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Internet Community Socialization Processes

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In the given article we research the processes of socialization of the Internet Communities' members. Here, we consider the phenomena of the individual's informational culture, informational culture of community, informational behavior, and general electronic literacy. We differentiate general electronic literacy into software electronic literacy, scientific electronic literacy and multi-literacy.

Keywords: socialization, informational culture, informational behavior, electronic literacy.

Socialization of the individual presupposes a process of social interaction, expanding in time. In the process of socialization, individuals internalize cultural values and norms. In case of absence of norms or their contradictoriness, socialization turns out to be weak, and there are formed personal characteristics or group psychology of a deviating character, pathologic peculiarities can be also revealed. The process of socialization combines in itself as a free choice of forms of informational interaction, so enforcement, and also network society's sanctioning of these or those communicative practices. Thereat, enforcement is already revealed in the process of mastering of the native language, which organizes the individuals' thinking.

The first knowledge of the person about the social Internet-reality is got in the process of basic socialization. It is almost impossible to set the lowest age threshold of the basic cyber-space socialization, in comparison with the basic off-

line socialization, which starts from the very birth moment of a child, for whom the surrounding world is a social reality from the very beginning. The last thesis can be explained quite simply: the basic socialization process starts from the moment of getting the information about the Internet cyber-space phenomenon existence, and this very moment of primary informing depends upon various social-economical, political and other factors.

In its turn, the basic socialization process can be divided into two stages: 1) archetypical and 2) instrumental-cognitive. In the process of the archetypical stage of the basic socialization, cyber-space subjective reality is formed in the mind of the individual on the basis of cultural artifacts: while getting acquainted with publications, advertisements, films, books, novels and so on and so forth. Thereat, the process of socialization goes on exclusively on the basis of perception of social myths, connected to the cyber-space functioning; and peers, parents, teachers of the corresponding

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classroom disciplines act as socialization agents. It is important to notice, that the archetypical stage of socialization process is originally inherent in cyber-space. Yet, before the global computer networks have appeared, mythological image of the virtual environment has been created in the literary works of writers-fantasts and been forecast in scientific publications. Thus, in their conscious, future computer users have performed social constructing of the objective reality of a new human-machinery world, which advent has been only awaited.

We may suppose that digestion of knowledge and skills of the mentioned socialization agents is the main educative mechanism of technical knowledge and also of cultural patterns transfer. But, the decisive role of social myths formation at the archetypical stage of socialization belongs to mass media, which realizes the function of public construction of the cyber-space social mythology in practice. This way, the press actually exerts a strong influence on the process of basic socialization, and in the course of this process, construction of the virtual reality world takes place on the personal level. Thereat, social myths compensate the individuals the lack of basic knowledge about society functioning in the cyber-space, and also contribute to shaping of the socialization process continuation motives.

Thus, at the given stage, the process of socialization is concluded in constructing of the future virtual identity, and also in cognitive integration of the person with the roles of these or those subjects, acting in the cyber-space. Precisely on this very stage, the user is got first acquainted with social norms, functioning in the cyber-space, and also digests basic elements of the network ethics. His behavior forms the system of inter-connected roles and expectations of the contact with the virtual environment. Thereat, there is created a pluralistic reality, which has a well-defined fragmentary character;

and, in the result of his cognitive experience, the person accepts the cyber-space behavior models of axiological orientation, which are well-spread within the public conscience.

The archetypical stage of socialization is over after the user has been connected to the telecommunication networks, and further the instrumental-cognitive stage begins. We are to take into consideration that on this new stage the individual has to be socialized simultaneously in two dimensions. First of all, it is a social community of the cyber-space. Secondly, it is a concrete Internet-community, wherein the individual participates. In the process of the instrumental-cognitive stage of socialization, the user meets alternative patterns of thinking and behavior, and also a reconstructive form of social memory of virtual network societies. Thereat, the individual studies concrete role orientations, studies to perform social navigation in the cyber-space and to interact with others, cognates normative models of social interactions, he experiences the impact of social control mechanism on himself.

Speaking about socialization in the context of social structure and the Internet on the whole, *first of all*, by this we mean individual's perception of instrumental knowledge, connected to the «electronic» literacy, skills of social navigation in the cyber-space and so on. The new-comers will not be able to use the possibilities, which are opening before them at full extend, without minimum of knowledge, allowing dealing with the virtual environment, with technical and program artifacts, without knowledge of human communication elements, without studying orientations, having functional meaning for perception of the system of mutual role expectations, existing in the cyber-space. Thereat, any processes of information searching and social navigation in the cyber-space can be considered as processes of socialization as well.

We are to take into account the fact, that communicative experience, obtained off-line, has a strong impact on the quality of computer-mediated actions. Correspondingly, we may speak about the fact that along with the processes of Internet socialization there are also the processes of digesting of new values, skills, and roles instead of previous, out-dated ones in the connection with transition into another communicative environment. For example, because of their specifics, the interactions, performed in the cyber-space, demand observance of safe conduct rules, which differ from the rules, accepted in the real society.

Secondly, speaking about socialization within the frames of the cyber-space social system, we are to speak about personal's digesting of the main structure of roles and values, dominating in this or that cyber-space national community, where the process of socialization takes place. On this stage, a structured world of existing social Internet interactions starts forming in the conscious of the individual.

Social cyber-space reality is always such, as it is interpreted by the users. Moreover, solidarity of the network society with reference to the social reality, being «common» for everybody, is based on the fact that in the process of socialization users begin to accept the existing social cyber-space norms, as far as they perceive that egoistic behavior model is criticized by the network society.

Meeting of individual's informational demands goes on in the process of interaction with other individuals, entering Internet-communities. Within the frames of these communities, socialization is focused on individual's acceptance of general axiological models, and due to this fact the integrity of mutually focused general values is formed in the conscious of the individual. Thus, the essential part of such socialization process consists in the successive introduction of new standards of axiological orientation.

Processes of socialization of the virtual network communities' participants take place in the frames of in-group attitudes and intergroup interactions development. So, we may single out the following: 1) forms of ritual interaction: presentations, forms of address, greetings, good-byes and so on; 2) usage of peculiar pseudonyms – «nicknames»; 3) special symbolic systems, being used only in the given social group – national language, jargon, slang, etc.

Only if socialization is performed directly in the process of off-line interactions, we may speak about the experience, by which the action and socialization are merged together. Such a feeling of immersiveness can be crucially important not only for the socialization process itself, but from the point of view of forming of individual's collective identity feeling.

Independently from motivation of the individuals, having entered the virtual group, and in order the community, which has gathered the necessary number of participants, could function efficiently, the users should experience the feeling of collective identity. «Maintained with computer help, the context of communication obligatory stipulates the act of imagination, which has to provoke the image of integrity with other individuals, who are most often faceless or even anonymous» (Foster, 1997: 25). Due to collective identity, virtual network community becomes the subject of social interaction.

Entering the community for his own goals achievement, first of all, in the process of communicative interactions the individual is reoriented from the system of values to maintenance of community solidarity and only then to satisfaction of his own private interests. After, in the course of socialization, the user has become initiated in the meaning content of the social world, existing in this or that community, he becomes an equal participant of the process of further collective understanding of the virtual reality.

Solidarity of the Internet-community is defined by the degree of its attractiveness from the point of view of the user, participating in it. Individuals think, feel and behave in accordance with the social characteristics of the communities, which they belong to at a certain moment of time. In the course of communicative practices, performed on a regular basis, community participants build up a collective «we», i.e. collective identity. Yet, at the end of XIX century, E. Durkheim has revealed an integrating quality of the group conscious: «The group thinks, feels quite differently, than its members would do it separately. Then, if we base on these latter ones, so we shall not understand anything of that, what is going on inside the group.» (Durkheim, 1995: 91)

Within the frames of the social structure, collective identity can be formed by the following three stages. At the first stage, in the course of socialization of a new participant, we may observe the processes of mutual influence of individual identity and collective identity of the group. On the second level, the participant takes part in the collective identity formation with regard to the social time of community existence. On the third level, entering the communicative interactions with participants of other communities, he, first of all, represent his collective identity, and, only secondly, demonstrates his individual identity.

Being a complex phenomenon, which includes cognitive and evaluative aspects, collective identity cannot be limited only by empathic factors. That is why, speaking about collective identity, we are sooner to make an accent on the commitment to common social values and solidarity in the questions of common interests upholding. Group identity is most vividly revealed in virtual network communities in cases of status-quo violation possibility, including as external threats, so in-group social conflicts. Thereat, only strong bonds between the community's participants contribute to

appearance of the feeling of group affiliation, what allow rising above personal interests in conflict situations. Creation of negative communicative behavior mindsets towards the participants of other network communities most often contributes to intensification of the group identity feeling.

It would be a mistake to mix up conformity and collective identity with unification of the Internet-community participants' opinions. The researches, made off-line, (which results, to our opinion, can be applied to on-line interactions as well) show that the more the opinions differ, the more some individuals wish to communicate with other individuals. There at, «to differ more» does not mean «to differ crucially», as far as crucial difference in opinions and intolerance to other points of view bring to social conflicts.

Does the formation process of collective identity of virtual network communities' participants contain the elements of subjectivity? The answer to this question will be certainly positive, because, as it has been asserted by J.M. Jasper: «Collective identity is not simply a pattern of the cognitive boarder, it is more than this – it is emotions of other participants of the group, based on the care of their membership maintenance» (Jasper, 1998: 18).

Common grounds and the collective identity phenomenon help to appear a certain confidence among the participants of virtual network communities. Correspondingly, united by the feeling of group affiliation, the users act more efficiently. Thus, one of the main problems is the maintenance problem of participants' fidelity to the community. Speaking about fidelity, let us use the definition of this group social interaction component, which has been introduced by T. Parsons: «Fidelity is an institutionalized predecessor of solidarity, which prepares one's motivation to conformity with the interests or expectations of others and sets the limits to

any function, having been institutionalized or accepted in the result of an agreement. On the other hand, the focus on the collective turns this inclination into an institutionalized function, which forms the role expectation. It does not matter, whether the doer feels something similar or not, but he has to act in a certain way, otherwise he takes the risk to be subjected to sanctions of negative character» (Parsons, 2002: 181). As all other components of group identity, fidelity is an important social instrument only in case the users clearly understand the limits of social structure, community goals, forms and methods of solving of the problems, set before the group.

Socialization of users goes on with a greater success, if there are technological recommendations of cyber-space social navigation, given by the group participants in order to help the new-comer. Acting from the principals of mutual help, experienced users can contribute to the process of socialization of new-comers. Thus, speaking about a chaotic character of network resources, Umberto Eco, a famous Italian philosopher, underlined the importance of mutual help in virtual network societies: «one studies to orientate oneself in these jungles through trial and error or constantly seeking for advice of more power users. But the most efficient way is to be in such a place, where you are surrounded by people with various levels of knowledge, various experience of Net lodgment. This situation can be compared to the experience of the first-year student: at the dean's office, nobody will tell him that to attend the lectures of the following professor is simply to waste one's time, but his fellow-students of the second year will certainly share with him about it in the local canteen» (Marshall and Eco, 1997: 97).

Becoming a participant of the virtual community, the new-comer not only satisfies his own informational demands to this or that extend, but also studies the social group structure,

becomes acquainted with group interests, local coalitions and corresponding interaction strategies. Well-socialized person, integrated into the Internet-community, must accept social status of other participants. Thereat, any new participant becomes an object of observation, control and appliance of ethical application of norms, ruling in the given society.

Correspondingly, the system of sanctions (rewards and penalties, existing in Internet-communities) plays an important role in the processes of individual's socialization. And the studying of the mechanisms, which help to maintain the processes of virtual society functioning, we shall call orientation. Proceeding from the empirical data obtained, the more actively the users take part in the community activity, the more efficiently they perform their orientation. In the given case, the commonality of tasks, solved by the individual and the rest of the community participants, contributes to revelation of «the resonance» of cognitive practices.

As far as users perform from time to time transitions from one community to another, so, we may assert that they are constantly in the process of socialization in cyber-space. Thereat, we are speaking not only of digesting of norms and values of the given Internet-community. The user has to correct his behavior under the influence of evolutionary changes, happening in the community, where he has already socialized earlier.

In the process of socialization, objective indicators of individual's study of communicative interaction norms are the level of informational culture. By the term of *individual's informational culture*, we mean the culture of information creation, maintenance, processing, transition, seeking and use of information. While, by the term of *community informational culture* we shall mean steady forms of behavior in the informational space, the forms being accepted

by the majority of members of the given virtual collective.

We cannot overestimate the role of informational culture in organization of the communicative interaction process, as far as only informational culture provides the coupling of notional human mindsets, allows interpreting acquired information, influencing by its senses on the senses of others, organizing the cyber-space communicative process. Cultural models of individuals' behavior are always normative, as far as they are based on the behavior standards, approved by the network society.

In its turn, the personal social world is «an informational culture» to the extent to which it is correlated to the values, which are shared by the individual. Thus, informational culture of users should be considered as a precondition of socio-cultural integration and also of disintegration of the cyber-space social system, taken as a whole. Informational culture characteristics are latent and reflect the activity of a person as a cognizing subject, who is constantly interpreting senses, being hidden in symbolic interactions.

Thereat, the process of senses interpretation presents by itself a social process. Interpretation depends as on the language, by which means communication is performed, so on the user's culture, historical context, social structure, and also on political factors. Moreover, users' cognitive abilities take their origin in the previous social interactions, and it means we are to consider this factor as well.

We are also to mind the fact that some kinds of socialization can form asocial behavior models of users. Thereat, individual socio-cultural orientations may influence the character of macro-social changes, going on in the network society, and unwelcomed changes are among them. We may particularly speak about non-admission of commercial activity in cyber-space, violation of intellectual property rights, intolerant perception

of socio-cultural distinctions, and also of anti-authoritarian feelings in relation to the problem of network interactions State regulation. Formed utopia ideals can give the grounds for participation in the communities of hackers, crackers, cyber-terrorists, and also contribute to the growth of tension in the cyber-space social system.

In connection with all the mentioned, the significance of informational culture and culture study is growing. Individual's informational culture is a qualitative characteristic of a certain kind of activity, concluded in the process of knowledge accumulation and its practical application. Informational culture is particularly revealed in the culture of personal home pages design, electronic messages writing, technological techniques of information seeking and spreading, and the manner of interpersonal communication processes realization.

The most important indicators of personal informational culture are user's relation towards obtained information integrity, user's diagnosing of himself as an information creator and consumer, and user's understanding of a communicative situation and its rules of behavior, and also the notion of «electronic literacy». An advanced understanding of informational culture includes in itself the following skills of social actions: solution of misunderstandings, logical structuring of arguments and a critical look at the sites' notional content. As far as informational culture externalizes itself only in social practices, one can get the notion of it by means of analysis of individual's informational behavior forms, generated in the process of socialization.

By individual's *informational behavior* we shall understand the way of actions, the synergism, undertaken for information acquisition, processing and digestion of the available data, for creating of new knowledge and its transfer to the Internet-community. Informational behavior is revealed: in individual's regular addressing

to informational resources; in the quality of digested information and knowledge; in thematic variety of information, being in individual's demand in native and foreign languages and so on. Informational behavior is not only an indicator of individual's informational culture, but it also reflects the availability and convenience of aggregate information resources of the society. Thus, we may assert that the character of informational behavior and the degree of individual's social activity are reciprocal.

Going on in the process of socialization, informational behavior formation starts from studying of «electronic literacy» bases. «Electronic literacy» presupposes presence of skills, necessary for seeking, processing and storing of information by means of electronic devices. Thereat, we are speaking about hypertext skills, participation in charts, forums, conferences, usage of search engines, spam resistance, computer viruses detection skills and so on.

L.J Gurak, a famous American researcher of computer technologies, considers, that the sense of «electronic literacy» is concluded in the individual's perception of his own place within the world of new communication technologies, new communities and cultural practices (Gurak, 2001: 28). Proceeding from the mentioned, we may come to a conclusion that sense changing of the term «literacy», going under the influence of telecommunication technologies, is not the first thing happening in the history of humanity. It is quite enough to compare the sense of this definition before and after the invention of book printing.

Significance of literacy in the processes of becoming of various social formations cannot be overestimated. Firstly, as in the period of capitalism becoming - literacy was an essential condition of person's success in the occurring social- economic conversions, so on the stage

of post-industrial society becoming - electronic literacy is an inevitable condition of participation in the social transformations. Secondly, on different stages of the human society development, literacy requires to combine the information itself and its carrier (book, computer and etc.). And only through this combination and taking into account the degree of obtained information understanding, a possibility of new knowledge birth appears.

Thus, in conceptual relation we are to consider the fact that: there is not just one, but there are many types of literacy; the meaning and the level of literacy changes in dependence on concrete social contexts; literacy is considered as a continuum, but not as a dichotomy «literate – illiterate»; literacy, by itself, does not automatically give any profit; becoming literate is not only the result of education and cultural environment, but also of individual's abilities.

Literacy is revealed in the skill to implement communicative processes with due account to the social norms, accepted in the community, in the skills to single out useful data among information noise, to search, to obtain and to digest knowledge, and also to use the possibilities of international collaboration for new knowledge creation. By themselves, global telecommunication public domain networks do not allow realizing the mentioned above scheme of self-education, in spite of the fact that there are huge volumes of information presented. Neither search servers, nor portals, nor systematic catalogues are able to handle the problem, as far as all of them are not meant for formation of the integral picture of this or that subject field. Consequently, one needs basic skills of «electronic literacy» in order to work efficiently with the information, presented in the Internet.

We shall differentiate general electronic literacy, software electronic literacy, scientific qualification and multi-literacy. *General*

electronic literacy of the user is defined by the skill to work with various types of information – text, audio, video, graphics and so on. Moreover, the user must possess the skills of searching of necessary information and interpretation of the results, obtained in the course of the search.

Software electronic literacy presupposes the skills of program products installation and use. Higher levels of software literacy presuppose the skills of computer programs writing and computer systems administration.

Scientific electronic literacy is defined by the skill of transformation of information, having been collected in cyber-space, into knowledge and decision making on the basis of the obtained knowledge. Moreover, the user must consider the processes, going on in the social system of cyber-space, and formulate his position in relation to these or those communicative practices.

Multi-literacy combines in itself two notions. The first one includes the skill of text, graphics, audio, and video files integration into a multimedia form. The second one presupposes the knowledge of foreign languages, cyber-space traditions and behavior rules, accepted in national communities. Thereat, the knowledge of English language is

an obligatory condition of participation in the international economical, scientific and many other types of activities. Though, the knowledge of the only English contributes to successful perception of information, nevertheless it is not enough, as far as it does not always guarantee that the necessary information will be gathered on the sites of non-English-speaking countries.

To the opinion of some researchers, there is one more type of literacy, which is called «*critical literacy*». This term has a row of interpretations, but the most popular of them is: it is a skill of writing and reading, critically considering the text. The mentioned above quality is supposed to be the most important for global telecommunication networks, as far as a significant part of information is located without any kind of editing or recension on the part of qualified experts. So, having already begun reading the text, the user has to estimate it and to decide whether it is worth continuing to obtain information from this source or he should search for some new documents on the necessary theme. Thus, using the term «*literacy*», we are to take into account its historical, political and socio-cultural contexts of social interactions.

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