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*Memory is inexplicable*  
**Virginia Woolf, Orlando**

## **MEDIA MESSAGE AS A CARRIER OF CULTURAL MEMORY**

### **Introduction**

Media messages play the role of memory carriers as they obviously constitute a significant source of cultural, sociological, historical and social information. In a way, by nature, they memorize the elements of reality, which – according to the semiotic theory of representation – are media constructs that refer to different aspects and fragments of the real life. Many of them are self-referential or self-topical. That results in the present trend of promoting celebrities, celestoids and the so called media personalities, which is a specific sign of the times. Their presence in the public space of media has an impact on the changes in the ways of understanding popularity, attractiveness or even authority as examples to be followed.

### **1. Media, cultural memory and socialization processes**

Despite the fact that a lot of media, especially the new ones, are concerned first of all with the present situation and they preserve current affairs (e.g. video blogs, real time Internet communication, SMS and MMS), due to their character and the ideology of various communication technologies they are becoming an element, product and a catalyst of contemporary culture. The culture does not concern only the elements of the social environment that are directly related to media, but also - although not only – a set of social behavior that result from the socializing, educational and culture-creating power and role of media, new media including. Media messages, while participating in such socializing processes, are also an element of cultural memory. Jan Assman defined this phenomenon in the following way:

„The concept of cultural memory refers to the common memory of people. We used to consider memory as a purely internal phenomenon, a function of an individual's brain and the object of investigations conducted by physiologists, neurologists or psychologists, but not by the historians of culture. However, it is not the individual

skill and will that decide on what individual memory acquires and stores but also external conditions – social and cultural ones”<sup>1</sup>.

Then the author discussed three other areas of memory: mimetic memory (which stores the patterns of behavior), memory of things that is included in products made by man, which reflect his understanding of esthetics and functionality, and communicative memory, related to the acquisition of languages and principles of effective communication. At present, in order to extend Assman’s way of thinking as regards communicative memory, one should also take into considerations the areas that are related to new forms of communication and to new media.

## **2. Functions of media messages: between exhibitionism and authotherapy**

One can observe -mainly among young people- a compulsion to register their own experiences and the experiences of the others that they witness; there is a need to present oneself, one’s privacy, body, emotions and social relations. This is a kind of media exhibitionism, aiming at the creation of identity, both individual, personal and that of the generation. It happens that only the preservation, i.e. an externalization and some objectification enables an individual to understand oneself, to complete one’s own image, to self-reflect and to achieve social self-promotion. In a more metaphoric way one can say that the creator can see him/herself in the product and look at him/herself using it; we feel more and more frequently the need to have a medium in which we can communicate with ourselves and to conduct intrapersonal dialogue. Sometimes the function of the medium is played by a particular person: a priest, therapist or a friend – but infrequently it is the communication technology .

When communicating with each other in a mediatized way, we usually leave the traces of our activity, thanks to which the others can not only get to know us but also they can gain a lot of valuable information. That kind of production also creates dynamic emotional communities<sup>2</sup>, which impose different meanings to the same messages, depending on sociodemographic features and generation experiences of particular individuals. The above mentioned self-promotional activity, which is supported by new media, e.g. Facebook or Nasza Klasa not only frequently exceeds good taste (the participants often reveal the most

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<sup>1</sup> J. Assman, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość tożsamość cywilizacjach starożytnych*, translated by A. Kryczyńska – Pham, introduction and scientific edition: R. Traba, Warszawa 2008, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> W. J. Burszta, , *Kultura popularna jako wspólnota uczuciowa* [in:] W. Godzic et al., ed., *Kultura popularna*, Kraków 2002.

intimate details of their day-to-day existence) but also poses a danger (e.g. the information about the family wealth may attract various illegal actions). It happened extremely rapidly that the users of new media accepted the rules and logics of the performance and supervising societies often disregarding the negative consequences of their conduct that was performed in good faith but without sufficient caution. New technologies frequently trigger irrational behavior (e.g. bullying unknown people in the cyberspace), which results in serious legal, economic or social consequences in the so called real reality.

### **3. Legitimization of violence in media**

Media do not only create the space where such tendencies can be expressed, but they also contribute to their escalation by legitimizing the existence of the performances of cruelty, sexual deviations and dying. They often arouse in people some ill interest in such problems. The shift of the boundary of social acceptance for the existence and presentation of such messages constitutes the beginning of an anthropological experiment on man who is performing for people who themselves investigate the boundaries of such tolerance and the acceptance for the phenomena that are relatively new. Thanks to the arranging function of culture – among other things – it is possible to reveal some “dark” sides of human personality that are related with the area of inclinations by means of forms accepted by the culture itself. For example, the introduction of such themes into conventions of genre, e.g. in horror films of reality shows, is a form of sublimation of such tendencies. The other area is the art and all artistic activities that explore and reveal the power of human inclinations, especially when perseveration issues appear referring to the area of culture, collective consciousness and sub-consciousness (e.g. sex, sexuality, aggression). Frequently, in order to achieve a higher level of sublimation, they are connected with social, cultural, moral or political issues (e.g. with identity, fight for equal rights, overthrowing negative sexual stereotypes, liberalization of law or moral principles).

Moreover, the new forms reveal the demiurgic ambitions of man that are usually related with the improvement of the appearance or with the encouragement of others to commence such actions<sup>3</sup>. The process of socialization, in which media and the new media play an active role, promotes increasingly the idea that man is not only responsible for his/her spiritual, intellectual and internal development but he/she should constantly make efforts to improve

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<sup>3</sup> A. Wiczorkiewicz, *Lustro i skalpel* [in:] W. Godzic, M. Żakowski (ed.), *Gadżety popkultury. Społeczne życie przedmiotów*, Warszawa 2007.

one's own image in compliance with the patterns provided by the cultural system. The feelings of self-fulfillment, self-realization and achievement of success are based more and more on the external aspects of "being an individual in the world": on interpersonal attractiveness, social intelligence, adequate choice and design of appearance (through clothes, hair-style, make-up and other body ornaments and the assistance of specialists (stylists, media advisers, fashion designers and self-development coaches).

#### **4. Compulsion to improve oneself and the world**

The compulsion to improve oneself and one's own surrounding in order to make it human-friendly and „intelligent” can be seen everywhere. People constantly - and this is evidently the sign of times - extend their potentialities, both biological, communicative and exploratory ones. In a relatively short time they can get to know (in the sense of overviewing) the world (even if it is the role of a post-tourist, as John Urry<sup>4</sup> put it) or people (with the application of various forms of the Internet communication); they get quickly saturated and look for new attractions and novelties. The expectations grow more and more rapidly, and the need for more intensive experiences is becoming dangerous to man, who may not endure biologically or mentally the level of stress related with such life-style. One of the causes of technological acceleration is the increase of the addiction to psycho-active substances (alcohol, medications, drugs, afterburners), extreme behavior (activities when life is at stake, e.g. bungee jumping, car races or ones that are risky: hazard, casual sex) and new technologies. The compulsion to participate in continuous change, to experience the acceleration and speed can also be seen in social relationships (e.g. the change of life partners, work or surrounding) and also in the compulsion to be in constant move and to change places.

It is a paradox that man does not change (on the biological level) as rapidly as the civilization which he created and which gets out of his control, often surprising him with its degree of technological autonomy. According to Grażyna Gajewska in her *Introduction to discussion on man's relation to technology*, the advance of technology frequently surprises SF authors and blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. John Clute, a SF writer even took the risk to determine the date when fantasy became reality. It was 1957, in the morning before the launch of the soviet Sputnik, which was looked forward to by the authors and readers of the *Astounding* science-fiction magazine. This was when they realized that the

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<sup>4</sup> J. Urry, *Spojrzenie turysty*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 149 – 151.

future described by SF magazines is becoming a reality<sup>5</sup>. Visions created by writers, artists, technophiles and technophobes suddenly came true, which motivated people to even greater effort and development. However, the realization of several scientific projects is more and more often blocked by moral, ethical, social and legal aspects.

Although, the progress in genetic engineering, transplantology and plastic surgery increased the length of human life and improved its quality, it also introduced a dangerous idea that human body is becoming an element to be produced, improved and modified. It may be shaped and may also be the source of precious organs that save lives to other people. Body is becoming a significant element of our identity that we constantly construct and shape in the current times of liquid identity. (Avatars are an example how attached we are even to our virtual corporeality). Despite a dynamic growth of various forms of therapy, personal development, support and management of personal resources and NLP we are still delayed as regards the mental level. The artificial conviction on the omnipotence of a skillful and dynamic individual results in the fact that man has no time to be fully engaged in any kind of relation although (under the pressure of society) she/she participates in many areas of social life in a virtual (the Internet communication, teleconferences), superficial, brief and partial way. Instead of durable and deepened relations, man creates a number of messages and participates, most commonly via new technologies, in many initiatives.

## **5. Social communication in the era of new technologies**

The computer screen has become a basic social interface. Human contacts are not intensified but they are rather based on technological contact points (mobile phones, skype, e-mails) that make it possible "to be in touch". A lack of connection, a computer system breakdown or a modem that is out of work, they all generate aggression, depression and anxiety because physical proximity of these technologies with a temporary disappearance of the service are perceived as personal weakness, disability or illness. It is worthwhile mentioning how our attitude to various technological extensions of human beings has changed, e.g. we are eager to wear an earphone that enables a phone contact but we are still ashamed of in-ear hearing aids. The first invention is a technological gadget and an individual wearing it informs indirectly the surrounding that he/she is an individual professionally active and open to the world, while the other enables the contact with the world and compensates

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<sup>5</sup> G. Gajewska, *Wstęp do dyskusji o mariażu człowieka z technologią* [w:] G. Gajewska, J.Jagielski (red.), *Klan cyborgów*, Gniezno 2007, s. 7.

hearing disability. The lack of contact, irrespectively of the reasons (either technological or neurological), results in the increase of an individual's isolation and - in extreme cases - to total loneliness in the crowd. The present-day technological gadgets are a visible evidence of how close people want to be to new technologies, how quickly and willingly they introduce them to their everyday lives and learn how to operate them in active communication.

## **6. Users and producers – performatization of receiver behavior**

At present, in the participation culture there are not only the elements preserved in media representation (e.g. in the mainstream media) significant but also the forms of texts and activities on the part of receivers and users that often challenge primary messages. There is a wide range of activities within the concept of *culture jamming*, which constitute some kind of contest against the culture mainstream or – simply – are an attack on elements that appear in public space (e.g. commercial advertising, election posters, political slogans on billboards). In the case of film art, the film dispositive is more and more willingly replaced by the surrounding of interactive media in which a film may function (from DVD recordings to a kind of cinephilia related to YouTube). Strange enough, the reception of such media message, especially of a “film in a cinema” that not so long ago was mainly identified with the area of popular culture (with the exclusion of the author's cinema, as far as the topic and not the reception strategy is concerned) has become an example of anachronic – because passive – form of participation in culture. The level of performatization of the receiver behavior is so high that receivers produce films about themselves and not necessarily solely for themselves, thus contributing to the increase of infomass. The quality of such production varies for obvious reasons, but – irrespectively of their contents and esthetical value – it is important to realize that such “production” trend has appeared in contemporary culture.

In that context, the semantic meaning of the notion *amateur* is expanding and changing as in the new cultural situation such a term refers to individuals who are not formally employed by media institutions but have a professional, and often specialist knowledge on selected media messages, including production methods. Such cases are mentioned by the authors of *Wikinomics*<sup>6</sup>, who describe a new model of outsourcing in which a part of tasks is not delegated to external entities (e.g. other companies) but to a spontaneously operating group of specialists. Wikipedia, the most significant product of the Web 2.0 culture is functioning and expanding on the basis of such co-operation of volunteers. Its rapid

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<sup>6</sup> D. Tapscott, A. D. Williams, *Wikinomia. O globalnej współpracy, która zmienia wszystko*, Warszawa 2008.

development modifies significantly the traditional way of treating such categories as scientific authority, institutional system of knowledge verification or the credibility and reliability of information.

## **7. Carriers of individual memory**

The urge to preserve the traces of one's existence, and sometimes to hand over one's life wisdom to the next generations can be observed among middle-aged and senior users, which usually shows in writing books, both documentary, social and autobiographical ones, etc. From the point of view of a historian of culture it is interesting to note that each age group chooses the medium that suits them as regards the generation. Thus, young users of the media sphere turn to audiovisual production, while the older ones to the sphere of "writing". As Aleida Assman puts it "every medium opens a different, specific access to cultural memory. Writing follows the language and registers other elements in a different way than pictures, which register impressions and experiences regardless of the language"<sup>7</sup>. A similar approach to the new media is presented by Lev Manovich<sup>8</sup>.

Some of these productions – irrespectively of the conscious, thus declared intentions of the authors – play a therapeutic role, while some other aim at shaping the memory of the author him/herself among future generations (Jan Assman calls it a prospective memory)<sup>9</sup>. As a result of the amazing speed of changes in different aspects of the contemporary world, people – who experience the fear of passing time - wish to leave something behind, to leave a trace in human memory by the application of various media. Some people collect objects and treat them as semiophores (a term coined by Krzysztof Pomian<sup>10</sup>), the others create something completely new, using accessible tools and technologies.

## **8. Institutions of culture and cultural memory**

As a result of the above mentioned changes, the attitude to several social institutions (e.g. to family) or cultural institutions (e.g. to cinemas, museums) also undergoes some changes. As far as the first group is concerned, it should be emphasized that in the case of

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<sup>7</sup> A. Assman, *Przestrzenie pamięci. Formy i przemiany pamięci kulturowej* [in:] M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa*, Kraków 2009, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> L. Manovich, *Język nowych mediów*, translated by. P. Cyprijański, Warszawa 2006.

<sup>9</sup> J. Assman, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, translated by. A. Kryczyńska-Pham, introduction and scientific edition by R. Traba, Warszawa 2008, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> K. Pomian, *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci*, Lublin 2006.

young generation the age of gaining emotional and social maturity has been shifted; young people postpone the decisions to get married, to found families, i.e. to achieve the moment of stability. As far as the cultural institutions are concerned, many of them – regardless of their primary functions – turn into heritage parks, which are a good object of research, but rather for an ethnographer or historian of culture and not an average customer who is accustomed to more interactive and personalized forms of contact and expects to join actively or even co-create several experiences and cultural narratives being typical for such institutions.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century young people do not go to the cinema to watch “ordinary” films ( we are not talking here about 3-D technology), because cinema is associated with other traditional “antique” elements of modern world such as (non interactive) museum or gallery. Unexpectedly quickly did such traditional institutions stop meeting the needs and reflecting generational experiences of subsequent generations. Thus, it is amusing to recall Karol Irzykowski’s comment expressed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that people attend cinemas despite being ashamed of it, as it is something common and beyond the dignity of the elite. At present, going to the cinema, e.g. to arts cinema may be perceived as the expression of nostalgia for the inevitably passing culture. Post-modern culture requires new institutions and specialists who play the roles both of animators and custodians of memory. A definite change can be observed in many contemporary museums that are based on interactive technologies or in galleries that present the art of the new media<sup>11</sup>. However, institutional transformation is still behind the dynamic development of culture and the motivation of its creators, receivers and users.

## **9. The culture of recycling**

Media do not only preserve the world „here and now” . It should be noted – which has been emphasized by Marcin Kula – that each of the messages has its own history<sup>12</sup>. The history includes the time when the text was created and the period of its functioning in collective memory, both in the “output” form and in intertextual connotations. It is interesting that in the case of numerous receivers the knowledge on the “output” text (the architext) is shaped through the knowledge of the new ones that were created chronologically later. That phenomenon is supported by a dynamically developing culture of remix and recycling and by the nostalgia of certain discursive communities for the selected messages that have connotations with emotions and recollections related, for example, with generation

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<sup>11</sup> O tych zagadnieniach kompleksowo pisze R. W. Kluszczyński, *Sztuka interaktywna. Od dzieła instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu*, Warszawa 2010.

<sup>12</sup> M. Kula, , *Nośniki pamięci historycznej*, Warszawa 2002.

experiences<sup>13</sup>. Some of such messages are considered cult messages and maintain that status simultaneously among several generations. Cultural recycling is sometimes the only form of contact with the past, including the element of the so called high culture; it facilitates the circulation of selected topics and forms in various cultural circuits among different groups of users. Thus, it is a strategy of maintaining the memory about the culture that is gradually passing. Infrequently, there are forms of its modernization e.g. in folk music or hip-hop music where the elements of various texts (samples, texts from other songs, popular slang expressions) are used and actively transformed. As a result, the investigation of various cultural texts provides some sociological, ethnographic and cultural knowledge about their creators, users and opponents.

A crucial role in the promotion of older messages is played by film or TV adaptations of literary texts and also computer games that popularize the plots of written classics. Media formats should also be mentioned as they are all based on the nostalgia for the past, for example the *Złote przeboje* (Golden hits) programme, which function and build the identity of their brand through the repetition. Such categories as sampling, loop or remix are the best examples of musical repetition as well as the existence of such groups as cover or tribute bands<sup>14</sup>. The aesthetics of repetition brings relief in the time of dynamic change and connects the past with the present in the cognitive experience of man, thus having an impact on cultural continuity.

Cultural adaptations of media formats constitute a separate category. Their analysis is helpful in the research concerning intercultural comparison. According to Henry Jenkins, in the culture of convergence – as Henry Jenkins calls the co-existence of the new and old media and the phenomena related - trans-media novels appear that are based on a particular story or its selected elements and apply various media platforms, hoping for a “poacher” behavior on the part of the media receivers and users<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> R. Drozdowski, , *Obraza na obrazy. Strategie społecznego oporu wobec obrazów dominujących*, Poznań 2009; the author introduces the notion of nostalgia iconography.

<sup>14</sup> More about it in A. Iwonicka, *Kultura popularna kultura recyklingu – casusu muzyki rozrywkowej* [in:] P. Dudek, M. Kuś (ed.), *Zawartość mediów masowych: od kultury popularnej przez studia genderowe do języka komunikowania*, Toruń 2010, pp. 13 – 20.

<sup>15</sup> H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, translated by M. Bernatowicz, More in Filiciak, Warszawa 2007.

## 10. Selected theories of the replication of cultural contents and media development

The replication and circulation of particular topics at the cost of the exclusion of other ones are described – among others – by the neo-evolutionist theory of culture. Analogically to the biosphere, the idiosphere evolves in accordance with the principles of natural selection: mems, i.e. cultural information does not only aim at the reproduction but also accelerates the development of media that encourage their multiplication<sup>16</sup>. The follower of Marshall McLuhan, Paul Levinson who is a supporter of the evolutionary theory of media – inspired, as he confessed by the “evolutionary epistemology” of Donald Cambell - wrote in his “The Soft Edge” that in the history of information technology and its contemporary configurations and plans for the future, evolutionary dynamics can be seen, which in many respects resembles the one that governs the natural organic world. The complex evolutionary process of information media resembles the evolution of the living creatures that constitutes the background for the subsequent episodes in the history of information technology and its impact on the world. Through the analysis of those episodes he analyzed its impact on the human environment and used it as the symptom, explanation or sometimes the negation of a broader theory of the evolution of technology<sup>17</sup>.

Jean-Louis Comoli in his essay *Machines of the Visible* points out to the logics and specific mechanism of technological progress. However, he makes use of the Marxist concepts of media development and emphasizes – among other things – the role of various social, political and economic configurations in the evolution of cameras and representations. The two approaches: the evolutionary and the critical (Marxist) research have one thing in common: the attempt to grasp the steering mechanism of the development of particular technologies and indirectly, the aesthetical conventions and the contents related. The circulation aspect of the contents within various textual practices has been the subject of intertextual research for years, and in the context of the new media the category of paratextuality has become the focus of researchers' interest<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> More on the subject Cf.. D. Wężowicz–Ziółkowska, *Heterotrofizm, epidemiczność, symbiotyczność. O niektórych mechanizmach cyrkulacji treści kulturowych* [in:] A. Gwóźdź (ed.), *Pogranicza audiowizualności. Parateksty kina, telewizji i nowych mediów*, Kraków 2010.

<sup>17</sup> P. Levinson, 2006, *Miękkie ostrze, czyli historia i przyszłość rewolucji informacyjnej*, translated by. H. Jankowska, Warszawa, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> It is sufficient to mention: A. Gwóźdź, red., 2010, *Kino po kinie*, Warszawa; A. Gwóźdź, ed., 2010, *Pogranicza audiowizualności*, Kraków.

To sum up the above considerations, the cultural texts described above can be analyzed from the following points of view:

- the analysis of the contents, i.e. in the relation to the preserved fragments of the social and medial reality (the answer to the question: what is the object of presentation?);
- ideological analysis of the message (the answer to the question: How is something preserved? What value systems are reflected in the message?);
- the history of the message production and individual history of its existence in various subsequent texts and cultural circuits;
- mechanisms that promote the development of particular media, the related messages and application strategies (e.g. reception regime as in a cinema, or creation regime as when writing a blog).

## 11. The role of media messages in preserving individual and collective memories

Media messages – due to their narrative character - put some order into people's opinions about selected aspects of the social world and preserve particular interpretations of the reality. They are subject both to the ideology represented by the transmitting body, which – as Foucault would put it – determines the creation of particular discourses and to various aesthetical conventions. That presentation of the “narration” in a selected genre convention or a particular media format is not neutral as far as the possible interpretations and meanings are concerned. As Harald Welzer put it:

„(...) in our autobiographical stories– apart from direct imports of the whole stories or narrative segments - we make use of socially formed organizational principles. Thanks to the process of *memory talk*, i.e. thanks to the collective practice of recollection in the course of conversation, as well as thanks to every book that we have read or every film that we have seen, we know that a proper story has its beginning, middle and end. In order to be comprehensible, it has to follow defined patterns”<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, media messages do not only provide some determined communication patterns but also have an impact on how we remember events and autobiographical and social facts. Literature, films, TV broadcasts, press articles, photo reports and Internet games enter our imagination and remain in our communicative memory (in Jan Assman's sense)<sup>20</sup>; they forge our individual ways of thinking and memorizing. As a result they contribute to the fact that the

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<sup>19</sup> H. Welzer, 2009, *Materiał, z którego zbudowane są biografie*, translated by M. Saryusz–Wolska [in:] *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, edited b., M.Saryusz - Wolskiej, Kraków, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> J. Assman, 2008, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, translated by A. Kryczyńska – Pham, introduction and scientific edition: R. Traba, Warszawa, p. 36.

memory of an individual is shaped socially, through cultural experiences and processes of social communication that the individual goes through.

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### ***Abstract***

The paper presents selected aspects of contemporary social and cultural reality, e.g. the role of new media in the processes of social communication and socialization, the relationships of man to new technologies and the attitude of individuals to body and corporeality, to privacy and intimacy. Moreover, the paper discusses the transformation of cultural institutions as the reaction to new information and communication technologies. All such processes are the sign of our times, which are preserved in media messages that constitute a significant element of the communicative and cultural memory.