Internet "Death Groups" in the Online Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Human existence in the space of online / digital / e-culture and information society is becoming more diverse and attractive. The digital culture used to be limited to only leisure, arts, education, and communication; over the last 20 years, it has become an essential part of the digital economy and business, e-government and online services, without which the entire social system would be malfunctioning now. A present-day person, who lives in the Internet era, would regard any gap in the electronic environment as something undermining the very fundamentals of his/her existence. Philosophic, anthropologic, social, and existential issues of the electronic culture and the digital society have become an object of in-depth research over the last two decades; research activities concerning them are becoming increasingly urgent and topical.

Nowadays the developed countries already face the consequences of virtualization of culture and interpersonal communication. Along with improvement of living standards and significant breakthroughs in medicine, electronics, and robotics, there are new deviations related to deformation of relations between a human and the world, changing attitudes to the virtual environment and communication, and increasing human alienation in the real world. The European countries, the USA, Japan, China and Russia already face the phenomenon of "escape from reality" related to the Internet culture (dependent gamers, hikikomori, etc.). They also face an increasing number of teenage and youth suicides, outbreaks of uncontrolled aggression, withdrawal into a virtual world from the real one, and increased dependence on gadgets and online presence in virtual reality; these issues are now regarded as real threats to existence of the present-day society. Virtual communities promoting murders or suicides have become a real hazard for human life and health.

Leading academic and collegiate centers in different countries of the world have been recently dealing in studying of the influence of informatization on different socio-cultural processes. Thus the issues of the development of electronic culture are the subject matter for the scientists in the University of Milan (A. Ronchi, 2009); McLuhan Institute (Virtual Maastricht McLuhan Institute (VMMI), the Netherlands (K.H. Veltman, 2004); studying ethical and anthropological issues of the information space are the subject matter for the researchers in the International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE) Karlsruhe, Germany (R. Capurro, 2006); London School of Economics, department of Media and Communication (Great Britain) (L. Haddon, 2004); Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility (De Montfort University, Great Britain) (S. Rogerson, 1998); Center for the Study of the Information Society of the University of Haifa, Israel (D.R. Raban, 2009); ethical, political and legal aspects of informatization are the subject matter for L. Rocci (2012); B. J. Kallenberg (2001), C.L. Chang (2011) and others.

Issues by J. Baudrillard (1993), P. Virilio (1984), B. Heller (2012), M. Heim, (1993), B., Girard, S. Siochru (2003) and P.C. Rivoltella (2008) focused to influence of e-culture (digital culture) to the hu-

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man values, lifestyle and worldviews. Professor of Harvard University Floridi L. conducted a study on philosophy of information and ethical issues of using information technology (2013). Professor of the London Open University A. Duff a, considered ethical issues of Internet development and addressed the issues of copyright, digital inequality and violation of the right to private life (2008). F. Schäfer (2009), E. Castronova (2005) studied existential issues and risks of the information society and development of cyberculture. These problems were also raised in our earlier studies related to existential-ethical and anthropological aspects of the electronic and media culture development.

Based on the abovementioned research findings and conclusions, let us study "the death groups" operating in the Internet ("Blue Whale", "Wake Me Up at 4:20", etc.), which have been attracting much attention in Russian and international social media since 2015, as they provoked teenagers to commit suicide, as well as "the Columbine communities" that promote copycat crimes at educational institutions.

Our research is based on both existential and axiological approaches, as well as on an empirical data analysis (by reviewing Internet communities and their web sites). Our research determines the risk factors and characterizes "the death groups" and "the Columbine communities" as complex social phenomena of the online culture.

History of "Death Groups"

A criminal phenomenon in the digital sphere was emergence of the so-called "death groups", whose members are forced to commit suicide. Those groups are focused mainly on adolescents, whose minds are not still developed completely, who are susceptible to manipulation. Teenage group members make their choices unconsciously; they are guided by external manipulation and obscure mechanisms that control their will or mind. They are usually driven by a desire to experience something thrilling and extreme, which is due to their disappointment in the real life. In Russia, such online groups began to spread in the social networks in 2015-2016, which has led to a number of investigations, changes in legislation, and introduction of tougher penal measures for driving someone to suicide by doing that via the Internet in particular. Similar communities have also emerged in other countries (including Ukraine, Kazakhstan), although they have not expanded so much.

The "death groups" attracted public attention in Russia in 2015, after Rina Palenkova, a teenage girl from the Siberian city of Ussuriysk, had committed a suicide. She jumped in front of a train on November 22. Just a few minutes before her death, she posted her photo with words of farewell in the most popular social networking service in Russia – VK (VKontakte). Her photo and message quickly became an Internet meme. After Rina's death, Philipp Lis, who was the administrator of the community named "F57", who had an intention to gain attention, publicly acknowledged his involvement in her death, as well as in some other teenager suicides. To emphasize his role, he pointed out that there was a direct link between his group and the groups "Sea of Whales" and "Silent House". There were eight similar groups in the social networks; those groups regarded suicide as a martyrdom, a self-sacrifice that one should glorify. According to some Internet myths, souls of those who committed suicide allegedly went to the "Silent House". This a meme of online stalking culture denoting the lowest level of the hidden web, a special state of conscience upon reaching which it is impossible to return to the real world, where they could find freedom and peace at the level of digital rebirth. Members of the community were mentally unstable teenagers, and Philipp Lis drove them to suicide by engaging them in a game. The theme of suicide, which traditionally attracts attention of young people of a certain psychological type or in a critical situation, has become popular in social networks. A number of Internet communities began to claim that they control behavior of adolescents and drive them to suicide.

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