

The digital conscious: the becoming of the Jungian collective unconscious

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Abstract

The rise of the digital domain has created a new virtual world that is eternal and ethereal and with it, has created a

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philosophical entropy state where more than ever technology has superseded cultural thought and ethics. What Jung once described as the collective unconscious was deemed once as being parapsychology or too esoteric is now a conscious reality of creation. We now, accidentally or intentionally, take part in creating a collective unconscious that more than ever has a visible presence and massive direct and indirect effect on our cultural groups as well as having a global unconscious appeal.

Keywords: collective unconscious; internet; subculture;
psyche; digital world

In today's world the main resource and obsession is no longer gold or oil but data and its communication thereof.³ The new digital hyper-connected constantly "on" and "online" world has evolved both in the form of the technology and its implication on the human, culture and psyche, to the very language and structure of interaction and communication. All of this has changed faster than we have been able to digest, ingest and comprehend. As Eric Schmidt, the chief executive of Google, said: "The internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy we've ever had."⁴

The rise of the digital domain has most definitely created a new world in the virtual sphere that is eternal and ethereal and with it, has created a philosophical state of entropy where more than ever technology has superseded cultural thoughts and ethics. This is not only a virtual creation but now has complete influence over our real world communication and even actual physical, biological effects on our brain structure and development which has been and still is being altered to adapt to it.⁵

With this, we need to turn our attention to not only the individual or the social structure but also to the subconscious at a larger collective scale, the new Collective Unconscious, which is now in the making; this Jungian concept which is now being birthed as both conscious creation and unconscious becoming.

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³ *The Economist*, "The world's most valuable resource," May 6, 2017.

⁴ Jerome Taylor, "Google chief: my fears for Generation Facebook," *The Independent*, August 18, 2010.

⁵ Tim Hinchliffe, "How social media affects our collective unconscious," *The Sociable*, November 1, 2017.

What Jung described as the collective unconscious was once deemed as being scientifically unverifiable, mere parapsychology, or simply too esoteric to take seriously is now, while still controversial to some, one of the most used and influential theories for society and analysis on various levels: “few people have had as much influence on modern psychology as Carl Jung.”⁶

We now, accidentally or intentionally, take part in creating a collective unconscious that more than ever has a visible presence and massive direct and indirect effect on our cultural groups as well as having a global unconscious appeal. It is true that when the internet was first launched it was too early to discuss such “deep structures such as the (sub)conscious. But now that we live entirely in the time of social media, it has become pertinent to do precisely that: link *techné* with *psyche*.”⁷

Let us first turn to Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious to fully comprehend it, and then extend it onto today’s digital dimension.

At first the concept of the unconscious was limited to denoting the state of repressed or forgotten contents. Even with Freud, who makes the unconscious – at least metaphorically – take the stage as the acting subject, it is really nothing but the gathering place of forgotten and repressed contents, and has a functional significance thanks only to these. For Freud, accordingly, the unconscious is of an exclusively personal nature, although he was aware of its archaic and mythological thought-forms.

A more or less superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal. I call it the *personal unconscious*. But this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the *collective unconscious*. I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a supra-personal nature which is present in every one of us.⁸

From its evolution and break from Freud’s vision of a personal unconscious to the development of the collective unconscious Jung brought into being a realization of the psyche of the collective; “Psychic contents that belong not to one individual but to a society, a people or the human race in general.”⁹ The individual is a sum of these psychic collective contents and in turn re-invests and adds back into this amalgamation thus it itself is a growing evolving entity separate and yet invested within each individual.^{10 11}

This now has been greatly used and adapted by many different schools of thought and parts of society, commerce, spirituality and education. “The existence of collective personas are implicit in: Marketing to target groups; assessing opinion,”¹² in the digital world the collective unconscious is already being analyzed for marketing, promotions, education, military, politics... With the importance of the concept of the collective unconscious so highly established today, even if it remains somewhat problematic for many, there is a vital need to see its most recent and prominent manifestation within the internet.

In the new world of “you are what you share,”¹³ not only individually but even collectively, with or without full advertence¹⁴, internet and social media has transformed from “hype and online service into essential infrastructure, just like letters and telegrams and the telephone used to be. It is precisely at this juncture of ‘becoming infrastructure’ that we (re)open the ideology file.”¹⁵ Various studies have shown that the fear of losing connection for just one day now is capable of giving people strong feeling of depression, isolation and anxiety¹⁶, it is to this extent that we have

⁶ “The Jungian model of the psyche,” *Journal Psyche*, accessed November 15, 2018.

⁷ Geert Lovink, “On social media ideology,” *E-Flux Journal*, no. 75 (2016).

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Routledge, 2014), i.

⁹ Firth Luton, “What is the collective unconscious?” *Firth Luton Articles*, accessed November 21, 2018.

¹⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Structure of the Psyche*, vol. 7 of *Collected Works* (Pantheon, 1970). par. 244.

¹¹ *Journal Psyche*, “Jungian model.”

¹² Stephen Brock Schafer, *Exploring the Collective Unconscious in the Age of Digital Media* (IGI Global, 2016), 17.

¹³ Charles Leadbeater, *We Think: The Power Of Mass Creativity* (Profile Books, 2009).

¹⁴ Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (Knopf, 2013).

¹⁵ Lovink, “Social media ideology.”

¹⁶ Rachel Nuwer, “What if the Internet stopped working for a day?” *BBC Future Now*, accessed September 15, 2018.

become 'connected' and that this now forms part of our very lives and being. As Bill Gates said: "The Internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow."¹⁷

The internet and social media were created and then developed by military in conjunction with industry and education, all of whom now fear their own creation for its force that it is self-generating as a collective entity.¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard said that social media can be understood as "reciprocal spaces of speech and response"¹⁹ where we are in a system of constant replying incessantly and speaking continuously to offer up more for others to reply and repeat. With the new digital world we are no longer defined just by geography and socio-economic status and genetics, we are now limitless and borderless.²⁰ We are not defined by the software or hardware we use, these are not our entrapments, we return and reside within the digital "social sphere."²¹

Elon Musk, the technology mogul, said that "in terms of the Internet, it's like humanity acquiring a collective nervous system. Whereas previously we were more like a collection of cells that communicated by diffusion. With the advent of the Internet, it was suddenly like we got a nervous system. It's a hugely impactful thing [sic]"²² Even Stephen Hawking who was very weary of Social Media and being 'connected' finally spoke out saying how important it was that "we are all now connected by the internet, like neurons in a giant brain."²³

The phenomenon of being connected seems to allow us to do what we are born to do: to communicate; this is what we are "hardwired for in the first place – as humans."²⁴ The social media is a "thrust of the collective unconscious to inseminate creatively the spirit of our time with the ageless truth that we live or die via interconnection."²⁵

Many today are using the digital domain to investigate its effect on collective unconscious and to understand the affects this in turn has on the personal psyche.^{26 27 28} But the digital domain is more than a place to study the effects or to look back and see the progression of development in archival manner of the collective unconscious and its effects on the personal psyche of each.²⁹ The collective unconscious is much more than a portal of communication or nexus for exchange of ideas.

The Internet and social media has now become a corporeal/non-corporeal embodiment of the Jung's collective unconscious. It is a domain where nothing is forgotten and even cannot be deleted; the "impossibility of erasing"³⁰ where the "reciprocity"³¹ of the space forces your continuous contribution and involvement, where new content is constantly developed out of the old and merged into a new again; a space where we are "all doing far more than contributing to a global conversation. We're helping to shape a new global culture."³²

¹⁷ Axelle Tssandier, "Citizens of the Internet," *Huffington Post*, March 3, 2014.

¹⁸ Vladelna Benson, Ronald Tuninga, and George Saridakis, *Analyzing the Strategic Role of Social Networking in Firm Growth and Productivity* (IGI Global, 2017), 202.

¹⁹ Geert Lovink, "What is the social in social media?" *E-Flux Journal*, no. 40 (2012).

²⁰ Tssandier, "Citizens."

²¹ Lovink, "Social media ideology."

²² JR MacGregor, *Elon Musk: Moving the World One Technology at a Time* (CAC Publishing, 2018).

²³ Jon Swartz, "Q&A with Stephen Hawking," *USA Today*, accessed October 18, 2018.

²⁴ Francois Gossieaux, *The Hyper-Social Organization: Eclipse Your Competition by Leveraging Social Media* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2010).

²⁵ Sharon Heath, "A Jungian Alice in social media land: some reflections on solastalgia, kinship, libido, and tribes formed on Facebook," *Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche*, no. 6 (2012): 111.

²⁶ Shaikat Hossain, "The Internet as a tool for studying the collective unconscious," *Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2012).

²⁷ Hinchliffe, "Social media."

²⁸ Haim Weinberg, "Group analysis, large groups, and the Internet unconscious" (PhD diss., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2006).

²⁹ Kelsey Perett, "Lily Morris, the American Dream, and the collective unconscious of social media," *Martha's Vineyard: Arts and Ideas*, accessed November 2, 2018.

³⁰ MacGregor, *Elon Musk*.

³¹ Lovink, "Social in social media."

³² Alex Lickerman, "Of mirror neurons and social media: how neurology creates culture and social media accelerates it," *Psychology Today*, March 20, 2011.

Is this not what Jung speaks of when he speaks of the collective unconscious “as the *totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious*,” separating the concept from conventional concept of the mind, which is generally limited to the processes of the conscious brain alone.”³³

Slavoj Žižek announces that what truly impresses him most with the virtual and digital world is that it “retroactively enables us to discover to what extent our self has always been virtual. Even the most physical self-experience has a symbolic, virtual element in it.”³⁴ There are great parallels to what Jung speaks of with mythology and symbolism and the archetypes within the collective unconscious³⁵; all of which are easily discernable in today’s digital world. Our influences and role models forming new archetypes and folding into the old versions and creating new variations therein of. All of which fulfilling and fitting neatly within an adapted version of Jung’s main concepts and theories.

Marshall McLuhan had anticipated that “the real strength of social media lays in the extension of the users virtual Persona and his or her contribution towards the formation of a collective global consciousness.”³⁶ This now is more than ever true and meets perfectly with the idea that “the collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind’s evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual.”³⁷ Thus the internet and social media are created by contribution: consciously and unconsciously which amalgamate to create archetypes and mythology and influencers... it is a place where we share and participate as well as digest and ingest. The continuous contributions and algorithms that are intertwined in what seems to be becoming a quantum entropic world, have created this new collective unconscious which is created by us and we are born into it as well. It has taken a both physical manifestations in binary language and physical hard disk space of storage and maintains a “divine-like”³⁸ (to borrow terms from Jung) nature where it is also ethereal and somewhat supra-human developing and growing and existing past each of us personally and yet reflecting within each of us. We are now contributing to create a digital conscious collective unconscious which then takes a big part in defining and creating our own personal psyche. This is the age of the digital conscious collective unconscious.

Authors’ contributions

This article was conceived and written as a cooperation between the two authors as part of their work on media, culture and transcendence.

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³³ *Journal Psyche*, “Jungian model.”

³⁴ Geert Lovink, “Civil society, fanaticism, and digital reality: a conversation with Slavoj Žižek,” *C Theory*, vol. 2, no. 21 (1996).

³⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Persona as a Segment of the Collective Psyche*, vol. 8 of *Collected Works* (Pantheon, 1970), 325.

³⁶ Benson, et al, *Analyzing*.

³⁷ Jung, *Persona*, 342.

³⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Psychology of the Transference* (Routledge, 1946), 389.

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