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**Digital Competencies and Technologies of New Sincerity  
in the Web 4.0 Era**Anton N. Fortunatov  , Natalia G. Voskresenskaya 

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**Abstract.** The problem of social aggression of young people that are immersed in digital communication has become the subject of this study. The authors did not confine to the state of the depressing condition of the ethical sphere in digital communication. They wanted to find out the underlying causes of the social antagonism and the conflict. One of the most important reasons for social destruction is the lack of clear space-time coordinates for a virtual subject. It leads to the use of the passive personality by the technologies themselves. A man turns into material for algorithms, and his psychophysics becomes a continuation of impersonal technology. This situation characterizes the formation of a new era of Web 4.0, which the authors call “counter communication”. Interactivity is a thing of the past. Technologies of “new sincerity” come to its place. Outrageousness, detabooing, use of eroticism are forms of communicative use of a virtual subject who, in the modern communicative space, is in a state of unrelenting tension, which only changes its mode in connection with all new reasons for exaltation. The study of the psyche of young people completely immersed in the virtual world has become a confirmation that virtual ethics is moving further and further from the “traditional” ethical principles. Their social skills, as well as social protection, were the lowest among the various groups of young people. Communication for them ultimately turns into a persistent search for entertainment, into a striving for a hedonistically comfortable environment, into denial of socially significant topics and problems.

**Keywords:** digital subject, Web 4.0 technologies, counter-communication, hedonism, digital competencies, digital ethics

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## Цифровые компетенции и технологии новой искренности в эпоху Web 4.0

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**Аннотация.** Исследуется проблема социальной агрессии молодых людей, погруженных в цифровую коммуникацию. Этическая сфера в цифровой коммуникации находится в удручающем состоянии, в связи с чем ставится задача выяснить глубинные причины социального антагонизма и конфликтности. Одной из важнейших причин социальной деструкции является отсутствие четких пространственно-временных координат для виртуального субъекта, что приводит к эксплуатации самими технологиями пассивной личности. Человек превращается в материал для алгоритмов, и его психофизика становится продолжением обезличенной технологии. Такая ситуация характеризует формирование эпохи Web 4.0, которую можно назвать «контркоммуникацией». Интерактивность уходит в прошлое. Ей на место приходят технологии «новой искренности». Эпатажность, детабуизация, эксплуатация эротики – это формы коммуникативного использования виртуального субъекта, находящегося в современном коммуникативном пространстве в состоянии неослабевающего напряжения, которое лишь меняет свой модус в связи со все новыми поводами для экзальтации. Подтверждением того, что виртуальная этика все дальше уходит от «традиционных» этических принципов, стало исследование психики молодых людей, полностью погруженных в виртуальный мир. Их социальные навыки, а также социальная защищенность оказались самыми низкими из различных групп молодежи. Коммуникация для них в итоге превращается в настойчивый поиск развлечений, стремление к гедонистически-комфортной среде, отрицание социально значимых тем и проблем.

**Ключевые слова:** цифровой субъект, технологии Web 4.0, контркоммуникация, гедонизм, цифровые компетенции, цифровая этика

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## Introduction

A huge number of studies have dealt with human interaction with virtual reality. Today, there appear more and more works on the individual's obsession with computer technologies, the formation of addictions and social deviations. An illustrative example in this context is the work of T.V. Ivanova *Internet Addiction as a Problem of Modern Society* [1], where the problems of addiction are reduced to the statement of socio-psychological contradictions of the modern personality, which are so clearly manifested against the background of Internet communications. Most often, recent studies only multiply the citation of social deviations, and the general trend of these works is that young people with their immature psychic setup are the most socially unstable layer exposed to serious dangers in the digital technology-rich environment, which simplifies the satisfaction of hedonic needs. Thus, for example, many papers are dedicated to the excessive absorption of young people in gaming reality and virtual communities [2; 3].

Another layer of studies analyzes the influence of new media on the consciousness of a modern person, primarily, a teenager, as well as on his/her world perception and personality organization. German researcher Manfred Spitzer calls the generation born after 1993 the “Google generation” [4. Pp. 152–153] and characterizes some of its features while referring to the literature review scrupulously made in the British Library of London. Together with his British colleagues, the author expresses the opinion that the Google Generation is the “copy and paste generation”, and the virtual gaming environment has a particularly strong effect on boys, which gives reason to speak of the “lost generation of young men” [4. P. 135]. This is also about the so-called “digital dementia”, which has already become a stable constant formula defining the intellectual potential of the young audience absorbed in the Internet. The invectivity of this problem statement ultimately leads to the appearance of a wide range of studies on “digital dementia”, infantilism [5; 6].

Finally, the ethics and axiology of the digital information exchange become an important object of research interest. In our view, they are a significant step forward in understanding the humanistic perspectives of modern communication. Let us exemplify it by the work of E.A. Gavrilova *Problems of Computer Ethics and Cyberethics* [6], which “pays special attention to the concept of ethical responsibility while using Internet communications and also concludes about the application of the golden rule for cyberethics” [7. P. 143].

However, even in the current conditions, we face the problem of an “inter-observer” assessing cyberspace from the standpoint of a realist who is “on the other side” of virtual reality, examining only its external manifestations.

The RFBR grant on digital competencies allowed us to outline the first steps in the analysis of digital reality as if from the inside, from the perspective of an active user who is comfortable with his/her opposition or insufficient connection with social reality. We will propose several ideas to clarify the underlying causes of this opposition, which, in our opinion, can serve as a scientifically grounded basis for the formation of socially acceptable, not accusatory (as in the above examples) but consensus strategies of the interaction between social and virtual realities.

### **Problem statement and discussion of research results**

One of the significant values in virtual communication is a specific temporality of information exchange. The passivity of social ethics is the essential element of social stability correlating with the passivity of the human psychophysiology (passive human vision sense, memory, feelings, social representation allowing one to be identified in a certain coordinate system, while the agility and plasticity of the human perception of information impulses look like a peculiar striving for the verge and mastering the information frontier – the information inaccessible in its ontological origin and balancing between novelty and obviousness). Perhaps it is for this reason that Baudrillard raved about the “implosion” of the masses – the passivity carried to the point of absurdity, all-absorbing indifference to information [8. P. 67].

However, virtual temporality is based on different principles, the main one of which is the insignificance of the spatiotemporal coordinates and restrictions, and therefore, the insignificance of inertial pauses between the perceiving consciousness and information flashes. The virtual hero is formed during the information exchange, and any abruptness turns into a major deficiency in his/her image because the consciousness of the audience involved in this action is shifted to other irritating stimuli in a matter of seconds. As a result, such an image can be only “held” due to the relentless focus, which is never interrupted by pauses and intervals, and therefore, does not require efforts to comprehend and reflect (to link together discrete parts). It is also important that the escalation of mono-states leads to a deformation of the world perception, the formation of manic psychological dominants, which replace a holistic picture of the world. A change in the psychological mode in virtual reality for a person absorbed in it is leaps between exaltations pushed to the brink. Internet addiction and narcotization of consciousness are rooted in such psychophysiology.

Another important property of the continuity and non-discreteness of virtual time is the problem-free internal content of the information flow. A problem,

a paradox, an aporia are born at a break, at the opposition of ontological peaks – their mutually subordinated remoteness from each other is a guarantee of their opposition. There is nothing to oppose in this situation: algorithm-driven self-affirmation is realized in its continuity, and, for example, the “presence” in any social network should be ensured by constant publications and reposts for the smallest reasons. Problem-freeness, in turn, gives rise to hedonism as an implicit ethical setting, as well as gamification as a tool for an artificial dramatization of the content (it is less “challenging” to destroy drawn heroes than to fight with real people, therefore gamers’ attempts to “come out into reality” with weapons in their hands lead to horrible consequences – after all, they expect the same problem-freeness, submission, and self-elimination from social reality). This context also includes the attitude to one’s own body as a simulated essence, which only interferes with or distracts from virtual identification.

We made these and other conclusions within the framework of a reflection based on the results of a study (within the framework of the RFBR grant) of the readiness of young people from Nizhny Novgorod for self-realization in the digital economy, which was carried out in autumn 2020. The share of young people who spend all their free time on social networks focusing on interpersonal communication and entertainment turned to be most vulnerable in terms of the formation of digital competencies. A comparison of the data obtained during the survey covering such subsets as the time spent on social networks, the age of the respondents, and the maturity level of their digital competencies, showed at the statistical significance level ( $p < 0.05$  according to the  $X^2$  criterion) that such complete immersion in virtual reality negatively affects the formation of elementary, from the standpoint of social norms, skills in working with office programs and using spreadsheets to systematize and analyze digital information when teenagers move into adulthood. One of the paradoxes is that teenagers who spend all their free time on social networks use digital technologies to work remotely at home less, have limited knowledge of the operation of electronic portals of public services, and less often strive to receive extended remote education.

Internet communications occupy an important place in the modern world, and during the pandemic and self-isolation, Internet communities are gaining more and more tangible weight and authority. Out of 807 respondents (senior pupils and university students), 80% named social networks among the most in-demand information resources. At the same time, the part of young people who spend a limited time on the Internet is distinguished by a much greater variety of interests when choosing topics of discussion than those who spend all their free time on social networks. The first ones are also interested in social, cultural, economic, political issues, although they also confirm the significance of Internet communication and the importance of entertaining sites. In this group, the index of interest in such “serious” subjects calculated as the average indicator of the

number of issues attractive for discussion on social networks is significantly higher than among young people who spend all their free time on social networks ( $p < 0.001$  according to the Mann – Whitney  $U$  criterion, see the Table). For those, who are completely absorbed in virtual reality, the “inverse sociality” created by the digital world in reality does not matter much. They are neither interested in its media or traditional journalistic aspects: the awareness of the socio-political situation is confined to a poor set of retold plots obtained from “intra-network authorities”.

The sincerity of the Nietzschean filling the “hollow vessel” (the human self) with personal, unique meanings is replaced by the reflexivity of the advanced gamer of the popular World of Warcraft game, who “succeeds” in defeating an army of countless monsters on the console. Spontaneity replaces the sense of purpose. Such a change in ethical guidelines also has a rather solid economic base: today, the “monetization of virtual subjectivity correlating with the “computational” economics [9] acts as a quite visible guideline for human aspirations (for example, according to Forbs, a cyberathlete can earn more than 600 thousand dollars a year [10]).

In this regard, “traditional” sociality always comes late after virtual challenges, trying to impose its own attitude to splashes into the everyday world of virtual cataclysms on the escaping network community (which notably causes only a growing rejection and negative response of the virtuals).

“The official data” characterizing the presence of a person in the social world (photographs, biography, etc.) serve as a support, or rather, a starting point for an individual absorbed in the virtual interaction world. According to our research, those who are mostly incorporated into social networks tend to more easily and actively share their personal data and photographs with others, often strangers, and talk about their hobbies, interests and habits: this group has a higher index of openness of the network behavior than the remaining studied sampling ( $p < 0.001$ , Table). The time spent on the Internet and the willingness to share personal information with Internet acquaintances increase the risks of various manipulations posing a threat to the individual. The index of the dangers of social networking calculated from the average frequencies of facing negative manifestations of virtual reality (fakes, posting personal information on the network without the respondent’s consent, bullying, use of information by cybercriminals, fraud, and theft of money on the Internet, hacking of an account, e-mail, theft of personal data, etc.) among those young people who spend all their free time on social networks is higher than among the remaining respondents ( $p < 0.001$ , Table). Although the Internet-addicted part of the young audience faces Internet dangers more often than others, the index of awareness about antivirus software ( $p < 0.05$ , Table) is inferior in value to those respondents who spend several hours a day on this pastime; there is also less commitment to licensed products ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The latter is largely linked with the high level of software prices and widespread Internet piracy, which (according to focused interviews conducted to clarify some aspects of the survey) is supported by some young people and finds moral justification at the growing need for various Internet content (most often, games and films were meant by “miscellaneous” in group conversations), as well as the symbolic authority of virtual theft initiators in the Internet environment. Such responses demonstrate a low level of awareness of the problems associated with intellectual property rights and a strongly pronounced wish to satisfy one’s own desires at the expense of others. This results in a growing value-based alienation between virtuals and society.

Table

**Features of the young people’s behavior on social networks depending on the time spent on social networks**

Indexes	Time spent in social networks				Mann – Whitney U criterion
	Up to several hours a day		All the free time		
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	
Index of interest in the topics of discussion in the network	3.02	0.816	3.20	1.013	0.001**
The index of openness of the network behavior	2.96	1.636	3.17	1.655	0.000***
The index of the dangers of social networking	1.646	0.941	1.801	0.887	0.000***
Index of awareness about antivirus software	1.358	0.904	1.273	0.907	0.011*
Index of usage of licensed programs	1.393	0.997	1.210	0.813	0.019*

Note: statistically significant differences: \* –  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* –  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* –  $p < 0.001$ .

This express openness characterizes the new state of information interaction, which can be called the Web.4.0 space. Indeed, as opposed to interactive Web 2.0 and ego-media Web 3.0, the current virtual communication level characterizes the consumption of the personality itself by intellectualized technologies, its use as a “working material” for continuous interactions rapidly losing their logic and justification from the standpoint of the social “traditional” world (it is no coincidence that this technology is linked with the “Internet of things”, which fundamental impersonality in this context is particularly striking). In other words, today, the center of semantic “gravity” has shifted from the personality or inter-subjective space to the field of communication technologies, which emancipated from the former subject of communications and began to develop their own mechanistic ethics. The movement vector is quite obvious: Web 1.0 (“media”) – Web 2.0 (“intermedia”) – Web 3.0 (“egomedia”) – Web 4.0 (“countermedia”). Robot journalism begins to acquire new connotations here (of a setter of ethical standards, aestheticized impersonality, etc.).

The reverse vector of the information social interaction (“object-subject relations”) implies a total transformation of sign systems, their new filling with meanings unknown to the social subjects who reflect about them. Almost the entire communication structure is subjected to an “unscrupulous” revision – starting from language (emoji instead of phrases, deliberate absence of punctuation marks, elimination of grammar, etc.) to the fundamental principles of trust and empathy (prankers as social provocateurs, hackers as virtual Robin Hoods, bots as an illusion of a sympathetic mass, etc.). Moreover, while a socialized observer interprets language violations as outrageous or at least as a manifestation of deliberate illiteracy and shamelessness, they are not a subject for reflection for a digital user. The deliberate coldness and ruthlessness of virtual “heroes” to social reality are camouflaged or compensated by the special properties of formal presentations primarily focused on the psychoemotional structures of an individual who is simultaneously in two worlds.

The unverifiability, fakeness, and falseness of the real world discredited by the technologies generated by it are a conventionally permissible ethical basis, using which communicative institutions build their attack on the individual. Two imperatives aimed at social reality become obvious: these are de-cognitivation and sensitization. In the first case, the usual everyday logic is discredited, and the meanings it generates lose their value. Panicky haste, which is a characteristic sign of manipulative influence, forces the individual to take no more than 15 seconds to “comprehend” the information seen on the screen of the gadget. Instead, there appears increased hypertrophied sensitivity, which replaces thinking processes and transfers the field of meanings into the sphere of sensually mastered perception. What instruments are used for this purpose?

First of all, it is the exploitation of erotica. Detabuization of sexual subjects imposed on a socio-political community is a continuation of the well-known vices of the Internet network, where nothing is forbidden. Eroticism becomes a “natural” language of communicative interaction.

Another sensitization tool is the hyperexpressivity of statements: pronounced hysteria, deliberate gesticulation. This also includes deliberate outrageousness, provocativeness in relation to the social environment. In fact, the thing is about the well-known neurolinguistic programming principles, which today are easily subject to detailed computation and, accordingly, algorithm-driven due to the current development of information technologies.

The main feature of these processes is that the focus is not on comprehension or consensus but on repost or retweeting, i. e. on multiplication, and hence mechanical signs of information circulation. These are not adverse thoughts and intentions (including paradigmatic interactivity) but the replication of form, which becomes the main measure of success and effectiveness of virtual communication. The emotion is monetized through the formal confirmation of attention to it.

The next tool is evaluativity instead of argumentation. Patterns of virtual behavior imply that there is no need to look for cause-and-effect relationships and sometimes even elementary logic in the message. Today, the virtual community is a civilization of ready-made solutions. Consequently, emotional labels and outrageous characteristics are not perceived as a reason for rechecking or at least doubts. This is an integral part of the communicative process, its fabric (in the understanding of virtual subjects) but not a goal, an outcome, or a result (in traditional logic).

Such ethical structures can be called “new sincerity”. This is the state of a virtual individual, relying on the technology-generated psycho-emotional sphere, which brings the maniac dominant states to the point of absurdity, to the point of screaming. At the same time, real relations between people are devalued. Sincerity turns into a communicative algorithm, which, on the one hand, replaces the previous sensibility, and on the other hand, is the virtual subject’s way to attack both the real and the digital world.

### Conclusion

In certain situations, the phenomena of socialization and the simultaneous advancement of digital competence in young people turn into antagonistic processes connected with the separation of the social and virtual worlds. The dualism of the personality of a virtual absorbed in the digital world is a source of his/her aggression towards adults who do not understand him/her, people who are “on the other side” of his/her reality. However, this circumstance is an essential basis for the development of new principles for interpreting virtual processes and forming a base for an intersocial dialogue.

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