondents” (Flick, 2010, p. 61). Representativeness is not the main aim. To explore the studied phenomenon we invited 280 students of the two aforementioned universities in Poland (private and public, both big and recognisable) to take part in our social experiment. In the end, 184 (113 females and 71 males) agreed to participate. 24% of them were students of the UITM (44 participants) and the rest – 140 – of the UoW. Their age ranged from 17 to 24 years. Most students were Poles, and 12.5% were foreign (mostly from Ukraine and other Eastern European countries) – at both universities. The participants studied at various faculties, and most of them were not heavy Internet users (Technopedia).

Students of the first and last years of studies of eight faculties were invited to participate in the study by researchers personally and via university email. Those interested then received an ‘offline diary template’ designed specifically for the study, where they were supposed to write down their reflections and reactions. Thus, they consented to participate in the study, being able to withdraw

from it at any time. The diary contained instructions for filling in and recording data (gender, age, having children, information about professional activity).

The designed social experiment consisted of two phases (March/April 2017), each lasting seven days. During the first phase, the participants observed and recorded their daily routine media habits – these were analyzed by Martens (2018). Then, they were asked not to use the Internet during the following seven days. For the professional and scholarly benefit of the participants, the rules of “exceptional” use of the Internet were defined: “If work does not allow it and you have to connect to the network while performing it, please create an Internet-free zone, for instance in your spare time, at your home” (except from the instructions from the observation journal).

The participants who wanted to give up the experiment were asked to write down the causes of this decision. After 14 days of the experimental stage of the research, the participants were invited to take part in individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews (Vaterlaus & Higginbotham, 2011). They were conducted by two researchers with ten participants in June 2017. Only eight participants of all the 184 had been totally offline for all seven days.

The completed diaries and the transcribed interviews, were coded in Atlas.ti 8.0 (qualitative data analysis software) independently by three researchers. As a result, a draft map of the most frequently mentioned topics was created and it was then analyzed with an analytical tool called ‘thematic networks’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001), enabling us to divide all the themes into the structure of dominant, major themes (called ‘general themes’) and those more detailed included in them - called ‘organizing themes’.

Results

Our analytical procedure allowed us to indicate 4 general themes in the participants’ notes from the offline week:

1. **areas of life** where the participants experienced the lack of the Internet the most – these statements have become the indicators for the research question about the purposes of using the Internet, including its role in social relations. These areas are: interpersonal communication, information and news, entertainment, everyday life, travelling, studying and working;
2. **changes in habits** caused by the inaccessibility of the Internet, which have shown the role of using the Internet in managing a variety of everyday life tasks;

3. **emotions** associated with living offline, and
4. **self-reflections** on their previous life and mental condition, which have answered the last research question: in which areas of life is using the Internet most important for the participant, both practically and emotionally – to what extent using the Web is crucial for the everyday functioning of the ‘digital natives’.

All the themes are connected – in every area of life staying offline caused changes in the participants’ everyday habits. The inaccessibility of the Web as well as these unavoidable changes were very often accompanied by strong emotions – both positive and negative, sometimes neutral. Participants also experienced a variety of mental states, usually described in the association with ‘Self-reflections’ on the lack of Internet or the participants’ possible addiction to the Internet. In this paper, just the first one – illustrating the mediatization phenomenon – will be discussed in detail.

As it was stated above, among our respondents, the lack of the Internet had a significant impact on seven areas of life. In these spheres, the experiment participants have experienced the greatest emotional, but also pragmatic effects of living offline. These will be presented in the next sections, in the order suggested by the significance and extensiveness of the aforementioned issues in the material put under scrutiny. The list is based on the analysed diaries – on the way the participants described their experiences. Certainly, it would be possible to distinguish more areas of life where the Web is also useful, although the students – participants of the experiment had not mentioned them.

Interpersonal communication

Our communication with others is one of the most important factors determining the effectiveness of managing private and job-related tasks, and our social and emotional relations. Among the respondents’ stories about problems with communication whilst staying offline, we have distinguished private interpersonal or group communication and other kinds – job and studying-related issues. As the participants were permitted to use the Internet at work and when preparing university assignments – if there was no alternative – experiences with communication within these areas of life were quite different from the private communication – visibly less stressful and problematic. As it can be concluded from the analysis, the impossibility to contact others was crucial for the participants of the experiment and more or less difficult to deal with – all of them would write about this issue. Social media and instant messaging were the most frequently mentioned ways of everyday communication, very important

for the examined students' lives, regardless of their country of origin, gender or age.

Without networking, you can die. People write, I cannot reply, it's hard to make an appointment with someone on the phone, they all use Facebook or Messenger (WhatsApp?), I get SNAPS, I cannot send mine, I cannot arrange with anyone for a party. Living at weekends without the Internet is hard, stressful. (D_1)

It seems that constant staying in touch with friends and family is obvious and expected by the respondents and their social environment – we write about this in another publication (Przywara & Leonowicz-Bukała, 2020). On the one hand, there were examples of giving the respondents great support by their family and friends.

I read an SMS from my mom – it was like from a child (and she is 35). “No, no, no, I don't want it! Don't leave me! I'm gonna cry!”. My father was laughing at us, and he said that he will be calling me on the phone and that I have to not give up for seven days! (D_2)

On the other hand, in every fifth case, the relatives or friends of the respondents expected them to stay online or treated the experiment as something weird or funny, impossible to handle for seven days. Few of them were quite angry. It was common for the participants to write about their friends questioning even the sense of exploring how people deal with life without the Internet.

By the way, I got to know that my sister was in hospital. She was irritated that I didn't show care, because I didn't open her X-ray on Snapchat. (D_3)

I told my boyfriend, that I will be offline from Tuesday, and he was angry to hear that. And now he is also very upset, that I don't use the Internet and don't contact him. (D_4)

The majority of my friends don't believe that I will make it. Some of them don't understand, why am I doing this [taking part in the experiment]. (D_5)

For some friends and relatives of the participants, shifting to more traditional tools of communication, like phone calls and SMS, was not obvious and uncomfortable. Apparently, for some young people trying to limit online

communication even a little bit may be just ‘impossible’ – due to the habits and expectations of their social environment.

The worst thing was to convince my friends and relatives to contact me by SMS or via phone calls. [...] They are expecting that after this week, I will be back online and everything will be “normal” again. (D_6)

According to Vriens and van Ingen (2018, pp. 2433–2434) it is possible to maintain close relations with many people using the Internet. Instant messengers are rather used for dynamic, synchronous and ongoing communication. Social media platforms – alternatively – are more often necessary to ‘stay up-to-date and ‘peek’ into friends’ life, enabling ‘to be up to date’.

The crisis came around 20:00. I really wanted to check what’s up with my Facebook friends. [...] When I was going to sleep, I was thinking only about being able to use Facebook. (D_7)

One of the assumptions of the study was the observation of changes in behaviour and habits caused by no access to the Internet. The experiment confirmed a strong mediatization of social life which concerns significantly all the areas of living of the participants, including interpersonal communication processes – both in the context of tools and activities. There were at least three tools replacing online options: the participants of the experiment started to use SMS, traditional phone calls and face to face communication.

[...] what is positive is that from the early morning I have been answering much more phone calls, not only writing messages. (D_8)

Today, I have found a letter from colleagues inviting me to a party in the evening. Thanks to my persistence, my friends started to use old communication tools like written letters. (D_9)

Each of the offline communication tools had noticeable advantages and disadvantages for the respondents. Using traditional tools (like phone calls) was not obvious and intuitive during the experiment. The participants were also wrote about a strong, subconscious, instinctive reflex to use online tools first.

The cursor was on the icon when I remembered that I could not do it. The next thought was to share your thoughts with a friend and the cursor moved onto the

Messenger icon, and again it struck me that I was not allowed to take the phone. I forgot to shut the network down and the cursor went back to the browser icon (I did not start it) when I was calling my friend. (D_10)

Moreover, some of our respondents simply did not have the mobile numbers of their friends – as they hardly ever use this communication channel.

I remembered about the birthday of a friend whose phone number I didn't have. I wanted to wish him a Happy Birthday. I wanted to go on Facebook, but then I remembered that I have the number of his sister. So she gave me his number and I called him. He was in shock, he said that the only people calling him are his grandparents. The rest use Facebook. (D_11)

Few participants felt very uncomfortable because they were not able to use offline tools.

I had a 'panic attack' because I had understood that in a very long time I hadn't used any other media. I even hadn't talked via phone – my all relations are based on chats or social media platform communication. (D_12)

The next issue was the financial cost – somehow online communication is perceived as free of charge, whether the students pay for the Internet access or not (as there are a lot of free Wi-Fi spots on campus and in public places). The financial aspect was extremely important for foreign students.

As I said, one can live without the Internet but needs to pay for that with time or money. It's very expensive to call parents in Ukraine. (D_13)

Some of the participants of the experiment noticed that the nature of SMS and mobile applications is not the same – the latter give a sense of a dynamic, synchronous, interactive communication, reminiscent of a face to face conversation, perceived as 'natural' and more effective.

This is what I missed the most – I wanted to communicate with someone faster than via SMS. When you have instant messenger on your phone, you cannot put your phone away, you are constantly online. (IDI_1)

Yet, some participants also appreciated time spent with friends and relatives communicating face to face. Some of the students asked other people for

help (e.g. writing a message to their parents living abroad), but this was perceived as inconvenient due to the feeling that they are dependent on others.

Information and news

The second theme covered by our respondents' diaries concerned access to on-line information and news. Generally, apart from specific applications and websites, participants were feeling uncomfortable being simply unable to check and verify the information.

I missed the Internet when I wanted to read, like every day, the news from Poland and the world. The Internet is the only source of information for me. (D_12)

It is tough without the Internet because it is full of useful information, e.g. addresses of institutions, recipes for lunch or the steps on how to cultivate a plant and so on. (D_13)

It seems that the participants of the experiment used to check on the Web almost all types of relevant information and when it was not possible, they had little idea where or how to find it elsewhere. Some of the participants used traditional TV, printed newspapers/magazines and the radio – and for many, these 'old media' became the 'new' sources of information, entertainment and 'time-fillers'.

For the first time, I watched the news on TV at 7 P.M., in order to be somehow up to date. (D_14)

Over these few days during which I tried not to use the Web, I noticed that I was paying a lot of attention to the newspapers. Previously, I used to read single headlines. Now, I have time to read whole articles. I do this, especially when commuting to university. (D_15)

Respondents often pointed to the fact that whilst using traditional media they had the feeling that they were receiving news much too late. They used to 'feel' that the news is 'somehow incomplete' and they did not have the 'wide spectrum' of events.

Instead of using my smartphone, I read "Newsweek" during the lecture, but I was felt constantly underinformed. (D_16)

My mom asked if I had seen something on the Web and I was irritated because the TV did not inform people about everything. (D_17)

Traditional newspapers, television and the radio do not provide such a variety of possibilities of searching information as online media. They actually limit the choice by the procedures of gatekeeping and agenda setting (McCombs, 2004). The contemporary media user is accustomed to receiving selected information ‘here and now’. Some of the participants, also from abroad, simply did not have TV or the radio at their place of living. Sometimes, they would visit friends or family to watch the news with them during their offline week. What we know from the first week of the study (Martens, 2018), the respondents rarely reach for traditional media in everyday life. They take much less of their time, but require much more attention and focus on the content they offer. The participants watched, listened and read with more scrutiny, to the end, as if they wanted to get as many details as possible.

I listen to the radio more attentively. (D_18)

I turned on the TV and absorbed a whole bunch of information. (D_9.1)

It may support Carr’s (2020) thesis on the different nature of using online and printed press and may also be connected with the phenomenon called ‘The Fear of Missing Out’ (referred to as FOMO). FOMO, “a pervasive apprehension that others might have rewarding experiences wherein the given person is absent, [...] is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others do” (Przybylski et al., 2013, p. 1841; Jupowicz-Ginalska et al., 2018), which may also concern the news. The term ‘FOMO’ was expressed by almost 20% of the participants of #NoWeb. This feeling consisted of 1. an apprehension about overlooking some important pieces of information; 2. a relief after using (accidentally or intentionally) the Internet (especially social media); 3. uncertainty, loneliness or even a feeling of exclusion. Students described their emotions using the categories of ‘fear’, ‘nervousness’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘sense of absence’, ‘isolation’, ‘anxiety’, ‘frustration’, ‘hankering’ in the context of inaccessibility to world news and their social network.

An absence in the world and a feeling that I will irrevocably lose or have already lost an event or a piece of information; a feeling that I won’t be / I’m not up to date. (D_19)

The FOMO effect seemed to occur especially during the first three days of the experiment when 1/5 of the participants experienced many unconditional reflexes.

I noticed that during the class I was tapping my smartphone time after time. (D_20)

I caught myself unintentionally trying to grab my smartphone or turn on the browser. (D_21)

Sometimes the feeling of ‘fear’ seemed to be so strong that some students not only broke the rules of the experiment (the majority of the participants), but even completely and officially quit before the scheduled end (eight people). After a short period of staying offline and then using the Internet, the students who decided to continue noting down their impressions despite breaking the rules used mostly categories relating to ‘satisfaction’ and ‘relief’.

At this point my patience has ended – I switched on the computer and from 9 to 11, I used the Internet [...]. I satisfied my hunger. (D_22)

[...] I checked Facebook and Instagram, of course, and I felt more peaceful – although there was nothing interesting. I was not excluded from the flow of information; perhaps not very important, but at least ‘delivered’. (D_23)

Some participants felt guilty of being unable to cope with the lack of the Internet. It was difficult to realize this and reflect on this situation of dependency.

Since normally social media allow its users to be up to date and constantly available to others, during the time of staying offline many participants felt also quite lonely (62 quotations across 184 diaries).

The messages were coming constantly, I wanted to answer them, to reply – but of course, I couldn’t. I felt strange. I read a book during the breaks. I felt as if I was completely alone. (D_24)

In the descriptions of their feelings, the students also used expressions like: ‘exclusion’, ‘loneliness’, being ‘separated from the world’ and ‘emptiness’. Apparently, staying active in social media is an inherent part of social life.

Entertainment

Entertainment also seems to be a strongly mediatized area. The lack of Internet-based leisure activities, as well as unproductive time-fillers, resulted in a very strong feeling of boredom expressed in almost all the diaries.

During the day – apathy, boredom all around. The day seemed to last twice longer. (D_25)

There is time that I don't know how to use. (D_26)

The participants wrote both about missing tools and activities enabled by the web-like 'scrolling', treated as a form of relaxation and 'time-killing' while commuting or queuing. They experienced a sudden and unexpected situation of having a lot of additional free time they would usually spend online on their favourite websites or music and gaming applications. The lack of favourite music from personalized playlists in the apps is significant at all times – while commuting to the university, working and learning, and also as background to all the activities during the day – the same applies to video platforms.

Whilst preparing breakfast, I changed the radio stations several times (the problem was finding the right type of music and the way the news is broadcast). (D_27)

I miss the Internet especially when I am alone and I would like to have a good time, for example when eating. (D_28)

To compensate for the missing e-entertainment possibilities, the first step was to look for alternative media tools such as TV or the radio, a laptop or a computer, even an mp4 media player. However, offline devices turned out to be insufficient for the research participants, accustomed to personalized content. One type of traditional media seemed to be unexpectedly welcomed – or even 'discovered'. It was a paper book, quite a 'new' experience for the participants, used to reading online content for years and hardly reading books.

Books have replaced the 'Internet addiction' – I read one book every day, I don't distract myself until it's finished and I bawl when someone interrupts me. It's getting worse than when I was on Instagram and Facebook because my parents cannot threaten me with turning the router off. (D_29)

On Wednesday evening, I finished reading the book I prepared for this week. I couldn't imagine that in three days I could have read 520 pages of text. (D_12.1)

Books probably became so attractive for several reasons: reading fills up free time which is the consequence of the absence of the Web. Also, books are the media with completely different features than those provided by the Internet, so they let the reader to forget about the absence of the Web.

The absence of the Internet provoked returning to other forgotten or abandoned hobbies or discovering new forms of spending free time, like meeting friends, walking and doing sports or arts. A few dozens of the participants observed that they had just more time for themselves. Eight of them started to go to bed earlier or nap during the day – and used to rest much more than they did before.

Probably, the nicest thing was just thinking. It was related to having free time, not being disturbed by the information noise. You can sit quietly, focus on the book you are reading, the movie you are watching, the past, the dreams, the completed projects. (D_30)

In the evening, I thought that I would get mad because of the lack of the Internet. Because of boredom, I went to bed really early. (D_31)

The students' observations suggest, that in many cases, after the first hours or even a day or two of helplessness and persistent thinking about the lack of Internet, free time became a source of great creativity – the same as Maushart's family experience (2011). In many cases, self-reflection about what was happening was the beginning of the process of rethinking the way of using the Web and media in participants' lives.

The lack of the Internet made me have 'eyes in the back of my head' - I saw a lot of things happening around me, which would not be possible with the nose stuck to the smartphone screen. (D_32)

It should be reported here that sometimes the experience of not using the Internet for more than a few hours would lead the students to thoughts concerning their possible addiction to the Web and/or social media.

In this time, I realized that I have a problem. Watching the Internet 'withdrawal' symptoms, I may honestly admit that I am addicted. I couldn't continue the experi-

ment that day any longer. [...] I'm trying to fight the addiction to the Internet. I'm using the Web, but only to read about the addiction to using social media. From now on, I've decided to pay attention to a conscious use of the Internet. (D_7.1)

The emotions accompanying the project participants during the week with no Internet were strongly diversified, in both positive and negative ways.

Everyday life and Commuting

The lack of the Internet in these two areas of living – 'Everyday life' and 'Commuting' – has a significant practical impact. In 'Everyday life' the absence was usually observed in the morning on the first day of the experiment and manifested itself in the lack of access to the current weather forecast. Afterwards, more difficulties occurred: no access to the bank account, to information about the opening hours of shops and institutions, sales, recipes, online shopping, booking applications. Within the 'Commuting' area a severe lack of the Web was felt regarding applications such as maps and travel apps, which help to move around the city more efficiently. Commuting without the Internet not only makes the journey more complicated and longer but also means more free time on the bus or train that needs to be managed.

I felt upset. I was often bored because usually, I played games using Internet access on the bus. (D_33)

I'm on the bus and I don't know what to do, I'm always on the phone. (D_4.1)

In the context of these two areas, the research participants realized how the Internet, used unconsciously, simplifies the organization of everyday life and is a really effective tool in dealing with daily matters, saving time and money. For the majority of the participants, there were no alternatives for using online tools to check e.g. the weather forecast or the bank account balance, which were apparently too engaging. In some cases, the participants asked others for help, or they would reschedule certain activities for the time 'after the experiment', perceiving doing them in an offline way as too demanding.

Studying and Working

Special rules were set for studying and working for the duration of the experiment. The participants had the opportunity to use the Internet at work or for university purposes, but only if it was truly indispensable. In the case of job duties, when

the lack of specific tools or online functions was connected to possible activities it usually resulted in the decision to use the Internet regardless of the experiment. These cases showed that using the Web for work required discipline – every single activity online caused the desire to use the Web for private purposes. The same phenomenon concerned university purposes, when the Web was missed not only as a source of information about course schedules, a tool for doing homework assignments (discussed in Facebook groups or requiring online dictionaries). As students declared, it would be impossible to study at university with no Internet access since this process is highly Internet-based nowadays.

I realized that it was the university that made it impossible to disconnect from the Internet completely (due to registrations, items on the university platforms, important emails from tutors, information on cancelled classes, sending materials, etc.). (D_34)

The Internet was missed at the university, for example for English lectures (dictionary). (D_35)

Regarding the changes in habits – those participants who tried not to use the Internet at all noticed that they were able to focus more easily on learning – due to fewer distractions. The lack of the Internet and the resulting excess of free time motivated them to learn. The inability to carry out some activities online provoked the participants to take care of matters which were usually postponed, like housework. This may carefully lead us to accept a not very surprising conclusion that work uninterrupted by private issues was more efficient (Lim & Chen, 2012).

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the study was to diagnose the range and role of the Internet in the life of the first generation raised in the environment of ubiquitous digital media. The qualitative analysis of the diaries presented in this study was aimed at verifying the way in which the role of the Internet in their lives is assessed by the students themselves. Likewise, one of the important assumptions of the study was to check how young people can cope with the absence of the Internet, what reactions and changes in their behaviour this would trigger.

As shown, the Internet is ubiquitous in students' lives, and they only realize the intensity of its use in the case of its absence. The most mediatized areas were

communication, information and news consumption, entertainment, managing everyday tasks, commuting, working and studying. In the end, it turned out that the Internet is often the first and basic tool for young people to realize almost all their short and long term goals. This confirms what Walter stated that nowadays both the young and adults use their smartphones connected to the Web ‘no matter what kind of activity they participate in.’ (2020, p. 81) and that the boundaries between online and offline life are blurred. As we predicted, the majority of the project participants had not expected the strength and scale of the effects of the lack of the Internet in their lives and their constant ‘background’ use of the Web – due to the convergent nature of the most commonly mentioned tools such as Messenger, Facebook and YouTube. All of them enable users to stay in touch with family and friends, maintain a network of professional contacts, learn, but also – perhaps most importantly – provide entertainment. Among the tools mentioned by the experiment participants, who used the Internet for various reasons, Google appeared the most (its specificity as a multifunctional, convergent tool is the same as of the aforementioned social media). All these tools are multimedia and have many features associated with all areas of living distinguished in this research. They facilitate meeting different needs at the same time, using different functionalities of one tool, which make them indispensable in everyday life, and replacing them causes many difficulties.

The need of staying up to date whilst having no access to the Internet is addressed by the action of asking others for help, but only in the context of information transmission. This kind of action does not satisfy the need for communication with family and friends. The lack of the Internet had a big impact on the relations with other people – some of the experiment participants were supported by their relatives, who found this situation of staying offline to be an interesting and important experience. Others were criticized by friends, university mates and members of their families who expected the usual, constant contact online. All tools and actions taken offline replacing tools and actions usually taken online seem to meet only a part of the communication needs. They also generate additional financial costs and take more time.

Regarding demographic variables, there were no significant differences in the responses of the respondents due to their age, gender, occupational situation and studies, although we need to remember the qualitative character of the gathered data and no statistical analysis on the studied population. Other studies show that e.g. gender is significantly important in smartphone addiction (Gökçearsan et al., 2018). However, what influenced the reactions of the participants visibly was the country of origin – both foreign students and Pol-

ish students staying outside their home town were more affected by the lack of contact with families. These students who were studying in their home town (Rzeszow or Warsaw) were not so visibly dependent on the Web in terms of everyday communication. What is most interesting, there are not the pragmatic but emotional reasons which often lead to breaking the rules of the experiment or quitting it. Some of the participants were strongly convinced that they were somehow ‘addicted’ to the Internet, and others were even shocked to discover it. This confirms the results of other research – that the Internet users may suffer psychological and physiological ‘withdrawal symptoms’ when they use the Internet a lot (Romano et al., 2013; Dębski, 2016). Sometimes, the mentioned ‘loneliness’ and ‘fear’ was so strong, that participants were unable to cope with staying offline for the whole duration of the experiment and used to break the rules or simply quit. Other research similarly suggests that young people have serious problems dealing with the lack of mobile tools, connected to the internet (Boyd, 2007; 2015; Białokoz-Kalinowska et al., 2011; Włodarczyk, 2013; Wójcik, 2013; Lewczuk & Jędrzejko, 2017; Kachlicka, 2019; Król & Trybuła, 2019; Leszczyńska, 2019; Staśko, 2019; Tomczyk, 2019). According to recent research, the need of belonging to others and the need for popularity and recognition may be important motivating factors for young people’s social media use, in particular Facebook (Santor et al., 2000; Beyens et al., 2016; Buglass et al., 2017). Some researchers connect the fear of missing out with Problematic Internet Use and subjective well-being (Stead & Bibby, 2017) or suffering negative psychological consequences (Oberst et al., 2017, p. 51). Almost all of the experiment participants are deeply immersed in social media, using them almost continuously. The absence of the Internet in the area of communication revealed a strong mediatization of interpersonal relations through technology, without which these relationships are weakened and/or become more difficult to maintain, which in turn causes frustration. Especially in the situation of geographical remoteness from home and friends, the use of non-internet forms of contact turned out to be insufficient in modern times.

The most significant issues for future studies seem to concern the possible consequences of such strong mediatization of life of young adults and the whole ‘wired generation’ (Barnes, 2009), especially in the new global context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the role of media literacy education is evident and should be an indispensable part of the educational processes, not only in primary and secondary schooling but also at universities. As some authors state, what we are observing now is a “shift toward permanent connectedness”

(Couldry, 2017, p. 1) and that “the future of digital culture [...] depends on how well we learn to use the media that have infiltrated, amplified, distracted, enriched and complicated our lives” (Rheingold, 2012, p. 1). Online-based life seems to be unavoidable, the research and research-based educational training should be focused on training the skills of using the Internet as a tool, and not as a living environment.

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