
SOCIAL ASPECTS OF INTERNET COMMUNICATION: VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICATION PERSONALITY

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The new global communication medium gives rise to a new type of discourse that exerts considerable influence on communication practices. The article touches upon the most typical features of Internet communication, while special emphasis is paid to its role in self-identification. The author comes to the conclusion that the virtual medium fosters the development of peculiar communication and cognitive skills which turn out to be indispensable for adequate and efficient Internet communication. Thus, the competence in Internet communication becomes the primary basis for social status ascription in the stratification structure of virtual community.

Key words: sociology of the Internet, Internet communication, Internet audience, virtual community, communication personality, communication competence, “clicking man”, hypertext.

Computer and information technologies are increasingly gaining in importance encompassing a broad range of our social activities. The number of Internet users taking advantage of its vast information and communication resources all over the world is growing rapidly. Moreover, people are spending more and more time on the Internet in their efforts to make up for the lack of straightforward face-to-face communication amid the avalanche of professionally compiled, edited, and “ready-to-use” cliché messages broadcast by various mass media.

Some social scientists proclaim the rise of new “clicking” culture as a new digital mentality of the XXI century highlighting the proliferation of its agent and bearer — the “clicking man” [19. P. 114] as a representative of the virtual world of Internet citizens (or Netizens) striking keyboard while surfing the Web. This type of personality appears as a specific product of the evolution of the “reading man” and the “scribal man”. It should be emphasized, however, that McLuhan’s “typographic man” might hardly be regarded as an immediate predecessor of the “clicking man” since the process of transition from one stage to another is by no means direct and involves as its offshoot the “audiovisual” type of man which can be described in terms of audiovisual products consumption. It is the latter type, which, in our opinion, has played a pivotal role in the making of the “clicking man”. The direct link between the two types can be convincingly illustrated by the proliferation of TV remote control devices designed to switch channels on TV, which provide a television viewer with an opportunity for zapping, that is, moving quickly from one television channel to another, pausing only a short time on each channel and thus creating an individual trajectory of TV broadcasts. Likewise, the representatives of the “Thumb generation” of the electronic age practice zapping communication format to their advantage while interacting with virtual reality. On the one hand, they have infinite opportunities of random browsing

from one source of information to another for hours on end; on the other hand, they are uniquely positioned to scan and select the obtained information comprehensively.

The new cultural practices and opportunities provided by Internet communication restructure time and space patterns, influence human mentality, and alter individuals' modes of social realm perception. At the same time, the demarcation line between reality and virtuality is becoming blurred. It is worthy of note that one of the prominent ideologists of the information society M. Castells introduces the concept of "real virtuality" providing the following interpretation of the term: "What is then a communication system that ... generates real virtuality? It is a system in which reality itself (that is people's material/symbolic existence is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in a world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience" [2. P. 404]. Thus, information technologies serve as agents for worldview change affording the "clicking man" an immense opportunity to create virtual scenarios of construction and deconstruction of a multitude of worlds which gradually acquire reality in the process of communication.

The aim of the present paper is to explore the dimensions and nature of Internet communication both in social communication as a whole and in individual communication practices of Internet users in particular.

As a working statement for that purpose the Internet can be defined as an emerging electronic information and communication medium with an open network structure integrating a number of communication domains into a single social space. In terms of technology Internet communication is the process by which individuals exchange, create, and perceive information using computer networks with common standards which facilitate transmitting, encoding, and decoding messages. The social rather than technical aspects of communication are accentuated in the following definition: "Computer-mediated communication, of course, is not just a tool; it is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space" [7. P. 16] Thus, the new medium of social communication provides an opportunity to carry out multilateral interaction and exchange of audio-visual and textual information via electronic channels by means of natural language. The properties of the new medium described as global, interactive, and virtual as well as electronic communication channels implying temporal and spatial separation of communicants make the Net into social communications space of unprecedented scale and significance.

The virtual medium of communication gives rise to a new distinctive type of discourse combining the basic features of spoken and written languages which differs so fundamentally from the traditional forms that it is neither written nor spoken [4. P. 48]. On the one hand, virtual discourse is not like traditional writing. First of all, both the content and the format of "virtual" texts are by no means static and permanent (e.g., a web page often varies from encounter to encounter as long as news and advertisements are constantly updated, new comments are added, site design is changed, animation graphics is created, etc.). Moreover, computer technologies considerably enhance the opportunities for text processing and editing, while users are able to modify

their texts in almost all kinds of ways. Finally, the Internet promotes new text structuring patterns, such as e-mail “framing” [3. P. 5], in terms of which communicators can split the received messages into parts and respond to each part separately; thus, the text becomes dialogical or polylogical.

Another significant feature of electronic communication is its hypertextuality. The term hypertext coined by T. Nelson is defined as “non-sequential writing-text that branches and allows choices to reader” [10. P. 2]. Hypertext is non-linear, decentered, and open-ended as opposed to the assumed hierarchical and linear structure of traditional text. The patterns of hypertext production and perception may differ drastically from the traditional practices of reading and writing. Another point worth mentioning here is that the principle of transparency implying almost unrestricted access to Internet resources makes electronic texts available to all users. Thus, the text as a social and cultural phenomenon is undergoing radical changes in its format and design which include the transition from “codex format to scroll format” [11. P. 177] and functional text structuring.

On the other hand, Internet communication does not provide any adequate format for spoken language in its traditional form. Firstly, unlike traditional face-to-face conversation, no simultaneous feedback (or immediate verbal/non-verbal reaction signals) between the participants is gained even in the most interactive formats of Internet communication, such as chats and IMS: the rhythm of message exchange differs from the rhythm of conversation. Secondly, the participants are denied the opportunity to employ traditional non-verbal means of communication which play such a significant role in describing emotions, expressing attitudes, and conveying social statuses. By way of compensation, special indicators of non-verbal behaviour (paragraphemic means), such as smileys and emoticons, are used [12. P. 73—74], although they fail to provide an adequate alternative to the vast spectrum of non-verbal means involved in face-to-face communication.

The new medium is by no means homogenous. Within the Net various discursive formats can be found, which differ in communicative purposes of users, number of participants, etc [13. P. 11—27]. Among various classifications of “electronic genres”, the subdivision into five communication domains carried out by D. Crystall seems the most pertinent. According to Crystall, five “Internet-using situations” can be identified — the World Wide Web, e-mail, two types of chatgroup (the synchronous type and the asynchronous type), and the domain of virtual worlds [4. P. 10]. This division is, however, rather arbitrary, while the division lines between various domains are blurred as new varieties and hybrid species are increasingly coming into being (e.g., weblog, Twitter, social networks, etc.). It is worth mentioning that the higher the level of electronic genre interactivity is, the more likely it is that colloquial speech patterns are used. For instance, synchronous real-time chat is characterized by a high level of interactivity, the level of interactivity in social networks and discussion groups can be described as medium, while e-mail communication is defined in terms of low interactivity. Therefore, colloquial patterns are expected to be more typical of chat than of e-mail.

It should be pointed out that the Internet promotes simultaneous coexistence of a multitude of various domains, events, situations, cognitive models, and identities, bring-

ing into life a variety of new genres and speech practices. It is normal practice to arrange texts of various genres with different communicative functions within the framework of a single web page, e.g., on-line news, users' comments to it, business information, advertisements, etc. A second point that is worth making here is that "virtual" texts are highly creolized [12. P. 73—74], since contemporary multimedia technologies provide a broad range of opportunities to create "multicode" texts combining signs of various semiotic systems within one web page.

Finally, the virtual communication medium is inherently relative and controversial. In terms of a particular communication situation the anonymous may become known, the local may be made global, and the hidden may turn out open. Moreover, the concepts of time and place of communication cease to have their conventional meaning.

Thus, Internet communication can be seen as a new species of communication, a genuine "third medium" combining characteristics of written and spoken discourse and offering novel opportunities for human communication, which can be called revolutionary and comparable in importance to those brought about by the invention of movable type printing by Johannes Gutenberg or the adoption of alphabet [5. P. 3].

The new global communication medium can exert considerable influence on communication practices. On the one hand, the combination of medium interactivity with an electronic channel characterized by a high speed of information exchange does sufficiently augment communication opportunities in contrast with traditional communication media. On the other hand, the virtual medium imposes certain restrictions on communication. Thus, Internet communication adds new dimensions to the communication personality of its participants.

In this regard an essential distinction of Internet communication versus traditional communication should be highlighted referring precisely to the opposition between the "real" and the "virtual". It is not difficult to distinguish two basic components (or "dimensions") of personality encompassing the entire range of individual communication behaviour patterns. Firstly, there is a "textual" dimension which can be perceived to some extent as the record of everything spoken out by an individual in specific communication situations and is manifested through the content of his/her utterances in particular communication acts (written and spoken, verbal and non-verbal, etc.). The second dimension corresponds to the non-textual "factual" (or "biographical") personality which can be seen as a track record of communicative situations in which he/she is involved. It is to the second dimension comprising the external "conditions" of text production, which an individual is apparently free to choose, that the label "real" is usually ascribed. In general context of "classical" communication the "textual" personality (i.e. the content of the communication act) can be separated from the "factual" personality (i.e. the conditions of the communication act). Thus, in "real" communication the social identification of an individual is performed in the framework of two dimensions — the "factual" one and the "textual" one, while it is normal practice to attribute his/her communication personality (and communicative competence) to the "textual" one. It is certainly not the case in virtual communication where the choice of the communication situation (as well as the communication "site") con-

stitutes a part of individual's communication behaviour and is therefore included in his/her "textual" personality. To put it differently, the two dimensions of communication personality overlap in the cyberspace: the trajectory of web sites visited by an individual becomes an indispensable component of his/her text; that is to say, it is included rather than excluded from the text involved. Thus, individual's pseudo-social identification in the Internet community can be carried out only in one dimension in terms of "textual" personality identification. As a result, communicative competence becomes the primary basis for social status ascription in the stratification structure of the virtual community.

It is obvious that "silent exploration" of various Web domains by an individual including his/her lurking on Internet discussion groups is to be considered a *sui generis* communication practice in the cyberspace exerting a significant influence upon individual's cyberpersonality (it is worth noting that in many computer-mediated forums lurking behaviour is easy to keep track of and denounced as violating the rules of Netiquette). Therefore, the Web is integrating the "reading/listening man" and the "clicking man" into the single subject, while it is the "clicking man" associated with "real" communication context (in particular with individual's spatial movement as well as with the process of "real" thinking regarded as "wandering through labyrinths of memory") that is tailored to the best advantage to the "real" component of subjectification. Given this latter point, it can be conventionally asserted that Internet communication involves not only speaking/writing and reading/listening but also thinking, provided we define thinking as an interaction with memory data array in a "request-response" manner. However, there is another major difference here between the processes of "real" and "virtual thinking" which is associated with the fact that in "real" thinking the given interaction is performed unconsciously *par excellence*, both synchronically and diachronically (people gain no control over their thoughts, while the amount of information to be processed by an individual and the processing time are constrained by external communication factors, e.g., the necessity to have a "mental scheme" of the text elaborated by the very time it is articulated). On the other hand, the access to "external" rather than one's own memory, albeit implying some automatic performance which comes with practice, is consciously regulated (e.g., a peculiar "clicking" rhythm of hypertext navigation with quick skim and scan reading followed by a switch to another hyperlink, etc.). Thus, the Internet affords the individual an opportunity to control his/her mental discourse by means of mere clicking. Therefore, it is not surprising that the members of the virtual community feel an irresistible impulse to take advantage of the unrivalled opportunity provided by electronic communication channels. In this regard M. McLuhan's well-known assertion that each different medium is an extension of the senses, especially, his hypothesis of the extension of consciousness by means of electric media is worth mentioning. As M. McLuhan puts it, "Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man — the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative proc-

ess of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media” [9. P. 5]. Although the hypothesis was formulated in the wake of television technology development, it is certainly the case of virtual communication in which Mc. Luhan’s conclusions can be adequately tested. For example, the description provided by the following quote: “Electromagnetic technology requires utter human docility and quiescence of meditation such as befits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide” [9. P. 69] seems to be quite in line with the concept of the “clicking man”.

The analysis of virtual communication is by no means reduced to technical parameters, resources, and limitations of the communication medium. The description of electronic communication as a combination of various types of discourse provides an opportunity to analyze it in terms of superposition of medium properties and personal practices of communicators since it is up to them to decide how the technology is to be viewed — as a limitation or as an extra option. In this respect, social, cultural, and psychological characteristics of virtual communication participants (Netizens) should be taken into account.

The members of the Internet community emerge as a radically new socio-cultural reality. The network-based structure of the Internet (as opposed to the hierarchical one) has the potential to “democratize” communication [6] reducing hierarchical differences in status of participants and opening up the opportunity to interact on equal terms. The high level of transparency of the virtual medium [12. P. 73—74] provides any user with an opportunity either to participate in communication or to lurk on-line. On the one hand, the Internet communication, which is inherently distant and indirect, naturally constrains adequate exchange of verbal information (including status indicators), which can result in communicators’ social anonymity and depersonalization through virtual communication identity construction. In the course of communication its participants assume specific roles determined by the need to work out the profile of the imagined target audience as well as by the need for self-presentation, which definitely influences communication behaviour patterns. On the other hand, the same factors shape the ludic style of communication, its carnival spirit resulting in innovations, language standards revision, and social norms reassessment. Meanwhile, socio-emotional intensity of Internet discourse is fostered by freedom of style as well as freedom of partner choice.

At present Internet audience is undergoing qualitative and quantitative changes. The number of Internet users in the developed Western countries has reached the saturation level with Internet penetration around 70%; thereby social, demographic, and other characteristics of the Internet audience (except for the age difference) are closely equal to the corresponding characteristics of the whole population [8]. As far as Runet is concerned, the research conducted by the Public Opinion Fund put a monthly Russian audience in 2010 at more than 41,1 million people [14]. According to the polls, a typical Runet user is 18—24 years old, highly educated, with a high income level [15]. Unfortunately, the given statistics does not take into account the communication ac-

tivity of various audiences which may prove useful in our study. An obvious example here is the emergence of a specific category of users (i.e., “cyber addicts”) [1. P. 203—207] who perceive virtual communication with a real or imagined partner and permanent Web browsing in search of information as a substitute rather than extension of traditional face-to-face communication. This group, though not very significant in number, wields an opportunity to exert substantial influence over Internet communication by means of specific discourse patterns, which they adhere to, and which are not infrequently as deviant as they are attractive in terms of communication. Other groups which can be distinguished in terms of their potential influence on virtual discourse patterns are English/Russian speaking programming specialists who developed strategy and tactics of virtual communication, introduced the basic principles of web page design and site navigation, created their own code of behaviour (or “Netiquette”), and coined the peculiar professional slang corresponding to their peculiar mentality [18. P. 41]. What is worth noting here is that the significance of the given groups in virtual communication can absolutely disagree with their significance in “real” life, where, for instance, the group of cyber addicts does hardly manifest itself at all as a result of their isolation and non-involvement in anything but virtual communication.

There are some issues here, which concern the functional parameter of communication personality [17. P. 173] which is commonly referred to as communicative competence [16. P. 41—45]. The questions can be posed like this: To which extent will the discourse patterns coined by active Internet users (people of different age groups with various education background) impose their structure upon the discourse of the Internet when the maximum possible number of users is reached with almost all adults and teenagers already online? Is it possible to attach any social prestige to the competence in Internet communication? What is the prospective status of Internet communication proficiency among other communication skills? To answer these questions some landmarks are to be highlighted in the Internet discourse development. As a working hypothesis here, let us assume that the following stages are involved.

1. At the primary stage the community of active Internet users, the originators of Netspeak, is confined to a rather narrow circle of “computer people” comprising mostly young males with higher education in the field of Engineering who consider computer programming an indispensable element of their proficiency. One can expect that the main contribution made by this group into Internet discourse is the use of computer slang, while their on-line communication is dominated by mostly pragmatic motives (e.g., the discussion of technical matters) which determine the peculiarities of their language efforts on-line. However, their “off-line” language patterns may significantly differ from the forms exhibited on-line.

2. At the second stage adolescents (irrespective of level and sphere of education), children, and teenagers of both sexes become involved into Internet communication. The communication orientation of the users is mostly conversational — it can be described as “communication for the sake of communication”, some kind of “virtual small-talk” which results in defying language norms amid the lack of censure as far as their innovative language forms are concerned. Moreover, the group perceives their on-

line vernacular to be identical to the language they use off-line, although this is far from being the case. Therefore, this group is to be considered as the primary agent promoting unrestricted assimilation of the “Internet vernacular” into traditional face-to-face communication.

3. The group, which can be characterized as a “marginal” group as opposed to the mainstream of the virtual community, appears on the scene at the next stage. It is composed of adult users who had to learn Internet communication skills as a must for living a productive life. This group is expected to adhere to conventional “off-line” language patterns in their Internet communication perceiving the peculiar computer slang as a foreign language which is to be learnt but need not be used in their day-to-day social interactions.

4. Subsequently, the first group becomes extinct and assimilates with the whole population of Internet users; while the second one, upon acquiring the adult status, affiliates with the third group. At this stage the virtual community is split into a multitude of separate “communication domains” which give place to all kinds of “hybrid” groups randomly combined of the above-mentioned ones. As an example, Internet dialects typical of various social networks can be pointed out.

As a result, the specific Internet language is gaining ground on the Web gradually acquiring its leading positions in virtual communication discourse. The proliferation of the Internet language encourages peculiar communication skills which radically differ both from high-technology skills required for computer programming specialists and from rhetorical skills displayed in face-to-face communication. Social, demographic, and motivation variables that are associated with the Internet usage as well as its “force of attraction” are also undergoing changes. While at the primary stage the core of Internet community was composed of people with technical background who perceived virtual communication as a tool for their cognitive abilities development, the more recent stages have been marked by the rise of another centre of “communication attraction” which is currently gaining increasing importance. It is represented by a group of users for whom virtual communication, as opposed to traditional forms of communication, affords the best opportunity to meet their needs for self-representation and self-identification, which is hardly available for them in face-to-face communication. What is more, both their mentality and habits of thought appear to conform to the specificity of Internet communication pointed out by us earlier. Thus, the representatives of this group can be viewed as Internet communicators *par excellence*. The above-mentioned group of “cyber addicts” can be classed among them; however, it is possible (to some extent) to attach the label of “cyber addiction” to all users who are in need of virtual communication. It is not so much the lack of face-to-face communication (which, generally speaking, is not true) as its dysfunction in terms of self-identification and self-representation that gives rise to the obsession with the new form of communication which is increasingly in demand in the contemporary society. In the modern world the individual is getting used to identifying his/her personality (within the full range of social activities from shopping to elections) by means of multiple-choice rather than other ways of self-identification. What is important here is that the

multiple-choice identification is hardly encouraged in face-to-face communication, while this peculiar form of cognitive activity is so intrinsically involved in the process of “textual personality” identification that it has become one of the most in-demand characteristics in Internet communication. Thus, the Internet turns out to be a perfect communication space for self-identification in contemporary social environment.

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СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ИНТЕРНЕТ-КОММУНИКАЦИИ: ИНТЕРНЕТ-СООБЩЕСТВО И КОММУНИКАТИВНАЯ ЛИЧНОСТЬ

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Новая глобальная среда коммуникации порождает новый тип дискурса, оказывающий существенное влияние на коммуникативные практики. В статье рассматриваются характерные черты интернет-коммуникации, причем особое внимание уделяется ее роли в процессе самоидентификации. Автор приходит к выводу о том, что виртуальная среда коммуникации способствует развитию своеобразных коммуникативных и когнитивных навыков, необходимых для полноценного и эффективного общения в Сети. Соответствующая компетенция может рассматриваться в качестве основного статусного признака стратификационной структуры виртуального сообщества.

Ключевые слова: социология Интернета, интернет-коммуникация, аудитория Интернета, интернет-сообщество, коммуникативная личность, коммуникативная компетентность, «человек кликающий», гипертекст.