# SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

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## SOCIAL NARCISSISM – HOW SOCIETY PUSHES US TO OVERESTIMATE OUR CAPACITIES, LEAVING MANY BEHIND

**RAR (Research Article)**

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**Abstract**

The following introduces the concept of overlife, not claiming that it is an entirely new idea, however suggesting that it is a suitable term to bring different problems of contemporary societal development together. Broadly speaking, overload is defined as simultaneously condensing patterns of life and the actual living, i.e. intensifying living by establishing patterns of multitasking; however, doing so occurs for the price of a shallowed concept of life by a differentiated system of standardization. Simplification of cognition and education, not least in the context of digitization, are important factors: The apparently increasing control, everybody experiences, goes hand-in-hand with increasing difficulties of understanding – and enjoying – the complexity with which we are confronted. Still, although this seems to be a secular process concerning humanity and humans in general, control and power remains in the hands of a few who, as individuals and corporations, design life and society. Paradoxically, the theoretically gained possibility to answer complex questions and develop long-term perspectives, turns, at least under capitalist conditions, into narcissistic idiosyncrasies, and wasting huge amounts of monies for the thrill of egos instead of strategically developing socio-economic strategies addressing major challenges as poverty, environmental threats, digitisation and new forms of stupidification.

**Keywords:** overlife, inequality, digitization, education, power, control, digital divide

### Introduction

The object of the article is the analysis of today's societal development – replicated in individual existence – in the light of a contradictory structuration: On the one hand we see the condensation of living, this is, however, on the other hand met by the shallowing of substance. In other words, while we get the impression of living more than we ever lived before, not only having several doors open for us but even walking different roads at the same time, we are essentially only enhancing quantities while we are substantially losing out. So far, this is frequently stated, going hand-in-hand with a call for slowing down, the need of increasing resonance (e.g. Erich Fromm and Rosa Hartmut [6]) and the claimed need of quality time. One might also refer to policy debates on rebalancing work and life relation (e.g. Oscar Vargas Llave and Tina Weber in Eurofond publication [4]). Already earlier some outstanding scholars from the Frankfurt School, as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse had been extensively working on this, emphasising especially the conditions of alienation as societal fact. While these had been important works, the problem remains that the relationship between individuals, society and societal conditions had not been sufficiently clarified – thus **the subject of the present article** is the reintegration of the different arguments – the term reintegration is used, as this subject entails reconstructing the entity that had been dissolved as consequence of academic differentiation. Referring to the methodological understanding of the relationship between individual and society as it has been put forward by Norbert Elias [3], the following is attempting to be more succinct about the interaction between functional and structural developments – the clarification of this relationality is **the goal of the research.** Although the proposal remains in need of further elaboration, we will be able to present at least an outline of a concept for further analysis. It has to be emphasised, that we are talking about the societal affect, not focusing on the socio-psychological aspects.

In method and luggage terms this is a major challenge: on the one hand we are of course on the level of appearance dealing with behavioural issues and psychological factors. However, what we're really interested in is located on another level, not only concerned with the macro level of society, but as well with the area that is usually distinct and separated as economic structure of society or, to be more precise, mode of production. This means that a strict historical-materialist perspective is applied, elaborating the dialectical relationship between the development of the means of production and the socio-economic structuration of society. Referring also to figurational sociology allows to determine the 'behaviour of society', i.e. the sociogenesis. We may also speak of sequencing the DNA of society. The complexity of such approach requires the reader to be open towards searching for open feedback loops between apparent fractals.

Modern stage of technological convergence[1], sixth technological mode [8] and Industry 4.0 create so many possibilities of control that in actual fact the controllability itself is in danger of derailing. Niklas Luhmann put this already in the 1990s into the words «Everything could be different – but nearly nothing that I can change» [11]. This is quite distinct from di Lampedusa's suggestion, that «if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change» that, in actual fact, results in a situation that (taking it metaphorically) «changed respectively into capricious arrogance, recurring moral scruples, and contempt for his own relatives and friends, all of whom seemed to him mere driftwood in the languid meandering stream of Sicilian pragmatism» (Giuseppe di Lampedusa[2]). According to our **hypothesis,** the result is what we call overlife, i.e. a situation where we – as society, social groups and individuals alike – condense the «elements of living» to such an extent that these elements themselves are hollowed out. We suggest this term as an analogy to the overkill capacities, known from the military sector where it simply characterizes the availability of destructive power beyond what is needed to kill the enemy – or in other words, clearly showing the absurdity: it is a matter of killing a person multiple times. When applied to overlife we can say that we live – seemingly and in our perception – multiple lives within the time span we have biologically available. It is a capacity of stretching life to its edges. This would be misunderstood if simply seen as not having enough time to do all the things, we would like to do while possibly not having the ability to do many things at the same time. Instead, it is the systematic, structured way of putting more «tickable experiences» into our lifespan: fully organised package holidays, extreme adventure holidays, wiki-wiki-answers replacing complex understanding, obligations that make our diaries bursting without leaving space to reflect on what is going on or even act consciously are examples for this pattern – while we speak of stretching, the process is equally a matter of condensation.

We use term overlife, not overliving, because we consider this issue as societal phenomenon, not from the perspective of individuals. One may compare it with the capacities of an engine that can for a short time drive very fast or perform in at an extremely high speed, however such extreme performance cannot be maintained over a long time – overheating, implosion or explosion are unavoidable problems. Modern technological convergence widens people's capabilities and the socioeconomic problem of overproduction transforms it into overlife with the consequence of «overheating» of our time frame, although a majority of people has to spend valuable time on bullshit jobs (see Graeber [9] and others).

Like an overkill, the overlife is a matter of proving relevance and effectiveness – our overdigitalised world provides so many possibilities that multitasking is the only way by which we can attempt to get a hold of the situation – although it usually means that achieving something useful is unlikely. To be more precise, and touching on the core: complex issues, processual relationalities are technically separated and segmented, thus each of them needs to be handled, a multiplicity of acts has to be undertaken without really dealing with the complexity. Not least, this emerges from and results in inequality – a meaningful life exists only for a few, who have both, choice and resources. Current COVID-19 crisis exposed many problems and illusions of modern society, emphasising the need to address the threat of overlife.

## Main text

The world finds itself in a transition period, digitization boosting a wide range of convergence technologies. While we find extensive debates about a supposed new technological order and risks of unemployment, the issue of meaning of traditional employment finds little reflection. In 2018, anthropologist D. Graeber transformed his 2013 essay about bullshit jobs into a theory, suggesting that we could be living in a jobless utopia due to technological achievements, yet there are still too many societal barriers on the way to it [9]. The connotation between work and self-worth, combined with capitalist growth of consumption for its own sake created a world with billions of bullshit jobs and – in our view – overlife. Transferring into sixth technological order with such ideological background leads to performative creation, when what happens on the surface is becoming the essence; it is there for the moment but it doesn't last and has no lasting effect.

This is, in a way, just another take on questions of inequality of a distribution that neglects some kind of equality or equity even and that is making it seemingly possible that some live more than one life and others don't live at all even if they are alive. Actually this has socio-political side as well, namely the reduction of the intensity of life, the quality of living and consumption that is permanently manifested by the divergence of use value and exchange value. Overcapacity, then, means that the focus is put on exchange value and with this on consumption as the foundation of the economy – in order to maintain this, the forgoing production is in actual fact geared

[1] We use the term as it was explained and used by M. Castells in his The Information Age trilogy, as the tendency for technologies that were originally unrelated with each other becoming more closely integrated and even unified as they develop and advance.

[2] Excerpt from The Leopard by Giuseppe di Lampedusa URL: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/40905/the-leopard-by-giuseppe-di-lampedusa/9780375714795/excerpt Accessed 18.06.2021.

to generating rubbish. Consumerism, throw-away-society, decreasing quality in favour of short-termist vogueism are relevant catchwords here. Increasing productivity by applying multitasking is in this light primarily a means of creating something that does not have any substance or: while the turnover increases it does so as result of the loss of quality and differentiated performance. To some extent this is – seemingly – contracted by digitisation, technical means now allowing fast reactions, individual designs, the «Ford Model T, available in all colours as long as it is black» is now nearly reversed: there is only a rough «framework» that needs to be specified by choosing engine seize to differentiated colour combinations. Adapting machines to different profiles is feasible also for very small production lines and even for individual products.

Economically this results easily in overheating: we witness the production of commodities that is born out of temporary moods and/or we face the production of commodities for which demand is only given by the fact of the existing supply. A double spiral is set into move, pushing the productive process further, thus answering the increasing demand; pushing at the same time the demand, this way compensating for the loss of time due to longer working hours or at least giving the impression of doing so by using various gadgets.

A simple example: an advertisement offers a gadget that promises to water the plants in the garden in a smart way. The lady in the advertisement says something like: *«Now I have more time to do the enjoyable things, not received anything back and sitting in the sun»*. There is no mention of gardening as a holistic experience, the joy gained from physical exercise, from getting a feeling for nature and the mystery of growth. While this may sound old fashioned, it may equally make a point in favour of seeing men being part of nature, the perspective that is too often lost and of which the loss is regretted.

As a result we have the fundamental alienation of actually losing life, losing control over it, by trying to live more by externalising part of it.

Another simple example: experiments are made, aiming on what is called similarity, meaning the merger of the human body with artificial intelligence. It's some kind of and we see the development of humans towards androids, allowing for instance to back-up the brain. This is externalisation in a strict sense.

Against this background, namely the shift from use value to exchange value as "relevant standard", it may well be time to revisit the foundation of calculating economic value. Back in the XVIII and XIX the highest value had been time and not just time but *the freely disposable time,* idea of «all economy is about time» had been quite popular [14]. This is of course a reflection of a limited perspective, namely the macroeconomic perspective whereas the micro-economic perspective had been – very much like today – geared to saving time as far as it appeared as cost-factor in the emerging systematic book-keeping, taking its beginning in the years of the Medici and their contemporaries and fully taking off with Josiah Wedgewood. However, today we talk about time poverty in general the other way around, and that freely disposable time is not valued at least not socially or societally. Valued is «Wikiwiki», the key word wiki meaning that everything has to go fast, everything has to be quick, quickly done, quickly digested and not thought through. It relies on assumption that everything that could be possibly relevant is already built into the system. As a result the system of thoughts is reduced on segments which are – at first glance – immediately «understandable», comprehensible. At the same time that means that anything needed to gain a slightly deeper understanding is faded out or/ and externalized via link. While Wikipedia, taken just as one example, does exist basically as collection of links, the various segments are not genuinely part of an entity. We may find relations, while we miss out the reflection on relationalities.

Such constellation of a perception of reality as agglomeration of segmented items is also a fertile ground for emphasising that education is mainly a marketable service, easily performed online. Already today it is a market that overtakes economically many of the traditionally major markets (for example car manufacturing), yet it is a quantitative increase while the qualitative increase may be at least questioned. The principle of segmenting knowledge, based on banalization is most effective – and most reductionist. Everything is faded out as long as it is not part of this immediate focus and can be «digested» within this limited framework, which leads to dominance of stereotype,[3] clip and click thinking. This is further underlined by the fact that there is still a long way to go to arrive at quantum computing, which may, on the other hand, offer some solution to more complex issues, including the handling of contradictions instead of denying them[4].

[3] Evidence is for instance the fact that we find in social media usually closed circles of "friends meeting friends", information provided by what we liked … - while this is surely not entirely new it seems to be a pattern that is now more than ever coming to the fore.

[4] "Because quantum computing technology is so different from the information technology we use now, we have only a very limited ability to glimpse its future applications, or to project when these applications will come to fruition. While this uncertainty fuels optimism, our optimism should be tempered with caution. We may feel confident that quantum technology will have a substantial impact on society in the decades ahead, but we cannot be nearly so confident about the commercial potential of quantum technology in the near term, say the next five to ten years" [16].

According to O.D. Kozlova and A.S. Kinderknekht stereotypical and clip thinking give only the illusion of a thought process. Due to time scarcity and overlife in general, such thinking types are «a simulacrum that meets the immediate needs of a person» [10: 43]. It is not a matter of only a digital communication, but everyday life: «Sociocultural spheres dictate certain patterns of behavior in which spontaneity and irrationality, mosaic and fragmentation come to the fore» [Ibid.]. Current transition to ubiquitous computing [1] (Industry 4.0 is its reflection in managerial strategies) amplifies this trend: it is based on the idea of merging virtual and real worlds to make controlling the environment from any place in any time possible. Therefore digitalization of everything is considered inevitable. M. Falikman states that even «human higher psychological functions are becoming mostly externalized again due to the use of new digital tools» and what is even more radical: «borders between one's cognitive system and a technical device become blurred» [5]. We already have so called generation Z, people, born between app 1997 and 2012, who are not only «wholly and completely socially mediated» in Vygotsky's words, but also digitally mediated from their first steps in life. Clip-thinking could be even more common in modern network society in which social and media networks become institutionally linked. Jan A.G.M. van Dijk points out that «Inclusion and exclusion in both social and media networks combined might be a powerful creator of structural inequality in the network society» [19: 48].

So far, we can already see radical changes in social and societal cognition, emergence of specific conditions that undermine imaginative thinking, because stereotypes are easier to digitalise and communicate. In consequence we are facing the risk to enter highly illusionary interactions, i.e. constellations that are in fact more statements than interactions. As Niklas Luhman said everything is possible, but it's nothing that I can change. This includes the entire system of giving us this impression of ownership. Instructions for any technical devise include a huge amount of security instructions, what to do when we dispose this item, terms and conditions of use, while there is little in relative terms on how we actually use the devise. As much as capital is defined as legal code[5], we can say that consumables are defined in the same way: they are meaningful as part of a legally backed exchange process, independent of the any substantial aspect. This example helps us establish a deeper understanding of what purchases are actually about and how they complete economic process as exchange. This shift within the economic process from the use value to the exchange value, from production to exchange cannot be highlighted enough – and now it shifts further, being limited to a legal form: asset, transaction, and use are becoming three formal shells of what had been a complex relation of developing and evaluating needs, coordinating demand and supply and balancing exchange by negotiation.

As part of this development, the social and societal impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) is gradually gains in importance. In the second half of the XX century researchers identified digital divide as a specific form of inequality. Nowadays the model of three levels of digital divide is one of the most popular (e.g. works from authors from different parts of the world: [2, 7, 12, 17, 19]). The first level – physical access – is economic in its core and therefore considered more a problem of poor countries and also poor strata of the population globally. The second level, concerning digital skills and the third levels, looking at usage, i.e. the motivation to use ICT and ability to improve life chances thanks to ICT, are more difficult to assess. Their influence increased significantly with ICT development and current technological shifts in general. In fears of unemployment and precarisation, enhancing digital skills is often considered best way to engage with the transition. In Germany Industry 4.0 (in implementation since 2011) and in Russia Digital economy (in implementation since 2017) are strategic programs, aiming on reducing the wide spectrum of social consequences behind the skills gap and also on overcoming the gap by addressing the relevant issues as they emerge on the three levels. With the COVID-19 outbreak the digital divide became according to UN Secretary-General António Guterres «a Matter of Life and Death». But even in respect of the second level of the divide, digital education became the only option for millions of people. Not only access needed, some basic digital skills now a must have for further education. Digital education is often used **not to close gaps, but to open platforms on which people can act as part of a societal setting which is always as well socioeconomic setting.** Today, educating people is increasingly seen in the light of commerce: people go to universities or private institutions where education can be purchased. The best education one can get is increasingly limited and educators often sell something that is quantifiable but does not have in the extreme case a qualitative value[6]. This is very

[5] According to Katarina Pistor «Fundamentally, capital is made from two ingredients: an asset, and the legal code. I use the term «asset» broadly to denote any object, claim, skill, or idea, regardless of its form. In their unadulterated appearance, these simple assets are just that: a piece of dirt, a building, a promise to receive payment at a future date, an idea for a new drug, or a string of digital code. With the right legal coding, any of these assets can be turned into capital and thereby increase its propensity to create wealth for its holder(s)» [15].

[6] The very best educators, while they or the institutions that employ them, treat education also as commodity, still move on a path of promoting holisitic understanding. It is worthwhile to mention that many leading figures in the ICT-sector send their children to Waldorf-schools or other forms of «altenative education».

important when it comes to precarity and the modern way of educating for the digital age: education that can be obtained is actually not easily marketable: while people are trained for a specific job, it often obsolete when the training is completed as by that time the job profile changed.

The United Nations addresses the problem of the digital divide as «the new face of the development divide»[7] and an important challenge to achieve the sustainability goals. However, in countries that have relevant statistics, digital divide is usually measured per se, not as a part of bigger picture. For example, the Rosstat statistical compendiums about the Information Society in Russian Federation include data about internet usage of employed and unemployed and different digital skills usage by gender. Using it, we can measure gender divide in skills, yet we don't have data about connection between digital skills using and employment.

Wolfgang Streeck mentioned something like we prefer to buy a good like a mobile telephone privately making a private contract with the company instead of fighting collectively for the extension of networks. The same is true with public transport which is increasingly privatized not just in economic terms, but as well in their perspective of an attitudinal change: why should we deal with something that is genuinely political if it is easier and more promising if we go for a private solution. We have the click democracy – this a very much individualized process of politics and policies and we have an itemized understanding of policies: environment, kindergartens, traffic, energy supply etc. – every little issue made even smaller by localisation and orientation on special groups, fading out the embedding of the issue in a complex environmental, socioeconomic and historical context. In this context we find frequently the critique of totalitarianism – while it is here not the place to discuss this issue as a political question, it definitely has to be said that there is the danger of throwing out the baby with bathing water. While we are on the one experiencing the loss of holisitic thinking, we are at the same time witnessing the same mechanisms of digitisation being used as means of control. Every little step we make on the internet is registered and this control is somewhat sweetened by offering cookie control, a kind of weight watch on the internet. In fact, the control of cookies is not more than another illusion. If we go through the cookies, selecting and deselecting them, figuring out what they are about … and repeating this every time we visit a site is nearly impossible. Cum grano salis, we find the same problem that had been shown in an earlier study looking at the Cost of Reading Privacy Policies:

[7] Social development key pillar for «sustainable and resilient» world – Commission hears. Accessed: 07.03.2021. URL: https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084162

| Estimate | Individual time to read | Individual time to skim | National time to read | National time to skim |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lower bound | 181 hours / year | 81 hours / year | 39.9 billion hours / year | 17.9 billion hours / year |
| Point Estimate | 244 hours / year | 154 hours / year | 53.8 billion hours / year | 33.9 billion hours / year |
| Upper bound | 304 hours / year | 293 hours / year | 67.1 billion hours / year | 64.8 billion hours / year |

**Table 7: Annual time estimates for reading and skimming online privacy policies.**

Picture 1, source: [14: 17], Table 7

The alternative to the illusionary character of individualisation via itemisation is individualisation by branding, a strategy used in particular, though not only, in the fashion industry – a German online retailer actually presenting itself under the heading «About You». This is just one example of using fashion industry as means of identity policy. It suggests an entire world being represented in one item, the purchase of one commodity opening the access to an entire world: style being translated into life style and life style suggesting representing an entire life, possibly a new one, and offering in any case with every single life-style commodity a new life. Low prices, affordability also for less well-off strata of society, are a good reason to ignore that the individual product is part of mass production. In this way it is as well a kind of representation: if you can't beat them join them. If you can't really individualize these items join the best brands, representing what is good, what is good for you. It is as well a kind of naivization: we are all made to little dependent children.

## Conclusions

We have to revisit the concept of value chains because what we actually see is not a matter of value chains, but as B. Selwyn analyses, of poverty chains [18]. It is leaving many people behind, even entire countries in favour of those who are already rich. The Matthew principle is in place, although the rich are rich only in relation to and on the back of those further at the bottom.

This paper brings four seemingly distinct issues of contemporary development together, namely 1) the firm move to further separating use value and exchange value, solely focusing on the latter; 2) the push to further fetishism of commodities: 3) the itemisation of life, not only emerging from datafication and digitisation but strongly supported by it and 4) the digital divide. So far we want to outline a first attempt for further research under the working title of «overlife». It is aiming on analysing the social fact of the permanent overload of personal life in a new perspective. Different to previous studies, often taking a perspective of management, time use and psychological greed we suggest that overlife is emerging from the mode of production and translating

the bubble patterns of the «real economy» (which is increasingly «unreal» finance economy and economy of virtual markets) into bubble patterns of life, what we call overlife. We also pointed out disturbing cognitive and psychological changes connected to overlife. The development of further theoretical and empirical research surely needs to combine social psychology and economics in order to arrive at a holistic picture.


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***Authors declared contribution:***
**Peter Herrmann** – the article concept development, literature overview, analysis of research results, formulation of the research conclusions.
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# СОЦИАЛЬНЫЙ НАРЦИССИЗМ – КАК ОБЩЕСТВО ПОДТАЛКИВАЕТ НАС ПЕРЕОЦЕНИВАТЬ СВОИ ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ, ОСТАВЛЯЯ МНОГИХ ПОЗАДИ


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**Аннотация**
В рамках данной работы авторы предлагают концепцию «overlife» («сверхжизни», подразумевая её своеобразное «перепроизводство»). Идею нельзя назвать совсем новой, но предлагаемый термин «overlife» даёт возможность объединить различные проблемы современного общественного развития. В широком смысле «overlife» определяется как одновременное сгущение жизненных моделей и самой реальной жизни, её интенсификацию за счёт установления паттернов многозадачности. По мнению авторов, цена этого – поверхностная концепция жизни с помощью дифференцированной системы стандартизации. Упрощение познания и образования, не в последнюю очередь в контексте цифровизации, являются важными факторами. Очевидно усиливающийся контроль, который испытывает на себе каждый современный человек, идёт рука об руку с растущими трудностями понимания и наслаждения от преодоления вызовов, современной жизни. Несмотря на то, что речь о процессе, касающемся человечества и людей в целом, контроль и власть остаются в руках немногих отдельных людей и корпораций, проектирующих жизнь и общество. Парадоксально, но теоретически полученная возможность отвечать на сложные вопросы и разрабатывать долгосрочные перспективы превращается, по крайней мере, в условиях капитализма, в нарциссические идиосинкразии. Огромные суммы денег тратятся на удовлетворение эго, вместо того чтобы стратегически разрабатывать социально-экономические стратегии, направленные на решение таких серьёзных проблем, как бедность, экологические угрозы, цифровое неравенство и новые формы отупления масс.

**Ключевые слова:** сверхжизнь, перепроизводство жизни, цифровизация, образование, власть, контроль, цифровое неравенство

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