



## Master's Thesis Evaluation Form

Student's name: *Martin Tremčinský*

Thesis title: *Identity plug-ins: Towards post-human theory of informational privacy*

Name of the supervisor: *Jakub Grygar*

Name of the opponent: *Dino Numerato*

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis? Please give your reasons for the suggested grade in detail below.

**1. Does the author show understanding of one or more theories, and use theory to generate a hypothesis or to make the problem area more understandable.**

The author offers an excellent theoretical synthesis that frames his reading of informational privacy in contemporary societies. Martin Tremčinský demonstrates capacity to connect the synthetically developed theoretical framework with empirical evidence and I must emphasise already at the beginning that the quality of this work goes well beyond the standard level of MA theses.

In my review, I will primarily emphasise several weaker points. I should add that I do not consider them to be substantial and will introduce them rather as possible remarks for further discussion.

I am not an active user of terms such as *plug-in, flows, actants, assemblages, translations, hyperobjects*. I acknowledge that this vocabulary makes part of a recognized body of scholarship and that its usage contributes to develop a somewhat internally coherent, logical and consistent story through the thesis.

However, I still struggle to see what “invisible” aspects of social reality the usage of these terms and perspectives help us to uncover and I still doubt whether we really need them and whether “*cyborg anthropology*” is really “*the right [or perhaps unique, or necessary] approach to better understand current western culture.*” (page 19). The conclusions developed in the thesis are relatively routinely debated in the journals such as *Surveillance and Society, Big Data and Society* or *New Media and Society*. The debates in these journals do not only critically decipher the corporate or political powers operating in the infosphere but also discusses the possible alternative engagement with these processes. Thus, I would raise the following questions: Do we really need the post-human theory of informational privacy? In what sense does the elaborated theory extends, complements or significantly revisits other theories or even sophisticated public debates about privacy? Similarly, in what sense is the “*live in informational ecology*” (p. 3) re-conceptualized?



**2. *Is the research question articulated clearly and properly? Is the research question sufficiently answered in the conclusion?***

The thesis provides a consistent narrative that very well captures the reflected phenomenon. The distinction between *overseers*, *traders* and *criminals* in relation to politics of privacy is nicely elaborated. The theoretization of infosphere as a hyperobject is convincingly developed.

**3. *Is the thesis based on relevant research and literature and does it accurately summarize and integrate the information?***

The literature that helps to build the main argument is definitely relevant and extremely rich.

However, the section “Social Theory of Privacy” that should summarize the state-of-the-art of the social theory literature related to privacy does not fulfil the promises that it suggests. This part is about selected social theories of privacy rather than about the social theory of privacy. The title of the section on the one hand sounds ambitious as well as the first remarks of this part that goes back to 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the section does discuss more recent theories of privacy and to my view is inappropriately based on the critique of Giddens’ work.

It is difficult to understand why Martin Tremčinský needs to critically engage with Giddens’ (or “Giddens lite” as Jeffrey Alexander put it) work when elaborating upon the social theory of privacy. While I would concur with the fact that Giddens’ account of privacy is inadequate for the analytical purposes of the thesis, I am not sure why we should even expect this account to be adequate. Giddens’ work treats rather different aspects of the self-identity making process, is situated in a different context of 1980s and, most importantly, have no intention to address the topic of privacy systematically.

**4. *What is the quality of the data or the other sources? Are the sample method, data collection and data analysis appropriate?***

The work is based on empirical evidence, on interviews and observations. It is a pity that quotes from undertaken interviews appear rather rarely in the text and Martin Tremčinský refers to them mainly indirectly. The thesis is based on interviews/“talks” with John Doe who “*is not one person, he consist of 5 different people, all males between 20 and 40.*” This is an original way of anonymising respondents and in line with the author’s epistemological approach towards the issue of privacy.

The potential methodological limits could better be discussed, notably more detail on the nature of undertaken participations could be given. A personal commentary in the footnote 16 is not appropriate for an academic piece of work: “*I would like to use the Data selfie plug-in longer, but unfortunately it is currently compatible only with Google Chrome browser whereas I use Mozilla Firefox which supports more plug-ins for my everyday use.*”



**5. Are the findings relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions of the thesis based on strong arguments?**

The general argumentation in the thesis is very strongly developed. The argumentation in partial points could be better elaborated as further suggested in point 8.

**6. Are the author's thoughts distinguished unambiguously from the borrowed ideas?**

Yes, this is done very clearly.

**7. Is the thesis containing original/innovative research (in terms of topic, approach, and/or findings)?**

The thesis is definitely original and innovative considering the synthesis of literature that it provides as well as the link made between the theory and empirical examples. The empirical account entitled "Politics of privacy" is very strong.

**8. What is the quality of style and other formal requirements?**

Although the work is in general very well written and has a somewhat original style in line with the canon of anthropology, the author sometimes struggles to clearly use the abstract theoretical language. Some sentences are just too long and their meaning is unclear, even in the context of previous paragraphs. This is understandable considering the fact that English is not author's mother tongue. To quote just some problematic statements:

"That is because ICTs create the ecosystem through which flow the information one is gaining and also producing (2014, 60-61)." (page 17)

"For the ontological difference between humans and their machines in technoscience is basically absent (Haraway 1991b, 152) the case with self in the infosphere is the same." (page 20)

"Similarly as the Runa people see and perform everything in the forest as a potential human self (De Castro 1998, 470; Kohn 2013, 17) western technoscience tends to interpret reality in terms of information." – It is unclear to me what technoscience does when interpreting reality in terms of information.

"Moreover Morton's hyperobjects change our notion of life and society (2013, 15) and shape other objects including our human selves by series of wounds and measures adopted to protect selves from such inscriptions (2013, 51)." I struggled to understand what is meant by these inscriptions.

Connections between some sections in the text could be better developed. On page 7 is written: "In order to better understand the ecology of the infosphere we shall focus on its design and its properties. In this task might come very helpful the concept of hyperobject introduce by



*Timothy Morton.*” However, no reference to the work of this author is not made before page 13. This is probably a relict of previous revisions.

Similarly, the parts 3f and 3g are disconnected.

Furthermore, there are elementary shortcomings in the list of bibliographic references. The place of publication is not indicated in several monographs, details given in chapters from edited books are insufficient. Moreover, pages and volumes are not provided in several journal articles.

**9. Are there any other strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, which are not included in the previous questions? Please list them if any.**

It is clear that the author is very well oriented in the area of digital technologies. However if the aim is to develop more broad theory of privacy, he should take into account that its readers do not need to be familiar with the object of his research and are not familiar with terms and events that he takes for granted. This can be well-illustrated with the quote on page 17: “American philosopher N. Kathrine Hayeles comprehends the root of this informational ontology in the Macy’s conference on *cybernetics* (Hayles 2008, 50).” For many readers, it would be difficult to understand who is Macy and what his conferences were about.

**10. What topic do you suggest for the discussion in the thesis defence?**

I believe that some of the previous comments could provide an input for discussion. I would raise only one additional question at this point, related to the term *enact*, frequently used in the thesis. Could Martin Tremčinský explain what does he have in mind when he writes that he tries to *enact* through his writing “the general metaphysical dimensions in which [*his*] text operates”? What does he exactly do when he enacts (through his writing) the metaphysical dimension?

**Overall assessment of the thesis:**

As anticipated in the introduction to this review, comparatively to other MA theses, this work still remains a strong piece of work, I would recommend it for a defence and propose the grade *excellent*.

Date: 16 June 2016

Signature: