Dialectics of freedom and alienation in the space of the internet

Dialéctica de la libertad y la alienación en Internet

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ABSTRACT:

The article presents the critical interpretation of the positive and negative consequences of infocommunicational technologies' development. The authors admit that "high" technologies make human life more comfortable and safe, promote the values of freedom, social equality, and tolerance. At the same time, it is shown that the reverse side of this is the phenomenon of social and psychological alienation of a human being in online-space. The problem of alienation in cyberspace is analyzed by the examples of such processes as turning the full-fledged communication into vacuous internet-communication, decentralizing and splitting the subject of internet-communication, transforming the social relations in the Net into a "social automatism"; forming the technogenic sensuality, when a person maximally distances themselves from the others' and even their own emotions.

Keywords: communication, Internet, freedom, infocommunicational technologies, alienation, sociality, sensuality.

RESUMEN:

El artículo presenta la interpretación crítica de las consecuencias positivas y negativas del desarrollo de las tecnologías de información y comunicación. Los autores admiten que las tecnologías "altas" hacen que la vida humana sea más cómoda y segura, promueven los valores de libertad, igualdad social y tolerancia. Al mismo tiempo, se muestra que el reverso de esto es el fenómeno de la alienación social y psicológica de un ser humano en el espacio en línea. El problema de la alienación en el ciberespacio se analiza mediante ejemplos de tales procesos en la comunicación de internet, descentralizando y dividiendo el tema de la comunicación por Internet, transformando las relaciones sociales en la red en un "automatismo social". ; formando la sensualidad tecnogénica, cuando una persona se distancia al máximo de la de los demás e incluso de sus propias emociones.

Palabras clave: comunicación, internet, libertad, tecnologías de la información, enajenación, sociabilidad, sensualidad.

1. Introduction

It is hard to imagine the modern world without infocommunicational technologies (ICT). Development of microchip processes and advent of the Internet have radically changed all

spheres of life in today's society: economy (new production technologies, e-commerce, new organizational forms in business, etc.), politics ("electronic agora" and e-government), social sphere (new round in the development of the network form of social relations), and everyday life. All this taken together not only makes human life more comfortable and safe, but also promotes such liberal values as freedom, social and political equality and tolerance, as well as more practical solutions of the topical social problems (Leontyev G.D., Cherepanova E.S., Gaynullina L.F., 2017). Alongside with that, ICT development makes their negative consequences more and more apparent. The reverse side of the freedom, acquired by a human being due to the "high technologies", is the phenomenon of social and psychological alienation. The object of this article is the dialectics of freedom and alienation in the Internet space.

2. Bibliography Review

When analyzing the topic, the authors relied on the tradition of researching the informational society and ICT, established in the works by D. Bell (1973), M. McLuhan, Q. Fiore (1967); M. McLuhan (1964), A. Toffler (1980) and M. Castells (2001). The article continues the vector of critical interpretation of media-technologies, set in the works by R. Barbrook and A. Cameron (1995), Nicolas Carr (2004). The concept of alienation in its social-philosophic aspect is interpreted within the Marxist tradition (Marx K., 1844) and in psychological aspect – within the frameworks of Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis (Fromm E., 1994). Revealing the specific forms of alienation in the Internet space is impossible without the analysis of the features of network communication and network culture. For that, the authors turned to the works by G. Lovink (2013), I. Kushnareva (2012), V. Campanelli (2010), D.M. Boyd, N.B. Ellison (2007), O. Aronson (2007), and A. Skidan (2007).

3. Method

The methodological basis of the research is dialectic approach in interpretation by Hegel and Marx, which allows revealing the deep interrelation of the positive and negative consequences of ICT development. The phenomenological standpoint was used for observing and describing the specific forms of social and psychological alienation in online-space.

4. Results And Discussion

In Marxist tradition, as is known, "alienation" denotes the process in which the results of human activity turn into an external uncontrollable force, acting as alien and hostile towards a human being. At that, the human being turns from a subject (active part) into an object of influence of the external forces. By K. Marx, under capitalism, the economic basis of alienation is the commodity-money form of labor products exchange. Since within the capitalist production a wage laborer is involved into the labor process only as a seller of their own labor force, the product of their labor belongs not to them but is appropriated by a capitalist (the owner of means of production). Thus, the goods produced by the laborer is opposed to them as an external object (product), in which they do not find their authorship.

K. Marx (1844) showed that alienation, though having economic basis, goes beyond this basis. The broader, social-philosophic interpretation of alienation implies analyzing two interrelated phenomena. From the social-philosophic standpoint, alienation within the frameworks of commodity production is viewed, on the one hand, as reification (thingification) of a person – the process, in which social relations between people take the appearance of relations between things. The social relations turn from the personal into the role ones, i.e., the relations between people as carriers of social roles and executors of certain social functions. The reverse side of reification is depersonalization of a person – the process when the personal qualities are alienated from them and are erroneously attributed to things and social institutions. At that, the person per se is no longer perceived as a subject, an active part and an author of social relations, but is reduced to the level of a thing.

E. Fromm (1994) extended the social-philosophic analysis of alienation into the sphere of

psychology. In psychological aspect, alienation is inability of a person to implement their true human (generic) essence. An individual loses the connection with their true "Self", is depersonalized. Surrendering to the forms of social relations predominating in the society, a person turns into a part of a featureless social mechanism, starts viewing oneself and the others as a mere thing, i.e., functionally. In such situation the life of a person is deprived of meaning, a person distances themselves from their kin, and even from oneself (one's feelings, true wishes, etc.). An individual feels the hostility of the world towards themselves, experiences frustration and loneliness. They are compelled to fill the existential emptiness with false values. For instance, the modern society cultivates consumption of material goods.

In this article, the authors view the social-philosophic and psychological aspects of the alienation phenomenon. From this viewpoint, alienation is interpreted as the loss of genuine human features by a person, turning them from a subject (an active part) of internet-communication into an object, which is passively formed and transformed by "high technologies". This issue will be viewed by the example of communication in the network communities.

1. Exterritorial character of interaction between users in the Internet results in the network character of social relations between them. The specific feature of such relations is their non-hierarchical nature. This means that the relations are "horizontal", all participants communicating as equals; decentralized, i.e. the society is not divided into the "centre" and "periphery"; and have predominantly personalized character, compared to impersonal-social relations off-line. At the same time, the social links in network communities are "weak", as they are unsystematic and do not imply actual mutual help and support of the participants. Thus, such communication tends to turn into "empty" (vacuous) communication.

The research by O. Aronson (2007) defines internet-communication as a specific kind of communication, during which people can communicate with each other, having no common interests, goals, viewpoint, or similar world outlook. By Aronson, the specific feature of internet-communication is that it has no goal outside itself. For it, of primary importance is the mere fact of a contact, but not its content. The basis of internet-communication is a "communicative image" (video, photo, music, etc.), an Internet meme. It organizes around itself a "communicative society" – a community of people united by nothing but the communicative image per se. The network communities, by Aronson, are mainly as such.

The network communities are interested in maximally increasing the number of their subscribers. That is why the content of communicative images, constituting the community, tends to minimize. This can be understood by the analogy with the formal-logic rule of the reverse ratio of the volume and content of a logical concept: the more signs are allocated in the concept (the larger its content), the fewer objects possess the whole set of these signs (the smaller its volume). Thus, the simpler and more primitive the content of the communicative image, the larger number of different people will this image attract. Supposedly, it is this strive for maximal popularity that explains the fact that the prevailing part of messages in social networks is superficial and non-informative (Safina A., 2017). As a rule, internet-communication in social networks does not imply deep reasoning of an author on serious topics. It is reduced to the function of sharing a funny photo or a piece of music with one's virtual friends. It is such messages that have a chance to obtain the largest social response in the form of "likes".

It follows that the ontological basis of internet-communication is not the users themselves, but the communicative image uniting them. Due to the minimized content, it can attract and unite all kinds of people, random people. At that, due to the simplified content of the communicative image, a user never can completely identify oneself with it and make it the content of their own exclusive internal experience. That is why, a member of a network community turns into a split, decentralized subject. Thus, they are deprived of the possibility to be a subject, a "master" of social communications in the Net, turning into an object of such communications.

2. The vacuous character of internet-communication reaches its apogee in the phenomenon of "social design". This is the term with which the Facebook elaborators called the innovations introduced in 2011 (in particular, "seamless (frictionless) sharing"), allowing

each network user to instantly inform their subscribers about each action of theirs. Since then, each step of the user in the Net is socialized: Facebook feed automatically broadcasts information about a video watched, a book read, a purchase made, etc. This option eliminates the very question whether something is worth informing the world of, or not.

The social design concept produces the image of an absolutely transparent and homogeneous person, in whom all sides of life correspond to each other, and there is no boundary between the public and the private spaces. That is why a Russian researcher I. Kushnareva (2012) characterizes such transparency of an individual in the Net as "forced socialization". Its reverse side is a "like". It lost its original meaning of "I like it" long ago, and is now used as a means of formal confirmation of feedback. A "like" exempts a user from the boring duty to leave a detailed comment under another message, or to exchange civilities.

The vacuous character of a "like" reflects the vacuous character of the internet-communication and the mechanical character of forced socialization. That is why I. Kushnareva describes communication in the Internet as "social automatism". One can grasp the essence of "social automatism" by continuing the mental experiment of an American philosopher John R. Searle (1980) with a Chinese room, described in his article "Minds, Brains, and Programs". However, instead of a human and a computer, now there are two computers in the room. Thus, social design resuscitates the social dimension of those actions which, as it may seem, lost their human potential long ago and became routine, functional (consumption, services, purchases, etc). At the same time, however, one should realize that this sociality is carried out automatically, almost without participation of a person. That is why, it is of technical-mechanical character; thus, it again threatens a human being with alienation.

3. The exterritorial character of the Internet and the technical capabilities of the modern gadgets make it possible for a person to be present at any point of space (including microcosm and megacosm) and time. As a result, on the one hand, the boundaries of the human sensuality are broadened, as a person can perceive through technology what cannot be perceived by their natural sense organs. But, on the other hand, when technically transmitted, an event is torn out of its natural spatio-temporal context, thus losing the power of its influence on the viewer. That is why the media technologies have an anesthetizing, stupefying effect on a human soul. This was noted as early as in the 1930s by Ernst Jünger (2007) and Walter Benjamin (1936), who analyzed cinematography and photography.

Mediation through technical means and mass media turns a person into an invulnerable and indifferent Spectator, who is ontologically and psychologically distanced from the observed event. This trend reaches its apogee nowadays, when a person looks at the world mainly through the screen of a gadget (a mobile phone camera). A person perceives oneself as a passive spectator, not an active participant of the observed event, even if they are physically present on its site. This is confirmed by numerous videos from the sites of emergencies (terrorist acts, accidents, etc.), when a witness of a tragedy, with poorly concealed curiosity, records and downloads video to the Internet, instead of giving first aid to the victims.

Being mediated by a gadget screen, any event is reified, and the experiences and emotions of its participants are objectified. A person is psychologically alienated not only from the observed event, but also from their own feelings about it. A scholar A. Skidan (2007) speaks of forming a specific "technogenic sensuality" in a modern human being. Technogenic sensuality is perception of an object and an event as "external" and infinitely "remote" (in psychological sense) from the observer. A person with technogenic sensuality is not capable of experiencing any deep emotions and feelings about the observed event – only superficial curiosity.

Moreover, in the modern world the boundaries between the virtual and the real space are more and more dissolved, and the Internet has become an indispensable part of our everyday life. For a modern person, an event passed uselessly, if it is not technically recorded and downloaded to the Internet. Being superimposed onto the technogenic sensuality, this results in the inversion of the real event and its on-line representation. These

are events which are provoked in the reality with the sole objective of being downloaded to the Internet and becoming a pretext for internet-communication. The most innocent form of revelation of this trend is, probably, flash mobs. However, there are videos in the Net with, for example, interactive suicides, group beating, etc., when the issue of suicide (or another fate of the victim, etc.) is voted on-line.

Thus, the technogenic sensuality, formed by the gadgets, threatens a modern human being with psychological alienation and self-alienation, when an individual is distanced from not only the others', but also from one's own emotions and feelings. Besides, this trend may go beyond the on-line sphere and turn into a behavior model in real life.

5. Summary

Thus, the social-philosophic and psychological analysis of the internet-communication phenomenon allows revealing the following problem situations. First, modern ICT create conditions for free communication of ordinary users, for almost unlimited manifestation of their uniqueness by an individual, and for the society as a whole they become the basis for implementation of the values of freedom, social and political equality, and tolerance. However, the reverse side of it is, inevitably, the phenomenon of social and psychological alienation. Second, the phenomenon of alienation in on-line space is revealed in the following ways: 1) turning the full-fledged communication into vacuous internet-communication, and, as a consequence, splitting the human subjectness; 2) the social relations in the Net tend to transform into a "social automatism"; 3) the technogenic sensuality is formed, when a person is maximally distanced from not only the others', but also from one's own emotions.

6. Conclusions

The analyzed forms of alienation in the Internet-space are objectively destructive for the society and an individual. However, due to the fact that the Net was originally designed as a space for free information exchange, it is not appropriate and not possible to implement the mechanisms of traditional control and censorship of its content (for example, on the part of the state), or imposing the "right" forms of social interaction. The authors suppose that the individual self-control strategy will be most effective in this situation. It implies the conscious and more attentive implementation of internet-communication, and taking personal responsibility by a user for the information consumed and created in the Net.

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