

Conference Paper

Ethic of Digital Communication, or New Scenarios for Having a Voice

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Abstract

A new type of online communication which is different from off-line one shapes a favorable environment not only for a dialogue but also for negative assessments and aggressive behavior on the part of active users. Specificity of open space communication on the Internet creates a number of moral and ethic problems and calls attention to the development of correct scenarios to interact online which will allow users to protect not only their own identity but also the identity of their communities. A multidisciplinary approach with the use of media studies' instruments acts as a methodological basis for examining specifics of digital communication. This methodology makes it possible to reflect upon digital media in their interrelations with social, cultural and anthropological transformations, to analyze ways of communication and interests of the internet communities.

Keywords: online communication, social networks, trolling, haterism, online-activism, brigading.

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1. Introduction

The period of romantic idea of the Internet as a decentralized platform where open and free exchange of opinions among online users crowns came to an end in the first decade of the 21st century. The modern development of social media has turned into centralization of platforms, total commercial and state control. Research on the Internet shows that networking does not make users more open or tolerant [4, 5]. Moreover, online communication due to a blurring of its responsibility limits creates a favorable environment not only for a dialogue, but also for negative estimates instead; it is becoming more and more aggressive. One could speak of the established system of trolling and aggressive, hater-like comments [7] in social networks, and such foreign words as "hype", "holy war" mark emotional accompaniment of communication. The given situation problematizes comprehension of online social experience, ethic rules, and cultural norms of our interaction in social media.

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2. Research Methods

A multidisciplinary approach with the use of media studies' instruments acts as a methodological basis for examining specifics of digital communication. This methodology makes it possible to reflect upon digital media in their interrelations with social, cultural and anthropological transformations, to analyze users' content, specific ways of communication and interests of internet communities.

3. Discussion

The present-day specificity of online communication is linked with new contexts and deliberations on users' interaction. And there are several reasons for this which we are going to consider. Firstly, social networks is a global information space (just one Facebook has above 2 milliard users) where everyone is in a mediated relationship with each other. The great number of offline actions and types of activities has turned into online acts, thus, every user's word becomes a performative communicative act. The major difference between a modern paradigm of social networks and traditional media systems is that social media have got rid of "people-curators" and have demanded permanent involvement through clicking from us. It is not only more comfortable and simple to talk on the Internet space: a multitude of users with different stances and notions of communication ethics interact there, and differences in conversational scenarios of behavior have become more visible than in everyday speech acts. The former classic scenario [3], which used to describe everyday communication – "scene and backstage" – does not always work online. Open and free space of social networks not only creates a favorable environment for a dialogue, but also for negative utterances. Certainly, we can also come across critique and aggression offline. However, it is on the Internet that the situation of presence and interaction changes principally. On the Web "face-to-face" meeting is different not only because users' feedback is restricted and mediated but also because we deal with the constructed images – profiles. In addition, a conflict situations online acquires the virus effect and becomes available for the majority of users provoking them into communication "breach" and violation of open interaction rules. Communication thereby becomes a sort of "no rules game", and it is difficult to recognize true intentions of users; whether they criticize the current state of affairs or they fight for a symbolic power on the cyber space.

Secondly, as D. Boyd puts it [1], the Internet has become a private-public space where nobody knows what audience this or that message will have, what response

his message will prompt. Multiple online contacts have created a new information transparency when everybody knows about each other and all users have actualized the question about what is acceptable in interactions with others, “acts of emotional trust” as a condition that contributes to subjects interpersonal relations. Users have found their own voice and have an opportunity to discuss things which big culture prefers not to talk about. Surely, public interest in private/sacred is not new in culture but every epoch has its boundaries for the private to be admitted to the public sphere. Online space has become a place for self-presentation [6, p. 144], such representations of the self reflect the emergence of a new type of self-care: public “speaking through” of intimate experiences and traumas in search for protection, compassion and moral satisfaction. In other words, the definition of “the personal” with regard to “the social” is reconsidered: within the framework of today’s understanding of “the self” we have to accept our story for the sake of participating in social life and, at the same time, make ourselves look good. On the one hand, all this allows for upholding one’s subjectivity by bringing together groups to defend their rights or a certain subject. For example, a social Facebook flash mob #IamNotAfraidToSay launched in 2016 was devoted to sexual violence and stirred conflicting assessments on the part of ordinary users and professionals. Some took this action as “a global confessional”, others exhibited abhorrence seeing it as “point scoring”, “gender phobias”, “public striptease”. Whichever way we look at this action it has managed to make things that used to be socially tabooed and not shared even within a close circle a part of public discourse. But the problem resides in the fact that “public therapy” triggers a further escalation of aggression against “a confessor” since users do not want to see true facts which shatter their emotional comfort, accepted social norms. An “overflow of the social” of which Baudrillard wrote is occurring at the expense of self-informing and continuous “self-intoxication” [2].

In other words, it has become possible in social media to advocate for particular rights of subjects or groups’ who have been discriminated for any reason. However, the online activism occurred exists within the space of some service and what we see/read is limited by “a filter bubble”[8], i.e. the principle of interaction with algorithms which is determined by our system of preferences, reposts, likes. But users themselves collect communities that approve their actions (“space of one’s own people”), which results in the specific limitation and reduction of utterances’ repertoire. Research shows that a spiral of silence is becoming tougher than a silence offline. This translates into functional criticism being perceived as bullying or aggression, the chosen response to which is the technology of brigading when those who support the particular user are invited to

join defense efforts. This discussion often grows into aggressive debates within which a particular group has the only one and reasonable stance.

Thirdly, one more ethic dilemma related to technological aspect of new media should be noted: a significant amount of traffic is made between the servers themselves without users' participation. According to Incapsula's Bot Traffic Report 2014 [9], a larger part of 2014 internet traffic was generated by bots -56%, 29% of which were characterized as "bad" and 27% as "good". A situation offered recently by Facebook refers to dead network users, and this problem of digital representation of death is not as abstract as it may seem. Users complain of painful experiences when the dead users are invited to celebrate "friendship anniversary", birthday, or to attend an event. That is why the issue how to deal with the accounts of the dead users and whether these accounts should be in the focus of our attention requires special treatment. The reply of Facebook is connected with commemoration of death as a result of a special legal procedure when the user reports what to do with his account after his death and appoints a caretaker. However, the problem is that the platform itself will develop an algorithm aimed at dropping out the dead of screening. It means that the key question where we still alive or dead will be delegated to machines, and it poses a new ethic challenge of technological colonization of human experience.

4. Conclusions

Alongside with undeniable advantages platforms of social networks revealed a number of moral-and-ethic problems of online communication. What information is permissible in public Internet space when everyone is totally transparent to another user; how to argue and uphold one's subjectivity; how to react to trolling and haterism; what consequences an individual's interaction with algorithms have – all these issues of online communication require designing adequate scenarios to interact online which will allow user to defend not only their identity but also the identity of their community.

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