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Research article

New Academic Culture: Digital Ethics in Virtual Communication

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Abstract. The relevance of this research is due to the significance of the problems of compliance with ethical standards in general and the obvious need to establish common rules of communication in the virtual environment, which became the main platform for academic communication during the pandemic. It is obvious that cultural traditions often lag far behind the changes that are taking place in the field of online communication. Among modern youth, there are differences in the perception of the culture of behavior in the real vs. virtual world. The aim of this research was to analyze the content of the new concept of 'digital ethics' and to study the ideas of value and moral guidelines in virtual communication among students of higher education institutions. The work was based on a socio-cultural methodological approach. The main method used was an online questionnaire created in Google Forms. The respondents were students of two Russian universities. The survey was conducted in January–February 2021 on a voluntary and anonymous basis. The results of the study demonstrated an increasing interest in the problems of compliance with moral and ethical standards in digital communication. The level of digital ethics was rated as average by the respondents. Among the main factors identified that influence the ethics of a particular person's behavior were the family, social circle, and level of education. The main recommendation for reducing violations of ethical norms in digital communication was the need for early education of children based on cultural traditions and moral foundations, while legislative initiatives of a prohibitive nature (for example, fines) did not receive adequate support from respondents. This paper provides reference points both for further in-depth research on digital ethics issues and for making concrete decisions in the academic environment.

Keywords: digital ethics, virtual communication, culture of behavior, digital environment

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1. Introduction

The pandemic that spread to all countries and continents in 2020 and continued in the current 2021 significantly adjusted the usual way of life. The system of restrictions associated with the prevention of the spread of a new COVID-19 infection acted as an indicator that exposed the problems and contradictions that have accumulated in the world community. The forced mass transfer of communication processes to the digital space of social networks, online education services, discussion platforms, blogs, etc. has exposed the need to establish common rules for communication in a virtual environment. It became obvious that the anonymity and, as a result, the permissiveness of speech behavior against the background of general social tension caused a sharp increase in the use of obscene language, insults to individuals, specific social groups, and society as a whole and also contributed to the spread of false, slanderous information.

The purpose of this research was a comprehensive analysis of a new socio-cultural phenomenon — the problem of compliance with the norms of digital ethics of communication and its perception among students.

The research tested the hypothesis that without declaring the most general moral and ethical principles and implementing regulated rules of behavior in the digital environment, civilized, cultural, and effective communication in the virtual space is impossible.

To test the hypothesis, it was necessary to get answers to the following questions:

1. *What content do students of Russian universities put into the concept of "digital ethics"?*

2. *What ethical values are decisive for them?*

3. *How is the impact of the place of residence, social status, and age of participants in virtual communication processes on their compliance with ethical standards assessed?*

4. *What factors have a key impact on the culture of human behavior in the digital environment?*

The very concept of "digital ethics" is quite new. For a long time, questions of ethics have concerned only the sphere of "real" relations in society. The development of informatization, the emergence of a parallel (virtual) space of human existence led to the emergence of a special applied field, which began to be called "information ethics".

The ethical principles and rules of information ethics were developed and adopted at the highest level — by the UN<fn> In particular, the specialized agency of the United Nations — the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)</fn> and UNESCO. Among the main documents of international status should be mentioned the "Declaration of Principles of the Information Society" and the "Code of Ethics of the Information Society" (project). For a long time, the main tasks of information (digital) ethics were considered to be the study of "ethical problems related to the production, collection, use and dissemination of data and related technologies and algorithms (including artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics) in order to develop ethically justified solutions", as well as issues of privacy, the right to keep personal information confidential, which are becoming increasingly relevant in connection with the accumulation of increasingly significant volumes of "big data" [1, p. 173].

Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly clear that digital ethics is also linked to other issues. Behavior in the digital space became the main topic of the 40th International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners (ICDPPD) (Brussels, October 2018). "The issues discussed at the conference show the relevance of the search for ethical regulators for new areas of human activity, for which many countries have not yet developed legal mechanisms" [2, p. 301]. One can agree with Nazarova and Anishchenko [3] that "modern post-industrial society acquires the features of a digital society, in which the main values are the values of information and knowledge. At the same time, with the expansion of the digital space, traditional moral values are being transformed, and questions about the criteria for the truth of information and scientific knowledge are becoming acute". It is obvious that new technologies and the rapid "digitalization" of public life cause the emergence of unique ethical challenges: the ethics of copying and distributing information, the ethics of communication in the online space, the etiquette of digital communication, etc.

Speaking about the factual side of digital ethics, consider one very important fact, the existence of which few people questioned, an objective to create a culture of behavior in the online space and voluntary admission to users. Recently, the term *netiket* has appeared in the Russian language, the meaning of which is reduced to a certain set of rules of behavior on the Internet. Experts in the field of digital technologies point out that this process is absolutely natural. A person as a representative of society in the online space somehow interacts with a huge number of explicit and implicit users. This means that the virtual space somehow forms a cultural environment, which, in turn, is based on certain ethical values. Any information and communication environment generates a cultural and ethical layer, without which the digital space of discourse is

impossible to imagine. It is clear that communicating online is very different from what one sees offline. Here, completely different socio-cultural processes operate, different psychological methods of communication are used, and, what seems most important, special linguistic means and tactics are used that differ from those that operate in reality. Accordingly, the ethics of communication in the virtual space is formed according to a different scenario.

The virtual space has a certain specificity; therefore, within it, the norms of modern ethics come into conflict with those that are regulated in the offline sphere. The behavior of users in the network is characterized by a quick reaction, a high degree of emotionality. Communication is freer and often accompanied by manifestations of aggression. "The modern process of formation of civil abilities (the ability to have civil rights and bear duties; the ability to discuss and form public values; to use and promote humanitarian (and not manipulative) technologies of interaction, to show civil activity within the legal framework and in accordance with the norms of morality, etc.) is not linear and contradictory" [4, p. 63]. It follows that the norms of modern ethics, based on the moral principles accepted in society, in the virtual space require a deeper understanding and careful regulation.

Scientific research in the field of digitalization and public discussions on this burning topic has shown that the rapid penetration of information technologies into the private life of a person, in addition to noticeable positive changes, carries risks whose importance can hardly be overestimated. Among the most disturbing are: "the possible dehumanization of society, the instrumentalization of human life, the deformation of human identity, its disintegration into fragments and even reduction to a profile ('digital person'), the devaluation of existing morals and ethics" [5, p. 101] In the current situation, the moral and ethical problems of digitalization are at the forefront. The question arises — how does digital transformation change the world around and what is the perception of the changing world in the human mind? What is the role of ethics in digital communications?

Digitalization of the academic university environment, the process of which was catalyzed by the sudden factor of the COVID-19 pandemic, has not yet abolished the imperative: it is the teacher who can develop the moral and social qualities of students, and not a computer program (artificial intelligence). The pedagogical community faces a difficult task to find ways to protect the consciousness of young people from aggression in the digital space and to educate the principles of moral stability. This process has already begun. "For the targeted formation of ethics and information culture in a number of countries, there are special training programs designed to help form certain

behavioral and value orientations that are significant not only in virtual, but also in real communication" [6, p. 159].

2. Methodology and Methods

In order to determine how netizens evaluate digital ethics, what ethical values are defining for them, and how they perceive the culture of behavior in the digital environment, a socio-cultural study was conducted in January-February 2021 using the method of anonymous questioning of students of two Russian universities: Samara State Transport University (Samara) and Don State Technical University (Rostov-on-Don). The main method used by the authors was a sociological survey in the form of an online questionnaire based on Google forms. The respondents were 359 students aged 17 to 25 years. The survey was conducted on a voluntary and anonymous basis, and respondents were attracted by posting information and links to the survey in the official student communities on social networks and educational platforms of the named universities. One of the additional tasks of the survey was to identify respondents interested in cooperation, who in the future may take part in focus groups and other highly specialized studies.

The general topic of the survey was the problem of perception of the content of the concept of "digital ethics" and acceptable norms of behavior in virtual communication. The questionnaire included both closed and open questions. The latter prevailed, because the discussion of the phenomenon of "digital ethics", in the authors' opinion, is still just beginning, and it is impossible to predict all the features of the reactions of the participants in the process to it. The resulting text fields required processing by content analysis methods. The fields with fixed answer options, which allowed automatic data processing, themselves gave a fairly detailed picture of the situation in the question under study. Multiple choice was used: respondents had the right not to answer any of the questions asked, the unit of measurement of the data was the percentage of the number of respondents to a specific question (i.e., a valid percentage), except in cases where the question allowed multiple answers for one respondent (the percentage of the total number of observations is given).

3. Results and Discussion

As mentioned before, digital ethics in its direct meaning as a set of rules of conduct in the information environment is still being formed. However, this process is rapid and

far from unambiguous. Currently, in the most general form, these rules already exist. Moreover, the idea of joining the culture in the digital environment is finding more and more followers. It is clear that digital etiquette is not yet regulated, but the prerequisites for this have already appeared.

Consider the typical requirements for acts of communication in the online space. These include a ban on insulting (this refers to profanity and other forms of abuse); a ban on *ad hominem* attacks (discussion and a personal insult); a ban on "off-topic" (deliberate evasion of the topic); a ban on "flood" (distribution of informative useless messages); prohibition of frequently asked questions (many resources create FAQs, to avoid clogging of the channel answers to the same questions); following local resource rules (each network community forms its own rules of behavior) [7, p. 491]. Nevertheless, "despite the gradual formation of the rules of Internet communication, the high fragmentation of the network does not allow formulating uniform norms of communication for all" [7, p. 492].

Nowadays, the entire academic community, students, and teachers find themselves in a situation where moral and ethical norms, cultural traditions, and internal beliefs lag far behind the changes that occur in the information sphere. Ubiquitous digitalization has led to a blurring of the boundaries of what is permissible, which has led to a distorted understanding of the essence of ethics itself. "This leads to the shaking of those foundations that have been fixed in the public consciousness as moral foundations, as something solid and unshakable. This implies the need for a reflexively formed ethical position, a firm belief that higher education, in addition to professional training, should authentically promote fundamental moral values, highlight their meaning and fruitful significance both in professional activity and in the harmonization of life" [5, p. 105].

The conducted sociological research and accumulated empirical material allowed outlining the range of ethical issues and analyzing the opinion of Web users about the role and place of ethics in virtual communication. According to the respondents, a modern cultured person has such qualities as politeness (90%), tact (85%), delicacy (80%) (a little less than a preference in the direction of fairness and responsibility). Friendliness, good manners, tolerance, and the level of education do not matter. However, simplicity and modesty are noted in the conditions of functioning of the virtual discourse. Against this background, 78.8% of respondents recognized themselves as cultured people, and 5.3% classified themselves as uncultured.

Despite the significant advantage in favor of written communication, more than 80% of respondents expressed the opinion that they like live communication as the most

optimal and preferred. At the same time, another circumstance is alarming, according to which approximately 20% said that they do not like to communicate with people at all. One can assume that these are potential introverts who avoid verbal interaction with others. At the same time, one rather curious property was revealed. Respondents do not understand live communication as oral communication, but communication in social networks or using gadgets in online mode, where the written form of social interaction prevails.

Digital ethics as an integral component of the information society regulates human behavior in the virtual environment and has a significant impact on its culture. Ethical rules and regulations provide recommendations on how to behave in a particular situation, but it is unlikely that ethical regulation is possible in modern conditions. It is no secret that the current means and methods of communication are associated with certain cultural values and ethical principles. "Instant messaging and social networks allow communicating with an extremely large number of people and at the same time make this communication extremely short; acquaintances become more superficial, it is impossible to know closely a few dozen people with whom one communicates constantly, exchanging only a few messages a week. This does not mean that instant messengers and social networks cannot be used in any other way. Nevertheless, today one can observe the need for such communication among young people" [8, p. 90]. It is no longer possible to dismiss this type of communication, but the ethical nature of this type of communication leads to the fact that one's own beliefs become ethically significant, while the rules of behavior adopted in society, the dictates of conscience, the opinions of parents, friends, and peers are pushed into the background.

There is a risk of moral depersonalization. There is an opinion that, in general, the course of technological progress at the present time "is not focused at all on the personal improvement of those who use its fruits" [8, p. 93]. On the one hand, information technologies have a very significant impact on the mass consciousness. On the other hand, the cultural phenomenon still continues to influence the ethics of behavior. The culture based on moral principles and moral principles, in the authors' opinion, is the only measure of the ethical component in the digital space today. To be a cultured person, to adhere to ethical rules of behavior is a kind of model that every educated person aspires to. Therefore, it is not indifferent to assess the level of ethics and culture of communication in modern social networks. By the way, 30.9% of the respondents rated this level as average, 25.6% — as very high, 16.7% — as low, 13.6% — as very low. From this, it follows that the users of the network state the desire for a high culture of ethical behavior.

As for the factors that influence the formation of a cultured person who adheres to the rules of ethical behavior, the respondents put the family in the first place. In Russia, the traditions of the family are elevated to the rank of high moral values. In the second place, the respondents put the circle of communication (colleagues, friends), which once again demonstrates the lack of live communication; in the third place — educational institutions. The norms of behavior that form the corporate culture of the academic environment are fundamental for many young people in the sense that a modern university becomes a powerful lever of socialization, in which the teaching community plays a major role. In the fourth place was reading books and going to the theater. However, the Internet, the press, and television, according to more than 85%, are no longer among the main cultural factors.

The high moral component as the driving force of ethics has also determined the types of unethical and uncultured behavior in the digital space, which include: the use of obscene language, insults, humiliation on religious, political, and social grounds. It is with these problems that it is proposed to fight in the first place. Seventy percent of respondents say that they do not like the use of obscene and invective language in the networks, they would like to make a comment and stop this process. However, there are also those who do not care what vocabulary dominates the digital space. However, the number of answers in favor of the fact that these problems do not need to be paid attention to, and therefore — to fight, tends to zero. The survey shows that 45% of users have never been in such situations, and only 11% have faced the facts of lack of culture. Almost 60% of respondents indicated that they had a negative attitude towards such manifestations. Nevertheless, the percentage of indifference remains quite high, in which users do not express any appreciation. Less than 10% of respondents supported unregulated freedom of communication on the Internet, where everyone allegedly expresses their opinion as they want.

The ethical behavior of a person in the virtual space is a new field of research, since the perception of the culture of behavior in the physical and virtual world differs among modern youth. This suggests that there is no regulated ethical code of conduct on the Internet. Therefore, the respondents, talking about the reasons for rude behavior in social networks, expressed thoughts about dissatisfaction with work, study, or career, a low level of education and culture, fatigue, self-centeredness, personal problems and experiences, subconscious hostility to other people, ideological intolerance. Such reasons as anonymity, impunity, a sense of security, a desire to speak out were not of fundamental importance. The respondents claim that examples of unethical behavior

in the virtual environment are most often manifested in social networks, political and religious spheres.

Nowadays, everyone is a participant in numerous processes related to digitalization. It is no longer possible to imagine oneself without e-mail, e-card, etc. People are becoming subjects of the digital state, which means that the traditions and mores of society change depending on how deeply the "digital" penetrates into people's lives. "The process of technology development goes beyond the usual framework of a technical problem, since it contains a wide range of socio-cultural aspects, which makes it necessary to adequately assess its impact on culture" [9, p. 1]. In this regard, the respondents' answers to questions about whether the level of communication culture in the digital space depends on the place where people grew up are of interest since 47.2% of respondents gave an affirmative answer. As for the question of whether the level of culture in this time depends on the place of residence, the answers were distributed almost equally: 35.6% answered "yes", 32.8% — "no", 31.6% — "not always". It becomes obvious that the place of residence of a person in terms of determining his or her behavior online does not matter. At the same time, according to respondents, the social status of users, as well as the previous indicator, is insignificant, i.e. a low social status is not always a sign of obscene behavior online. As for the age group, most often the rules of ethics and the principles of morality in the network are violated by teenagers, young people, and adults. This logically implies that the main violators of ethics are (top-down) secondary school students, young people receiving secondary vocational education, university students, workers and employees, bloggers and journalists, representatives of the IT sector.

The recommendations given by the respondents on the formation of digital ethics are of interest. The most widespread opinion was about the need for early education of children on the basis of cultural traditions and moral foundations ("everything depends on education"). Radical measures were also offered, like a ban on the use of profanity, censorship, blocking pages that systematically violate the ethics of online behavior, quickly fixing publications prohibited by the terms. Students are encouraged to improve the quality of education and the level of culture, reduce the degree of aggression in the media and on television, encourage and support local online communities that independently and voluntarily monitor compliance with digital ethics. There was also a rather original piece of advice — "introduce fashion" for cultural behavior. In any case, regulated rules of conduct in the digital environment in the current conditions are urgently needed.

4. Conclusions

To solve the problem of digital ethics, a number of solutions are required both in the field of creating a certain infrastructure to limit the destructive consequences of the growth of digital communications and in the field of regulatory and moral regulation. Understanding the growing impact of digitalization on people and society, its consequences, requires an ethical reflection of digital processes in society and the development of a system of moral regulations. Among the main tasks, the solution of which will be required in the very near future, are seen:

1. Determine the importance of ethical control in the digital space in order to broadcast cultural values and deter harmful negative manifestations in the form of aggression, insults, and incitement to various kinds of conflicts.

2. In the context of inclusive digitalization and accessibility of higher education, it is important to ensure that the main professional educational programs have disciplines that include the study of the main ethical categories — responsibility, honor, conscience, duty, mercy, compassion, etc. Therefore, it seems very appropriate to introduce a new discipline (module) under the general name "Digital Ethics".

3. One of the most pressing issues of global digitalization remains the task of preserving and increasing the value of the state language, which is the main means of communication on the Web. The solution to this problem lies entirely on the shoulders of the academic community. "Humanities should take on one of the main roles — an active participant in the process of socialization and education of young people who recognize themselves as citizens of Russia as a democratic state, know the history of its development, share morals and traditions, and monitor the purity of their native language" [10, p. 239].

4. Finally, the problem of creating a single code of ethics containing the basic, most general rules of behavior in the infosphere based on cultural values seems to be of paramount importance and requires as quick a solution as possible.

The authors ' team believes that the data presented in the article can be useful to colleagues who conduct educational activities in secondary professional and higher educational institutions in the framework of disciplines related to the teaching of ethics, professional ethics, cultural studies, sociology, culture of oral and written speech, as well as to anyone interested in the culture of behavior in the digital environment.

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