■ ■ ■ Dichotomy of the Personal and the Public in Virtual Communities

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Abstract. The paper is dedicated to the characteristics of online communities in the virtual space. The study is based on the review of manuscripts on social interactions within online and offline communities in social reading of this term, and represents the key characteristics, similarities and differences of interaction in such communities. The analysis of sources suggests that online and real (offline) communities are largely similar in their features, and that virtual communities as self-organizing networks of interactive interaction, like real social communities, are formed on the basis of the common interests and goals of their participants. Real and virtual communities are located in the same social space, virtual communities take on some characteristics of traditional ones, and vice versa. The possibility of supplementing or replacing spatial connections in real communities with virtual interaction forms the so-called convergent communities. Like virtual ones, they are characterized by a high emotional involvement of community members in the communication process, but at the same time, they lose some of the properties traditionally inherent in communities due to a single territory, history, culture, and have a high potential to form a modified, virtual environment of interaction.

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Introduction. The understanding of communities as a key unit of social structure that unifies people on the basis of common interests, norms, beliefs and values, customs, political views, hobbies, and identity is not new, as is the understanding of the contradiction immanent in communities between unity and confrontation, common interests and competition between the interests of various structural units within communities and between communities.

Understanding of structural relationships in communities dates back to antiquity, while the formation of sociology predetermined the emergence of a maze of research in this area, starting with the concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity, collective personality and the opposition of individual and collective consciousness in *The Division of Labour in Society* [Durkheim: 127], as well as the concepts of social action (Gesellschaftshandeln), communal (Vergemeinschaftung) and associative (Vergesellschaftung) social relations [Weber: 506; 511], as well as the concept of understanding (Verstehen) sociology in assessing the social actions. At the same time, F. Tönnies operates with the categories of individual and social in defining relationships in social communities and introduces the concepts of community (Gemeinschaft) which describes the situation of the coincidence of the interests of an individual and a group, and society (Gesellschaft) which is a space of competing interests of its participants in constant interaction with each other [Tönnies].

The comprehension of the meaning of "community" extends to geographically isolated groups of people united within a certain physical space, as interpreted originally [see, for example: Tönnies; Park; etc.], as well as to the social ties between members of the community regardless of the territory of residence. These relationships determine the sense of community that is important for the identity of all members of the communities, their social practices and the social roles. In this regard, it is important to draw attention to the works of philosophers, sociologists, and culturologists on interaction in dig cities [see, for example: Simmel; Jacobs; Sennet].

Structuring of social space implies that the system generating human resources and structural norms is shaped through social interaction [Giddens 1991]. These interactions within communities, being initially aimed at overcoming contradictions, intrinsically actualize contradictions between the individual and the collective. Firstly, they exist as a form of interaction between individuals [Simmel 1970: 27]. Secondly, they represent a priori the product of interaction of individuals, whereas their development is based on previous interactions, while, on the one hand, the community as a social structure becomes the basis for the actions and interaction of individuals, on the other hand, it directs and organizes them [Giddens 2005]. Finally, from the standpoint of the figuration theory of N. Elias [Elias], interaction within a community implies a close interdependence between its structural elements and the social actions of individuals: each individual exists within the framework of the relationships he builds, where his functions depend on others, and others depend on him. The structure of these relations in different types of societies will be different, and no individual, whatever his personal qualities and inclinations, is free from social frameworks and at the same time cannot instantly change them [Elias: 62], but together they form a social order with its own history and identity. This pattern also works for virtual communities, which will be discussed below.

Interaction in virtual communities

In virtual space, physical location or geographic proximity becomes illusory for interaction inside and between communities. Many researchers [see, for example: Markham; Budka] appeal to anthropology and ethnography to understand and describe

the interaction of people in the virtual space: how they express themselves, what motivates them, and what involves them in the communication process. The study of social interaction on the Internet often is based on approaches and methods used to describe interactions within communities before [Levi-Strauss; etc.], for example, designing user interfaces and information companies based on qualitative, de facto ethnographic research. Examples of virtual communities are wiki communities, forums, chat rooms, web conferences, social networks and blogs, multiplayer games, etc. Online it is relatively easier to start interaction and to find people with similar interests, even if such common interests are in the field of entertainment and fun. However, a community of people passionate about a common goal is in itself a powerful resource for achieving a goal – this largely explains the fact that today it is generally recognized that Internet communities play a significant role in the life of the whole society.

Transition to digital has actualized the issue of the strength of relationships with such communities. Social networks and other interactive platforms are a tool for continuous communication with circles of friends with "weaker ties" [Granovetter], that implies communication with extended friends and their acquaintances, who previously would barely enter the circle of "friends". However, the authors of one of the papers in the collection *Communities and Cyberspace* [Smith, Kollock], exploring the factors that distinguish virtual communities from geographically limited communities, came to the conclusion that virtual communities are no less real than territorial ones, and social ties in such networks are no less strong than social ties in traditional communities, although they are somewhat different in their properties [Wellman, Gulia]. This is due to the volume and the nature of the dissemination of information (we mainly receive new information from Internet sources), and to the growth of mobility within and between communities – interaction through instant messengers and social networks allows people to keep in touch while being at a distance.

The network space is structured by connected audiences that consume information and entertainment and at the same time change the previously existing model of the interaction [Sharkov et al.]. The audiences (users) themselves become the makers / co-makers of content. So, G. Jenkins [Jenkins] in *Convergence Culture* writes that one of its most characteristic elements is the possibility of participation / co-participation. The advent of the Internet, in fact, marked the beginning of a gradual revolution in the possibilities of communication and exchange between people. It is also true that the very interaction within the community, the involvement of participants in the process of such interaction, keeps them within the framework of the discourse taking place in the community even if the original goal loses its importance for participants or modifies in the process of interaction. In addition, interactions within virtual communities create a kind of virtual identity [Asmolov; Gosling et al.], which does not always correspond to its real foretype.

Scientific texts offer the concept of virtual world, which refers to the space of symbols, values, and communities [see, for example: Bell; Biocca, Levy; Rheingold; etc.]. In all cases, the virtual world implies a simulation and does not always have a connection

with a specific matter. The virtual world can copy the real world or do it partially [Kaplan, Haenlein]. In this regard, the goal of creating virtual reality is to simulate such digital world that is basically similar to the real one, but involves augmented reality when computer simulation, in fact, allows to create a virtual environment that bears no resemblance to offline. At the same time, there is no reason to assert that there are no interconnections between these environments. The very fact that the virtual world is constructed by real people and communities based on what they see, analyse, represent to others based on their experience, gives reason to believe that the real and virtual worlds are interconnected. Some objects exist only in real space, while others exist only in a virtually constructed world. Moreover, many objects can be created in a virtual field only if they have real images. However, many objects can appear in the virtual space without having a real analogue, although they can be but can externalise in the real world.

Although in real communities the understanding of the interaction between structural elements goes back to the explanation of social action, then virtuality introduces its own distortions into this concept, which were noted, in particular, by J. Baudrillard. Therefore, he introduces the concept of hyperreality, i.e. the redundant, simulated real, which results in a rethinking of the understanding of the social. Baudrillard offers the concept of simulacrum as a key for the understanding of of signs, as well as for the process of interaction between individuals, drawing attention to the phenomenon of "the copies without an original" with the possibility of their unlimited distribution, i.e. copies that have nothing to do with any reality. He associated this process with the emergence of a new state of reality, which he defines as "hyperreality" [Baudrillard]. This raises the question of the production of new information and new meanings in the process of interaction in a virtual environment.

The personal and the public in virtual communities

In the concept of personality [Simmel], the key point in the formation of identity is the individual and his ego, which determines the perception of the surrounding world, while "others" are perceived as part of the external environment, although the individual's self-identification occurs through social interaction with "others". Therefore, others, or alter egos, are perceived through the prism of the ego [Krasnopolskaya, Solodova: 24].

In virtual communities, virtual distance also becomes important, as well as the emotional involvement in the dialogue and the extent to which individuals within the community share similar feelings and moods. In social networks, blogs, wikis and other interactive platforms, agents (users) construct their own reflexivity, and this allows to produce, distribute and consume in new ways the symbolic forms and meanings necessary to understand and change the surrounding world. It gives life to a common heritage of cultural and symbolic practices, rules, behavioural practices that intersubjectively shared within the same communicative environment and contribute to settling "an accepted version of reality" [Boccia Artieri et al. 2021].

The network offers not only the distribution and receipt of information, but also participation, which becomes apparent from blogs, forums, any social networks and

other interactive options. The development of the Internet and, mainly, its interactive options, has led to the formation of a different social balance: the reproduction of social reality, the development and modification of the social structure seems to be fully conditioned by the interaction of subjects, the exchange of information, and the media [Sharkov, Kirillina].

The basis for the emergence of virtual communities is the feedback, the personal choice for entering such a community and constructing one's own identity within [Startsev et al.]. An example would be the groups in social networks that has no connections with any way with real-life communities. In such groups communication is initially formed according to the ad hoc principle around some cases, news, and can exist and develop in the long term. In this case, we are no longer talking about maintaining previously established social ties (i.e., not about transferring primary reality into virtual space), but about a new type of virtual community that was originally created in a virtual environment from actors united by common interests and supporting in the future more or less permanent relationships.

At the same time, interaction in virtual communities is determined by the personal characteristics, social and cultural background of community members. It is also the case that participation in such communities forms the so-called "virtual identity" of the participants. Belonging to a virtual community becomes a cultural matrix that empowers individual and enhances its role in the formation of social ties, supporting the organization and reorganization of social roles, and, possibly, shaping the following interactions [Boccia Artieri 2012]. Hence, there is no difference between offline and online, because both ways of interaction are adequate to the sociality of an individual interacting both in a real and virtual environment and manifesting itself in this interaction through authenticity and individualization [Ibid.]. It is more about leveraging personal content on social media that is, following R. Sennett [Sennett 2002], aligns with the presentation of self in the public, and on the balance of public and personal.

H. Giles theory of communicative adaptation emphasizes the influence of context on the communicative behaviour of interaction participants. At the same time, the process of adaptation itself can occur, firstly, through convergence, through which individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviour in order to reduce social differences, and, secondly, through divergence, when individuals emphasize social differences between themselves and the interlocutor [Giles].

Transformation of semantic content within communities in the form of interpretations, simulacra [Baudrillard], appearing as a result of the actions of others, triggers the communicative behaviour of subjects, affects the functioning and internal integration and / or disintegration of the elements of the communicative system and determines its impact on the social environment [Kirillina: 173]. At the same time, on the basis of daily interaction in the network, we not only associate or do not associate ourselves with certain communities and play the roles assigned to us as a result of such choice, but we also receive further information in accordance with our previous experience.

The dichotomy of the engagement (involvement in the community) and distance actualizes the ratio of rational and irrational, objective and subjective in network interaction from the standpoint of direct participation in it and / or observation and control from the outside. This reflects the anthropological constructions of "internal – external" and "friend – or – foe" in traditional communities [Vakhstein*], with the difference that in a virtual community, in fact, the only system-forming and defining element is communication. In such interaction the identity of the community members, as well as the identity of the community itself, is determined precisely by the interaction – namely, who and with whom interacts, what events on the agenda of the network community trigger the maximum public reaction and what is ignored by the community members, what is the intensity of interactions (engagement as a derivative of likes, shares and comments), and, finally, what codes and memes mark one ore another virtual community – that is an approximate list of virtual community markers.

Conclusion. Summarizing the results of the analytical review above, we the above material, we can conclude the following: (1) The structure and regulation of interaction in virtual communities are in many ways similar to largely similar to those in real communities on- and offline. (2) The basis for the emergence of online communities is the feedback, the availability of personal choice for entering such a community, and the possibility of constructing one's own identity. (3) The order of interaction engenders within the virtual community, and the structure itself, i.e. how it looks and how it develops, is actually determined by the interactions within such a community. (4) The interaction in virtual communities, on the one hand, is determined by the personal characteristics, social and cultural background of community members, but at the same time participation in a particular virtual community, especially "involved participation", forms "the virtual identity" of the participants, as well as the identity of the community itself. (5) The day-to-day interaction in online communities actualizes the process of creating and shaping new values and meanings, and poses a question of whether the meanings that appear in such everyday practices are intentional and manageable.

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■ ■ ■ Дихотомия личного и общественного в виртуальных сообществах

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Аннотация. Рукопись посвящена изучению характеристик сетевых сообществ в виртуальном пространстве. Основу материала составляет обзор научных источников, посвященных собственно социальным взаимодействиям внутри сообществ – онлайн и офлайн. Определены их ключевые характеристики, сходства и различия между ними. Проведенный анализ источников позволяет предположить, что сетевые и реальные сообщества во многом схожи по своим признакам, и что виртуальные сообщества как самоорганизующиеся сети интерактивного взаимодействия, как и реальные социальные общности, формируются на основе общих интересов и целей их участников. При этом реальные и виртуальные сообщества находятся в одном социальном пространстве, виртуальные сообщества принимают некоторые характеристики традиционных, и наоборот. Возможность дополнения или замещения пространственных связей в реальных сообществах виртуальным взаимодействием формирует так называемые конвергентные сообщества. Как и виртуальные, они характеризуются высокой эмоциональной вовлеченностью членов сообщества в коммуникативный процесс, но утрачивают часть традиционно присущих сообществам свойств, обусловленных

единой территорией, историей, культурой и обладают высоким потенциалом к формированию измененной, вириальной среды взаимодействия.

Материал является продолжением публикации «Конвергируемость реальных и виртуальных сообществ в цифровой среде»[1], в тексте используются фрагменты предшествующего исследования.

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