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Ethical Theoretical Reflections on Social Media: Place of the Human Being in the Digital Space


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Abstract. Raises the problem of ethics in interpersonal relations on the Internet. The ontological difference between digital cyberspace from the real world is emphasized and the corresponding conceptual constructions of modern thinkers are derived. Relevant questions of modern philosophy are substantiated — whether there are some specific ethical relations in cyberspace, which arise directly on the Internet, how they are possible, and how they can be regulated. As a theoretical and methodological basis for answering these questions, presents Levinas' ideas regarding ethical thinking and the principles of “real” meetings on the Internet: *for-the-other*, *face-to-face*, and *existent-beyond-Being*. In this context, Levinas' conception of interpersonal and ethical relations in digital reality and the role of the Other in these relations are examined. The idea of the Other as a subject being outside, but for whom the user of the Internet is responsible, is disclosed. This type of responsibility, according to Levinas, is an ethical norm. The article shows the phenomenon of augmented reality as a type of hybrid reality, which is formed with the help of digital technology. Augmented reality superimposes virtual images on the real world so that both parties interact with each other. It is emphasized that in modern social science augmented reality technology is seen as blurring the boundaries of virtual and real, as well as true and false. The concepts of Bill Persky, Nicholas Negroponte, and Marc Prensky on digital communication and the impact of cyberspace on humans are considered. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the construction of so-called primordial ethical relationships on the Internet. An important place here is occupied by D. Barney's theory, aimed at studying the impact of the technical characteristics of network technologies on the social interaction of people. His idea of building qualitatively new interpersonal relationships in the digital environment is emphasized. The characteristic of the virtual environment as a

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space without response and one-way communication is noted. In this regard, the concept of N. Luhmann about the construction employing mass media of a special illusory, symbolic space, which modern man perceives as objective reality, is substantiated. The problem of obtaining truth and objective knowledge-information is derived.

Keywords: media influence, the Internet, digital space, ethical relations, virtual world, modern technology, mass media

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I. Introduction

Where there is a crowd of people, there are ethical issues. It is because we will encounter problems of norm there, such like how to judge an interpersonal action as good or evil, or as right or wrong. Since the Internet also brings together a large number of users, and the operation of the computer network must at least presuppose the existence of a human community, then it is reasonable to say that those people who interact with each other on the Internet would also encounter ethical issues.

So far, the discussions on the ethics of the Internet, i.e., cyberethics, mainly focused on issues such as privacy, copyright, freedom of speech and so on. This is because the computer network makes reproduction and circulation of speeches so easier, that many people try to find out a proper way to regulate words and deeds on the Internet in order that their interests in real life would not be damaged by them. However, this approach, strictly speaking, only lets issues of applied ethics encountered in the real world directly extend to the cyberspace and thus be dealt with. With this mode of processing, they actually have presupposed that social norms from the real world are still valid in the cyberspace. Therefore, the main point at issue for them is *how* to make these already established social norms applicable on the Internet. It is worth noting that the reasonableness of their presupposition is seldom called into question. As long as we reflect carefully on it, we can see that the above-mentioned presupposition needs to be based on the belief that the Internet world is only an extension of the real world. But this belief is not as self-evident as they think. Their problem is: since most of them recognize the cyberspace as a fictional space, not as a reality, but now still at the same time assert that the ethical norms from the real world can be directly applied in the Internet world. Doesn't it sound a little bit contradictory?

In view of this contradiction, what we need to explore at first is: whether there can be any original ethical relationship on the Internet? The task of this paper is thus to ponder over a more fundamental question than the issues of applied ethics, that is: if the cyberspace is really different from the real world ontologically, can we find out some kind of ethical relationship which is directly generated on the Internet? If there is actually such a relationship, how is it to be possible? To ponder over this question would lead us to consider the virtuality/reality of cyberspace as an influential factor in cyberethics in order to reflect further on the ontological structure of ethical relationships on the Internet.

For our purpose, this paper attempts to refer to Levinas' ethical thinking as a methodological clue to guide our exploration. Levinas can be seen as an existentialist philosopher in a certain degree, and the ethical dimension of his philosophy could be simplified here to three points: *for-the-other*, *face-to-face*, and *existent-beyond-Being*. He bases on these three points to establish a primordial basis for ethical responsibility. However, in the eyes of many people, everything on the Internet is *virtual for me*, *no real face to face* and even *no death*. Therefore, it seems at first glance that we would not meet any existential choice in the Cyberspace, let alone the commitment of the ethical responsibility. In short, the three points of Levinas' ethical thinking seem to be incompatible with the ontological structure of the Internet world. If that is the case, does it mean that the primordial ethical relationship in Levinasian sense would not appear in cyberspace? On the other hand, since Levinas claims that language is a place where people meet each other and the ethical relationship starts from, doesn't it mean that we still could shape some kind of ethical relationship through linguistic interaction on the Internet? This article tries to answer those questions through following exploration and to ponder over the conditions of possibility of an existentialist ethics on social media.

II. The ethical actor on the Internet

Today we can see a lot of negative behaviors on the Internet, such as piracy, plagiarism, doxing, defamation and so on. These behaviors trespass copyright, right of privacy, freedom of speech etc., and thus violate the fundamental values which all modern democratic states of law (*Rechtsstaat*) stand for. Since these rights in modern civil society are asserted in a *legal* manner so naturally, that any deliberate violation of them would be easily condemned in a *moral* manner. Correspondingly, researchers of cyberethics so far have mostly focused on topics about privacy, copyright, freedom of speech and so on.

However, if our target is to investigate the primordial ethical relationship on the Internet, then we obviously cannot satisfy with this. It is important to emphasize at first that we are not going to doubt the necessity of those rights for modern civil society, but rather to inquire about the ethical basis for these rights in cyberspace. Previously, the discussions on cyberethics almost presupposes that the real world's social norms can be undoubtedly applied to the virtual world. We have already pointed out that this is not so self-evident. In addition, the legal norms and moral

norms are essentially different — although both are certain kinds of social norms. For example: Even if a state apparatus can resort to violence to force an Internet user to accept sanction of the law to a certain extent, it is difficult to use the same way to make him being a man of autonomous morality. Nevertheless, not everyone would recognize this difference. Many people who were born before the invention of the Internet would take it for granted that ethical norms outside the Internet can be brought into the Internet. So, they are easier to condemn those on the Internet who do not comply with ethical norms. But for the Internet generation, things are not so. They regard their privacy, for example, not as serious as their preceding generations do, and that is why they are willing to show their everyday lives on social media and to gather information about someone else through the Internet. Their experiences about Internet privacy suggest that their ethical relationship on the Internet appears somehow differently from the common way in the real world. Thus, if we want to inquire whether there is some primordial ethical relation in the cyberspace, we should not be satisfied only to examine how an ethical norm outside the Internet to be implemented on the Internet. On the contrary, we'd better be able to examine an ethical norm that originates in the web.

Let us first look at the people living in the digital environment and their ontological views, which will help us see clearly and thoroughly where the primordial ethical relation on the Internet comes from, if there really is this kind of relationship.

So far, people generally understand the Internet as a space isolated from the real world and call it “cyberspace.” They say that it is simply a fictional, untrue world and the truly real world is only one, namely, the here and now world where we physically live in and directly encounter other real beings. People think that only who lives in such a real world is real person. As for what happens in the cyberspace, it can neither be taken seriously, nor worth to spend our precious life time on it. This idea has been deeply rooted in the brains of ordinary people from the beginning of the computer network. Therefore, many people would like to dub those who sit in front of the terminal all day long “freak,” and comment that they have no feeling of reality and their way of life is abnormal. However, with the continuous development of digital technology, the computer network is more and more widely used in daily life, so the “normal” point of view which regards virtuality as false and reality as true becomes more and more problematic. The “normal” point of view may sound reasonable when it previously came to comment on virtual reality; but if it is now used to explain augmented reality, it may not be so justified. The augmented reality as a kind of hybrid reality is formed through a digital technology which overlaps virtual images on the real world to make both sides interact with each other. It is the technology of augmented reality that blurs the boundary of “virtual/real” and “true/false” — if not completely canceling it. Thus, we gradually see in the spread another point of view which is no longer dedicated to distinguish real space from virtual space in augmented reality, but more cares about whether it can produce a useful effect for us.

Now, there are two opinion groups concerning this newly digital lifestyle which fuses the online world and the real world as an integration. The two groups have a very strong contrast. For example: Most teenagers who live in this digital environment from a very young age regard the phenomena of phubbers as normal and not as anti-social; in contrast, there are a large number of adults (especially those over fifty or sixty years old) who are worried that the popularity of the phubbers will make people more alienated and the society more disintegrated. This contrastive attitudes towards digital lifestyle can be illustrated by two representative figures as their examples. Bill Persky, an experienced personage of television industry in the United States, could be seen as a representative of the negative opinion. He made the following comment on the occasion of the rise of social networks: “I’m not losing my patience but my sanity. With the wisdom I have gained from age and experience, I have finally decided it’s time for all these breakthroughs to take a break from breaking through, since they’re no longer improving communication but actually destroying it. How? By making it easier and faster for people everywhere to be in constant contact with each other — about nothing” (quoted in: [1. P. 237—238]). In contrast, Nicholas Negroponte, the co-founder of Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab, can be regarded as a representative of the positive opinion. In his famous book *Being Digital*, he said: “But being digital, nevertheless, does give us much cause for optimism. Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped. It has four very powerful qualities that will result in its ultimate triumph: decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering” [2. P. 229].

Persky and Negroponte represent respectively the *nostalgic* front and the *futuristic* front. The former has a negative evaluation on the digital communication technology and worries about the traditional communication patterns of face to face will be on the brink of collapse; the latter attempts a positive evaluation of such technology and welcomes the arrival of digital communication patterns wholeheartedly. As mentioned above, the supporters of the two fronts can roughly belong to different age groups. In this regard, we can use the American writer Marc Prensky’s argument to do more explanation. Prensky who has devoted to the promotion of digital education, used in 2001 the famous terms of “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” to describe the difference between students and teachers at that time: *digital natives* refers to those who were born in the digital age and are so good at the digital “language” of computer, video games and the Internet that we can draw an analogy between them and native speakers of a language; *digital immigrants* are those who were born before the digital age and started learning this new “language” only after they already grew up [3]. This explains to some extent why age differences are here important related data items to distinguish two fronts — although these are not decisive influencing elements. According to Prensky’s observation, today’s students are largely differentiated from their teachers while reflecting on and dealing with information, because their “thinking pattern” has changed so dramatically, that they could live very well in the new

digital environment, just like fish's living in the water, and their teachers who still maintain the traditional thinking pattern can hardly fit this environment. Prensky explained that the differentiation between thinking patterns bases on a long-term influence and molding by a certain life pattern. For example, by spending several hours each day to play video games, the game experience is accumulated day after day, and will further be internalized over time, then finally alter the thinking pattern of players. Following this logic, it follows theoretically that a digital immigrant may eventually become a digital native, if he or she is so active in a social media every day that his accumulated digital experience would be internalized. In addition, this change of thinking patterns is in fact a transformation of a worldview (Weltanschauung), that is, a shift of a knowledge system for understanding the world as a whole. If we regard the difference between the nostalgia and the futuristic front as the difference between worldviews, it can be easy to foresee how most people would evaluate the digital living environment in next years. Although both fronts today undoubtedly have their supporters today, correspondingly with the social trend that more and more middle-aged and elderly people become members of phubbers, the negative evaluation of the digital living environment will also become increasingly less. Moreover, with gradual reduction of digital immigrants due to their aging and passing away, the digital natives will become the majority of our society, and the digital life will become more and more unstoppable — whether we like it or not. It is worth mentioning that communication activities never disappear in such a digital living environment, but only change their mode of expression. Here, we have become aware of the variation of communication ways and ethical relations, in short, the shift of worldview.

Since the worldview is not the same, do the digital natives also have different ethical norms? If they do, do these norms actually originate on the Internet? In order to answer these questions, let us inquire into the ontic features of digital natives more deeply.

The French philosopher Michel Serres has accurately described the ontic features of digital natives in his book *Thumbelina* where he called those digital natives born after the 1970s, “Thumbelina” (Petite Poucette) and “Tom Thumb” (Petit Poucet). Thumbelina was originally a fairy tale characters created by Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen and looked as small as the thumb; now it is used by Serres to denote those digital natives because they are skilled in using their thumbs to press the screen of a smart phone. In Serres' view, these people have great differences from people of his generation. First of all, these people's life experience is different from their predecessors:

[T]hey are fortunate. They know nothing of the rustic life, domestic animals, or the summer harvest. They have not lived through ten wars, the wounded, the starving, the motherland, bloody flags, cemeteries, or monuments to the dead. Nor have they ever experienced, through their suffering, the vital urgency of a morality [4. P. 4].

Secondly, their sense of time and space and ways of thinking are also different from the past:

These children inhabit the virtual. [...] They can manipulate several forms of information at the same time, yet they neither understand it, nor integrate it, nor synthesize it as do we, their ancestors. [...] With their cell phone, they have access to all people; with GPS, to all places; with the Internet, to all knowledge. They inhabit a topological space of neighborhoods, whereas we lived in a metric space, coordinated by distances. [4. P. 6].

Finally, Serres pointed out: “Like an atom without valence, Thumbelina is completely naked.” [4. P. 10]. Serres meant that these digital natives are “individuals” in the true sense of the word, because they are no longer part of groups of any ideology, no longer affiliated with “regions, religions, cultures [...], teams, towns, a sex, a dialect, a party, and a motherland” and so on, in short, no longer have any belongings. [4. P. 9] Just like an atom without valence is not able to combine with other atoms into a molecule, the digital natives as individual won’t connect with each other into a collective. But it doesn’t imply that there are no any possible connections between digital natives. It means only that “new links still need to be invented.” [4. P. 10].

III. The primordial ethical relationships on the Internet

As Serres said, the new relationships on the Internet have yet to be established, and one example of these possible new relationships is the linkage on Facebook. On the face of it, Facebook is based on real-world relationships to connect its users on the Internet; in fact, it gives each user to a possibility to connect further with all its users in the global world. As same as the Facebook, all social media on the Internet link their users in a hypertext way. Each user is like a node in a network, and the ways of linkage between nodes are very diverse. Since each user is an individual which don’t need to belong to any collectives, those social media provide an alternative channel of communication that allows people to create new patterns of interpersonal interaction. Darin Barney, a Canadian scholar in communication studies, has analyzed in his book *The Network Society* in 2004 that every network consists basically of three elements: a node, a tie, and a flow: each one node can lead to at least another one node, and the tie links them together, in order to pass various message flows between each other [5. P. 26—27]. These three elements have respectively different kinds of variation, so that the network formed by different combinations of elements can show as many modes of operation as possible, such as: centralized, decentralized, or centerless; hierarchical or horizontal; inclusive or exclusive; interactive or non-interactive, and so forth. Barney’s analysis aims to examine how human social interactions are influenced by the technical characteristics of network technology. In other words, he seeks to elaborate how the new interpersonal relationships in the digital environment would look like. Compared to him, what we are more interested in is rather: How would

the primordial ethical relationship in the digital environment look like? Another way to express: What kind of ethical norms will come into being from such a new interpersonal relationship?

Levinas argues in his book *Totality and Infinity* that the interpersonal relationship is nothing but the ethical relationship, which is an *irreducible* structure for human being, and that the ethical relations have a priority, so that other structures — whether aesthetic or ontological — are required to be based on it [6. P. 79]. Levinas enumerates three manifestation modes of the relationship of man to man: signification, teaching, and justice. All three modes must presuppose the existence of the other. Signification is an act to present oneself as other through language; teaching is a behavior that bring us the experience of the others through discourse; and justice is a state of affairs where the other as himself can be respected in conversation [6. P. 79].

What we here communicate with each other through discourses cannot be the same universal thought, because “a universal thought dispenses with communication,” and so it can only be conveyed in a monologue without any audience (others) [6. P. 72]. On the contrary, the other always has the freedom to escape from our rational cognition and control and is thus *an existent transcending Being*. The other would express his irreducible self while communicating with us — Levinas called this expression the *face* of the other. It is the facticity of the other that we need to accept. Correspondingly, we will find that we have already been thrown into a concrete *face-to-face* relationship. Therefore, an irreducible relationship is to be established in a discourse, that is “*revelation* of the other.” More directly to the point, a discourse is “an original relation with exterior being” [6. P. 66].

Levinas then further argues that a discourse in this sense is inherently an ethical relationship, because whether it is to give a meaning, to learn an experience or to establish a justice, the key point always is — let the other be himself. According to Levinas, “[t]he ethical relation is defined [...] by excluding every signification it would take on *unbeknown* to him who maintains that relation”; that is, “[w]hen I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of me” [6. P. 79]. Once the ethical relationship in Levinasian sense is really primordial, then it is clear that the actors in such a primordial ethical relationship ought to have autonomy in some degree and their lives cannot be predestined or manipulated by someone else. Being in such a relationship that cannot be reduced, we therefore also have an irreducible responsibility for the other. We have a primordial duty to respond justly to the other whom we face to face encounter.

For a long time, many people are accustomed to understand Levinas’ thinking under the context of existentialism. Although different existentialists will construct different systems of philosophy, but their common attitude is to emphasize the

freedom of human subject, concrete experience of life, and the authentic meaning of existence. Levinas' philosophy is undoubtedly not in conflict with this existential attitude. It would be difficult to imagine the possibility of applying Levinas' thinking to discuss the ethical relations on the Internet if we read Levinas' philosophy from this existential attitude. It seems impossible to talk about real face-to-face, sincere for-the-other and even existent-beyond-Being on the Internet, since everything on the Internet is virtual. From the perspective of the existentialist attitude, the life experience on the Internet is simply dominated by technology and therefore an inauthentic, and even alienated experience. There are many phenomena on the Internet that seem to support such diagnostic results. For example, a user behavior common in today's social media: to read messages without responding. Such a behavior makes many people feel nervous and is regarded by them as a symptom indicating disrespect for the other. Using Levinasian terminology to speak, this behavior means not to respond the other whom the user encounters, and thus is an irresponsible behavior. If now "responsibility for the other" is an ethical norm we should obey, then "reading without responding" seems in all probability offend that norm.

But is the case really so? Is it true that no response logically leads to irresponsibility? Or does, on the contrary, reading without responding in social media actually reflect the primordial ethical relationship on the Internet, therefore it is not inappropriate that the digital natives understand it as normal? In other words, is the ethical norm involved here actually a very different one?

Let's take a closer look at the phenomenon of reading without responding. It is undoubtedly not the case that the users of social media always don't respond all messages of the other after they have read them. They would actually respond, but only by selection. For example, Thumbelina and Tom Thumb may not read back most messages their parents post on the Facebook, but they would always answer to their peer's posts, at least by way of thumbs-up.

IV. Constructing Self in the Online Media Reality

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann develops the idea of the media existence of the subject in *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Luhmann proceeds in his book from the following thesis: "What we know about our society and even about the world in which we live, we know thanks to the mass media... On the other hand, we know so much about the mass media that we cannot trust them... knowledge borrowed from the mass media seems to form a closed, self-sustaining structure in and of itself. We characterize this kind of knowledge as dubious, and yet we are forced to base ourselves on it and proceed from it" [7. P. 8].

Modern technologies, the virtualization of people's lives, the increasing role of the entertainment component of the mass media change the nature of social communications, often transferring them from the category of real social interactions to simulative, illusory-symbolic, imitative [8]. Considering the mass media as one of the isolated, autonomous, self-contained "functional systems of

contemporary society,” Luhmann argues that “the mass media construct reality” and inquires, how do the media do this? He emphasizes that there is an even more important question that requires closer attention, namely, how can society, or sociologists, describe “the reality of mass media constructions of reality”? This does not ask of “how mass media distort reality” by their ways of presenting messages and information, since this would imply an ontological, objectively cognizable reality, albeit in a distorted form. However, Luhmann’s analysis of mass media is based on the assumption that mass media reality has a twofold meaning. The reality of the mass media is a real reality consisting, first, in their “own operations” of printing, broadcasting, watching programs, etc. The second reality is the dissemination that is possible only on the basis of technology.

Luhmann argues that it is vital to speak of a second, illusory, not real sense of mass media. It is not only the information messages created (or observations transmitted operationally) that are important, but also the observations of the consumers of this information. It turns out that the recipient constantly monitors the observations created and transmitted by the mass media.

We agree with Luhmann that the logic of mass media activity is connected to the construction or formation of a reality that does not exist in reality. Informational knowledge about such a constructed “world” a priori contains perceptions and preferences of mass media, editors, communicators, customers, and expected results, but all of this ends up being far from objective [9]. However, this is where the opportunity for consumers and producers of online content to engage interactively through social media, presenting themselves as the *other*, lies. We deem Luhmann’s ideas of importance since they allow getting an insight into the processes that accompany mediatization of information and social interactions. Gradual transfusion from the first into the second reality with an increasing component of virtual being on social media platforms establish a special kind of reality.

Let us emphasize, postmodern communications are not the usual social interactions between the individual and the other, between the individual and this or that community. The nature of the new communications is specific and simulative, since the real interpersonal relation is replaced by the communication of the individual and the technical device, of the individual and the screen. The human being gradually becomes accustomed to this kind of interrelationship, having been brought up from childhood with semblances or imitations of forms of social communication, getting used to them and feeling a deep need for them throughout life. A certain communication model of human life is formed. The expectation of receiving information, screen images, turns out to be an expectation of a thinking “image” — a reasoning, a sign, a meaningful message, a discussion, a forum on the website.

In the conditions of postmodernity and simulative nature of social reality, increasingly more attention of researchers is paid to the specific nature of connections — situational, simulative, unreal, created by the game of imaginary

reflections. How are these interactions constructed? How does one realize oneself and the other? How does perception differ depending on socio-demographic characteristics? The next step for reflection should be to introduce the measurement of the ethics of interaction through social networks and other Internet platforms to find answers to these new challenges.

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Этико-теоретическая рефлексия социальных медиа: положение человека в цифровом пространстве

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Аннотация. Поднимается проблема этики в межличностных отношениях в сети Интернет. Подчеркивается онтологическое отличие цифрового киберпространства от реального мира и выводятся соответствующие концептуальные построения современных мыслителей. Обосновываются актуальные вопросы современной философии — существуют ли в киберпространстве некие специфические этические отношения,

которые возникают непосредственно в Интернете, как они возможны, и как их можно регулировать. В качестве теоретической и методологической основы для ответа на поставленные вопросы представлены идеи Левинаса об этическом мышлении и принципах «реальных» встреч в Интернете: «для другого», «лицом к лицу» и «существующее-вне-Бытия». В данном контексте рассматривается концепция Левинаса о межличностных и этических отношениях в цифровой реальности и о роли Другого в этих отношениях. Раскрывается идея Другого как бытия субъекта извне, но за которого пользователь Сети несет ответственность. Данный вид ответственности, по Левинасу, является этической нормой. Показан феномен *дополненной реальности* как вида гибридной реальности, который формируется с помощью цифровых технологий. Дополненная реальность накладывает виртуальные изображения на реальный мир с тем, чтобы обе стороны взаимодействовали друг с другом. Подчеркивается, что в современном общественном знании технология дополненной реальности рассматривается как стирающая границы виртуального и реального, а также истинного и ложного. Рассмотрены концепции Билла Перски, Николаса Негропonte, Марка Пренски о цифровой коммуникации и воздействии киберпространства на человека. Особое внимание уделено анализу выстраивания так называемых первобытных этических отношений в сети Интернет. Важное место здесь занимает теория Д. Барни, направленная на изучение влияния технических характеристик сетевых технологий на социальное взаимодействие людей. Акцентируется его идея выстраивания качественно новых межличностных отношений в цифровой среде. Отмечается характеристика виртуальной среды как пространства без ответа и односторонней коммуникации. В этом плане обоснована концепция Н. Лумана о конструировании средствами масс-медиа особого иллюзорного, символического пространства, которое современный человек воспринимает как объективную реальность. Выводится проблема получения истины и объективного знания-информации.

Ключевые слова: влияние медиа, Интернет, цифровое пространство, этические отношения, виртуальный мир, современные технологии, масс-медиа

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