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ANONYMITY AS A FACTOR IN THE CULTURE OF VIRTUAL SPACE

The article examines anonymity as a theoretical concept and practical factor of culture and identity in situations of virtual communication. Development of digital technologies and Internet opened broad possibilities for anonymous communication, Those possibilities are analyzed both in the context of the very nature of digital information transferring, as well as depending on the specifics of the various virtual platforms. The effects of anonymity cause broad range of phenomena in the culture of virtual communities. The article also briefly outlines possible approaches for analyses of those phenomena on the example of anonymous forums culture.

Key words: anonymity, anonymous forums, social networks, Internet, informational society, mass culture.

Some concepts used in virtual space culture researches have come from traditional culture, videlicet, the culture before the emergence of the Internet and first computers. Anonymity enters this range of concepts. In the narrow sense, anonymity can be defined as the situation where the text's author's name is purposively substituted or absent at all. This concept can be used, with some reservations, for expressly non-author's texts such as folklore products - epics, folk songs, tales, etc. Anonymity as a potentiality came into existence with a physical ability of an author's detachment from his statement i.e. with the invention of writing systems; or earlier if folklore is included as an anonymous phenomenon. But here we come up to the question of the adequacy of using the anonymity concept in relation to cultural

periods during which the existence of the notion of authorship or, rather, the act of attributing a product to an author is uncertain [1, p. 107].

When digital communication and the Internet emerge, anonymity has received ample opportunities and prospects. According to Marshall McLuhan, detachment of author and statement, which is implicitly present in the writing process (at least when phonetic alphabets are used) [5], has changed in two ways in the times of the Internet. Foremost, modern technologies allow confirmation of text's identity, depending on a type of communication platform, by various tools. These are individual accounts with captions and identification pictures (so-called avatars), which are protected with passwords and other types of security tools, on standard forums. Accounts from social networks usually claim to a digital representation of a real person (at least these are the demands of Facebook which is the most popular social network) based on the requirements of issuing a big amount of a private information - personal photos, e-mail, phone number, etc. Message sending or publications of any texts via such accounts are supposed to be a confirmation of author's being a real person who created the account and using it.

However, the other side of the relationship of the author and the text on the Internet lies in the fact that the identification of the author with his digital alter ego is problematic, particularly in terms of law. If any text, which was published from the personal account, appeared undesirable or unfavorable to the author, the authorship can be reasonably denied on the ground that the account could not have been used only by its creator. An example is the case of Ukrainian opera singer Kateryna Abdulina. The post containing insults to Ukrainian-speaking schools and their pupils appeared on the Facebook page of the singer. After the post was noticed by the wide audience, it raised a wave of indignation, and Abdulina immediately denied her authorship of the post stating that her page was hacked [6].

Actually, physical distance, which separate author from the mechanism of an electronic writing, computer or another tool, and from the real location of the text or, to be more exact, one of servers, for example, Facebook or Google, is enough for allowing a possibility of unwelcome invasion at any stage of the creating the final

message. It turns out that it's impossible to determine certainly that the computer, where the account was opened, was used exactly by the account's "owner". Likewise, it's impossible to state that the account wasn't hacked without getting any "real" information, which could identify the user's personality, such as photo or voice recording, which can also be faked by dint of digital facilities. Thereby, an identification collision emerges; it undermines relations between an author and his statement at the most basic level and enables great possibilities for anonymity in the Internet.

This "identification gap", being present by default in any situation of virtual communication, can be called the first aspect of displaying anonymity as a factor in virtual communication culture. Other aspects are the communicative situations on forums, public pages, comments, guestbooks and so on, i.e. short meets of strangers, who have never met before and who unlikely meet again in virtual space and all the more so, in physical space. Even though virtual embodiments, which claim to be representations of real persons in such situations, and the authorship of the speech isn't impugned, that communication is still anonymous to a large extent. In fact, even a certain speech isn't anonymous in a literal sense – it has an author as a person who spoke, this attachment doesn't mean anything for an interlocutor, as he doesn't know the author, who is still invisible despite real name and photo. Situations of such communication, generally, are brief, episodic, fast alternating and not suggesting to go deeply into contradictor's personality, for whom being unknown is easier in two ways: for the recipient and for himself.

So these two situations, in which the factor of anonymity appears, are not created deliberately, as well as they are an integral and, at least so far, an inevitable part of the virtual culture. However, there are also two deliberate possibilities of Internet usage for anonymity. These possibilities are creation of "fake" accounts and usage of special anonymous forums. First is usually used in social networks. Fake accounts refers to accounts that give false information about their owners, which does not correlate with real persons, or is created on behalf of some well-known public figure, while absence of relations between created account and real person is

obviously absent. For example, in “Vkontakte” social network on the search query “Putin” was found 10 621 accounts with this or similar name. A lot of pages are also created by fans with named and images of popular actors, characters or even objects. It can be assumed, that these accounts are created with different intentions: just humor, desire of entertainment, experiments with identity, attempts to create alternative images of self. Among those intentions not the last place takes also the desire to hide from demanding stress of contemporary social networks, meticulous attention to oneself and his interests from friends, classmates or colleagues. Also, there are reasons for information security when users want to use social networks but not willing to provide personal information, fearing that it will be used by private companies or law-enforcers. Such concerns became widespread after the famous case of Edward Snowden, who disclosed facts of espionage by USA intelligence with use of social networks worldwide [9]. In Ukraine, many users of “Vkontakte” deleted their accounts or created new fake accounts after it was officially notified that Russian law-enforcers can get any information regarding users of the social network [3].

Concerning particularized anonymous forums, they are literal embodiment of anonymity as an idea and a communicative rule in the Internet. The peculiarity of these forums' is that their contributors use one, general for everyone there, name for signing their posts. On anonymous forum called "4chan.org", English-speaking and the most popular among such forum, "anonymous" is used as such general name. So why specific culture, evolved on such forums and the whole movement of activist hackers, which is related to political events "Occupy Wall street" and struggle against copywriting initiatives, acquired with this name [10]. Worthily to notice, that often there is a possibility to sign own posts with an individual name on such forums, but this possibility is used not so often and other users reaction to this is negative. Users, who take peculiar names there, are disparagingly called "namefags".

Researchers agree that the anonymity in the Internet promotes emancipation of users which can result in more often appearance of obscene vocabulary, abuses of other users. Anonymity creates possibilities for exit from one`s own personality, from

usual social roles, and allowing construction of new identities, masquerade game with them [4, p.30]. For instance, at anonymous forums exists popular practice of multiposting, publishing posts as like from different authors, most often with the goal to support your own point of view with “public opinion” in discussion, or just to entertain, entering in a fierce argue with oneself. At English-speaking anonymous forums authors of those posts are calling “sameperson”. At Russian forums this term, like many others, is reproducing according to sound similarities, so “sameperson” are transformed into names “Semyon” (Семён), “Semyon Persunov”, “Semyon Semyonovich”. On the other hand, accuses of multiposting are also widespread, and one cannot prove otherwise (one of such conversations with accusations of “semyonstvo” is also a good example of discussing taboo topics under cover of anonymity [13]). This example can help to imagine the masquerade, gaming context of communication in conditions of principal anonymity of users. Thus, a specific space of privacy is created, where there are opportunities to publicly disclose you, proclaim your thoughts, fears, fantasies without being afraid of intervention in privacy, because disclosing is happening anonymously and possibility of punishment through public condemnation or legal prosecution is unlikely.

That is why one of the obvious consequences of anonymity is frequent rejection of norms and rules of common communication. Prevalence of obscene vocabulary, disparaging tone of messages towards opponents in debates, discussions on usually forbidden issues are normal for anonymous communities. Therefore, negative image of anonymous forums is formed, as a place where misanthropes, drug addicts and pedophiles are gathering. View of the Russian Orthodox Church priest Vsevolod Chaplin is representative in this case. He proposed to prohibit anonymity in Internet itself, though without specifying how it is possible [7]. It should be noted that indeed such issues as misogyny, racism and interest to pedophilia indeed exist at anonymous forums (example of misogyny [11]), but they are not something crucial for the overall discourse of anonymous communities. For instance, in contrast to misogyny replicas, anti-sexism declarations could be also seen [12], child pornography is deleted by administrators at almost all legal anonymous forums.

Among the users of those forums exists an idea, that negative aspects of anonymity attracts mainly beginners, especially minors, and more experienced users are less prone to groundless insults and interest to taboo topics because of the mere taboo [8]. However, we do not have reliable sociological data in support of this point of view, because of obvious reasons.

Regarding the culture of anonymous forums and anonymous communications, one can easily notice a number of parallels with situation of Bakhtin carnival [2]. This topic worth individual article, so here we confine to some comments. In this culture, as well as in carnival, “lower stratum” of the body takes an important place, especially issue of excrement, and inversion of binary oppositions. Not by accident, Russian trash film “Green Elephant”, full of incoherent monologues of one of the main characters, scenes of coprophilia and cannibalism, became extremely popular at anonymous forums and through them in broader Internet communities. One form of the local folklore – stories called “копипаста” (копипаста) from English “copy paste”, which emphasize the process of their distribution through well known typing combination of transferring a ready-made text. Especially popular are stories also connected with feces, particularly in public places and during important situations, i.e. at a romantic date, lectures in the university etc [14]. On anonymous forums, which exist in pretty conservative towards homosexuality cultures, gay porn photos and videos are very popular. The cultural protagonist of anonymous forums is "bitard": unemployed loser, virgin and almost crazy sociopath. Credibly that bitard is an analog of Rabelaisian vagrant, who becomes "carnival's king", and the described stories are cases of flipping important for traditional culture situations and habits.

Drawing conclusions, we can say that anonymity is a factor which has been since traditional culture, since writing systems had been emerged especially, but gets new prospects and influences with new possibilities. Anonymity creates essential possibilities for Internet users: private space security in times of ubiquitous publicity, alternative self-image creation, access to communication by dint of masks for those who has psychological or other communicative problems. Simultaneously, anonymity can have conditionally negative effects: impunity entails a spread of using abusive

language, hate speech and allows plunging in negativity, a forbidden, and often also criminal from legal and moral standpoints.

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