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## EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY: AMONG THE REAL AND VIRTUAL CIVIC INITIATIVE

**Summary:** The new media enable numerous advantages in the strengthening of civic engagement, through removing barriers in space and time and through networking of individuals of the same social, civic or political interests at the global level. Different forms of civic engagement and civic responsibility in the virtual space are ever more present, and internet and mobile technology are its main instruments.

Taking into account the findings of previous research in this area, in particular, the findings of a positive correlation between new media literacy and civic engagement in the United States and in Serbia, the objectives of this study were to investigate the differences in civic engagement in relation to media exposure and the differences in civic engagement in relation to digital participation of the Serbian academic and educational community.

The survey was conducted in 2013. Questionnaire regarding the presence of respondents' civic engagement has been taken from the author's Literat earlier study (2011) and it consists of 5 close ended questions, whose reliability is satisfactory:  $\alpha = 0.742$ . The research sample was consisted from the members of Serbian educational community, including those from high school students to university professors.

The research results of differences in civic engagement in relation to media exposure showed that the research participants who spend more time reading the print media or using the Internet for the purposes of work or school are more socially engaged, while respondents who watch television program are not. Analysis of civic engagement in relation to digital participation showed that respondents who use online communities, forums and message boards (online activities that require discussion and active participation) achieve higher scores on civic engagement, in contrast to respondents who spend more time on entertainment, commercial facilities, such as YouTube and video gaming.

The results of this study are indicative of the impact of the media on creating a responsible, civic and democratic society. Due to the fact that the number of users and media consumers increases progressively, the changes in the level of state and educational institutions in terms of acquiring of media competence and media literacy are becoming all the more necessary.

**Keywords:** new media, civic engagement, media exposure, digital participation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The change in ways of conversation and informing has opened a new method of using Web 2.0 in citizens' civil engagement. Web 2.0 causes an increase of public involvement in information flows and enables average citizens to explicate their viewpoints publicly and participate actively in the creation of socially-oriented media. By erasing spatial and temporal barriers and making connections between people of the same social, civil or political interests at the global level; new media provide significant advantages in strengthening civic engagement, (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Curran, Fenton & Freedman, 2012). It is interesting that the basic characteristic of today's online social movements makes the structure which is specific, (not)controllable, decentralized, networked and non-hierarchical. Its other characteristics are democratization of relationships, the absence of leaders and equal rights of all participants in a process of publishing and creating media content.

It is well known that political elections are nowadays followed increasingly by online activities on social networks (Lasica, 2008; Turner-Lee, 2010). Different forms of civic engagement, actions and liability are becoming ever more actual in a virtual space, and new media is its main instrument: internet and mobile telephony. Donations, petitions, discussions, as well as movements of various human rights arise and spread rapidly with the help of Web 2.0 technologies.

Mobile telephony is becoming extremely powerful tool for strengthening of civic engagement; and the rapid development of applications and their usage for different purposes confirm this. Examples that endorse this viewpoint are different individual activities of users: conducting research and interviewing, counselling, reporting incidents in local community, testing air quality, charity donating, recording video materials, dissemination and promotion of environmental movements, etc.

Naomi Klein has presented a significant influence of the media on social engagement in the book "No Logo" (Klein, 2002). Digital media has become the main instrument of resistance against the dominant corporations (e.g. Shell, Nike, Microsoft, Intel, McDonald's - Schell, Nike, Microsoft, Intel, McDonald's ...) and against representatives of the global economic system (the World Trade Organization, the European Union, G-8, OECD, World Bank). Civic activists use internet and, acting worldwide, deprecate the global dominance of multinational companies and mobilize international movement of civic resistance (Klein, 2002). These virtual connections are transformed into real ones, in situations when virtual activists are joining the coalition groups, act directly against corporate power and organize protests in front of financial institutions, stock exchanges, supermarkets, banks and multinational offices (Klein, 2002: 316).

According to the number of research in the scientific literature, there is a certain socio-demographic structure of people who commonly act socially or politically: the ones with higher incomes and with higher level of education. However, as social networks and online movements for different purposes are strengthening progressively, their sociodemographic structure is changing as well, and is becoming more heterogeneous.

On the one hand, analysis of civic engagement and democracy in the digital age indicates its perspective, but on the other hand, there are warnings about the increase of digital divide among the population and its implications on civic engagement as it is determined by digital

media literacy of the activists. The expansion of civic engagement through digital technologies had been investigated and analyzed by numerous authors: Mandarano, Meenar and Steins (2011), Turner-Lee (2010), Bennett (2008a; 2008b), Coleman (2008), Burgess, Foth & Klaebu (2006), Jenkins (2006) as well as Klein (2002). Seltzer and Mahmoudi (2013) point the connection between civic engagement and open innovation.

Pew Research Center have conducted the research on civic engagement in the United States, which indicates that there is a huge increase in political activity in social networks from 2008 to 2012 (Smith, 2013). The report on this survey reveals findings that the number of users of social networks increased from 33% of online population in 2008 to 69% of the online population in 2012. The large increase is evident in the proportion of users of social networks who share political content, follow city or political organization, or are members of online social network which is organized with some political or social purpose. A significant number of users of social networks consider that, due to their activities in these networks, have learned more about social issues and have taken concrete steps in solving them, and 39% of the adult population in the United States examined was included in some social activities in online social networks (Smith, 2013: 3).

The findings of previous studies showing a connection between civic engagement and the usage of virtual platforms are the basis of this study. Multimedia, digital literacy is an important aspect of civic engagement being realized through new media, and it involves full handling and managing media, the usage of media for one's own purposes, critical thinking and evaluation of media content, understanding the media and the creation of new content. All this should be realized in multimedia context that includes both old and new media (internet and mobile technology). Earlier studies have indicated the correlation between new media literacy and civic engagement (Literat, 2013; Arsenijević & Andevski, 2015a).

Based on the findings of previous research, the conclusion can therefore be derived that participation of citizens and digital media exposure represents the predisposition of civic engagement. On the grounds of all the discussions about the potentials of digital media in the process of strengthening civic engagement and the indication of a correlation between media literacy and civic engagement, the objectives of this study are to examine whether there are differences in civic engagement of the academic and educational community in relation to their media exposure and digital participation.

The starting assumption of this study is that there is a connection between civic engagement and media exposure and connection between civic engagement and digital participation of members of the academic and educational community of Serbia.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research objectives of this study can be formulated as follows:

1. Examination of the differences in civic engagement among members of the academic and educational community of Serbia in relation to their media exposure.
2. Examination of the differences in civic engagement of the academic and educational community of Serbia in relation to their digital participation.

The survey was conducted in 2013. The questionnaire was distributed in electronic form, among members of the Serbian education community from high school students to university

professors. The questionnaire was distributed throughout Serbia, addressed to all universities and colleges through the e-mail address, or distributed through Facebook and Twitter.

## 2.1. Research Sample

A sample of the research is appropriate, with elements of deliberation, it is therefore unrepresentative, consisting of units of the basic set that were available, the choice that the authors considered typical of the population. The results obtained in this way are considered to be valuable and relevant, but with limited possibilities of generalization.

The questionnaire was distributed throughout Serbia, and data were obtained from 726 respondents, of which 64.3% were female. The youngest respondent was 14 years old, the oldest 66, and the average age was 28 years. The largest share of respondents were university of college students (29.3%), followed by high school students (27.3%), while the rest were divided evenly on individuals with bachelor degree (12.8%), master or postgraduate studies (17.9%), and the ones with the PhD degree (12.7%).

When it comes to the field of education, social and humanistic field is dominant (53.6%), followed by technical and technological field (29.3%), field of natural sciences (12.7%), while the field of art and bio-medical field were in minority (a total of 4.4%). Most of the respondents live in major cities - even 80.9%, 25.6% of respondents were from Belgrade, while 41.5% from Novi Sad.

## 2.2. Research Instrument

The instrument is based on a questionnaire tested by Ioana Literat (2011) and is divided into three sections: the first section assesses the level of civic engagement, the second determines the level of media exposure and the third is related to digital participation. The permission to use the research instruments, have been obtained by the author (Literat, 2011). The questionnaire was translated and adapted to the Serbian population.

The first section of the questionnaire, related to the examination of the presence of respondents' civic engagement, corresponds to the original version taken from the author Literat (2011) and consists of 5 closed-ended questions with 5 point Likert-type scale. Reliability of the scale of civic engagement is satisfactory,  $\alpha = 0.742$ . Issues that operationalized this questionnaire are based on three dimensions of civic engagement: self-efficacy (statement: "I believe I can make a difference in my community"), civic responsibility (statement: "Being actively involved in national, state and local issues is my responsibility") and commitment to civic action (statements: "I have volunteered in my community", "I have done something to help raise money for a charitable cause", "I stay informed on current events and politics").

The second section of the questionnaire examines habits of respondents in media exposure and consumption: access to the Internet, exposure to new and old media (measuring time spent per day) and exposure to individual types of media in detail (television, print media, internet and video games).

The third section of the questionnaire refers to digital participation of respondents (measuring hours spend per day participating in various online communities).

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 3.1. Descriptive Statistics on a Scale of Civic Engagement

Detailed results of descriptive statistics on civic engagement of the members of the educational and academic community Serbia are presented in the author's earlier works (Arsenijević & Andevski, 2015a; Arsenijević & Andevski, 2015b). The arithmetic mean of the subscale of self-efficiency is 3.62; civic responsibility 3.05, and commitment to civic action 3.45 (SD = 0.98).

The average score of respondents for civic engagement is 3.39, on a 5 point scale, and therefore represents civic engagement which is partially expressed. Respondents believe in part that they can contribute to changes in their communities, contribute in part to the development of community through volunteering and fundraising, consider in part as their duty to actively participate in social events, and are informed in part about current events in their environment.

#### 3.2. Media exposure and digital participation of the respondents

Earlier studies the authors within the same survey indicate significant media exposure of members of the educational and academic community of Serbia, on average, respondents spend 6,67h day consuming media, of which two-thirds of the time (4,45h day) spend consuming new media (internet and games) (Andevski & Arsenijević, 2013; Arsenijević & Andevski, 2015b). The respondents spend 2,05h on the Internet fulfilling their obligations regarding school or work, while, they spend slightly less (1,97h per day) in leisure activities. Respondents spend time on video games only 0,44h per day. Respondents spend on average 1,15h per day watching television programs, while slightly less (1,07h) consuming print media (books, magazines, newspapers etc.).

Most of their time respondents spend on Facebook (1,31h per day) and on the YouTube (1.2h per day). On average, they play videogame by themselves for a quarter of an hour, and with other gamers a little less, then they use Twitter for 0,17h, forums 0,19h and online communities for 0,17h per day. MySpace or other social networks, as well as blogging and podcasting do not take much time and attention in the subjects of this study (0,47h) (Andevski & Arsenijević, 2013).

#### 3.3. Differences in civic engagement in relation to media exposure

As the first research objective is related to determination of differences in respondents' civic engagement in respect to their media exposure, the results are provided through the implementation of t-test for independent samples, with civic engagement as the dependent variable and groups of respondents in relation to media exposure obtained through the median-split as an independent variables, in separate analyzes.

The results indicate that there are significant differences in civic engagement in relation to the number of hours spent on the Internet for purposes related to school or work ( $t(723) = -4.62$ ,  $p = .000$ ), while respondents spending more hours on the Internet, achieved significantly higher scores on the civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{less time}} = 16:26$ ,  $SD_{\text{less time}} = 4:59$ ,  $AS_{\text{more time}} = 17.78$ ,  $SD_{\text{more time}} = 4.20$ ).

As for the print media, the results of statistical analyzes indicate that there are significant differences in civic engagement in relation to the number of hours spent reading books, magazines or printed newspapers ( $t(724) = -2.82, p = .005$ ), while respondents spending more hours reading books, achieve significantly higher scores on the civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{less time}} = 16.71, SD_{\text{less time}} = 4.47, AS_{\text{more time}} = 17.79, SD_{\text{more time}} = 4.43$ ).

Significant differences were detected in civic engagement in relation to the number of hours spent watching television program, but not on PC ( $t(724) = 2.32, p = .021$ ), while respondents who spend less time watching TV, achieved significantly higher scores on civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{less time}} = 17.24, SD_{\text{less time}} = 4.44, AS_{\text{more time}} = 16.40, SD_{\text{more time}} = 4.53$ ).

Based on these results, it can be summarized that respondents spending more hours on the Internet for their obligation in school or work, and then reading books, magazines and other press, have higher score on civic engagement, and those who spend more time watching TV have lower scores in civic engagement.

### 3.4. Differences in civic engagement in relation to digital participation

The second research objective was related to determination of the differences in respondents' civic engagement in respect of their digital participation, and therefore the results are obtained by using t-test for independent samples, with civic engagement as the dependent variable and groups of respondents compared to digital participation obtained through the median-split as an independent variables in separate analyzes.

The results show that there are significant differences in respondents' civic engagement in relation to the number of hours they spent on YouTube ( $t(724) = 1.39, p = .050$ ), while respondents that spend less time on YouTube, achieved significantly higher scores on civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{less time}} = 17.29, SD_{\text{less time}} = 4.42, AS_{\text{more time}} = 16.63, SD_{\text{more time}} = 4.53$ ).

Furthermore, there are significant differences in civic engagement in relation whether time is spent on online communities or not ( $t(724) = -2.36, p = .018$ ), while respondents spending time on online communities, achieve significantly higher scores on civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{non-users}} = 16.81, SD_{\text{non-users}} = 4.52, AS_{\text{users}} = 17.87, SD_{\text{users}} = 4.19$ ).

Significant differences in respondents' civic engagement were shown in relation to the spend time on forums and message boards ( $t(724) = -2.93, p = .004$ ), while respondents spending time on forums and message boards, have significantly higher scores on the civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{non-users}} = 16.75, SD_{\text{non-users}} = 4.50, AS_{\text{users}} = 18.00, SD_{\text{users}} = 4.28$ ).

When it comes to video games, the results show that there are significant differences in civic engagement in relation to time spent playing games ( $t(724) = 2.20, p = .028$ ), while respondents who do not play games, have significantly higher scores on civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{non-users}} = 17.18, SD_{\text{non-users}} = 4.45, AS_{\text{users}} = 16.33, SD_{\text{users}} = 4.62$ ).

Finally, there are significant differences in civic engagement in relation to the usage of other online activities ( $t(724) = -3.02, p = .003$ ), while avid users have substantially more scores on the civic engagement ( $AS_{\text{non-users}} = 16.62, SD_{\text{non-users}} = 4.48, AS_{\text{users}} = 17.68, SD_{\text{users}} = 4.42$ ).

It can be summarized that the differences are obtained in the number of hours spent on online activities, online communities, forums and message boards and games, following hours spent on YouTube. In addition, users of online activities, online communities, forums and message boards achieve higher scores on civic engagement, in contrast to respondents who spend more time on YouTube and video games.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The research results of the respondents' habits of media consumption and their digital participation indicate substantial media exposure of members of the educational and academic community in Serbia per day: respondents spend more than a six-and-a-half hours consuming the contents of both old and new media, and most of this time are taken by the new media - primarily internet.

These findings differ from previous study on the use of new media and technology in the general population in Serbia. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the so-called Network Readiness (NR) Index - the measure of the country's readiness to benefit from the development of information and communication technologies, Serbia was ranked 87th among 144 countries for the period from 2012 to 2013.

The results speaking in favour of digitization in Serbia can be found only in the report of the Institute for Statistics of the Republic of Serbia, namely almost 92% of the internet population aged 16 to 24 have an account on social networks (Facebook, Twitter), and 30.9% of the population uses the Internet services instead of going in person to public institutions or organs of administration (RZS, 2012: 27). The results of our study are relatively consistent with the findings of the World Economic Forum's Network Readiness (NR) index - insufficient readiness of the country to benefit from the development of information and communication technologies.

Findings gained in relation to media exposure and digital participation of respondents can be connected with time as a specific dimension. Changes in information and communication technology occur rapidly, while this study was conducted two years after the research of World Economic Forum; it is therefore probable that the situation has altered. On the other hand, the research presented in this paper had a homogeneous structure of respondents, consisted of the members of academic and educational community in Serbia. Such a structure of research sample should lead to the expectation for better results of media exposure and digital participation, comparing to the overall Serbian population. Moreover, conditions related to internet communication and technical capabilities, in terms of access to the Internet, improve in time as well.

The results indicating a partial civic engagement of members of Serbian educational and academic community are not satisfactory. Research available in the scientific literature prevail in results that there are certain socio-demographic structure common for citizens active in civic and political engagement: higher incomes and higher levels of education. Taking into account a very favourable educational and academic structure of the sample of this research, the results indicating mere partial expression of civic engagement of the participants of this research cannot be considered satisfactory.

Furthermore, respondents who spend more time consuming print media or using the internet for obligation in work or school achieved higher score on social engagement, while those who

watch television program are not active in the regard of civic engagement. Users of online activities also have higher scores on civic engagement, in contrast to participants who spend more time on YouTube and playing games. The results of this and similar studies show in general that watching TV makes individuals passive. Dominant characteristic of consumption of television program are passivity and lack of interaction. Watching television does not lead to concrete action. We can hardly expect more involvement in local community from the individuals who are prone to spend time in this way. In this sense, individuals who are active in social networks, online communities, forums and message boards, have much more favourable results in civil engagement. Interactive media, which require a constant online activity, with no passive receiving external notions, demand strong reflection and thinking activities, therefore all that is necessary for activities in direct, real social environment.

Users who spend more time consuming the internet for the work or school and participants who read print media, as well as the users who prefer activities on online communities, forums and message boards (online activities that require discussion and active participation) have higher scores on civic engagement, unlike the respondents who spend more time on entertainment and commercial contents such as YouTube and video games. This result is not surprising, as internet provides many opportunities for social networking. Avid and enthusiastic internet users create free and equally accessible public good. Technical basis for collective projects of social production are new technologies that enable users to interact, monitor and exchange mutually, involve jointly in the creation of content and in social networking and engagement. One of the main arguments used in debates on the Web 2.0 content is the educational aspect of Internet tools that enable fast, simple and easy way to interact and exchange data and information. It is therefore understandable that the intense activity in the online space reflects the intense involvement in the civil sector as well. These members use the internet for more intensive cooperation and participation, as well as for effective exchange of information intended for public use and common good.

Similarly, James Surowiecki (2005) has introduced the concept “the wisdom of crowds”. Unlike individuals prone to passive consumption of media content (e.g. watching TV programs or content on YouTube and playing games), a large number of networked, connected users realize more efficient and effective operation and achievements, both for their own needs and for the sake of public activities (Kleemann, 2010). The structure of the respondents of this survey allows networking that is diverse, high-quality and creative; exchanging in a system that gives greater democracy and freedom of choice; the deviations from the original exchange of information and rapid penetration and exchange of new ideas, attitudes, emotions, features of operation - all that is propulsive and beneficial to civic sector. The opportunities provided by the new generation of the Internet and rapid exchanges of information readily available in almost all areas of life should be highlighted – with the aim of solving technical problems, improving health and quality of life in general, comparing price, quality of commercial products to political action and involvement in the civic sector in the current political issues and resolving problems in local communities (Ahrenes, 2009).

The main advantage of Web 2.0 technology is the possibility of easier and faster communication and new ways of management of mutual relationships and management of relationships with the environment. Given that participants in this research were members of the educational community, there have been expected their more intense recognition of the need for civic engagement, greater initiation of change in the community they live in, and greater participation in the design and creation of values of life. Internet is based on the skills and enthusiasm of the people who are willing to volunteer their (free) time to solve current



problems through direct civic initiatives. Internet nowadays becomes collaborative and conceptual platform for presentation and exchange of ideas, comments and questions on promoting human rights and freedoms. In this sense, internet users have the ability to verbalize their own needs and interests and to confront them with the opinions of other participants in this community. Through its specification and relativization, exchanged comments and suggestions show an aspiration and commitment (or even civic duty and obligation) of changing the current situation. Democratization of the society externalizes itself from the virtual sphere to realization, since all have the ability to become partners in creating social values.

Naturally, the following question arises: who wants to use these resources and how many users actually use it in practice? Therefore the results of this research are not satisfactory, as results show that these resources are underutilized in Serbia, even in academic and educational community. Accordingly, there is still a big and unsolved dilemma about what kind of results could be expected by the research of a heterogeneous sample, which would include more comprehensive population of Serbian residents?

An open and challenging question is following: what is the main driving force, what is individuals' motivation for civic engagement through new media? These activities, in fact, do not provide immediate and adequate benefit to the participants. Possibly, there are certain indirect benefits, such as gaining prestige and influence in a group of like-minded individuals, the contentment of satisfying personal altruistic and philanthropic motives, satisfaction in contribution to the common good etc. Driving impulse can be found in the desire to participate in a collective aim – such as the improvement of the quality of community life. For certain individuals, the participation itself is the primary purpose. Moreover, motivation can be encouraged through social recognition and interaction with other participants.

The civic engagement is a phenomenon which involves complex mechanisms of personal characteristics and properties of individuals as well as wider economic and political principles. All this exceeds the educational and academic concept, which was in the focus of this research, and requires introduction of other parameters. Therefore, this research raises new questions that require consideration and analysis through wider public discussion. Thus, educational and academic level can be considered as a partial social and demographic coverage that should be expanded and further analyzed; as virtual and real space are nowadays ever more being seen as inseparable and intertwined, and therefore are being further explored in order to come up with some predictability (Kalthoff, 2005).

In this sense, dilemmas that have been raised by this study, which should be the subject of further analysis, are related to the specifying the characteristics of individuals who prefer an active role through civic engagement by their nature and personality traits and structure. Therefore, the more accurate empirical research on nature of the everyday practical involvement and activities of internet users is necessary: whether their civic engagement reflects spontaneous, personal contribution or it is a reflection of broader, social events, with a tendency of the improvement the social reality.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The results of differences in media exposure and digital participation of the educational and academic community of Serbia in relation to their civic engagement are presented in this paper. The study of these relationships doesn't have a long tradition. Only a modern lifestyle

of the 21st century requires the analysis involving the dynamics of media changes and their context with a public, civic dimension of individuals' activities. Along with the intensive communication and technological changes, it seems that this kind of research will become essential in explaining the role of individuals in the social, economic, cultural, political and institutional processes and interrelations. Those individuals, who deny the need for the engagement through the virtual space, will be less able to manage in the implications of the collision of virtual and the real world, worlds that are no longer parallel but more mutually interdependent.

Participation in the context of civic engagement is not organized hierarchically; the attitude of the Internet participants is based on the principle of voluntarism and exchange, whereby individuals engage socially by perusing their own interests and general welfare of the community.

As for those who are active in internet participation, their motivation is not very clear, and this aspect requires detailed analysis. Generally speaking, the question of personal benefit is closely linked with specific motivational structure of users in practical voluntary inclusion in the online community as well as personal understanding of the effects of such a virtual civic engagement, which can be the focus of some future research. Conducting qualitative interviews with individual respondents, content analysis of individual comments and views on forums, as well as establishing contact with the most active participants would be useful. It is necessary to investigate motives for internet participation from the participants' point of view, which would have a more direct influence in the activities related to public activities and work related to the civil sector.

Limitations of this study reflect in the homogeneity of the sample, and absence of other socio-demographic characteristics and political, economic and religious characteristics which are reflected in the field of public, civic sector. Therefore following questions remain open: What level of social engagement can be expected from the population that is less educated than members of this research? Can we expect social development and the strengthening of democratic spirit in a society where the awareness of the need for corporate social responsibility and civic engagement is low? Is it real altruistic, human intentions, achievement of prestige and recognition, or some other motive in question?

Moreover, in the literature the remarks of analysts that the virtual and real spheres are more compatible are often encountered, and the question is only the dynamics in which they are adjusted to each other. This is the precise question that could be investigated empirically, along with formation an analytical frame that will include all the possibilities and connection processes of digital and real, the process that is complex and requires a higher level of motivation than the current and known form of interaction and exchanges that is almost always associated with social recognition.

The actual contribution of this study is the long-term change of social subjectivity, along with erasing the boundaries between the real and the virtual participation of individuals in society, hence the contribution is in the change of attitudes, which was dominant and which separated the two spheres until recently. This new understanding through the concepts of "alienation" and "globalization" is discussed, and the question is about the need for a deeper consideration of how this historic macro perspective affects the analysis on micro perspective, or the relationship of the individual and its environment.

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