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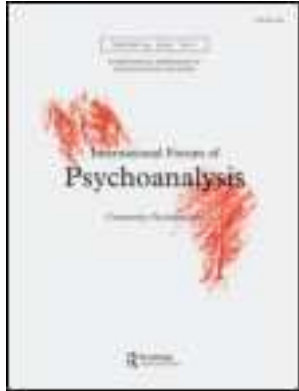
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### On Media Identity

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# On Medial Identity<sup>1</sup>

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An important change is taking place in the identity forming processes in human development, caused by the increasing medialisation of communication, through television, video and Internet. In this regard, the medial mode of communication seems to be more important than the overwhelming variety of the transmitted contents. It represents the prototype of a narcissistic relation structure by arousing needs but not answering them. The identification with this mode of communication creates what the author calls medial identity in this paper. It is described as an adaptation to non-contingent experiences. An interaction consists between the medialisation of the adult world and an estrangement in the identity forming developmental conditions in childhood, which gets more influential from generation to generation. The increasing usualness of the described phenomena indicates that a new normality is heralded here.

*Key words:* development, identity, identification, media

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One of the central questions for understanding identity change in our time is to understand the interaction between social processes and mental development. Since George Mead and the symbolic interactionism, it has been assumed that adolescents identify in the course of their development with the mentality provided by their surroundings. In this way identity evokes a complex of ideas about oneself in a certain social environment, which give rise to the sense of a coherent self and a delimitation towards others. Identity is the result of identification with the ideas that important others have about the individual during his crucial periods of development, including their values, their culture and their socialization. Identity is more or less an imprint of the social developmental conditions of the individual. From this point of view a change of identity reflects a change of the social framework in which it is formed, and also, the opposite way around, a changed sense of identity provides social changes.

In this paper the influence that derives from virtual experiences and the increasing medialisation of our everyday life on the development

of identity shall be examined. Models which are presented by media tend to become more important in identity formation. The focus is more on the mode of transmission of these models than on the information that is transmitted. My core hypothesis is that identification with the medial mode of communication results in a non-coherent relationship experience which forms a mental structure. This I call medial identity.

## Developmental Conditions of Identity in the Transition from the Traditional to the Contemporary Society

As a starting point I wish to consider the change of the developmental conditions for identity formation in the transition from the traditional to the contemporary society. George Mead (1) and Erik H. Erikson (2) regarded identity in the framework of the classical society as being formed by tradition and example in the course of the change of generations, namely as an accent setting selection of important identifications during the childhood (3). The scheme which the previous generations drew up for their descendants concerning values, norms and spiritual orientation was assumed to have particular influence for their roles in the

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society and the style of life. The traditional idea about identity formation is that the identification with values of important others is decisive. Social expectations and self-perceptions are coordinated, so that a realistic sense of self is established within a certain social context. Ideas, values and manners transmitted from the older generations to the younger provide structure and continuity. This process is based on interactions, which are inevitably bound to interpersonal relationships.

Erikson described the development of identity as a lifelong process. He made a distinction between levels of identity that expressed the life phase specific answers to the role expectations of the society. He described identity as a fluent state in a largely stable society. This shows clearly that his concept of identity was formed at a time which was still marked by relative continuity and stability of the society – a state of society which Levy Strauss (4) called “the cold society”.

With the transition from traditional to modern society these conditions have changed radically. Sociology and social psychology – e.g. the German social scientists Beck (5) and Keupp & Höfer (6), respectively – have analysed the results of the acceleration of the social process, the so-called “heating of society”, according to Levi Strauss. Sociology and social psychology have studied the influence of postmodern development on identity formation and psychopathology. These studies are in agreement regarding the increasing acceleration of the social development, which in its turn has created a social climate of continuous change. These new conditions affect identity formation. It has become more and more difficult for the individual to find a stable identity. Coherent identity is replaced by a lifelong identity work resulting at the most in a “patchwork identity” (7).

A rapid change takes place in all social areas. It is marked by five milestones:

- Liberalization: Dissolving of social values
- Multiplication: Multiplicity of private and cultural life-styles
- Mobility: Unsteadiness of work and living environment
- Globalisation: Networking of capital and employment
- Medialisation: Depersonalisation of the communication experience

This process is connected with a basic change of the cultural background (for overview see Zenaty (8)). The authoritarian social character has been replaced step by step by a narcissistic type of socialization. In sexual life an increasing liberalization has taken place and new forms of sexuality have subsequently been legitimized. The influence of the traditional paternal structures within the families have diminished and partly dissolved completely and have been replaced by maternally structured dyadic partnerships of limited duration. Employment as the second identity forming social element besides the family, has also begun to change. Temporary jobs and changing work places have taken the position of traditional occupations which granted a continuity of the living place. These are only some of the milestones of a social change, which has occurred within a few generations and changed the conditions of identity formation fundamentally in the last five decades.

Decisive for the identity development is that the traditional family has lost its central identity forming function through the acceleration of the changes in society. As a result of this development, adolescents searching for identification models have been finding these outside their families to an increasing extent. The most important one may be the peer group, with its identity forming rituals. In interaction with the peer group, there has been a rapid increase in the influence of technological media during the last decades. Media have become the specific expression of contemporary culture within the industrial countries, attracting the attention of all ages and social groups. However, it has become an identity symbol particularly of the youth culture: at first television, then computers, access to the Internet and mobile phones. The use of media has become the Shibboleth of a modern, youth oriented society. To an increasing extent the development of children and adolescents is dominated by virtual experience. An obvious trend in our time is that young people obtain their sense of self through their participation in a virtual world.

The participation in virtual, medial worlds produces a feeling of affiliation to a group, sharing the experience of being able to obtain in a matter of seconds more or less unrestricted access to an overwhelming wealth and variety of information from all over the world – independently of one’s place of residence. This sense of self evokes an experience of omnipotence and provides relief

from feelings of limitation. Formerly, no one had access to as much information as quickly as today. Never before was it possible to get in touch with so many people, over such large distances, so rapidly. On the other hand, no one has ever before had to process so much information so quickly. Never before has the threshold between the public and the private space, between the social and the intimate sphere, been so low.

Nowhere is the feeling of omnipotence and that of being lost so close to each other as in front of the television screen or the computer, in the everyday life of today. This is why these media are so fascinating. However, this also implies a danger of uncritical use and dependency. From a psychoanalytical view, the fascination is maintained by dyadic primary relationships and narcissistic relational modes, in which media become a substitute for the mother (the breast). She promises the greatest happiness, harmony and satisfaction. However, the mother is also related to implicit memories of attachment and dependency. Media do not ask whether the information is wanted. The consumer has to accept what is offered. At the most he has the freedom to refuse and to use the switch-off button.

### Emotional Effects of Virtual Experience

In principle, virtual experience transmitted by electronic media, influences the individual in the same way as experiences in real life. Actually, interpersonally and medially transmitted information are both "real", with respect to the distinction between the psychic outside and the internal psychic world. Both kinds of information have their origin in the outside psychic world. It is important to underline that virtual reality is not based on primary fantasy life (like dreams), but on the observation of something outside the self. It is processed in the higher mental structures of the occipito-parietal cortex (9). But though there are some differences concerning the context and the intensity of the effects, the neuro-physiological processes they activate and the resulting imagery in the mental world are more or less the same.

Thus, what is experienced works more or less in the same way, independently of whether it is real or virtual, i.e. independently of the media by which it is transmitted. In each case, mental and physiological memory traces are produced. Thus we

can understand that a crime thriller on television can be processed as a day rest in dreams in the same way as a traffic accident, prevented happily in reality.

Brain research confirms that our brain does not clearly distinguish between actual experience and virtual illusions (e.g. 10). Virtual experiences evoke neuro-physiological processes in the same way as actual experience in interpersonal interactions. Both modes of experience cause comparable effects in regard to basic functions like emotions and even muscular activations. Learning with the help of video presentations, e.g. in behaviour therapy or training of air pilots at the simulator, is based on this principle. This also evokes the thrill in electronic games.

Recently Dornes (11) has reviewed the experiments of infant research, which are useful for the understanding of these processes. In correspondence with different anthropological theories of psychoanalysis (e.g. in the Kleinian tradition and increasingly in newer developmental psychology), he interprets the "still face" and "perturbation" experiments as an expression of innate expectations of interactions in the infant. Dornes refers particularly to the concepts of the Norwegian development psychologist Bråten (12) who assumes that a potential readiness for interaction is inherent in the infant and has to be filled by actual experience in order for its contents to be defined. He calls it the internal "virtual other" with whom the infant is already in contact before he enters into actual interaction experiences.

In the "still face" experiments the mother faces her baby silently and with a motionless facial expression. In the "perturbation" experiments the adult reacts to the baby after a certain interval, so that the reaction does not match the action of the infant any more. In both cases, the baby reacts to the discrepancy between his own action, e.g. a smile, and the reaction of the other, e.g. the non-appearance of a suitable answer. He reacts with unrest and finally withdraws from communication. He starts to act on his own and breaks off the contact.

These experiments indicate that the infant expects certain reactions to his action. These expectations must already be inherent in him at the time. Independently of whether one explains them as proto-experiences or regards them as innate, they obviously motivate a communication

need and demand to be fulfilled. In his reviews Dornes (11) found that quite young infants already make a distinction between human beings and objects operating like human beings. They react in a different way to a smiling human mouth than to a box formed like a mouth. These results point to the fact that these expectations are structured toward fulfilment in a human relationship. They represent a “social need”, as Dornes has called it. There is an existential need for a social answer inherent in them.

With this knowledge in mind, one can study the medial process that e.g. occurs at the television screen, when the spectator is watching a virtual scene. At first the scene produces an emotional, sensory and muscular reaction in the spectator, as if the scene were real. A film can touch the individual emotionally and move him to tears. The stupidity of a fool in a movie scene can make the observer so furious that he flings a glass into the TV screen. As in real life, the reaction is pressing to a removal of the tension. The spectator is looking for affect regulation in a social interaction, as if the TV screen were a living other.

One can study these connections in detail in the clown theatre. If a crocodile approaches the clown, the children get so excited that they finally cannot contain in themselves. They then shout to warn the clown of the threatening danger: “Match, Punch, on!!!” Suddenly the unexpected happens: The clown, mediator between the virtual and the actual world, leaves his role, turns to the children and asks: “Why, children, what’s going on?” and the children, fascinated, shriek out their warning: “The crocodile! The crocodile . . .!”

When watching TV no such thing happens: In the totally medialised scene the protagonists do not react to the spectator. The scene cannot be influenced by him. One cannot intrude on the TV scene from the outside. Protagonist and spectator cannot enter into a real dialogue or in contact with each other. The social need activated in the spectator by the virtual scene ends up in a frustration. This can be resolved only by renunciation, perhaps also by withdrawal from contact.

One can find the dynamics in “channel-hopping” on TV and in “surfing” on the Internet in a distinctive way. Both are motivated by the desire for satisfaction of social needs and – by further channel-hopping and further surfing – at the same time they are unconsciously anticipating

disappointment, as the medium fails to react and fulfil that desire. There is no interactive need regulation for the spectator through the medium. By channel-hopping and surfing the spectator is caught in a frustrating object relationship, a one-sided relationship without reaction, contingency and solution, from which he can only protect himself by renunciation and withdrawal. Nevertheless, the hope for a better solution causes, according to Freud’s (13) concept of repetition compulsion, that the spectator repeats the disappointing action over and over again.

### Medial Identification and Medial Identity

The core of the medial identification consists in the internalisation of the medial mode of communication just described: A one-sided communication in which social needs are evoked, but their satisfaction denied at the same time. This way of communication misses the essence of the interpersonal need regulation – namely the fit of proto-desires, answer and satisfaction. This sequence of events is internalised and forms a base in the experience of self and other (14, 15). It is this element in communication which produces identity: I am because I have experienced in the relationship to an other that he or she is looking at me, recognizing me and confirming or rejecting me in what I wish to be. What the medial communication leaves out is the spectator’s contingent reaction to the expectation of a social response.

So what is special in medial identification is not the identification with virtual roles, which are discovered by channel-hopping on television and surfing on the internet. Virtual roles have always existed, e.g. in theatre, in films, in literature, and in a way even in religion. An example of the reality character of such virtual experiences is the imitation of the sufferings of Goethe’s *Werther*, which initiated a wave of suicides among disappointed young lovers after the first publication in the 19th century. What is decisive in respect to medial identification, is rather the conviction, created by the lack of response, that one’s own needs are irrelevant and perhaps not even existing. If they exist, they can find resonance only in the own self.

If this experience becomes the central component in the formation of a model of relationships, a model of what is “normal” in relation to one’s self and to others, then a medial identity is formed. It is

related to the conscious and primarily unconscious acceptance of a form of communication, which disappoints the needs for social satisfaction and confirmation, as well as the social needs themselves. It is the adaptation to an object relationship in which desires are evoked, but not seen, not confirmed and not satisfied. This is the prototype of a narcissistically structured dyadic relationship in which the relatedness to the self predominates. Medial identity is therefore a variant of a narcissistic identity.

### The Search for Medial Communication

What is the attraction of a communication, which continuously ends up in frustration? Why do more and more people get caught in an ineffectual experience with the media, and even get dependent or in the extreme case develop a type of a medial addiction?

To understand these phenomena, one must expand the classical idea of identity as a reflexive self-construct. Identity formation was considered as an identification with the ideas of others. Nowadays, it is obvious that identity is not only connected with information transmitted in these processes but also with the way in which the information is transmitted, i.e. by the mode of the relationship. Thus identity is based not only on the identification with values, but also with the context in which they are experienced. The individual obtains his central sense of self through the way in which he was treated during decisive periods of his development in dealing with his environment, and through the way in which essential messages were conveyed to him.

The increasing use of technological media as means of reference for life and the replacement of the interpersonal by medial relatedness reflect a quality in the early object relationships, which has obtained growing importance towards the end of the 20th century. This development underpins a tendency toward estrangement. While structures and relationships were dissolved in the heated up society, the developmental conditions actually were organized less and less to serve the social needs of infants, children and adolescents. This is why psychogenetic concepts as explanations of modern psychopathologies – like lack of holding and containing, of mirror functioning and primary motherliness – seem very plausible.

One has to keep in mind that adult reference persons like mother, father, older brothers and sisters, and grandparents are exposed to the same influences of medial communication as the younger generation. They are also forced to adapt their social needs to the development of information technology shown by the increasing use of cash dispensers, surfing on the web and consumption of TV shows in the late evening. The reference persons also get used to being seen and confirmed less and less in their social needs. The more they accept that and get used to it, the less they are able to meet and confirm the social needs of their descendants.

An interaction has been introduced between the medialisation of the adult world and an estrangement in the identity forming developmental conditions of childhood, which gets more influential from generation to generation. The increasing medialisation of everyday life as a time specific variant of the narcissistic socialization is both: consequence and catalyst of a social development rapidly replacing reality by ideas, persons by technology and relationships by illusions. In this way a virtual reality is formed.

In their dependency and addiction on technological media the individuals affected repeat unconscious forms of communication. Medial communication gives them a possibility to enact never recognized forms of communication stemming from narcissistically structured relations. Technological media offer a confirmation of their narcissistically compensated identity. Supposedly the experiences with technological media in the form of a specific one way communication in front of the television set, at the computer and with machines result in a condition of being excited and not satisfied, which corresponds to the psychological and neuro-physiological state in the period of early pre-experiences.

These individuals unconsciously expect frustration instead of confirmation and fulfilment. They are in search of frustrating relationships because these correspond to their self concept of how they are in relation to their environment. This state is repeated again and again because it is unconsciously familiar to the individual. It creates a feeling of relative safety since expectations in regard to interaction with an object are confirmed. This also explains that the addictive dependency on technological media definitely does not lead to

relaxation but is connected to the inability to gain continuous satisfaction from virtual experiences. But behind this compulsion to repeat failure and dissatisfaction lies an implicit longing for another type of relationship unknown to the individual.

### The Medium as a Self Object

If the nature of the medial communication is that needs which are evoked are not answered, then the question about the further destiny of these needs arises. Generally one can say that like all needs, which cannot be satisfied, they are repressed in some way. However, to understand the dynamics of this process and its further development, one must consider in detail what it is that is repressed.

We must examine separately the dynamics that emerges from the denial of the need for interactional response in the context of medial communication and the one that arises from the repression of identification with interactions in virtual scenes.

From a clinical point of view the lack of satisfactory interpersonal experiences lead to self-sufficiency and denial of the need for response and attachment. Thus, substitution of coherent communication by medial relatedness either promotes an openly dependent kind of narcissistic personality development or leads to prevention and denial of dependency tendencies in the pseudo-independent narcissistic personality (16). Both lines converge in the medial type of narcissistic socialization, again bringing forth individuals who commit themselves to the medium in order to experience confirmation of their existence by virtual participation. In their use of media they are looking for a substitute for the response which they have failed to receive in their early interpersonal experience. A frustrating relationship is substituted by a technological medium that suggests satisfaction of social needs outside of an interpersonal relationship. Following the theories outlined by Kohut (17) one can say that the medium becomes a self object.

Altmeyer (18) has drawn up another developmental line based on early experiences fostering narcissism and becoming manifest in dealing with media: It is the use of the medium to serve the omnipotent self. He analyses modern medial productions like "Big Brother" (a TV series where some people live together in containment and are recorded by cameras around the clock). Behind this

wish for exposure of privacy to a virtual audience he assumes a "need to be seen". In the eye of the camera the forsaken self gains significance, which supports identity. At the same time the protagonist looks at himself through the eyes of the virtual audience, which is always present in his mind, and creates an identity for his self. In "Big Brother", on the home pages, and perhaps even more clearly in the chat rooms, identities are created which do not at all exist in actual life. "*Videor ergo sum*" (I am, because I am seen) becomes the metaphor for a medial God complex. The relationship to the virtual other is used to confirm the virtual self. Thus, life is created in a virtual world disconnected from other dimensions of reality.

A new task arises in psychoanalytic work, the healing of the split between the virtual and the actual world. The therapy with a young patient gave me deeper insights into these dynamics.

### Clinical Vignette

A young woman came for psychotherapy in a state of a depressive breakdown with suicide fantasies and impulses, after having met for the first time in real life the man whom she had promised to marry, after a long internet friendship. At first I assumed that a gap between expectation and actual appearance, fantasies about the man and meeting him in real life, might have caused the breakdown. However, this was not the case. His description of himself and the image she had created of him in her imagination during the years of virtual contact were more or less accurate. What shattered her was the discovery, which she had wanted to deny, that in all that time she had not at all been interested in him as a concrete, desirable person. We found out that she had rather been in need of the illusion of the other in order to feel more alive herself. This culminated in fantasies that he was watching her being aroused as she was lying nude in front of the computer. Actually this freedom in the virtual relationship was forbidden in real life by her compulsive neurotic superego. What had gone to pieces by actually meeting the man was the denial of her voyeurism from the point of view of the virtual other and the discovery of a virtual self outlined by herself. She had to realize that through the Internet she had not been in search of a partner but of her mirrored self.



## Medial Induction

The second aspect of repression prompted by media concerns the needs that are produced in the individual by identification with virtual scenes and protagonists. This induction of needs and impulses is based on the fact discussed above, that virtual experiences cause comparable reactions in the individual as actual experiences in reality. There arises in the spectator an active proto-experience from a virtual participation in a medially transmitted scene. According to findings in development research (e.g. 19, 20), it is based on an innate readiness to respond to perceptions not only as occurrences on the outside, but also by the arousal of movements inside, imitating the actor.

A group of Italian neurophysiologists around Rizzolatti (21) has found that watching an action activates in the observer neurons which mirror the pattern of neurons activated in the one who performs the action. This arousal even finds expression in accompanying actions – activation of specific muscles. Thus virtually aroused feelings and imitation of action are connected on the psychological level. Simply by medial participation in virtual scenes a complex psycho-physiological action readiness is produced, pressing toward real action. If this were not so, we could hardly explain the success of medial advertising, to give only one example. Participation in a virtual scene leads to imitative patterns and evokes reaction readiness and then triggers a pressure for realization.

These findings are congruent with infant observations of reflected mouth movements at feeding (22). In a similar way watching a sexual act or a criminal scene on television can therefore initiate patterns as if the observer himself were actually penetrating or striking out, if he identifies with the active part, and – vice versa – be the victim if he identifies with the passive part.

Repression of virtually induced action readiness may evoke similar pathogenic effects as the repression of impulses that are in conflict with reality. With the concept of psychosomatic *Bereitstellungsstörungen* (reaction readiness disorders) von Uexküll (23) has demonstrated what such reaction readiness may lead to. He has described repressed action intentions, for example an attack or an embrace, as an essential illness factor for the emergence of somatisation disorders. Similarly

Alexander (24) discovered more than fifty years ago that inhibited actions are the core of many psychosomatic disturbances. For example, he found the feeling of being captured in a cage that prevented flight and attack to be the onset of psychosomatic high pressure.

The coincidence of frustrated needs on the one hand, and blocking of medially induced readiness on the other, may result in an explosive psychophysiological state. This can weaken particularly a personality with a disturbed self, who devotes himself to medial relating in order to fill his deficits – exposing himself inevitably to new provocations on his weak ego through new actions which are consequently frustrated.

## On the Way to a New Normality?

One surely must be careful not to explain social phenomena one-sidedly by one single factor. The assumption nevertheless seems reasonable that indiscriminate and uncritical use of technological media serving to substitute sublime and obvious identity deficits, is one of the reasons for a number of social phenomena which the general public has had to deal with and is frightened by in recent time. The appearance of crazy gunmen, seizing hostages in spectacular ways and politically motivated terror acts probably cannot be understood without regarding the cultural and psychological background of contemporary use of electronic media. On the one hand, media cannot respond to basic needs of being related from infancy and onwards, and on the other they open a forum for the shaping of an omnipotent substitute medial identity. A culture which moreover creates a climate of latent violence and impulsiveness by the indiscriminate supply of virtual violent actions of every kind overstresses the coping mechanisms of medially formed individuals.

It would be foolish to play down the dangers, which arise from medialization, commercial exploitation and by the mechanisation and computerisation of everyday life. These developments change the relation between man and his work. Professional skills are no longer a solid column of identity. The consequences of this for social, interpersonal and individual development processes cannot be assessed yet.

However, it would be just as foolish to believe that the medialisation can be diminished or

even stopped. The increasing occurrence of the described phenomena rather indicates that they can hardly be characterized as pathology any longer, in the sense of being exceptional, but rather that they herald a new normality. Some essential features of the medially formed character are already visible: The fixation on virtual as-if-experiences instead of acting, using the other as if he were an object instead of interacting with him, and the denying empathy instead of acting with concern and shared responsibility. Medial identities are specific to our time at the threshold of the 21st century – comparable to the narcissistic socialization type of the 1980s and 90s. They are marked by an increasing need to contain the experience of medially induced feelings and actions and by denial of the need to express them within the very relationships in which they are produced. In this way social resignation becomes a main feature of the medial identity.

The ideas I have presented here should not be regarded as cultural pessimism or hostility towards media. We cannot successfully cope with the challenges of our time by condemning the underlying cultural processes. But I am convinced that we must look into these processes, that we must participate in them and intervene if we want to control the excesses and dangers which are involved in them.

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## Summaries in German and Spanish

### Über mediale Identität

Die zunehmende Medialisierung der Kommunikation durch die Ausbreitung von Fernsehen, Video und Internet bewirkt eine bedeutende Veränderung der identitätsbildenden Prozesse in der menschlichen Entwicklung. Wichtiger als die überwältigende Vielfalt medial vermittelter Inhalte erscheint dabei der Modus der medialen Kommunikation. Sie ist der Prototyp einer narzisstischen Beziehungsstruktur, indem sie Bedürfnisse weckt, aber nicht beantwortet. Die Identifizierung mit diesem Modus schafft mediale Identität, die als Anpassung an nicht-kontingente Beziehungserfahrungen beschrieben wird. Dabei besteht eine Wechselwirkung zwischen der Medialisierung der Erwachsenenwelt und einer Entfremdung in den identitätsstiftenden Entwicklungsbedingungen der Kindheit, die von Generation zu Generation einflussreicher wird. Die zunehmende Alltäglichkeit der beschriebenen Phänomene deutet darauf hin, dass sich hier eine neue Normalität ankündigt.

### Ermann M. Sobre la identidad y medios de comunicación.

Por la difusión de televisión, video e Internet, se ha producido un cambio importante en el proceso de formación de la identidad en el desarrollo humano, causado por el incremento de los medios de comunicación. Visto así, la moda de los medios de comunicación parece más importante que la variedad abrumadora de los contenidos transmitidos por los medios. Representa el prototipo de una estructura de relación narcisista por las necesidades surgidas pero no en respuesta a ellas. La identificación con este modo de comunicación crea la llamada identidad y medios de comunicación (medial identity), presentado en este trabajo. Se describe como una adaptación a las experiencias no contingentes. Una interacción consistente entre los medios de comunicación del mundo adulto y una enajenación en la identidad formada por las condiciones de desarrollo de la infancia, la cual tiene más influencia de generación en generación, el incremento inusual del fenómeno descrito indica que una nueva normalidad es presentada.



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