

## In the Waves of the Communication Flood without the “Old Testament Ark” of Culture

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### Abstract

The collection of essays “Sharing Opinions” published in 1997 by Miroljub Radojković, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences from Belgrade, also contains an essay from 1981 titled “The Communication Flood and the ‘Old Testament Ark’ of Culture”. The author of the essay offers a critical analysis of the changes brought about by the era’s new communications technologies and how they impact both society and an individual. Forty-three years later, the overview of how communication technology would grow in the future is especially impressive when viewed from today’s perspective. In the early 1980s, the technical concepts and predictions that the author wrote about - such as working from home, remote learning, and the smart watch - seemed like science fiction. The “look into the future” section of the aforementioned essay, in which communication technologies play a significant role in shaping culture and social connections, is, however, its most significant component. Radojković uses the “power of sociological imagination” to offer partially positive, but mostly negative responses to questions about the future of morality in that new society, as well as the place of art or religion. The author of this paper wants to examine the futuristic theses that were developed more than 40 years ago by looking at them through the lens of contemporary communication technology and its effects on society. The main research inquiry is derived from Miroljub Radojković’s thesis regarding the communication flood (or “floods of generality”) that will endanger the fundamental cultural values based on interpersonal interaction, human engagement with nature, and the symbolic environment, and it is as follows - why, in spite of the warnings, did man encounter the communication flood without the “Old Testament ark” of culture?

*Keywords:* communication technologies, man, society, culture, Miroljub Radojković

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## **In the Waves of the Communication Flood without the “Old Testament Ark” of Culture**

### **Technology paves the way for alienation**

The Communication Flood and the ‘Old Testament Ark’ of Culture<sup>3</sup>” by Miroslav Radojković begins with a common life situation. Namely, in public transport in the early ’80s, he noticed a teenager gazing into the distance with on-ear headphones through which music was playing from a Walkman in her purse, hanging around her neck. This scene was scientifically provocative enough for Radojković to highlight certain observations and questions. The girl, according to the author, probably enjoyed the music; however, the problem was that she was not in a position to share that music with others. “Her choice of music is entirely personal and selfish” (Radojković, 1997: 13).

Recalling McLuhan’s ideas about detribalization, the return of youth to rituals of openness, and total engagement in the game, Radojković wondered whether, according to the prominent Canadian theorist McLuhan, this annulment of the possibility of communication would cause horror. The teenager isolated and secluded herself with the help of a portable device: “She entangled the sense of hearing, the sense that most easily seduces us and engages us in contact with others. Is she expressing her ignorance or fear of seductive speech? What can her peer do? Can he approach her? He may be gifted with the greatest cleverness and wit, but for him, she remains ‘untouchable.’ The path of the seductive sense is occupied. The chance for communication is annulled” (Radojković, 1997: 13).

The author of the essay critically examines, or rather, questions whether the academic community at that time wrongly and prematurely accepted McLuhan’s position, according to which in the electronic civilization, there would be a “return to emotional and tactile communion among people,” or that in culture, “the creations and values that will be freely shared, through play and in complete communication, will resurrect” (Radojković, 1997: 14).

More than four decades later, we can confidently say that Miroslav Radojković’s criticism and pessimism regarding McLuhan’s theses about bringing people together through electronic communication technologies have been justified. Instead of one girl with a Walkman and on-ear headphones, there are at least ten boys and girls in public transport today who, thanks to smartphones and wireless headphones, have alienated themselves from their surroundings and nullified the possibility of communication with it.

In 2023, a smartphone is the equivalent of the 1981 Walkman, a portable audio player, with the added features such as Tetris, alarm, television, radio, and more. Due to all these options, the path to alienation through a mobile phone compared to the Walkman can be likened to a comparison between a macadam road and a fast highway. The author of this text observes daily, whether in public transport, a park,

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<sup>3</sup> The essay was first published in 1981, and later reissued in 1997 as part of the essay collection 'Sharing Opinions'.

or at the university, groups of young people who do not communicate because they are engrossed in their mobile phones.

Exploding Topics Company<sup>4</sup>, which aggregates and consolidates data from statistical research worldwide, published the results of global research on smartphone usage in January 2023. The findings revealed that, on average, every person who owns a smartphone spends 3 hours and 15 minutes per day using this device. Every fifth user spends more than 4 and a half hours per day looking at the screen. On average, each user checks their smartphone 58 times a day (notifications, etc.) (Howarth, 2023).

Taking into account Radojković's predictions, the data that stands out as particularly interesting is that the majority of respondents, or 52 percent, stated that they use social media on their mobile phones out of boredom.

Thanks to smart devices, the message that Professor Radojković mentioned describing how audio, video cassettes, or disks would enable us to create our own private stockpile of culture gains full meaning. It reads: "People, create your own stockpile of media culture and carry it with you" (Radojković, 1997: 16).

When it comes to content, smartphones have opened up almost limitless possibilities for us, whether it is searching for it or creating it.

A specialized portal dealing with mobile phones, "BankMyCell," published a study showing that the average adult, globally, spends 6 hours and 58 minutes simultaneously in the online space and in front of screens (mobile phone, computer, tablet, television). An average of 3 hours and 43 minutes of this time is reserved for the mobile phone. Particularly concerning is the data that "if we consider that the average person sleeps seven to eight hours a day, the result is that the average Internet user today spends more than 40% of their waking time online, or in front of a screen" (Turner, 2023).<sup>5</sup>

No mass medium has destroyed another, emphasizes Radojković, but each has demanded additional time and attention for itself. Every new medium has taken a portion of a person's time for itself, leading to the concerning data mentioned earlier. Each social media also takes a portion of one's time. The social networking service "Threads," owned by Meta, was launched on July 6, 2023. In just 5 days, it reached 100 million users. In light of this thesis, each user had to allocate additional time for that network in addition to the time spent on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, or any other network.

According to Radojković, the greatest danger to humanity is the non-renewability of time. "Every new victor in the field of communication technology (e.g., Threads) begins its era by providing evidence of 'subsistence' to people – the owners. But at the same time, it takes away a new segment of personal and social time, the natural dimension that humans waste most mercilessly, and for which, in the end, they regret most sincerely!" (Radojković, 1997: 17).

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<sup>4</sup> The complete research is available at the following link: <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/smartphone-usage-stats> (Accessed on 11/7/2023).

<sup>5</sup> The complete research is available at the following link: <https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/average-screen-time-on-iphone-android> (Accessed on 11/7/2023).

## **Culture and Art in the Cage of Communication Technologies**

In the era of traditional mass media dominance, print, radio, and television, Radojković labels these concepts as ‘nurseries of mass culture.’ According to him, mass media “cheapened cultural goods, standardized cultural creations, brought them closer to broad taste, translating culture from the ‘temples’ into people’s homes. In return, creativity became industrialized, favoring mass tastes inclined to decline, functional illiteracy spreads, language blurs, subcultures flourish, and there is resistance against culture” (Radojković, 1997: 15). In the age of modern Internet-based communication technologies, discussions about art and culture more often revolve around being slaves to mass consumption.

According to Colbert, in the field of culture, marketing “can be defined as the art of reaching market segments that are likely to be interested in the product, adapting commercial variables to the product (artistic work) – price, promotion, contact with a sufficient number of consumers, while simultaneously providing good service to customers and achieving goals in line with the mission of the cultural organization” (Colbert 2018, cited in Pinto de Sousa, 2021: 29).

We are contemporaries of supermarket culture and art. Art is everywhere around us, leaving galleries, museums, exhibition halls, and moving to online stores, online auctions, and giveaways. In 1981, Radojković saw this transfer of art and culture as a potentially positive direction. “As distribution channels multiply, there will be more space and eventually a need for works of art. Artists could experience demands from institutions and spontaneous affinities that exceed their overall creative possibilities. Because they will need to create for countless creative and distribution centers, for an enlarged audience and market” (Radojković, 1997: 15).

From the perspective of 2023, when it comes to positive developments, we can say that the only thing left is just potential. There is indeed space for art, but the artist may not be ready to respond creatively to such a market. The author of this text spoke in 2018 with an academic painter visibly burdened and upset by the job he accepted – painting over 30 art pieces. When asked who needed 30 paintings in a short period, the answer was a hotel. According to the applicable regulations in the Republic of Serbia for higher categorization of hotels, it is prescribed how many artistic paintings each room should have.

From the pessimistic point of view from 1981, Radojković wondered whether new works of art would have a chance to communicate in competition with those already in circulation. He questioned whether new works would survive the reproduction of old artistic pieces and if a new artistic act could attract the attention of someone creating their own collections, arranging, combining, or creating their own art (Radojković, 1997: 23). These questions have proven to be justified, as they lead to the following: Will a modern person, after returning from a visit to a museum or gallery, notice a painting on the wall of a hotel room and engage with it? Will a new artistic painting attract more attention than a reproduction on the opposite wall of a hotel room? Will a person notice the painting on the wall of a hotel room alongside the ability to create their own artistic image on their mobile

phone using artificial intelligence-based tools? All the answers point to the fact that communication technology has completely taken over culture and art. In 1981, Radojković wrote: “As far as culture is concerned, it already largely represents communication technology. If it dominates that domain and continues to spread further, the cultural creator (human, note by the author) is next in line” (Radojković, 1997: 26). Considering the development of artificial intelligence, culture is already in shackles, and the cultural creator is on the path to centuries of enslavement.

### **The “submerged” society and social relations**

The analysis discusses the thesis that communication technologies will completely change the way people are informed about politics and social movements. Radojković, in 1981, wrote about the “death” of traditional print media. Printed copies will be replaced by electronic newspapers, and each person will be able to choose content thanks to their personal decoder (Radojković, 1997: 16). This prediction has fully materialized. Initially, during the transitional period, we had online media accessed through computers. Printed editions still coexisted, but with significantly lower circulations. With the expansion of mobile phones and the development of informational applications by media houses, we can now speak of the extinction of printing rotogravure machines. Confirmation comes from the news on June 30, 2023, with the headline “Wiener Zeitung ceases printed edition after 320 years of existence and transitions to an online format.” These Viennese newspapers were the world’s oldest in terms of continuous publication. On the same day, 63 people lost their jobs, with 35 from the editorial board.

The key problem in online information-sharing characterized by speed is the lack of analytical processing of information by the media. Lee points out that smartphone users in the informational sense are more akin to “swarms of bees” that quickly gather around certain topics and leave them even faster, moving to another subject in an environment saturated with media. In the swarms that characterize modern communication technology, passive members predominate, processing data without emotions (Lee, 2015).

Radojković examines the progress of communication through satellite and Internet networks that will enable the development of a “videophone.” With this communication system, as Radojković predicted, people will be able to order various goods, “visit” relatives, conduct business meetings, all from the comfort of their own homes. Thanks to this type of communication, he wrote, students will not have to go to school. “On a two-way TV monitor, one can ‘attend’ school by following classes from a classroom without students.” He also questioned the need to go to work. “If physical tasks are transferred to robotic machines, the only function left for humans is control over the production process. The control panel can be moved to their office” (Radojković, 1997: 23). We were able to experience all these forms of communication during 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has become the “new normal.” Lee and his colleagues researched changes in social contacts in the United States during the pandemic. The main conclusion is that “face-

to-face” contact is a unique form of social contact that has stronger protective effects on individual mental health, and all other forms of social contact (e.g., videophone, etc.) cannot compensate for social distancing (Lee, et al., 2022). Monica Anderson and Emily Vogels from the Pew Research Center conducted a study with a sample of over 2,000 adult U.S. citizens, which showed that the majority of them (64%) emphasized that any electronic form of communication cannot replace “face-to-face” communication (Anderson, Vogels, 2020)<sup>6</sup>.

Radojković had a visionary insight into the use of today’s smartwatches as early as 1981. “If you happen to decide to travel or move away from home, it is enough to equip yourself with an indicator like a wristwatch. Its signals will show your family that you are well and healthy and how far you have moved away. [...] Man is a being that will ‘see’ and ‘know’ everything without moving from his own center of the world” (Radojković, 1997: 17-18). Today, we witness the phenomenon that a mandatory part of school equipment for children is a smartwatch<sup>7</sup>, through which parents can track their child’s whereabouts at any moment using an application on their mobile phones. Have schools become such unsafe places that parents no longer trust leaving their child there? What happened to the trust between parents and children? These are just some of the questions that need to be answered before accepting it as a normal occurrence for children to wear a movement indicator around their wrists. Adults have also transitioned from classic analogue and digital watches to smartwatches that have numerous features such as measuring blood pressure, stress levels, sleep quality, the number of steps taken, etc. At first glance, all of this seems useful; however, looking at the other side of the coin, this raises questions about sharing private data, such as the user’s health condition. Then there is the question of the reliability of these devices in terms of measuring vital parameters such as pulse and blood pressure, potentially causing anxiety or panic attacks in users due to potentially inaccurate measurements. We must agree that these are not medical devices. Research conducted by Liu and his colleagues showed that various sensors on smartwatches can jeopardize our private data, such as PIN codes, and any text typed on the watch’s keyboard (Liu, et al., 2015: 1285). It is a common practice that in the era of the “communication flood” (Radojković, 1997), we approach technological innovations with enthusiasm, without critically observing the issues that concern the negative impact on society and individuals. This approach is precisely what drags the modern human “to the bottom” and leaves him “without oxygen.”

In the early eighties, Radojković also highlighted the potential threat to religion with the development of communication technologies, raising the question of whether religion, a public sphere fundamentally based on belief, is endangered in

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<sup>6</sup> The complete research is available at the following link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/03/31/americans-turn-to-technology-during-covid-19-outbreak-say-an-outrage-would-be-a-problem/> (Accessed on 13/7/2023)

<sup>7</sup> An example of an offer from mobile operators in the Republic of Serbia: <https://www.yettel.rs/sr/privatni/usluge/digitalni-servisi/pametni-sat/> (Accessed on 26/7/2023)

the conditions of a possible communication flood (Radojković, 2017). The author emphasized the importance of interpersonal contact for religion. “Without direct contact, people have no confirmation of religiosity through temptation, and there is no religious confirmation through visions. The church based its influence, besides fear, secrets, and hope, in part on rituals, on group behavior, and on collective sentiments in the temple, i.e., in the gathering place of the faithful, clearly separated from the space of others. Already entering most sanctuaries creates a feeling of humility” (Radojković, 1997: 21). The influence of communication technology directed “pastors” towards believers, instead of the practice of people going together towards God. Referring to the example of radio-churches, Radojković wrote that in our “urgency to support the spiritual life of modern man in a way he is not accustomed to, we have forgotten one essential thing – total presence. If theologians are concerned about the fate of religion in the conditions of losing ‘complete presence’ already today, the possible total absence of presence tomorrow must raise suspicion about the fate not only of religion but also of culture” (Radojković, 1997: 22). The era of the Internet and social media has further complicated the relationship between believers and the church/religion. McClure notes that the use of the Internet has influenced an increase in the disconnection of believers, reducing the likelihood of maintaining a close connection to their religious tradition. Additionally, this author points out that although the Internet can be used to create or receive religious messages, it can simultaneously, due to the large amount of unchecked information, undermine the truthfulness of the religious message (McClure, 2017). Suitinen and Cooper write that the Covid-19 pandemic forced the church to behave entrepreneurially, that is, to adopt a “start-up mentality.” “Examined churches in the United Kingdom, Finland, and Namibia offered weekly services in an online format, and many expanded the offerings of their church communities using online technologies for small group meetings, children and youth activities, prayer meetings, and quizzes” (Suitinen, Cooper, 2021, cited in Bingaman, 2023: 12). Not only can we no longer speak of “total presence” in 2023, but today we must direct our attention to “total absence” and religion “at a distance,” where religious sacred rituals in temples are definitely lost. On the entrepreneurial platform of today’s churches, participants offer prayers and confessions in the privacy of their homes in front of a monitor or mobile phone screen. Suitinen and Cooper, in the conclusion of their research, state that the key challenge for contemporary religious organizations is the ability to design technology that will replace the experience of remote participants with the experience of teleparticipants, a kind of virtual reality in which a believer can feel everything at home that believers in the temple feel (Suitinen, Cooper, 2021, cited in Bingaman, 2023: 12).

At the end of this subsection, we will reflect on Radojković’s assumption about morality in the new communication environment. According to this author, the foundation of morality lies in “doing, an act done towards others and oneself.” If new communication technology, the author wonders, “physically isolates and immobilizes the individual in their habitat, the ultimate consequence is the question: Is morality possible? Will there remain the possibility of individuals touching each other without an intermediary, so that it can be evaluated as an act in accordance

or against moral norms, necessary to create new norms? [...] New communication technology offers ‘connections’ between individuals in channels without witnesses, indirectly, and therefore without ‘others’ with whom morality is spontaneously created” (Radojković, 1997: 21). More than 40 years later, we can note that morality is created with an intermediary (social media), without direct contact between individuals. Influential individuals (influencers) are now leaders in creating (im) morality. Millions of followers, among whom children and teenagers are the most numerous, devoid of the help of parents and the educational system in interpreting the moral and immoral, adopt (im)moral behavior patterns from those whose only reference is the number of followers and the number of views. According to this model, we may not be able to speak of the end of morality, but we can certainly talk about the greatest crisis. If humans as cultural creators do not find an adequate model to navigate this crisis, a certain end of morality will mean drowning in the waves of the communication flood.

### **Conclusion – a drowning person without a lifebelt**

At the end of the essay “The Communication Flood and the ‘Old Testament Ark’ of Culture,” Miroslav Radojković offered two potential paths to avoid, at that moment, pessimistic forecasts about the impact of communication technologies on humans, society, and culture.

The first path involves the search for “another human (Zen) beyond the circle of the already created and malignant industrial civilization. It leads to the Far East, to the origins of the past that still exist here and there on the planet” (Radojković, 1997: 24). However, the author foresaw what we witnessed today. “Going there, one does not get further than the new paradox. Because many are leaving those oases and laboriously breaking through to the West, right where we must return” (Ibidem). Indeed, oases of Eastern cultures like China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, India are now at the forefront of technological development on a global level. What is even more dangerous for humanity, these countries are now competing with the West in innovative technologies, which implies an even smaller likelihood that in the future we will “find” a person who will rely on another person without the intermediary of communication technologies.

The second path was traced toward the man of tomorrow. According to Radojković, this orientation required a “radical change in the individual conditions of existence that need to be saved from the grinding of technology. Such determination requires an immediate, willingly individual engagement and the power of social decisions. It demands that we turn away from resignation, not towards action. As a first step, it is necessary to carefully assess the direction in which the development of communication technology is truly heading. Second, it is essential to consider whom among the attractive servants we need to take on this journey” (Radojković, 1997: 25).

The contemporary man, whose salvation from the “grinding of technology” Radojković warned about 42 years ago, has not only failed to embark on the



correct path but has willingly subjected himself to the passion for technological advancements. Here, we find the answer to the fundamental research question posed at the beginning of this paper. For centuries, people have observed the development of technology with enthusiasm, and indeed, technology has been subject to human control for many centuries, facilitating daily life, work, communication, and information-sharing. However, with the advent of the “network of all networks” and the subsequent widespread digitization, the worldview of humans has undergone a complete transformation. Continuous technological innovations have occupied the mind of the modern human, offering faster communication, quicker access to information, speedier nourishment, faster work, but, in reality, they have only “sped up” human time. The term “speed-up” is in quotes because there has not truly been an acceleration of the passage of time; rather, technological and digital innovations, each on its own, have stolen a portion of daily time. As a result, people have lost time for some traditional norms such as face-to-face conversations, spending time in nature, and caring for it. Engrossed in digital technologies, people have lost precious personal and social time.

Such an irreparable loss of human time actually means that we are already “submerged” by the communication flood. The idea, or rather the warning, by Miroslav Radojković about Noah’s Ark and the “Old Testament Ark of Culture,” which would contain the foundations of human culture unburdened by digital communication technologies, can be seen as a long-overlooked opportunity for survival. The final “loss of oxygen” for humans as cultural creators will occur when they submit to artificial intelligence. It is already here, presenting itself as being in the service of humans. Let us remember that all previous technologies applied the same scenario, creating the illusion of a safe game in the waves, and today, people are drowning without a life jacket.

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## **U talasima komunikacionog potopa bez „starozavetnog kovčega“ kulture**

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### **Apstrakt**

U zbirci eseja „Podela mišljenja“ iz 1997. godine profesora Fakulteta političkih nauka iz Beograda Miroljuba Radojkovića, nalazi se i tekst iz 1981. godine pod nazivom Komunikacioni potop i „starozavetni kovčeg“ kulture. Autor u eseju kritički piše o promenama koje izazivaju nove komunikacione tehnologije tog vremena, te na koji način utiču na društvo i pojedinca. Gledano iz današnje perspektive, 43 godine kasnije, posebno je upečatljiva skica razvoja komunikacionih tehnologija u budućnosti. Tehnološke ideje i predviđanja o kojima je pisao autor, kao što su rad od kuće, učenje na daljinu i pametni sat, početkom 80-ih godina 20. veka delovale su kao naučna fantastika. Međutim najznačajniji segment pomenutog rada je „pogled u budućnost“ u kojoj su komunikacione tehnologije važna determinanta kulture i društvenih odnosa. Kakav je usud morala u tom novom okruženju, kakva će biti umetnost ili pozicija religije, pitanja su na koja Radojković „snagom sociološke imaginacije“ pruža delom i optimistične, ali pre svega pesimistične odgovore. Osnovni cilj autora ovog rada je da kroz prizmu komunikacionih tehnologija sadašnjice i njihovog uticaja na društvo analizira futurističke teze koje su nastale pre više od 40 godina. Osnovno istraživačko pitanje proizilazi iz teze Miroljuba Radojkovića o komunikacionom potopu („poplave opštila“) koji će ugroziti osnovne vrednosti kulture zasnovane na interakciji između ljudi, interakciji čoveka sa prirodom i simboličkom sredinom, te glasi – zbog čega je čovek, i pored upozorenja, komunikacioni potop dočekao bez „starozavetnog kovčega“ kulture?.

*Ključne reči:* komunikacione tehnologije, čovek, društvo, kultura, Miroljub Radojković

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