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Blogosphere as an Expression of Virtual Reality (Nature of Blogosphere Formation Revisited)

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The article considers effect of mass communication tools onto achievement of a young person's personhood on the example of blogosphere as a means of his/her expression in the conditions of a globally developing artificial environment. Both positive and negative impacts of this activity onto the process of personal self-actualization are displayed. A theoretical justification of harmony between the distinguishable extremes is provided.

Keywords: a young man – socialization – blog – blogosphere – virtual reality – mass communication tools – self-actualization – personality – alienation – society model – noosphere.

Point

The present stage of social development is characterized by the increasing role of information in all domains of human life, which entails growth of mass communication tools existing as computerized telecommunication technologies, and Internet technologies, in particular. Such types of mass media are becoming a key functional element of communicative space.

The idea that mass communication tools are becoming a social institute appears to be more and more habitual. It cannot be stated that traditional social institutes are vanishing or losing their value, however the fact of the growing influence of mass media is evident. Members of the younger generations utilize these mass communication tools more actively and become more susceptible to their influence. The younger

generation masters the novelties first testing their personal impact, and only then do novelties become generally acknowledged and available to the remaining society. In this way, the future development of our society is determined.

Of primary importance for achievement of a young person's personhood are the social determination and outlook. A person's comprehension of one's individuality becomes deeper, as one gains a clearer understanding of the conditions and norms constituting the framework, in which one is bound to resolve one's vital problems. Mass communication tools play a decisive role in satisfying these needs.

Development of mass communication tools has been caused by the technical progress. It leads to the changes in society, which can reform the entire system of social relations; the society

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is coming into a new state of condition, the human nature itself is being “adjusted”. Human is becoming dependent on the very technical devices that he creates for satisfying his needs. That is to say, human alienates himself from his own inventions once again (Narinyani, 2008). On the one hand, this can result in striving toward the society of knowledge, while on the other hand it may bring about the destruction of mankind’s social basis (Gorokhov, 2007).

Development of mass communication tools has been caused by the necessity, since they are our “fabric of life”. Virtually anyone in the most remote part of our country can have access to a mobile phone and computer. Getting a connection to Internet may be a larger problem, but the web is winning more and more space and popularity by the day, especially among the youth. This is explained by the fact that a basic function of communication is being so fulfilled, while the participant of these relations is the subject of the action.

Mass communication tools are developing ahead of the actual requirement (however paradoxically, the offer most often determines the demand) becoming a part of our life (Argonov, 2008). Human is changing under the influence of mass communication tools, while the latter are changing to meet human requirements. Losing one’s mobile phone or a computer is recognized as a perceivable vital failure (a non-restorable database is in question most of times). We are becoming dependent on technical devices, but in doing so, we are using the entire range of available opportunities for personal objectives: development, education, communication, and eventually self-actualization.

Example

A blog may serve as the source for studying interaction between mass communication tools and a young person. Is there anyone now that at

least has not heard about blogs? This means of communication is still quite fashionable, not easily accessible to everyone, however the popularity of it is growing rapidly. Blog is a personal territory, a “personal voice amplifier”.

A blog (an English combination of the words “web log”, a “network log or log of events”) is a user’s personal web site, which is accessible for public viewing. It consists of entries, images and multimedia updated on a regular basis, which presume a discussion between the reader and the writer. Blogs typically contain short recordings of temporary significance sorted in a reverse time order (the last entry comes first at the top). A blog is differentiated from a conventional diary by the environment: blogs are public and presume stranger readers, who may initiate a discussion with the author. Bloggers are persons maintaining blogs. The totality of all blogs on the Web is known as blogosphere. In terms of author’s involvement blogs may be personal, group (corporate, club ...) or public (open). In terms of their contents, blogs may be either theme-specific or general.

It should be taken into consideration that reading blogs and writing ones are different processes with different contents. Persons utilizing the blogs’ communicative capacities beyond the context of maintaining a personal blog look at the opportunities of communicating with persons, with whom they cannot communicate immediately, e.g. with friends living in other cities. In addition to keeping in touch with friends and relatives, more objectives pursued by a blog reader may be distinguished: obtaining information, reading for entertainment, tracking public reaction onto particular actions (in fact, blogs are a finished enormous focus group), reading for socialization, feeling one’s involvement into the life of famous people.

The following blog functions were identified in the course of surveying Livejournal bloggers in 2005: the most often mentioned function –

communication followed by, in respective order of significance, self-presentation, entertainment, strengthening and maintaining social links, function of memoirs and psychotherapeutic function².

Blogosphere is a term of similar structure with the term “noosphere”. It denotes a totality of all blogs as a community or a social network. Dozens of millions of blogs kept in the world are normally in a close relation to each others; bloggers read and comment each other, make references to each other, and thus create their own subculture. Participants of blogosphere create rules, including specific features of speech and behavior, which are then accepted by their environment. This activity domain may be viewed as the channel of entering the panhuman culture³.

Blogosphere reflects social opinion expressing expectations of the young people, their problems, hardships, which they are able to demonstrate in an indirect public communication. The study of blogosphere is a very fortunate method of studying the reaction toward particular events, including appearance of new goods, values and interests of citizens in accordance with age ranking, studying their attitude to various aspects of social life, as well as promoting a change of opinion.

Importance of this domain is also proved by appearance of the Russian President’s videoblog and its fast-growing popularity¹³. At first, this event generated a lot of gossip and skeptical remarks to text editors. In the course of time, visitors became allowed to leave comments to entries; the blog rules and mandatory registration of community members were treated more ironically. Nevertheless, the number of hits over a short period of time beat all previous records (number of activated visitors amounted to 10219) thanks to popularity of the person and comprehensive significance of topics discussed⁸.

In order to start our research, let us familiarize with ratings of the most popular blogs⁶: the five leader blogs are as follows: <http://tema.livejournal.com/>¹⁹; <http://dolboeb.livejournal.com/>¹⁴; <http://drugoi.livejournal.com/>¹⁵; <http://abpaximov.livejournal.com/>¹⁰; leoa.aha.ru/dnevnik/2009/04/08.html²⁰.

It appears impossible to give an unambiguous description of the blogs’ messages: looking at bloggers’ reaction to real events, one may study modern history and more. Nevertheless, initial acquaintance with this domain of public opinion allows the author of the article to infer that the majority of bloggers use them for personal positioning (acquisition and maintaining popularity). Presence of comments to messages or statements brings popularity to both the author blogger (deliberately spelled incorrectly in Russian-speaking blogs as “афтра” (“aftar”) as opposed to the correct spelling of “автор” (“avtor”) and readers (“critics”). Therefore, it is important to say at least something (even of low significance) or impress the fellow community members with something appalling or shocking. Vulgar language of all forms and manifestations is often used to this purpose. Appalling statements luring the most discussion participants are normally based on aggression or demonstrating one’s antisocial behavior, only, of course, when the blog’s author and theme so allow. No external control over the participants’ behavior is exercised, and the common definition of ethics is lacking.

Show-off behavior is widely spread as well as attempts to seem more important than the rest. This is achieved by demonstrating one’s social status through a lifestyle, which includes travelling, expensive cars, expensive clothes or gadgets. Demonstrating one’s lifestyle appears to be the consumerism cult. This is why commercialization of yet another interaction niche of our peers needs to be brought in

question (blogosphere is becoming yet another space for advertisement). Each blogger strives to reach particular blog ratings. A blog's rating is determined by the number of readers and comments left. The more one's blog is being read, the more expensive are the advertisement slots in this blog.

What are the blogs of the top dogs like? They are all connected with events happening in the world and in Russia, in particular. The author states a message (or makes a reference to a message), provides personal photographs taken on the spot. Therefore, the top five popular bloggers are well-known journalists or, as an option, well-provided personalities. The event's description is followed by an evaluation of the fact, by critique or impressions. The success is determined by real-life popularity; while the reverse may happen equally so – virtual popularity may develop into a real popularity.

In our attempts to be objective, we did not suffice with studying the themes brought to discussion in the most popular blogs and respective behavior of the blogs' readers, but also ventured out to study other blogs of smaller popularity. Object of our research was determined by random sampling. In accordance with main blogs' functions, their authors actually try to express themselves, speak out their problems, feelings hoping for support and getting it. They write about art, hobbies or entertainment; while some authors state their views on problems of social importance and offer their solutions (¹⁸ writes about migration problems, education, the Munich conference and missile defense discussions as well as bilateral nuclear disarmament; ¹² writes about work and writing a book; ¹¹ writes about representation of social trends in blog ratings; ¹⁶ writes about a rally against slaughtering homeless animals' ¹⁷ writes about academic activity, attended theatrical plays, general impressions and many other topics). Self-expression and translation of one's ideas are

evident, which constitutes the advantage of this mass communication tools.

Some of these and also other opportunities are vividly represented in an advertisement for a school of young Internet activist published in blog <http://abpaximov.livejournal.com/> (member of top five), which was immediately responded by thousands of users: "Each person expects to be valued. In the age of global information revolution, evaluation of an event or a human also depends on what was written about this event or person. When nothing was written or the message was not read by anyone, this only means that the person or event in which the person took part did not exist!

While in days past newspapers, radio and television had the monopoly to write and speak, nowadays each of us has the opportunity to be heard or valued. BLOG is a personal means of self-expression, a personal voice amplifier in the world of the victorious Internet! Everyone has heard about BLOGS and some have even tried, but very few have succeeded! A BLOG is not an AK-47, although at times it can become equally or even more effective. Keeping a BLOG is an art, creativity, trade – you name it! All of us treat it in a personal way. This is something we may learn and should learn to do to win attention and disposition of our audience".

The author enumerates the following basic advantages of keeping a blog: standing one's ground, advancing personal projects and topics in the Internet, getting new knowledge and skills through communicating with experts, developing analytical capacity, acquiring new social links, gaining popularity, professional management of blogs and monetary remuneration for the effort. With a correct approach and skills, blogs open dozens of potentials ways for self-actualization and self-expression ¹⁰.

However, certain authors, such as Leonid Kostyukov in his article "Blogs' plain" [9], stress

a number of disadvantages to this method of self-expression. Here are just a few of those objections:

A word (lying between verbal and written language) ceases to bear semantic load being reproduced as all mass production. Brief and clear expressions become more popular (as opposed to deep and intelligent).

Blogosphere is an endless comment – a reaction to the external stimulus, which does not promote internal motion. Comment distracts a person from life.

Events migrate from people's actual lives into blogosphere. In this way, blog participants alienate themselves from responsibility, which is an integral part of life. Brilliance in blogosphere, but not in life is perceived as lack of mental speed, elegance of speech and concentration. Blogosphere normalizes a deferred reaction and does not motivate a person to fight against one's drawbacks.

The level of argumentation is extraordinarily low; therefore skills of building logical ideas or conducting arguments degrade too.

In a democratic field, no person is entitled to mark a period; the argument goes on until the last participant speaks, thus knowingly leading nowhere.

There are a few features in comments and statements format used in blogs, which impede the advance toward the truth: the level of argumentation and lack of a mechanism to draw a line under the discussion. The situation is absurd in principle: any issues cause equal avalanches of opinions – for and against. This, basically, exhausts the “discussion”.

Pseudonymity and anonymity continuously generate slippery, ambiguous and ethically dubious situations.

Like any other social and cultural phenomenon, Internet communication has generated a small addition to the language. New words, word combinations and syntactic moves

are a percent's fraction of the total number of opportunities, but language was much reduced to these fractions. A blogger seeks to position oneself as “member of the club” by marking his/her language with these linguistic means: at the end of the day all become alike when not a thought, which is not trivial, can no longer be expressed.

Resume

Each new participant of blogosphere assimilates norms and rules of behavior acceptable in this community. Topics of discussions and methods of self-expression for young people are determined by the spirit of time and may become quite diverse. Nevertheless, discussion of meaningful events runs down to generating meaningless phrases, which cause the impression of the discussion's meaninglessness and absurdity.

Blog is absurd per se. A diary is a tool of self-knowledge, it is intimately personal, which is exactly the reason, why it cannot be public. Whereas blog claims to be a method of self-expression and self-research, but it is public and therefore deprives of the opportunity of the personality's public “exposure”. This is why its contents appear empty and absurd, while the messages look meaningless.

Absurd (of Latin *absurdus* – “discordant, awkward”, *ad absurdum* “stemming from the deaf”) – is something, which is illogical, awkward or contradicts common sense¹. Absurd is a notion actively used by fiction writers. Absurd is not meaningless; it is something that does not receive a rational explanation. The purpose of absurd is to act to repair the meaning. While knowing that keeping a blog is important for the author, we must find the meaning, perhaps together with the author. On the basis of the contradictions we observe, we come to conclusion that this activity should either result

in progressive advance or a logical dead-end, where all development ceases.

Today's world has a great deal of virtual reality in it. This is caused by development of information and communication technologies. Content of the blogosphere is a presentational expression of a person's virtual condition. Blogosphere is the society's model, which is built through virtual deflection or exhibition of virtual reality. Virtual reality (Latin *virtus* – "potential, possible" and Latin *realis* – effective, existing) – is a world created by technical means and conveyed to human through habitual senses of perception⁹.

Although the term only appeared recently, virtual reality was studied as a phenomenon since times immemorial in the shape of collective ritual actions, using mind-altering substances, sleep or art. People have always been lured by virtual reality. Given the modern level of technological development, the objective is becoming accessible thanks to technical equipment. Virtual reality acquires a new meaning formed under the influence of surrounding reality, in which a subjective perception prevails.

Plunging into virtual life is associated with failure to self-actualize in common life, with search for positive emotions or endless replay of uncompleted emotions, with attempts to reach full culmination and satisfaction. It is also viewed as various ways of escaping the reality, in which a person fails to find one's place, implement one's potential or get a true natural pleasure.

On the other hand, we have no grounds to doubt that virtual reality creates enormous opportunities for personal self-actualization. The extent, to which we will be able to utilize these opportunities for a truly creative, professional and spiritual personal development, will primarily depend on recognition of the threat conveyed by virtual freedom.

Human has always been wishing to alter the world, its understanding and one's place in it. Not every individual may achieve this in reality. A blog allows to set up communication, in which the author of messages, a commenting reader or a plain reader are the subject of action, and each can try on a role, which suits one best. Participating in blogosphere inspires imagination and provides the opportunity to overcome the limits of reality, to cancel one's desertion and finiteness, to gain security and assuredness. Subjective attitude to reality is decisive.

Vulgar language and appalling behavior, which are such an easy way into community and a method to find soul mates, may become the consequence of lacking language expression to correspond with the new realia. Image plays a decisive role in mental activity of a modern person's outlook versus aural perception; the word is losing its initial meaning. Blogosphere, same as all other types of Internet communities, makes attempts to create such a language, which now only exists in the form of slang – Internet memes, whose list is provided at⁵.

Blogosphere is a virtual model of the world, which embraces meaningful characteristics of young people. In the course of discussing a topic, the comments tree is growing and the discussion drifts away from the main line providing the opportunity to deepen its meaning. Discussion of topics in blogs is perceived as chaotic, meaningless, and absurd. Still, it may appear useful in the sense that it provides an opportunity to communicate with oneself, to analyze others and oneself. It is in collective work that the individual displays itself and yields to recognition. Taking part in blogosphere allows young people to feel for something important, something of value; they require to obtain a meaning and a target, to find their own place in a strange world (Nazaretyan, 2009).

Participating in blogosphere has a number of negative consequences, the biggest of which is devaluation of personality. Public demonstration of intimate component of a personality deprives the person of his/her individuality, and the person becomes a mediocrity. Blogosphere may become a territory of perfect personal self-alienation, therefore, one needs to channel efforts to preserve personal value of each participant when self-actualizing in blogosphere. For a full-fledged development of the system, a harmony is required in presence of extremities.

Radical changes in social design, lack of a generally accepted normative system, disparity between social layers, age groups and youth subcultures cause the younger generation to seek for methods of adapting to these conditions, and the blog becomes a means to a desired end, a fashionable method of self-expression and self-actualization.

Mass communication tools being the product of the latest informational revolution are one of the key channels translating values, which can be referred to as basic values. We are able to witness that general human values, religious values, liberal (democratic) values, socialistic values, consumer values and tradition values are interacting in the society. All of these are values existing in various societies, which are justifiable at a particular stretch of time, or even throughout the entire duration of the society's existence.

Young people are typical of the search for oneself and one's place in the world. They often have critical perception of proclaimed statements, which is determined by nurture, education, material and domestic conditions of life, by economic, political and social situation in the country, as well as, last but not the least, by the effect of mass communication tools. The anomic world presses the youth to make a choice; and, naturally, they select what may seem to be the most acceptable in the current conditions. In

our view, this is what explains such a diversity of judgments related to the younger generation.

Is there an opportunity to affect methods of youth's self-actualization? Of course, there is – by providing the opportunity to select the most significant guidelines of activity. As discussed above, a blog is a spot for trusted communication among peers. Also, existing ratings allow for identifying the most authoritative blog authors, whose opinion will be followed. These features make it possible to draw the attention of a huge audience to the existing diversity of opinions, evaluations, priorities offering the choice of the most important elements for everyone. This is an opportunity to take part in forming new generations, which will determine our future.

Mass communication tools actively affect achievement of personhood by a young person, however their dependence on human may be observed. This is especially vividly displayed in blogs. We subject ourselves to changes in accordance with the purposes of a blog: this can be viewed in two dimensions – either we lose a fraction of value ascribed to our own personality, or supplement the latter with a large amount of meaning, greater functionality, if I may put it this way. In doing so, the blog changes as well being influenced by us. There cannot be a blog without a personality, while the blog is an important element of the personality.

We are observing an increasing interaction between human and mass communication tools (Gurevich, 2009), which reminds of Vernadskiy's theory of technosphere – an extremely close interaction of human and machines altering the human nature. At a later point, this will bring about the emergence of noosphere – the highest step of society's development. Nevertheless, the idea's author warned mankind against potential hazards associated with this type of development. Progress requires an unheard of

level of responsibility, which mankind may not yet be ready to accept.

Noosphere is a new highest level of biosphere's evolution, whose emergence is related to development of human society causing profound impact onto natural processes. In noosphere theory Human appears to be embedded into Nature, while the "artificial" is regarded as an organic part and one of the factors (growing with time) of the "natural's" evolution. Recapitulating human history from a naturalist's viewpoint, Vernadskiy arrives at the conclusion that throughout its development, mankind is gradually turning into a new strong geologic power, which transforms the planet's face with its thought and labor. Accordingly, in order to preserve itself, mankind will have to assume the responsibility for the

development of biosphere turning into noosphere, which will require a particular social organization and a new environmental and simultaneously humanistic ethics⁷.

Given all power of mankind, its weakness lies at surface. Simplification of life, which progress entails, leads to the need for human to assume the responsibility for his future, and for the future of the entire society. It is hard to say, in fact, how much mankind has advanced toward this goal. People are not becoming wiser due to abundance of information (or rather abundance of means, which may be used to obtain information), while they find it more difficult to navigate through this information. Let us hope that future will compel mankind to care for its environment and care for the image of the future's human.

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Блогосфера как выражение виртуальной реальности (к вопросу о характере становления блогосферы)

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Рассмотрено влияние средств массовой коммуникации на становление личности молодого человека на примере блогосферы как средства его самовыражения в условиях глобально развертывающейся искусственной среды. Показано как позитивное, так и негативное влияние этой деятельности на процесс личностного самоутверждения. Дано теоретическое обоснование гармонии между отличающимися крайностями.

Ключевые слова: молодой человек, социализация, блог, блогосфера, виртуальная реальность, средства массовой коммуникации, самореализация, личность, отчуждение, модель общества, ноосфера.
