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## GLASS MAN IDENTITY: FROM BIG BROTHER TO COVID PASSPORT

This article will investigate the communication problems creating cultural identity and saving private space in the era of QR-codes and vaccination passports, in which every step offline and click online is recorded and stored in databases. The author proposes using the metaphor of the Glass Man to explain the status of the current cultural identification process. The term has come from medical terminology, where it means "imperfect osteogenesis", a condition when bones are weak and unable to provide the necessary level of support. The body lacks the stamina and resistance required to function properly. The identity of Glass Man means transparency by default on the one hand, but fragility on the other. The Glass Man is a person without the need to hide anything. Nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of – it is a new mode of communication, with no taboos or ethical limits applying to topics of conversation. The Glass Man identity also means transparency, not just for the individual but also for the corporation acting in the mediated public space. The Chinese social credit system can serve as a good example of how social control disciplines citizens and increases levels of social control. We can hide something about ourselves from other users, but not from service owners. The Glass Man identity means a new type of human, a new type of balance between control and power. Glass Man means a person who does not need to hide anything. It is a new mode of both communication and power. Big Brother is no longer merely a metaphor or a reality TV show. This is a "brave new world," and most likely our new reality.

Keywords: Glass Man identity, algorithms, social credit, extensions of man, new new media

Today's consumer-oriented society offers a comfortable life in a "gilded cage". People are unaware that their consumption world is slowly transforming into more and more of a panopticon prison. The process of increasing control is only accelerating, as some circumstances can lead to unexpected consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as a catalyst for that transformation. This text is dedicated to looking at social and cultural transformations in societies and redistribution of power to socially control individuals as a consequence of the pandemic in the sphere of media consumption. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, waves of protests against various governmental restrictions have taken place around the globe. Policies of total lock-down and COVID-19 passports are widely utilised like medical insurance

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and healthcare policies in many countries. China has been proactive in its attempt to reach total collective immunity; Belarus, a well-known COVID-19 dissident country, rejects any rational reasons. Nevertheless, what they have in common is their willingness to increase the level of control over the society using COVID-19 as a plausible excuse.

The aim of this article is to discuss and present the concept of the Glass Man identity and to describe the process of appropriation of social communications through mobile applications and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CREATION OF THE ALGORITHMIC IDENTITY

The metadata and algorithms of our online activities tell far more about us than we are ready to tell ourselves. According to algorithmic identity, "cybernetic categorisation provides an elastic relationship to power, one that uses the capacity of suggestion to softly persuade users towards models of normalised behaviour and identity through the constant redefinition of categories of identity" (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, p. 177). Metadata define our identity not only in the Metaverse, as they have become a general canon for all aspects of everyday life.

In this context, algorithmic identity can be regarded as a technology for creating social inequality. Depending on how users will be identified by algorithmic means, there will be various restrictions on access to certain information on the Internet, blocking certain information regarding the location of the user. "Within a digital ecosystem of continual data collection and algorithmic analysis of individuals, identity becomes a primary social currency" (Markham, 2016, p. 201). At the same time those social assets can be, by default, dependent on AI and algorithms. Nowadays, algorithms are becoming decisive stakeholders in cultural fields:

> Algorithmic culture is the privatisation of process: that is, the forms of decision-making and contestation that comprise the ongoing struggle to determine the values, practices and artefacts – the culture, as it were – of specific social groups (Striphas, 2015, p. 406).

In these pandemic times, algorithmic determinants of social behaviour mean predicting reactions, both online and offline, via QR-codes and applications that allow people to leave their homes for shopping. We are under a permanent process of user verification, facial recognition, and payment tracking. Practically everything can be verified, and people can lose control of their past, as all activities have been tracked and stored in databases based on blockchain algorithms.

## CRYSTALLISATION OF THE GLASS MAN IDENTITY

G. Vattimo formulated this new condition as a "The transparent society" (Vattimo, 1992). The Glass Man identity means a new type of human. The Glass Man is a metaphor based on medical slang, where it refers to "imperfect osteogenesis". The body does not become as transparent as glass, but the bones are weak and are not strong enough to do their job. The Glass Man is an interpretation of identity trouble, when the moral "skeleton" is flexible and

bends under the pressure of mass culture. I propose using metaphor of the Glass Man identity to explain the situation of the current cultural identification process.

> Glass Man identity means transparency, not for all, but for corporation which acts in the mediated public space. We are able to hide something from other users, but not from service owners […] Glass Man means a person who does not need to hide something. Nothing to hide, nothing to shame – it is a new mode of communication that is the best practice for social network (Krivolap, 2018, p. 79).

There are no more taboos or ethical limits in communication, because all activities are visible and presented online. Glass Man identity is a life without the skeleton of a hidden past in the sense of "skeletons in the closet". We can no longer be flexible because our skeleton in the sense of the past and personal history looks like a piece of glass: stable and fixed in one hard form.

Our memory, our history, and our past do not, in a general sense, belong to us anymore. We use social media like an outsourced contractor to take care of our "dirty laundry" and bad memories. The main problem is that we helpless to change or modify this. In fact, we have lost control of the representation of ourselves.

Thanks to blockchain technologies, in an attempt to take control of our history and personal memories BigData pretends to replace the figure of the Other in the identification process. The Glass Man identity has made it impossible to forget unpleasant memories. We have lost the right to forget. We can forget the date when we got a vaccination, the name of the vaccine, or any other medical procedure. But the COVID digital passport cannot forget it. We have no possibility of controlling the number of people or AI-accounts who will have access to this, our, information. That means it is possible to affect the identity-construction process. We have the ability to hide things about ourselves from other users, but not from service owners. We need a medium to be presented in this new virtual public space. Nevertheless, the discussion is broader than the battle between state and transnational corporations for leadership in providing a policy and establishing rules for this state of affairs. The challenge is linked to every individual, to the way all of us will solve the problem concerning our own internal stigmatised sphere and social networks. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a productive example of these developments. Who has decided what medical information about me will be in the public domain? COVID-19 mobile applications do not ask such a naive question. Mobile applications, QR-codes and vaccination passports simply share this information with whomever may need it. In addition, there is one tricky question of whether all people really own and actively use smartphones to run the application and scan the QR-code, to use it like a digital passport. There is a new social expectation to being a smartphone owner: A person without smartphone can come across as strange. Social life without registration in social networks or owning a smartphone falls in the category of suspicious behaviour.

## THE AGE-OLD CHOICE: SECURITY VS FREEDOM

There has always been the difficult choice between security and freedom – especially when security means a lack of freedom and freedom means a deficit in the stability of tomorrow.

We hear myriad warnings for personal security and the annihilation of the private sphere as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. There are many questions about personal data and privacy that can arise in the pursuit of public security: "Where and how long are data being stored and […] are they being shared with other government agencies, such as law enforcement or intelligence services?" (Momani, 2020). All questions of this sort can be referenced as an ethical issue, one presented by Jean-François Lyotard as among the most important questions in the postmodern world: "Who will know?" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 6). It is possible to rephrase this to suit the conditions of the pandemic condition: Who will know tomorrow what you wrote or 'liked' about vaccination and COVID-19 yesterday? Did you really get the vaccination, or did you buy a forged certificate?

At the same time, in this age-old choice between "security and freedom" (Balzacq, 2016) in the context of the pandemic conditions, a new dimension has arisen. There are many threats lurking online, and the so-called 'man in the middle' is one of them. What if they are not hackers trying to hack your data, but a state agency or impersonalised body doing so on a legal basis? Today, we have an apt name for that impersonalised body: artificial intelligence (AI). Sometimes this shift can be painful. "The technology that will transform medicine the most over the long run is artificial intelligence. In fact, it could well be the most profound shift we are undertaking as human beings" (Zakaria, 2020, p. 83).

Personal human experience and AI are connected via a virtual bridge that can be called social networks. The name of a selected social network does not matter. Inside the "culture of connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013), all of our accounts will be connected, and our virtual identity will be upgraded by adding new details. A user of social networks has lost the ability to hiding information once it is published online. Essential changes have occurred. People wrote diaries for many centuries, but a paper diary can be securely stored and hidden from the eyes of strangers. An online diary, a blog platform, or any social network account will provide no guarantee that your locked post will be visible to only you. AI will see and scan it too.

## CHINESE SOCIAL CREDIT RANK

The social credit system that was established in China in 2014 can perhaps be regarded as the best-known example of AI that scan human behaviour online and offline in real-time mode. This social credit system was strongly criticised by Western liberal democracies as intervention of state control into the private sphere. It runs, moreover, even deeper: The social credit system intents to establish a narrative control, as "discourse power allows a nation to shape and control its internal and external environments" (Hoffman, 2018, p. 7).

This experiment of social control has risen to a new level in the times of the pandemic. "In the long term, it is clear that social credit fits into the CCP's grand designs for 'data-driven governance' covering all spheres of society" (Reilly, 2021). According to human rights reports, the COVID-19 pandemic can be exploited to increase levels of control.

> The Chinese government has begun to track some of its citizens through software that analyses their personal data to sort individuals into colour-coded categories – red, yellow or green – corresponding to their health status and level of risk for COVID-19 (Dukakis, 2020).

This concerns not only healthcare but also social contacts. To prevent infection, it is necessary to estimate and to define one's circle of contacts: not only communication via gadgets but offline contacts, if you have your phone with you at a meeting. The AI sorts individuals into colour-coded categories – red, yellow or green. "While the code is visible to folks using the application, it also shares that data with the police" (Mehta, 2020). Thus, the mechanisms of social control are ascending to the next, more dangerous level, whereby deeply personal information is available to third parties. While it is possible to limit social contacts in accordance with medical advice in fact the goal is to isolate people at home under the pretext of quarantine measures.

## DIGITAL VACCINE PASSPORT

The idea of controlling the freedom of citizens is not new, and China is not the only country well-known for that. Although the Chinese social credit system has been criticised, the electronically based vaccination certificate and its connection to personal data has been accepted in principle, as an idea, as something within in the realm of the possible. "A person who has a valid EU Digital COVID Certificate should in principle not be subject to additional restrictions, such as tests or quarantine, regardless of their place of departure in the EU" (EU Digital, 2022).

The Russian Federation has promoted its own application, "Travelling without COVID" (Travelling, 2022), which can be recognised in neighbouring countries. When one is ready to use it, they accept its terms of service, means that that person is ready to share their personal data with an enormous Russian databank.

In some cases, it amounts to a lack of trust and shows the danger of chronological theories. "Vaccine passports, digital identity & social credit systems are designed to manipulate human behaviour" (Hinchliffe, 2021).

The waves of protests against COVID restrictions underline a situation of redistribution of power in society, "As governments lose public trust, the private sector is building its trust capital. Google and Apple's collaboration on their exposure notification system positioned them as privacy guardians" (Scassa, 2020). Enough has been written about the panopticon, a new form of social control. I would instead like to draw attention to the question: Why do we need to use a smartphone and be ready to receive a call 24/7? The smartphone is key for the process of control. New media have created a new need – to be connected, to be online. Social networks propose a wide range of opportunities for the creation and manifestation of one's own identity by consumption of media in various forms (messengers, 'likes', sharing, etc.). Big Data and AI make it possible to predict a user's behaviour online via algorithms.

## THE GLASS MAN'S OUTSOURCING OF SHAME

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Marshall McLuhan put forth the idea of media as an extension of man. This notion of extension performs properly if we are talking about

traditional media as extensions of the external world for human bodily tools, "for media, as extensions of our physical and nervous systems, constitute a world of biochemical interactions that must ever seek new equilibrium as new extensions occur" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 202). It can, however, be a real challenge to define this new system. When media work "with our central nervous system strategically numbed, the tasks of conscious awareness and order are transferred to the physical life of man, so that for the first time he has become aware of technology as an extension of his physical body" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 47).

And the external approach of media can be broader and not limited to only our body; it can be presented by the idea:

> Since our new electric technology is not an extension of our bodies but of our central nervous systems, we now see all technology, including language, as a means of processing experience, a means of storing and speeding information (McLuhan, 1994, p. 353).

However, what happens if we also add facilities of new media and social media, based on the messengers of mobile technologies? It will be something different than an extension of our central nervous systems. If the central nervous system needs a body, then more complicated psychological processes can be created based on it. Conceivably the most important of them is consciousness as the highest form of mental activity, which actually allows us to be connected with other individuals:

> So the social aspect of new new media, though crucial, and in much greater evidence than the social aspect of older media, is not unique enough in new new media to warrant our use of the terms "social media" and "new new media" interchangeably (Levinson, 2014, p. 4).

This social aspect of new new media is deeply rooted in our human needs of communication, our necessity to speak and to be heard by the Other. According to that approach, the history of media development can be understood as the history of invention of new social needs and extensions in media that address them:

> [The] anthropotropic theory of media evolution – […] can be seen as an attempt, first, to fulfil the yearnings of imagination by inventing media that extend communication beyond the biological boundaries of hearing and seeing […], and, second, to recapture elements of the natural world lost in the initial extension (Levinson, 2001, p. 179).

But it is not a panacea to restore natural communication. Instead, we generate more complicated forms of communication and develop social media and cultural practice, the "remedial medium of remedial media" (Levinson, 2001, p. 179). New new media have offered the opportunity to provide outsourcing for our personal secrets. When it was just for my friends only, it was a game. Whilst in the case of the Glass Man identity, such an extension of man can work like outsourcing of shame or horrible memories. All of what once had to be hidden now can be visible and manipulated by others. When television reality shows became famous, Big Brother style, the audience took perverse pleasure in voyeurism, especially when participants spent time in the Big Brother room and confessed on camera. Nowadays, we confess about our private lives with a view to becoming popular and more recognised online.

Instagram, Twitter, or any other social (new new) medium is always ready to receive an upload of a user's private secret. Christian culture is based on the idea that we have something to hide, something to be ashamed of, something that is our personal secret and which we need to confess. There are no ordinary people without sins, only saints. The Glass Man identity allows people to be transparent and to bring to the public what we once used to keep hidden forever. The Glass Man is neither sinner nor saint.

Thus a new challenge is posed for the moral condition of society. Who can perform the function of external conscience in relation to a person? In that situation, how can our comprehension be changed: What is ethical, and what is not? As well, on what basis will the morality of the new Glass Man, who cannot have secrets, be founded? Thus, religious morals can be updated by including a new point on power. People change their behaviour in the sight of God, who was and is a moral regulator. Nobody, however, is able to believe in BigData, although morality and shame can be replaced by BigData, outsourcing our conscience there as extension.

While finishing up this article I came across the book *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms*. The sociological concept of habitus can be coded and converted into algorithms, as "Machine habitus can be defined as the set of cultural dispositions and propensities encoded in a machine learning system through data-driven socialisation processes" (Airoldi, 2022, p. 113). The concept of machine habitus does not repeat; it does not nevertheless contradict the metaphor of the Glass Man. Habitus has an individual dimension and even in algorithmic format it does not predict the future:

> Individual habitus is path-dependent for the very same reason: the sedimentation of past experiences as cultural schemas and dispositions, and their perceptual and classificatory influence on present and future practices (Airoldi, 2022, p. 125).

The Glass Man is practically living in a dystopia and is actually deprived of the opportunity to resist coercion and normalisation algorithms. Life under governance of the algorithms can be quite safe, but not necessarily free, not by default. "The prospect of severely curtailing the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals through ill-thought-out plans for 'immunity passports' or similar certificates […] is beyond dystopian" (Renieris, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The metaphor of the Glass Man has been applied to explain the status of the current cultural identification process. The body lacks the stamina and resistance needed to function properly. For the Glass Man identity, this means transparency by default. Now we can see the birth of a new type of human with the Glass Man identity, one who is not ashamed and/or has nothing to hide. This person is transparent like glass and is also hard but at the same time fragile. There will be absolute transparency for AI and algorithmisation of everyday processes and a total lack of privacy. Personal data and electronic traces of online activities do not belong to us in this new world; they are a profitable commodity. Glass Man identity

means transparency not for a person but for a corporation that acts in the mediated public space. In the era of QR-codes and vaccination passports, every move offline and online can be recorded and stored in databases. The Glass Man identity means a new type of human, a new type of balance between control and power. If Big Brother invades a closed and limited private space, then the Glass Man will simply be deprived of privacy by default and obliged to solve ethical dilemmas by outsourcing.

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