

How New Technologies Shape the Understanding of the Political Act: Case of Digital Vigilantism

Augustė Dementavičienė

Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University
Email: auguste.dementaviciene@tspmi.vu.lt

Summary. This paper is part of a bigger project where I try to evaluate and merge different philosophical and sociological approaches in order to understand and show how new technologies could change political life. This article aims to propose conceptual instruments suitable for that endeavor through the analysis of a small example of postmodern life – Digital Vigilantism – and based on ideas of Daniel Trotter, Zygmunt Bauman, and Michel Foucault. The *swarm* is a metaphor used by Zygmunt Bauman to show how the understanding of communities is changed in liquid modernity. Swarms are based on untied, uncontrolled, short-term relationships between consumers/users that are formed with the express purpose of achieving some goals. Swarms could be massive in numbers and have a lot of power for a quite short period. One such example could be Digital Vigilantism, which is an act of punishing certain citizens – those believed to be deserving of punishment by Internet users. One particular form of digital vigilantism is disclosing someone's personal information (addresses, phone numbers, emails, Facebook accounts, etc.) for everybody to see in order to spread shaming acts. The acts of DV sometimes gain enough power to change the political agenda. The problem is that the interest of people to solve certain issues is often extremely short; meanwhile, a sustainable political act/change requires an active and stable effort for a much longer period. The main intrigue lies in whether the political act itself can change from being influenced by the swarm effect.

Keywords: digital vigilantism, swarms, technology, postmodernity, Bauman.

Kaip naujosios technologijos nulemia politinio veiksmo suvokimą: *Digital Vigilantism* atvejis?

Santrauka. Šis straipsnis yra viena iš projekto, kuriame permąstoma, kaip naujosios technologijos keičia politinio veiksmo sampratą, dalių. Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas *Digital Vigilantism* (toliau tekste DV) reiškinys glaudžiai susijęs tiek su diskusijomis apie naujasias

Received: 26/03/2019. **Accepted:** 30/08/2019

Copyright © 2019 Augustė Dementavičienė. Published by Vilnius University Press

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

technologijas ir jų inspiruojamus pokyčius, tiek apie teisinę interneto veikimo pusę ir bandymą ją sutvarkyti. Straipsnyje naudojamos skirtingos filosofinės ir sociologinės Danielio Trottier, Michelio Foucault ir Zygmunto Baumano idėjos. Jame analizuojamas Baumano pasiūlytos spiečiaus (angl. *swarm*) idėjos pritaikymas DV analizei siekiant suprasti, kaip spiečiaus fenomenas keičia patį politinio akto turinį ir jo supratimą. Trottier DV apibrėžia kaip procesą, kurio metu asmenys, pajutę, kad kito žmogaus ar žmonių veiksmai pažeidė tam tikras visuomenės normas, siekia atkurti teisingumą ir per mobiliuosius įrenginius ar socialines platformas spontaniškai ir autonomiškai koordinuoja atsaką. Įdomu, kad paprastai neigiamai vertinami pasisakymai ar veiksmai nebūna rašomi sąmoningai siekiant sulaukti visuomenės reakcijos, šio proceso metu dažnai gali būti išviešinamos net mintys, kuriomis pasidalyta draugų rate. DV pavyzdžiu galima laikyti asmeninės, privačios informacijos (adresų, telefonų numerių, el. pašto, sveikatos duomenų ir kt.) viešinimą siekiant sugėdinti ir nubausti. Plintant virtualioms technologijoms, vis dažniau tokio pobūdžio aktai įgyja pakankamai galios pakeisti ir politinę darbotvarkę.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Digital Vigilantism*, internetinis linčo teismas, Baumanas, spiečius, naujosios technologijos, postmodernas, virtualybė.

Introduction

There is no doubt that new technologies are continuously provoking discussions and raising new questions in the daily political agenda. Heated discussions sometimes even transform into active actions, caused by such issues as stem cells, artificial insemination, frozen embryos, enhancement technologies, and others. In addition to all these biotechnological and medical topics, there are also ongoing discussions about the virtual world – for instance, cybersecurity, the processes of platformization, gaming, the threats and opportunities of social networks, and many others. These new, technologically driven issues arise at such a speed that it is hardly possible to respond to them, or to think adequately about them. Obviously, the contextualization of discourses contributes to this, given that technological languages are closed and understandable almost exclusively to professionals, while philosophical and political reflection is “lagging behind,” and there is a great lack of suitable conceptual instruments for describing the ongoing processes. A so-called “empirical turn” occurs as a reaction to this, when across different philosophical branches, more and more attention is focused on better understanding

the new technological or scientific discoveries.¹ The development of new ideas or tools is gaining traction as well.

In general, the phenomenon of Digital Vigilantism (hereafter referred to as DV) discussed in this article is closely related to discussions about new technologies and the changes they inspire. The main incentive for writing this paper is to start a discussion about the changes that we are facing and which we do not know how to evaluate and understand at the beginning. It is common to regard changes as inevitable and know that severe effects will follow, but we do not know what kind of effects these will be. The philosophical approach, which will be used in this paper, allows one to raise questions about the meaning of acting politically in postmodernity, which could be a good start for understanding the emerging phenomena by determining in what context they take root.

Thus, one of the problems is that the dream of the internet as a new agora for democracy is changing. More and more negative and quite the opposite effects can be seen and have to be understood in order to try to evaluate the current state of society and political acts. Users and legislators must also be more involved in thinking about the legal side of the internet and the attempts to fix it and to put a “legal leash” on it. This article aims to propose conceptual instruments suitable for that endeavor through the analysis of a specific example of postmodern life – digital vigilantism – and based on the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman and Michel Foucault. The departure point of this article is Bauman’s proposed concept of the *swarm*, a different way of being together, which replaces the traditional community. According to Bauman, “[i]n a liquid modern society of consumers, the swarm tends to replace the group – with its leaders, hierarchy of authority and pecking order.”^{2,3} A swarm can do without all those at-

¹ Brey Philip, “Philosophy of Technology after the Empirical Turn,” *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 14.1, 2010, p. 36–48.

² Bauman Z., *Consuming Life*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007, p. 76.

³ Disclaimer: the author of this paper is fully aware that Bauman’s comprehension of insect swarms or animal behavior patterns is quite limited. The metaphors and con-

tributes and strategies without which a group could neither form nor sustain. “Swarms need not be burdened by the tools of survival; they assemble, disperse and gather again, from one occasion to another, each time guided by different, invariably shifting relevancies, and attracted by changing and moving targets.”⁴

Is it possible to be politically motivated while acting according to the rules of a swarm, given that one of its main features is non-affiliation, non-commitment, individual access, and maximization of efficiency? Is a political act possible in the case of the renunciation of the community and the transition into a swarm society? Is it still a political act as such, or does the concept of politics change, and the traditional definitions and rules are no longer valid? Can swarms coexist with other forms of being political?

The scope of digital vigilantes is quite broad: scambaiting, hacktivism, citizen-led cyber-stings, crowdsourced acts of vigilantism,⁵ and other forms. Digital vigilantism is a lynch law that has moved from reality to the virtual world and pervades in a variety of digital tools, which are extremely important and based on social media, the internet, and apps. The aims of DV differ vastly: from the will to implement social justice⁶ or citizen empowerment⁷ to personal revenge⁸ or propaganda.⁹ This includes boredom or the personal satisfaction of learning

clusions sometimes contradict the evidence gathered by studies of real life swarm behavior. Bauman uses a simplified, stereotypical, and even negative understanding of the swarm in order to put a stronger emphasis on its difference from the community. For some examples of studies on bee swarms, see Kwong Henry, Christian Jacob, “Evolutionary Exploration of Dynamic Swarm Behaviour,” *The 2003 Congress on Evolutionary Computation*, 2003. CEC’03. Vol. 1. IEEE, 2003. Kudělka M., Horák Z., Snášel V., Krömer P., Platoš J., & Abraham A., “Social and Swarm Aspects of Co-authorship Network,” *Logic Journal of the IGPL* 20 (3), 2012, p. 634–643.

⁴ Bauman, p. 76.

⁵ Smallridge J. et al., “Understanding Cyber-vigilantism: A Conceptual Framework,” *Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology* 8 (1), 2016, p. 59.

⁶ Cheong, p. 471–487.

⁷ Smallridge, p. 57–70.

⁸ Andrews R., “Baiters teach Scammers a Lesson,” *Wired*, <<https://www.wired.com/2006/08/baiters-teach-scammers-a-lesson/>>, 2018 06 14.

⁹ Kasra, p. 172–188.

new skills of hacking, which is a very important part of DV. To summarize, DV could serve as a way to empower citizens but also as an antidemocratic mechanism for normalizing the coercion of raw power, which could be dangerous. In addition, the understanding of social justice varies extremely among groups of DV. Nevertheless, the relation with the law is problematic in every approach described above.

The attention of media and academic research on digital or online vigilantism has been increasing over the last decade.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is still quite a new phenomenon and requires special attention because of its complexity and effects on different fields. In order to understand DV deeper, I decided to discuss a few specific questions concerned with the philosophy of technology. It goes back to the discussion on whether technology itself is a neutral tool or not.¹¹ The approach of this paper is that technology is not fully neutral, even if it seems to be, and that movements and changes are dependent on the features of social media and other platforms.¹² There are a considerable number of articles analyzing this phenomenon from the position of media studies^{13, 14, 15} or from a legal perspective¹⁶; however, there is not much analysis in the field of political philosophy – and the field of political science in general.

The first part of the article aims to answer the question what Digital vigilantism is and how it is different from traditional vigilantism. Then, I want to put DV in the context and debates of philosophy of

¹⁰ Smallridge, p. 58.

¹¹ Balabanian N., “On the Presumed Neutrality of Technology,” *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 25 (4), 2006, p. 15–25.

¹² More about platformization: Van Dijck J., “‘You have one identity’: Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn,” *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (2), 2013, p. 199–215.

¹³ Trotter D., “Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility,” *Philosophy & Technology* 30 (1), 2017, p. 55–72.

¹⁴ Kasra M., “Vigilantism, Public Shaming, and Social Media Hegemony: The Role of Digital-networked Images in Humiliation and Sociopolitical Control,” *The Communication Review* 20 (3), 2017, p. 172–188.

¹⁵ Cheong P. H., Gong J., “Cyber Vigilantism, Transmedia Collective Intelligence, and Civic Participation,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 3 (4), 2010, p. 471–487.

¹⁶ Smallridge, p. 57–70.

technology. There are still heated debates in philosophy of technology and in other fields whether technology really changes some old phenomena or just adds some additional features. This chapter tries to show that the difference is extreme and that we do not have the sufficient instruments to analyze and understand the new phenomena of DV. The final part of the paper is an attempt to find ways to see DV in a new light. The ideas of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman are consulted as useful perspectives to reflect upon DV and its possible consequences for the political realm.

1. What is Digital Vigilantism and Why Is It Different from Traditional Vigilantism?

Vigilantism and vigilantes were and still are shocking and attract a lot of media and public interest. A number of scholars have sought to understand why vigilantism is so varied and, in a way, so confusing. There are many discussions in the academia on how to describe vigilantism and pinpoint the scope of its acts, but these questions are not involved in this paper. In this article, I decided to use the quite commonly cited¹⁷ L. Johnston's definition of vigilantism. This definition comes from criminology studies and is quite simple; therefore, it will be used as a starting point to understand the main aspects of vigilantism: "a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force – or threatened force – by autonomous citizens."¹⁸ The act of vigilantism has to include six elements for it to be considered conventional vigilantism: planning, private agency, autonomous citizenship, use of physical force, reaction to crime/deviance, and personal and collective security. However, these elements accurately describe conventional vigilantism, but they are really problematic for understanding DV.

¹⁷ Smallridge, p. 57.

¹⁸ Johnston L., "What is Vigilantism?" *The British Journal of Criminology* 36 (2), 1996, p. 220–236.

In order to be more specific, Table 1 below, taken from Trottier's article, shows how the concept has changed from the conventional to the digital version.

*Table 1. D. Trottier: key features of conventional and digital vigilantism.*¹⁹

	Conventional vigilantism (Johnston 1996)	Digital vigilantism
Planning	Premeditation	Facilitated spontaneity
Private agency	Distinguished from state and corporate actors	Possible connections with state and corporate actors
Autonomous citizenship	Self-protection	Asserting new boundaries
Use of force	Embodied	Visibility as weapon
Reaction to crime/ deviance	Threat of established order	Fusion of local and mediated norms
Personal and collective security	Policing localized territory	Mediated policing

It is clear that there are changes in all dimensions, and that even more different dimensions could be added. The main change is that vigilantism went from having more planning and a premeditative approach to action to being very reactive and spontaneous. It is also obvious that the understanding of what is painful and hurtful has changed. Nowadays, physical force is sometimes not even needed, as the negative visibility and negative records put on the internet could bring extremely serious consequences in real life.²⁰

The act of vigilance has been and still is politically driven, and this is digital vigilantism's basic similarity with conventional vigilantism. Politics can be viewed from two aspects: (a) in principle as related to the state, law, bureaucracy, etc.; (b) as the preservation and consolidation of moral norms. Moreover, it is important to un-

¹⁹ Table is cited from: Trottier D., "Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility," p. 59.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 55–72.

derstand that the act of DV is based on the idea that the “vigilantes” are doing the things they do because they *have* to bring morality and justice back to the world.²¹ And not just any morality, but an extremely simplified, “crystal clear,” black-or-white concept of the morality that makes it easy to categorize people into good-doers and wrongdoers. By the acts of DV, the vigilantes seek purity and clarity in morality (including the fight with bad protocol, hate speech, racism, sexism, terrorism, etc.). Regardless of the ideological reason behind DV attempts (even aimed either against racism or a possible terrorist attack), it usually violates individual privacy, is not based on the principle of innocent-until-proven-guilty, and does not attempt to look at the whole picture but rather at just one post, one photograph, or one video. In the view of vigilantes, it is obvious that the truth is “always on their side” and there is no reason to try to understand somebody from the “wrong-doers” side. Someone who suggests taking into account the arguments of “the dark side” could be regarded as a new target for DV.

In most cases, it can be said, “while lacking state authorization, vigilante groups do not perceive their actions as over-riding or transgressing the legal order but construct themselves as self-anointed guardians rescuing national sovereignty, citizenship and the law’s moral sanctity, from cultural elites, moneyed interests, inept bureaucrats and a sclerotic state.”²² The vigilantes perceive their actions as protecting, rescuing some sort of segment of society, or an idea, a moral position, which is being stigmatized. The action is presented as inevitable, obviously requiring the intervention of the “ordinary” people – otherwise it will remain unresolved, neglected, unnoticed. Such a negative emphasis on impartiality and non-interference is characteristic of both conventional and digital vigilance.

²¹ Kasra, p. 172–188.

²² Trotter D., “Digital Vigilantism as Critical Reinforcement of Law and Order,” *Re.Framing Activism*, 2019 03 07, <<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/activistmedia/2016/04/digital-vigilantism-as-critical-reinforcement-of-law-and-order/>>, 2019 03 07.

The act of vigilance itself can be extremely diverse, ranging from public shaming, which often results in, for example, getting the subject fired from their job, to publishing all of the subject's personal information (including that of their friends and family): full name, workplace, position, university, phone number, email, address, blood type, passwords, specific location, CCTV recordings, and anything else that may be "extracted" from the internet.

One of the most important things and changes that DV brings is that an ordinary perpetrator can be the equal subject of a DV "attack" as an officer of the law – for instance, for inappropriate behavior in public,²³ improper wording when speaking about the victims of a catastrophe²⁴ or the organizers of a terrorist attack,²⁵ or government officials who exceed their authority.²⁶ In addition, the target is not aware that they are going to be involved in such a massive act.

In addition, DV, unlike conventional action, is no longer restricted to one nation, state, or village.^{27, 28} This is due to two things. First, the technological tools that are used to make the act of DV make it easy to remove boundaries and helps the perpetrators get into "distant" issues; one of the goals of social media is to help people who are scattered all around the world to connect, to eliminate the feeling of distance.²⁹ On the other hand, the actions that cause reactions are

²³ Clune B., "Digital Vigilantism: Think Before Putting Pictures of Wrongdoing Online," *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/29/digital-vigilantism-think-before-pictures-of-wrongdoing-online>>, 2013 03 07.

²⁴ Fortey I., "8 Awesome Cases of Internet Vigilantism," *Cracked*, <http://www.cracked.com/article_17170_8-awesome-cases-internet-vigilantism.html>, 2019 03 07.

²⁵ Hill C., "How Digital Communities Cope: Cyber-vigilantism Following the Boston Marathon Bombings," *The Yale Review of International Studies*, <<http://yris.yira.org/essays/2039>>, 2019 03 07.

²⁶ Key, "Sue me if you dare, my dad is Li Gang," *Chinehush*, <<http://www.chinahush.com/2010/10/21/sue-me-if-you-dare-my-dad-is-li-gang/>>, 2019 03 07.

²⁷ Kucera M., Mares M., "Vigilantism During Democratic Transition," *Policing and Society* 25 (2), 2015, p. 170–187.

²⁸ Kingsley D., "Keeping a close Watch—the Rise of Self-surveillance and the Threat of Digital Exposure," *The Sociological Review* 56 (3), 2008, p. 347–357.

²⁹ Fuchs C., *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, London: Sage, 2017.

not necessarily included in the local jurisdictions or legal systems. For example, scam baiting³⁰ – the police find it extremely difficult or even impossible to handle such cases,³¹ which enables the vigilantes to gain even greater self-confidence and a sense of legitimacy, because they feel as if they are solving problems in no-man's land, a place where no actual government can intervene. This is caused by issues in intermediate states, existing between countries and systems.

Another key difference is that the participants of the lynch law usually have a strong anti-establishment rhetoric. Nevertheless, as scientists point out, DV's relationship with the government and the police is much more complex; in some cases, they actually act as an aid to the state and not as a force against it – for example, sharing information about the criminals that is not necessarily obtained through legal means.³²

Because many vigilantes act anonymously in the virtual world, it is impossible or at least terribly difficult to punish those whose actions actually deserve punishment. Thus, the tables turn, and now the other side feels that the legal system and the state cannot protect and defend them against inadequate or essentially unfair shaming acts. In this case, DV may serve “as means for small independent groups to exercise social power and control over marginalized and underrepresented groups <...> and has the capacity of web-distributed visual imagery to sustain a new kind of sadistic hegemony. <...> circulation of the digital – networked images concomitantly perpetuates and motivates unjust and undemocratic desires.”³³

³⁰ Andrews R., “Baiters teach Scammers a Lesson,” *Wired*, <<https://www.wired.com/2006/08/baiters-teach-scammers-a-lesson/>>, 2018 06 14.

³¹ Trotter D., “Coming to Terms with Social Media Monitoring: Uptake and Early Assessment,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 11 (3), 2015, p. 317–333.

³² Trotter D., “Digital Vigilantism as Critical Reinforcement of Law and Order,” *Re. Framing Activism*, 2019 03 07, <<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/activistmedia/2016/04/digital-vigilantism-as-critical-reinforcement-of-law-and-order/>>, 2019 03 07.

³³ Kasra, p. 173.

2. A New Form of Political Act: Analyzing the Example of Digital Vigilantism

2.1. The Postmodern Technology Paradox: Individuality and Connectivity

One of the main differences between digital and traditional vigilantism is that DV is implemented by using technological tools. And the tool level is very important here, because when we understand how new technologies are created and how the perception of the human is changed by using them, only then we can better understand DV. In one of his famous articles, Martin Heidegger claims that “technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology,”³⁴ The key is to understand that technology cannot be perceived merely as a neutral tool, because then it would appear that this tool can be completely controlled by people. We cannot control the technologies we created – that does not mean that they can act on their own, but it is impossible to control them and know how they will be used in reality (e.g., nuclear power and the atomic bomb, Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, etc.)

In his essay, Heidegger claims that modern technology can only come about when there is an attitude that everything can be transformed and re-arranged, that all the objects of the world are divided into parts that can be used to create new things. Things and beings can no longer simply be present; everything has to be restored according to the designed laws and this reality has to be established as genuine. The whole reality is restored into a stagnant reservoir, a repository of resources (*Bestand*), from which one can constantly take the things one needs.³⁵

³⁴ Heidegger M., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 287.

³⁵ Heidegger M., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 287–318.

When reality is perceived as a repository of resources, it can be used – sold, exchanged, owned, transformed, and designed. Reality becomes an abstract; it does not exist in the present, it is a project of the future. When it becomes this, the lack of it can be felt immediately,³⁶ since it is not specifically realized at present: there are only resources that enable us to create it, but this process never ceases – we must constantly recreate and reinstate reality.

The most important change occurs when there is a realization that people’s “role in terms of the relationship with being also inevitably changes. This occurs because modern technology, as an ordering revealing, is not only a consequence of the expression of human action, it acquires the function of an autonomous and self-regulating power”³⁷ [translated by the author]. People themselves become standing-reserves, they are no longer (only) human – they are energy and resources that can be used.

By analyzing the technological development, which is relevant in the case of digital vigilantism, one can see the paradox that in certain situations people are treated as one unimportant mass that needs to be used as effectively and efficiently as possible. One way to see technology is to stress that it operates by leveling and equalizing people. For instance, social media is for everyone, its availability is not restricted to any person (except for the age limit, etc.). On the other hand, in different contexts, a totally individualistic way of treating both people and their bodies begins to prevail. The body is treated as unique and inimitable; we must conform to everyone, find the most appropriate way to influence them, and act towards the same goal, but this is done with all individuals in different ways, adapting to their specific characteristics. With the development of science, an individual’s inimitability is discovered and absolute value is given

³⁶ Smith G. B., “Heidegger, Technology and Postmodernity,” *Social Science Journal* 28, 1991, p. 369–389.

³⁷ Vėželis T., “Gamtos ir technikos santykių problema Heideggerio dialoge su daoizmu,” Andrijauskas A. (ed.), *Rytai-Vakarai. Komparatyvistinės studijos IX*, Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2010, p. 318–336.

to it. One of the basic medical terms nowadays is *genome* (genetic code) – a proof of the uniqueness of the individual. Each individual has a unique DNA sequence that cannot be matched by anyone else in the world. This uniqueness is consolidated even before they appears on this earth; they do not have to do anything to be treated as unique, and it is recorded in their body. Thus, people are unique without doing anything “remarkable” – in terms of biology, all people, despite their morals, aspirations, and desires, are treated as equally unique. So that is the path of medicine; but on the other hand, we can see the same individualistic approach in digital advertising, where the idea is to personalize the internet for everybody.

Technologies create such conditions that allow, encourage, or even force us (not somebody with expert knowledge, like scientists or philosophers, but anybody) to treat our bodies as a circumstance, a case, a study, something external. People are encouraged to know their blood type, maintain a healthy lifestyle, and by doing this “understand” the needs of their bodies and be able to evaluate them. Nowadays it is trendy to have health apps that help users get and evaluate data about their personal health issues.³⁸ People are accustomed (by individual apps, because of convenience) or in some cases required (by national e-systems, when all data are only online) to put a lot of different information about themselves on the internet, which is one of the main ways of how vigilantes get information. It is also extremely important to understand that any attempt to invade the body and one’s privacy is received highly sensitively and poses an enormous danger. Thus, it could be extremely painful to merely have the vigilantes share the information (i.e., doxing).

Postmodern technologies are considered to be incredibly complex; it is commonplace to believe that mastering them requires a specific education and knowledge. It should be noted that in almost

³⁸ Sharon T., “Self-tracking for Health and the Quantified Self: Re-articulating Autonomy, Solidarity, and Authenticity in an Age of Personalized Healthcare,” *Philosophy & Technology* 30.1, 2017, p. 93–121.

all postmodern technologies, small, often invisible “magic” particles (stem cells, nanoparticles, genes and such) play a major role.³⁹ They are “magic” because people no longer understand how the things that they use actually work, they only know the “spells” – the gene, the bite, the nano, and they use these words while trying to talk about things that they actually do not understand. This escalation of magic and incomprehensibility arises because postmodern technologies are completely dependent on specialized knowledge, and it is simply impossible for the ordinary citizen to comprehend them. It is important to understand that making technological objects is extremely complicated, but actually using them at home without putting too much thought into it is gradually becoming easier.

However, the case of DV shows that some people have “magical” powers and are able to read, translate, and use the new language collectively, using it to decipher personal data, shame or otherwise affect people involved in those cases that personally touch or interest them. The particular personal interest could be even not the story itself but the will to test one’s hacking skills. Some of the stories of DV show the enormous efforts made by hundreds of people to find a specific person and punish them (even for relatively insignificant inappropriate behavior). It requires a large amount of time and other resources, which is why traditional law enforcement or other institutions do not carry out such investigations, but internet users might gather and make these cases public.

In the presence of such a human condition, consumerist, profit-seeking, predatory relationships can be very easily realized, and the possession and control of resources becomes an aim in itself. It is precisely this set of assumptions that allows Bauman’s swarm concept to be applied.

³⁹ Haraway D. J., *Manifestly Haraway*, Vol. 37, Minnesota: Minnesota Press, 2016, p. 12–13.

2.2. *Swarms and Digital Vigilantism*

In his book *Consuming Life*, Bauman puts forward the notion of swarms. According to Bauman, the swarm changes the group and the community; people gather together only driven by certain ideas, interests, desires, or activities, but these gatherings only last as long as their desired action continues. There is no continuity – a person can belong to several swarms at one time, assemble, disperse, and gather again; there is almost no commitment or responsibility.⁴⁰ Bauman's conception of the swarm can be better understood by analyzing DV.

DV is temporary, yet a process rather than a one-time act, although the contribution of different people varies greatly. In the first stage, someone points out a case of wrong behavior, and then the same person or someone else who is personally, individually affected by that behavior, and who has the necessary information technology tools (i.e., can access relevant data), starts sharing personal data of the alleged wrongdoer. It is important to understand that the end result is never the result of just one person's efforts: someone has found one piece of information, someone has shared a link leading to relevant information, someone has published CCTV records, and someone has viewed them, and so on. A later phase, which actually happens parallel to the first stage, is the sharing of data – either by exposing the inappropriate behavior or publishing the wrongdoer's personal information. The last stage is a reaction, which already happens in reality rather than in the virtual space. People get sanctions: they are fired from their jobs, they get condemned by others, and they get fines or even go to jail.

In developing the concept of swarms, Bauman stresses that “Swarms are not teams; they know nothing of the division of labour. They are <...> no more than the ‘sum of their parts,’ or rather aggregate of self-propelled units, united solely <...> by ‘mechanical solidarity,’ manifested in the replication of similar patterns of con-

⁴⁰ Bauman, p. 76–77.

duct and by moving in a similar direction. They can be visualized best as Warhol's endlessly copied images with no original, or with an original discarded after use and impossible to trace and retrieve."⁴¹

According to the image drawn by Bauman, a swarm starts to work when each member of the swarm continuously repeats the same action,⁴² tweeting and retweeting, sharing and re-sharing. And most importantly, each action is done individually, without being coordinated.

Still, the case of DV raises some doubts concerning Bauman's ideas – he claims that there are no specialists in a swarm, they are all “jacks-of-all-trades”⁴³ and no one assists each other. It is important to understand that DV does not really work as a traditional team, but the division of labor exists. However, it happens completely accidentally, without assigning anyone to any tasks. Nevertheless, the case of DV shows that sometimes people act through supplementing each other's weaknesses or lack of resources – if one hacker cannot decode all data, he just uploads whatever he has, and this unprocessed data is taken by someone else to complete the unfinished task, as if compensating for the previous hacker's drawbacks.

Postmodernism “does not mean that the ‘normal,’ weekday conduct of the individuals has become random, un-patterned and un-coordinated. It only means that the non-randomness, regularity and coordination of individually undertaken actions can be, and are as a rule, attained by other means than the solid-modern expedients and stratagems of enforcement.”⁴⁴ According to Bauman, discipline and punishment are no longer enough, other mechanisms are at work.

By using the term *biopower*, Foucault essentially states that traditional politics are changing and are being replaced by a completely different system, with no single clear center, no clear leader – a di-

⁴¹ Bauman, p. 76–77.

⁴² Ibid., p. 77.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 77.

⁴⁴ Bauman, p. 75–78.

visive micro-policy that lives in local contexts and creates certain identities.⁴⁵ In a swarm, “every command from above” is superfluous. After all, swarms truly do not have superior positions of power; the current direction of their flight only puts some of the dynamics of a self-propelled vehicle into the positions of “leaders to be followed,” which they occupy temporarily and which change unpredictably. The sense of trust and security that magically coordinates the movement of the swarm is the best and equally as effective substitute for the authority of the group leaders.⁴⁶ It is quite obvious that there are no distinct leaders in the processes of DV – every prompting to take action seems exaggerated because the process is either happening or not. The most interesting part is that it is never possible to guess which form of bad behavior will trigger such a severe reaction, it happens spontaneously every time, it accelerates remarkably quickly and crashes when the general interest dissipates.

When the system is changed and biopower is operating, when the “government is everywhere,” it no longer has a definite center or a subject that both creates it and is responsible for it. The government is withdrawn from a clear position in the society, leaving imitation in its place – i.e., governments, states, and politicians who seemingly implement politics still exist, but this just disguises the real position of the government, which is impossible to pinpoint. It hides in everyday life and takes root as a biopower through various microprocesses and new mechanisms of control: “<...> I do not mean to say that the law fades into the background or that the institutions of justice tend to disappear, but rather that the law operates more and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory. A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life. We

⁴⁵ Foucault M., *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. I, New York: Vintage, 1990, p. 135–145.

⁴⁶ Bauman, p. 75–78.

have entered a phase of juridical regression in comparison with the pre-seventeenth-century societies.”⁴⁷

Most importantly, regardless of the processes in reality, the condemnation – fair or unfair – occurs in the virtual world, as if each person individually decides if there was a violation, a threat to the state, morality, order, etc. or not. According to Foucault, power is established not through the main arteries but through small capillaries⁴⁸: e.g., various expert systems are spread across all sections of the population, and biopower is spreading through them; governments are no longer competent institutions; decisions are taken in hospitals, laboratories, schools – not just in the parliament.

Another remarkable aspect of the manifestation of biopower is that it is getting more and more impossible to pinpoint what is non-political life, to distinguish between what is private and what is public and also what is a state and what is social. “Vigilantism is typically understood as extra-state, popular and extra-legal, yet it takes on ‘state-like performances such as security enforcement <...> a perpetual renegotiation of the boundaries between state and society.”⁴⁹ Along with what is private and public, Facebook merges all different worlds of citizens: colleagues, friends, family, classmates, and bosses.⁵⁰ This is one of the reasons why actions are so easily transposed from one context to another. This way, someone who misbehaved – say, yelled at a child in a park – may be dismissed from work the following day, for an act that is not actually related to this person’s direct duties. The shaming campaign can be so massive that the employer simply does not want to be associated with that person, although had they simply found out about the incident privately, perhaps they would judge that particular employee personally, but a dismissal could not be justified

⁴⁷ Foucault, p. 144.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 135–145.

⁴⁹ Trottier, “Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility,” p. 55–72; Burr and Jensen, 2004, p. 144, as cited in Trottier *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Trottier D., *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World*, Routledge, 2016, p. 1–7.

in this case. A complete refusal to establish the boundaries of what is private and what is public is a dangerous predicament, as everything may be considered public then and privacy in general disappears.

Therefore, the consequences for those who have experienced mass condemnation are often quite horrible not only in the virtual world, but also in reality: loss of employment, reputation, expulsion from university, incarceration, and such. However, in reality, nobody takes responsibility for the shaming campaign; more precisely, it gets split up among all the members of the swarm, who can surprisingly quickly forget or ignore their participation in any action. “In the case of human feelings and thoughts, the comfort of flying in a swarm derives from having security in numbers: a belief that the direction of flight must have been properly chosen since an impressively large swarm is following it, a supposition that so many feeling, thinking and freely choosing human beings could not be simultaneously fooled.”⁵¹ Same as in the conversation mentioned above, people do not think of re-sharing or re-tweeting as a substantial action, since so many people have done it before them – they do not feel responsible for the information that they share, even if it later turns out to be fake news.

Conclusions

The core of DV, which very well represents Bauman’s idea of the swarm, could be described in the following way: “digital vigilantism is a **process** where citizens are **collectively offended** by other citizens’ activity, and **coordinate (spontaneously and autonomously mobilizing) retaliation** on mobile devices and social platforms. **These offensive acts are typically not meant to generate large-scale recognition.** Therefore, the targets of DV are **initially unaware** of the conflict in which they have been enrolled”⁵² [highlighted by the author].

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵² Trottier, “Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility,” p. 55–72.

After analyzing DV as an example of the postmodern way of being political, some conclusions about how political life may change or is changing can be drawn. It is becoming clearer that postmodern technology and life have shifted from ideas of modern unification to the individualistic “no pill for everybody” view. There is less and less need for traditional collective forms of being/acting/participating (political parties, communities, stable groups, etc.). Therefore, swarms, members of which are connected by weak links, may change the group and community. Some specific issue or interest holds them together for an extremely short period (in comparison with communities). Swarms gather, scatter, and gather again, from one occasion to another, every time inevitably for a different reason, and are attracted by changeable aims.⁵³ However, swarms can be remarkably effective.

The problem that paradoxically comes from the technologization of life is its urge for simplification. When technology and science are too difficult, too complex, and when the perception of life also gets more and more complicated, there is a call from users to make everything easier. This may be viewed from two perspectives. On the one hand, this basically entails making life more convenient, when as many things as possible can be done with a few clicks of a button (and there is no need to know how exactly the machine is working). On the other hand, living with “hidden/complex” technology, “hidden/complex” bureaucracy, “hidden/complex” politics brings the will to destroy or to neglect these irritating complexities. One example is populism, the ideas of which work when they simplify a particular social problem to one magical solution. Another aspect of that kind of simplification is reducing morality down to black-and-white judgments, leaving no space for complex feelings, for intricate, ambiguous situations. This is the so-called “grey” area, where “real humanity manifests itself.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Palese E., “Zygmunt Bauman. Individual and Society in the Liquid Modernity,” *SpringerPlus* 2.1, 2013, p. 191.

⁵⁴ Ronson J., “Strange Answers to the Psychopath Test,” <https://www.ted.com/talks/jon_ronson_strange_answers_to_the_psychopath_test>, 2018 06 15.

A faster than previous and constantly changing lifestyle is, in a way, closely interconnected with a lack of responsibility for one's actions. Users find themselves in situations where, because of anonymity, and because of the rules of social media, there are no obvious personal consequences; the understanding that everything is interconnected and complex, paradoxically, makes users pay less effort to reflect and try to understand the impact of their acts.

In addition, it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish between what is completely private and what is not. What actions belong to the political sphere, and are there some areas that are not political? Which actions should be taken by the state, and which by private individuals or collective groups? If Bauman and Foucault are right, then in the future, our lives will have less clearly defined boundaries, be less stable, and politics will become more and more reactive and spontaneous.

These conclusions reflect that DV shares different features with other postmodern phenomena. As planet Earth becomes "smaller," and Nomads still need to travel, we can foresee the possibility of travelling to/from different realities and different systems created or simulated by/with new technological tools. Technologically created new realities could be seen as New Lands (H. Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* wrote that there are no more new lands to hide or to explore), where no law is present, or where a new law is created. So, it is possible that in these "new lands," other ways of being political or being social are emerging, and that DV is only one such example. However, the most important thing in the future will be to decide whether users should merge the different systems or try to regard the virtual way of being as some additional features of society.

Of course, there are more additional questions to ask and answer, but political philosophers should pay more attention to such processes as DV in order to find suitable ways of understanding the new forms of political acts and be capable of evaluating and researching them. It is still unclear how the paradoxes of DV could be solved –

the desire to protect the public's norms transforming into a development of anti-democratic values, the striving for security becoming the extension of discipline and control, and the provision of power to the citizens shaping the doctrine of universal surveillance.

References

- Andrews R., "Baiters teach Scammers a Lesson," *Wired*, <<https://www.wired.com/2006/08/baiters-teach-scammers-a-lesson/>>, 2019 03 26.
- Balabanian N., "On the Presumed Neutrality of Technology," *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 25 (4), 2006, p. 15–25, <<https://doi.org/10.1109/mtas.2006.261460>>.
- Bauman Z., *Consuming Life*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007.
- Cheong P. H., Gong J., "Cyber Vigilantism, Transmedia Collective Intelligence, and Civic Participation," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 3 (4), 2010, p. 471–487, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2010.516580>>.
- Clune B., "Digital Vigilantism Think Before Putting Pictures of Wrongdoing Online," *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/29/digital-vigilantism-think-before-pictures-of-wrongdoing-online>>, 2013 03 07.
- Fortey L., "8 Awesome Cases of Internet Vigilantism," *Cracked*, <http://www.cracked.com/article_17170_8-awesome-cases-internet-vigilantism.html>, 2019 03 07.
- Foucault M., *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. I, New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Fuchs C., *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, London: Sage, 2017.
- Haraway D. J., *Manifestly Haraway*, Vol. 37, Minnesota: Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Heidegger M., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 287–317.
- Hill C., "How Digital Communities Cope: Cyber-vigilantism Following the Boston Marathon Bombings," *The Yale Review of International Studies*, <<http://yris.yira.org/essays/2039>>, 2019 03 07.
- Johnston L., "What is Vigilantism?" *The British Journal of Criminology* 36 (2), 1996, p. 220–236.
- Kasra M., "Vigilantism, Public Shaming, and Social Media Hegemony: The Role of Digital-networked Images in Humiliation and Sociopolitical Control," *The Communication Review* 20 (3), 2017, p. 172–188, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2017.1343068>>.
- Key, "Sue me if you dare, my dad is Li Gang," *Chinehush*, <<http://www.chinahush.com/2010/10/21/sue-me-if-you-dare-my-dad-is-li-gang/>>, 2019 03 07.
- Kingsley D., "Keeping a close Watch—the Rise of Self-surveillance and the Threat of Digital Exposure," *The Sociological Review* 56 (3), 2008, p. 347–357, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.2008.00793.x>>

- Kucera M., Mares M., "Vigilantism during Democratic Transition," *Policing and Society* 25 (2), 2015, p. 170–187, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2013.817997>>.
- Palese E., "Zygmunt Bauman. Individual and Society in the Liquid Modernity," *SpringerPlus* 2.1, 2013, p. 191, <<https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-191>>.
- Ronson J., "Strange Answers to the Psychopath Test," <https://www.ted.com/talks/jon_ronson_strange_answers_to_the_psychopath_test>, 2018 06 15, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/e613612012-001>>.
- Sharon T., "Self-tracking for Health and the Quantified Self: Re-articulating Autonomy, Solidarity, and Authenticity in an Age of Personalized Healthcare," *Philosophy & Technology* 30.1, 2017, p. 93–121, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0215-5>>.
- Smallridge J. et al., "Understanding Cyber-vigilantism: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology* 8 (1), 2016, p. 57–70.
- Smith G. B., "Heidegger, Technology and Postmodernity," *Social Science Journal* 28, 1991, p. 369–389.
- Trottier D., "Digital Vigilantism as Critical Reinforcement of Law and Order," *Re. Framing Activism*, 2019 03 07, <<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/activist-media/2016/04/digital-vigilantism-as-critical-reinforcement-of-law-and-order/>>, 2019 03 07.
- Trottier D., "Coming to Terms with Social Media Monitoring: Uptake and Early Assessment," *Crime, Media, Culture* 11 (3), 2015, p. 317–333, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659015593390>>.
- Trottier D., "Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility," *Philosophy & Technology* 30 (1), 2017, p. 55–72, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0216-4>>.
- Trottier D., *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World*, Routledge, 2016, p. 1–7, <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315609508>>.
- Van Dijck J., "'You have one identity': Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn," *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (2), 2013, p. 199–215, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443712468605>>.
- Vėželis T., "Gamtos ir technikos santykių problema Heideggerio dialoge su daoizmu," Andrijauskas A. (ed.), *Rytai-Vakarai. Komparatyvistinės studijos IX*, Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2010, p. 318–336.