

# Mark Deuze - Zygmunt Bauman Interview

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**Zygmunt Bauman :** "In history as you know there were two basic visions of time, one was cyclical, another linear. Most recent was the linear: darting or plodding forward while dismantling the bridges once crossed. There's no way back, you can't return, you can't reverse (unless in a sci-fi film). Certainly ours is not cyclical time – nothing repeats now exactly as the last time, like in the annual cycle of farming: 'last year' means now 'outdated', and 'the way things were done' is the way they should be done no more..."

People who are at the forefront of organizational progress are certainly afraid of sticking to experience, tradition, going by the pattern. None of the two models fit liquid modernity. Time is no longer cyclical [time], but not linear either because events and actions succeed each other randomly rather than in a straight line, and seem to change direction on their way...

Nowadays we are held together by short term projects, moving constantly from one project to another – what model of time can be derived from such experience? I suggest 'pointillist' time. Much like canvasses of Sisley, Seurat or Signac, which consist of points only, no broad brushstrokes and no continuities. That is, though, as far as the analogy goes, because in pointillist paintings you have pre-designed and in-built meaningful configurations. However, in liquid modern life configurations are not given beforehand. They are just randomly scattered points: episodes, fragments - but of what whole?

Living though the moment, one point in time, you can not be sure to what configuration you will eventually belong when scrutinized retrospectively [...] Some points, though, are known to be 'Big Bangs'. The original Big Bang, the birth of the universe. We know a lot about what happened in a fraction of a second after – but nothing whatsoever about before, There were no ways to predict that a universe will be born in the next fraction of a second. And so in liquid-modern life. Each 'time point' could be a big bang; could be, potentially, the ultimate experience, the great beginning, the moment of 'being born again' – but there is no way one can be sure in advance that this indeed will happen, and in this moment, not another."

**Mark Deuze :** *Theorists of the network society such as Manuel Castells and Jan van Dijk would posit that our contemporary lived reality of moving between seemingly isolated points in time is in fact connected and patterned, but in different ways than the cyclical or linear schools of history would have it. Castells (2001) for example suggests the internet-enabled global surfacing of a "hypersociality" consisting of networked individualism, while Scott Lash (2002) talks about "communicational bonds" that keep otherwise disjointed people and experiences together. How would you set your analysis of pointillist time against such, perhaps more hopeful, views on an emerging different kind of cohesion or connectivity of lived experience?*

**ZB :** "As to the influence on the nature of human bonds and sociality skills, I wrote profusely before and will be again writing in the study of internauts of the consumerist era. In my view, both Castells and Scott fall victims of internet fetishism fallacy. Network is not community and communication not integration - both safely equipped as they are with 'disconnection on

demand' devices. By many academics internet and world-wide-web have been greeted as the wondrous alternative and replacement for the wilting and fading political democracy, with yet more enthusiasm and less criticism than the market.

Theorizing of internet as the new and improved form of politics, of world- wide-web surfing as a new and more effective form of political engagement, and of the accelerated connection to the internet and rising speed of surfing as advances in democracy, look suspiciously as so many glosses on the ever more common life practices of the knowledge-class, and above all on their keen concern with an honorable discharge from the 'politics of the real'. All the more resounding for that reason is Jodi Dean's blunt verdict that the present day communication technologies are profoundly depoliticizing, that communication functions fetishistically today, that the technological fetish is 'political'. It lets us think that all we need is to universalize a particular technology and then we will have a democratic or reconciled social order.

Reality stands in stark opposition to its sanguine and cheerful portrait painted by the 'communication fetishists'. The powerful flow of information is not a confluent of the river of democracy, but an insatiable intake intercepting its contents and channeling them away into magnificently huge, yet stale and stagnant artificial lakes. The more powerful that flow is, the greater the threat of the river bed drying up."

**MD :** *In several recent interviews you seemed quite hopeful that perhaps we have now come to terms with globalization in its more horrendous consequences. We know that globalization is an inevitable trend in the way the world is increasingly organizing itself, and we know its negative consequences. So it is possible to argue that we have arrived at a time when an alternate current may be developing – a more positive consequence of globalization, the emergence of new systems that might counterbalance some of the negativity. Because of my new media bias, I am tempted to look at internet as a potential platform for a renewed global debate, referring to the Web where we can see glimpses of individuals and groups counteracting the negative consequences of globalization. Yet I also realize the dangers of techno-utopianism, so I don't know...*

**ZB :** "I don't know either. I have weak spots here, really. I wasn't quite sure how to bite it, this phenomenon, or the information highway or however it's called. You're absolutely right when you mentioned the negatives of globalization. Indeed, so far we've had only negative globalization. Negative globalization is a 'destructive side' of globalization. What has globalized so far are only such forces like capital, trade, commodity circulation, drug smuggling, criminality, mafia, terrorism. These are very different things but have one thing in common: that they are specialized primarily in destructive and dismantling jobs: breaking boundaries, tearing up defenses, neglecting and playing down territorial sovereignties, making space irrelevant, and so on... They attempt, and often manage to destroy local social settings one by one, or undermine them very considerably, without however replacing them with new structures that could serve as both the catapult for foolproof local undertakings let alone an effective global action.

And I realize as well that the big task - not mine, because being a very old man I will die well before the task may be accomplished, but yours, your generation's - will be to complement, constrain and balance or outweigh the negative globalization with the positive globalization.

And positive globalization would be to do the same, though this time on the planetary scale and for this reason in a different and so far unfamiliar form, what the emergent nation-states did in the nineteenth century with no-man's land, wide virgin or devastated territories left behind or conjured up by business running loose from supervision of local communities – the sole effective powers of that time. To invade, conquer and colonize that no name's land ruled by the law of the fist took the nation states something like one hundred and fifty years of pushing through parliaments bills cutting down child and women labor in mines, limit the length of the working week and legalize such organs of popular self-defense as trade unions and strikes and reaching true universality of voting rights.

Once more as in the beginning of that uphill struggle, there is nowadays no address in the directory where society could look for a resolution of its problems through collective undertakings. Once again the most haunting problem is not 'what needs to be done', but 'who has the power and the will to do it'.

I believe that the worst thing to do, the most startling, the most paralyzing question today, is not so much what is to be done, because I think there is a vaguely general consciousness about fighting pollution, the warming of the planet, ending wars, eliminating criminal elements. The real question, unanswerable so far, is who is going to do it; there are no institutions that are able to shoulder this sort of an enormous task.

There are no institutions on the global level equivalent to the nation-state organs in relation to the supervised territory. There is no equivalent of state government, of parliamentary representation, democratic control, universal jurisdiction or universally binding code of law on a global level. It's a no man's land over there. And who is the quickest at pulling the pistol is at the top. It's a hit and run sort of politics.

Can the internet be an answer? Paul Virilio says that currently the 'information bomb' is potentially a threat to humanity much more disastrous than even the nuclear bomb... It's waiting to explode. It's already 'exploding': the dream of 'complete knowledge' turning unrealistic, we are doomed to 'surf' having no time to dig into anything in depth.

Internet is a wonderful contraption for surfing, yet absolutely unfit to dig into whatever. We haven't come as yet anywhere near designing a super filter to segregate and sieve away the useful grain from the useless chaff. Internet seems to be as well a good tool for bringing together like-minded people and separating them from other-minding people – but what about making words into flesh?

I don't believe in the possibility of changing the substantive, hard and fast conditions of human life with the help of creating new blogs and adding to the millions of websites. I even suspect it may be dangerous in the long run: it gives people who are engaged, committed, wishing to change something important in the world, an illusion of action. It is though, I suspect, not an action (certainly not an effective one), but a substitute of action. 'I signed a petition. I contacted two hundred other bloggers. I am active.' There was no shortage of internet petitions objecting to the folly and cruelty of Iraq invasion... And yet the politicians could ignore all that and send troops to kill and die nevertheless."

**MD :** *Focusing on journalists, journalism studies and media education, I would like to talk about the roles and responsibilities of journalism in this context. Journalists tend to think of themselves as successful particularly if their peers recognize the uniqueness of their contribution, their point, or 'big bang' if you will. On the other hand, discourse and content analyses suggest that journalistic narratives and the kind of stories reporters tell are always the same, reducing complexity by focusing on good versus evil, conflicts among political and economic leaders of men. So one of the criticisms leveled against journalism today is that they are stuck inside their own myths that they keep repeating over and over while the rest of society has moved on and is engaged in a different type of conversation altogether.*

**ZB :** "What you said applies to the structure of one single journalist piece, one of the myriads of journalist pieces. Even if your postulates were met by all authors of all pieces, the most harrowing snags - how to absorb, retain and use the thereby 'available' information? – won't be affected... One Sunday issue of the New York Times today contains the same amount of bits of information that the highly educated individual of the eighteenth century took in all his lifetime. In last thirty years or so more new information was produced than in the last five thousand years of human history. The amount of information on offer is growing exponentially while the retentive and processing capacity of human brains doesn't grow...

Transfer of a message is complete only when the message is received, or retained, or memorized. But journalists today are confronted by a readership of 'zappers', picking a sentence apart in bits and pieces, consuming not so much ideas, interpretations, arguments and analyses, as (in the currently fashionable terms) 'sound bites'. Journalists can't but be affected. They wouldn't get through to their readers. They will be in fact eliminated at the earliest stage of their message's travel if what they produce were not a 'headline-worthy' stuff. Better still to produce stuff worthy of front-page headline. Front pages though tend to be for that reason overcrowded and the life expectation of a first page headline is a day or two... No time to 'get to the roots' before the page needs to be vacated by the next headlines in line."

**MD :** *Journalism, in its dominant professional self-perception, legitimizes its existence by arguing that it provides the social cement of society, that is a necessary cornerstone of democracy. Considering liquid life and the contemporary post-national constellation, to what extent can we still derive that social cohesive function from journalism? I mean how can we define a journalism that would fit a liquid society? Would this be a very different journalism?*

**ZB :** "Well it would differ really [...] But since there are journalists who are writing for The Guardian or the New York Times, and there are those who work at the regional, little newspapers who have two hundred constant readers, all of them friends and neighbors - I would find it extremely difficult to make generalizations that cover them all.

To take the second of the named categories: I wrote recently of what I called the 'cloakroom communities'. In a 'cloakroom community', people gather before a two hours-long performance to hang their anoraks or cloaks; then they all enjoy the same performance, watching the same actors in the same plot. When it's finished, they jointly applaud the actors and the director, return to the cloakroom, take their jackets off the pegs; then each one goes in their own direction. This allegory grasps well the predicament of most communities of

today. They are put together, temporarily, around a shared focus. There are little lateral bonds between the gathered, either extant or emergent apart of that focus of fleeting interest.

Another feature is the diminished ambition and power of ‘cloakroom communities’ in comparison with the real ones. They don’t intend to be exclusive – one may, and one does belong to many such communities at the same time with no conflict – but also without much commitments and obligation of lasting loyalty to either.

Journalism fits that scheme very well indeed. When ‘hitting a gold mine’, by getting ‘an exclusive’, by getting through to sensationalist news that others neglected or failed to reach, a journalist provides as well a peg for another ‘cloakroom community’ as well. Though because in a liquid-modern world each of us is only as good as their last hit, in two weeks time no one will remember where the peg was and there will be need for another. Very few people keep or even record the pegs of yore – unless it is an event of the 11th of September 2001 magnitude, deserving to be shown and re-shown endlessly on millions of screens in slow motion. In case of lesser events - if you went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, you might miss with no second chance.

Communities built by journalists are frail and have no more than a butterfly’s life span. For that reason, they fit very well with the pace of contemporary life. Besides, every day many communities are created that way in New York or elsewhere depending on who reads what kind of magazine or paper... Very seldom, there is the same headline on the first page of every newspaper. Such consensus only happens during the World Cup, a tsunami or September 11th. One may say that we witness an overproduction of communities (in the ‘cloakroom’ form, of course), but very little, and very seldom, it is done and can be done in the way of reproduction and long-term survival.”

**MD :** *For me there’s something contradictory here. On the one hand it would almost seem that the way journalism is structured would make it a perfect partner to a liquid modern life. It is a profession running after itself, it is never as good as its last moment. It constantly reinvents and reproduces, as always exclusively focused on the new. On the other hand, it doesn’t fit with the contemporary lifestyle at all anymore. Audiences for news are graying, young people don’t follow the news, at least not in the way that journalism is used to: by subscribing to a newspaper, by deliberately going to a news agent, and turning on the evening news at eight o’clock. So there is this strange disconnect. I’m tempted to think that journalism was an unwitting partner in establishing liquid modernity, and now that this is achieved it finds itself unable to let go of its solid modern roots.*

**ZB :** What is in the mind of the actors when they are acting? Has been the effect the conscious motive of action, or did it emerge as what the sociologists call its ‘unanticipated consequence’? Are the journalists (which ones? How many?) Motivated by the wish to ‘reproduce community’ and supply it with ‘cement’? Or are they really interested (which ones? How many?) in being first to bring the news whatever the news might be, providing it is likely to sell the papers? Neither you nor me know for sure.

I’m sure you are right when suspecting that they provide ‘social cement’. But what you cement doesn’t depend on the quality of the cement itself. It may be a tower block. It could be a mud hut. It could be a new shopping mall. A prison. A madhouse. A discotheque. But

only when the building is finished you can really say what has been cemented using the cement of your making. We can give the benefit of the doubt to some orthodox, traditional journalist's intentions; and his loyalty to the traditional vocation, his determination to fulfill the mission. But look – even the old masters' paintings, Vermeer, Picasso... even they would be admitted to liquid-modern public intention as an event - a hyped exposition, from January to February - rather than on the ground of their own, age-old, indestructible merits.

I don't think media can be the sole defendant for the charges often made against them and against them alone - for instance, the depraving nature of their messages - but I do believe that willy-nilly, by design or by default, media importantly participate in producing as well as reproducing reality.

McLuhan memorably said: the medium is the message. The message of the media, the impact of the media, is not so much the letter of the messages but the form and way in which they are supplied. The way in which they emerge from nowhere and immediately disappear, the lightning speed in which they are fed into public consciousness and evicted from it, the impossibility to digest any news in any depth [...] Just try to convince those young people to give you a hierarchy of what's important and what's less important, instead of just knowing about events. Liquid life - of which no one is exempt! - prompts journalists to behave in the way they do; but by doing what they do they heavily contribute to life's liquidity."

*Source* : Mark Deuze <http://deuze.blogspot.com/>

The full interview, complete with references and appropriate theoretical context, is published in the **Summer 2007 issue of Journalism Studies**.

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a780333519~db=all~order=page>

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**Zygmunt Bauman** (born 19 November 1925 in Poznań)

Professor of sociology at the University of Leeds (and since 1990 emeritus professor), Bauman has become best known for his analyses of the links between modernity and the Holocaust, and of postmodern consumerism.

According to Bauman, the passage from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity has created a new and unprecedented setting for individual life pursuits, confronting individuals with a series of challenges never before encountered. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life plans, so individuals have to find other ways to organise their lives.'

*Source* : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zygmunt\\_Bauman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zygmunt_Bauman)