

## CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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### SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF “INTERNET-CONSCIOUSNESS”

The article provides a critical review of existing sociological terms which are used to describe the part of the spiritual world of the Network user which is connected with the Internet. It singles out their advantages and weaknesses and argues the need for introduction into the scientific use of the term "Internet-consciousness", which is considered in conjunction with the already used term "Internet-practices". The article analyses the features of Internet-consciousness on micro-, meso-, macro- and mega levels as well as provides the definition of Internet-consciousness within the framework of structural functionalism which enables the elaboration of appropriate tools of empirical research in the sphere. It introduces the conceptual model of the above-mentioned phenomenon within the context of the systematic approach, specifies the structure and the main types of Internet-consciousness and formulates the main theoretical principles of the phenomenon's functioning.

**Key words:** the Internet, Internet-consciousness, the structure of Internet-consciousness, the types of Internet-consciousness.

According to Eurostats in 2015 42% of the world population used the Network, and in 2016 the number of such users already rose to 50.1% of the planet inhabitants; in Europe this figure reaches 76.7%<sup>1</sup>, and in the former Soviet countries it ranges from 71.3% (Russia) to 14.5% (Turkmenistan)<sup>2</sup>. This dynamics has remained for two decades and has stimulated various Internet research in different fields of the scientific thought, including sociology. The topic is actively studied by such western authors as K. Bessière, B. Boneva, R. Kraut, S. Kiesler, R. Kling, P. Kollock, H. Rheingold, B. Wellman<sup>3</sup>. The topic has also been researched by the sociologists from the former Soviet countries (R. Abramov, G. Batygin, N. Bilan, S. Bondarenko, L. Vasilenko, B. Golovko)<sup>4</sup>. However, the issue of the spiritual world of the Network user still remains on the margins of sociological research. It should also be noted that the spiritual world of an individual includes not only conscious but also unconscious component, although we do not include into our research this nonrationalised sphere of the Internet user and take it out of the scope of our analysis because, unfortunately, sociological science currently has not elaborated appropriate methodological tools for empirical study of the sphere. Therefore we will focus on the conscious aspect of the spiritual world of the Network user in a sociological context.

The existing theoretical works on the topic are fragmentary and disordered. They describe a studied phenomenon mainly in a certain context or perspective which indicates the lack of formulated ideas about the Internet user's consciousness within a certain sociological approach. The researchers do not even have a consensus concerning the term which would mean the spiritual world of the Network user. At present there is a great need for a complex profound theoretical conceptualisation, the absence of which makes it impossible to conduct a high-quality operationalisation and correspondingly to make

<sup>1</sup> Internet Usage in the EU. *Internet World Stats*. <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm>> (2017, April, 25).

<sup>2</sup> Internet Users by Country (2016). *Internet live stats*. <<http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country>> (2017, April, 25).

<sup>3</sup> Bessière K., Kiesler S., Kraut S., Boneva B. Effects of Internet use and social resources on changes in depression. *Robert E. Kraut Home Page*. <<http://kraut.hciresearch.org/sites/kraut.hciresearch.org/files/articles/bessiere08-EffectOfInternetUse%26SocialResourcesOnDepression>> (2017, April, 20).

<sup>4</sup> Білан, Н.І. (2011). Інтернет як простір різних видів соціальних комунікацій. *Актуальні проблеми міжнародних відносин*, вип. 103 (Частина I).

an empirical use of the above-mentioned phenomenon. In other words, there is a distinct lack of the scope of theoretical principles which form the complex of sociological knowledge: the definition of a studied concept within the framework of a certain approach (structural functionalism); distinction of the main types of a phenomenon; articulation of the main principles of the concept of the Network user's consciousness.

Therefore there appears a contradiction, on the one hand, between social and scientific importance of studying the features of the Network user's consciousness (the number of whom is gradually increasing), on the other hand there exist insufficient knowledge of the essence and content of the concept; blurring theoretical principles; lack of sociological conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

Thus, *the aim* of the article is a theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon of the Network user's consciousness within the framework of structural functionalism. The achievement of the given aim requires the fulfilment of a range of **tasks**. Firstly, to substantiate the need of introduction into the scientific circulation of the synthesised concept of "Internet-consciousness" to describe the part of the spiritual world of the Network user which reflects their cognitive activity. Secondly, to formulate the author's definition of the term, to single out the structure and types of the phenomenon, to formulate the main principles of its functioning.

The range of topics connected with the study of the spiritual world of the Network user is new and not sufficiently developed in comparison with other sociological research of the Internet. The Network user's consciousness is most often discussed by authors in the context of the topics which are the subject of their research. For instance, I. Alekseyeva views it as an issue of an agent in the Network<sup>1</sup>, M. Kazarova – as an agent on the Internet within the framework of a network approach<sup>2</sup>, S. Gurko is interested in the topic of an individual's freedom on the Internet<sup>3</sup>, O. Novozhenina researches an agent in the Network<sup>4</sup>, where the latter means a new type of reality.

The above-mentioned sociologists elaborate a certain topic (mainly the issue of an agent in the Network) and the Internet user's consciousness appears within the framework of "the main" research, if it is articulated at all. Since the phenomenon is not central for the given scientists, they do not conduct its complex research and only mention it in a certain context and describe it from a certain perspective.

However, some scientists focus on the Network user's consciousness as the central subject of their research. For instance, V. Nikitayev, working on the boundary of social philosophy and sociology, views consciousness of this type as a result of "the merger" of an agent's and the Internet's consciousness. To define the studied phenomenon the author uses the term "cyber consciousness". He treats an agent's Internet-activity on-line as a separate virtual life world of an agent, in which the latter has special personal experience, interests, aims and all this in a certain way is connected with hypertext: the experience is gained from "living" the hypertext and at the same time it is its (experience) result<sup>5</sup>.

The author analyses an agent as an individual, an active social agent who acts in the cyberspace. He takes into account individuality and an active position of every agent (every hypertext is unique, constructed by the author).

However, this work has some weak points. One of them is the idea that an agent is only an active agent (he modifies, creates a hypertext or at least tries to do so). Such an approach does not consider the role of an agent as a consumer of the Internet-content. Not only information can be consumed but also services, in particular, entertainment, and other content. In this case the main feature is self-positioning of an individual which is directed at passive perception/reception instead of creation/modification of a product. It should be also mentioned that the Internet users are typically characterised by both consumption and construction – these processes alternate, connect in the Network as well as off-line, thus this is the feature which combines both realities.

<sup>1</sup> Алексеева, И. (2004). Интернет и проблема субъекта. *Влияние Интернета на сознание и структуру знания*. Москва: ИФ РАН, 24–56.

<sup>2</sup> Казарова, Т. (2002). Культура информационного общества в контексте аксиологии. *Информационное общество в России: проблемы становления*. Москва: ИНТЕЛ, 35–52.

<sup>3</sup> Гурко, С. (2004). Об иллюзорности свободы в Интернете. *Влияние Интернета на сознание и структуру знания*. Москва: ИФ РАН, 182–189.

<sup>4</sup> Новоженина, О. (2004). Интернет как новая реальность и феномен современной цивилизации. *Влияние Интернета на сознание и структуру знания*. Москва: ИФ РАН, 195–215.

<sup>5</sup> Никитаев, В. Киберсознание. *Кентавр. Сетевой журнал*. <<http://circleplus.ru/circle/reflexum/archive/11/print>> (2017, April, 24).

A profound analysis of the interaction between the Internet and consciousness was conducted by the sociologist S. Katrechko. He distinguishes three types of consciousness according to a medium criterion: individual, group and social. The author identifies the latter type with planetary consciousness, therefore combining mega- and micro levels of the analysis. According to the author, planetary and locus consciousness is gradually formed on the mega level: on the one hand, the Internet eliminates the importance of a geographical distance, but on the other hand – promotes the formation of small and stable groups of likeminded people – informational social loci or informational (local) villages as opposed to megalopolis and isolating type of sociality (locality vs globality). S. Katrechko introduces the concept of “virtual consciousness” on the micro level of the analysis – which is a conventional “inner” constituent of a virtual person; the latter is a certain analogue of a person who goes on-line<sup>1</sup>.

All mentioned above can be viewed as an attempt at sociological conceptualisation of the Network user’s consciousness. The author provides a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of the Network user’s consciousness on the basis of N. Smelser’s level approach. S. Katrechko singles out two types of such consciousness within its framework: planetary and locus (mega level) and virtual (micro level). The researcher distinguishes between some features (effects) of the latter: effect of dispersion, effect of polyphony and introduces the concept of “virtual consciousness” as well as gives its definition.

However, some weak points of the given scientific research should be mentioned. Firstly, it should be noted that the author declares the research of the Network user’s consciousness in the light of a three-level approach, but he actually singles out only two types of the mentioned phenomenon, omitting the meso level. Another downside is the fact that S. Katrechko chooses various Internet-forums as an empirical basis for the research conclusions. We consider that particular point to be a weak spot of this framework, because the author makes general theoretical conclusions (on the micro- and mega levels) regarding the Internet user’s consciousness, but takes as an empirical basis only the research of on-line communication (communication is not the only activity of an agent in the Network).

Thus, the topic of the Internet user’s consciousness is not developed enough in sociology at present: even if it gets into the focus of scholar’s interest, it is not an independent object of research but a part of a wider topic (mainly an agent in the Network). Few attempts at sociological theorisation which focus on the Internet user’s consciousness, firstly, include different terms to describe the phenomenon and, secondly, do not always clearly define the framework of a theoretical approach they work within.

Lexical inspection of the above-mentioned terms, suggested for describing the Network user’s consciousness, such as “cyber consciousness” and “virtual consciousness” reveals some drawbacks of the wording.

The meaning of the term “cyber consciousness” can be translated as a combination of the Internet (“cyber”) and an agent’s consciousness. Though a simple etymological analysis shows that “cyber” is not identical to the Internet; to be more precise, this expletive word has several lexical meanings and only one of them refers to the Network. The modern literature (scientific as well as publicistic and fiction) and speech use this prefix to describe a computer as a technical device<sup>2</sup> (for instance, cyber phobia – a fear connected with computers, notebooks, smartphones and other similar technical devices); to refer to the Internet as a global computer network (cyber space); to emphasise a technological novelty of an object (cyber knife – a modern radio technology of surgical intervention). Therefore, in our opinion, the term “cyber consciousness” is not correct when describing an agent’s consciousness specifically *in the Network or regarding it (the Network)*, since cyber consciousness is a computer user’s consciousness which does not always presuppose the Internet. However, it should be noted that “cyber”, in comparison with others, is most often associated with the Internet in the scientific community.

The next term which must be reviewed is “virtual consciousness”. The meaning of the concept “virtual” has not been clearly defines yet and it has several meanings:

- 1) concocted, imaginary, which does not exist in real life;
- 2) artificially created (for instance, a training simulator which is used to train pilots);
- 3) denotes a computer or the Internet-variant of an object that also exists outside the Network or information technologies (for instance, virtual money)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Катречко, С. (2004). Интернет и сознание: к концепции виртуального человека. *Влияние Интернета на сознание и структуру знания*. Москва: ИФ РАН, 57–72.

<sup>2</sup> Cyber. *Dictionary.com*. <<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/cyber>>. (2017, April, 17)

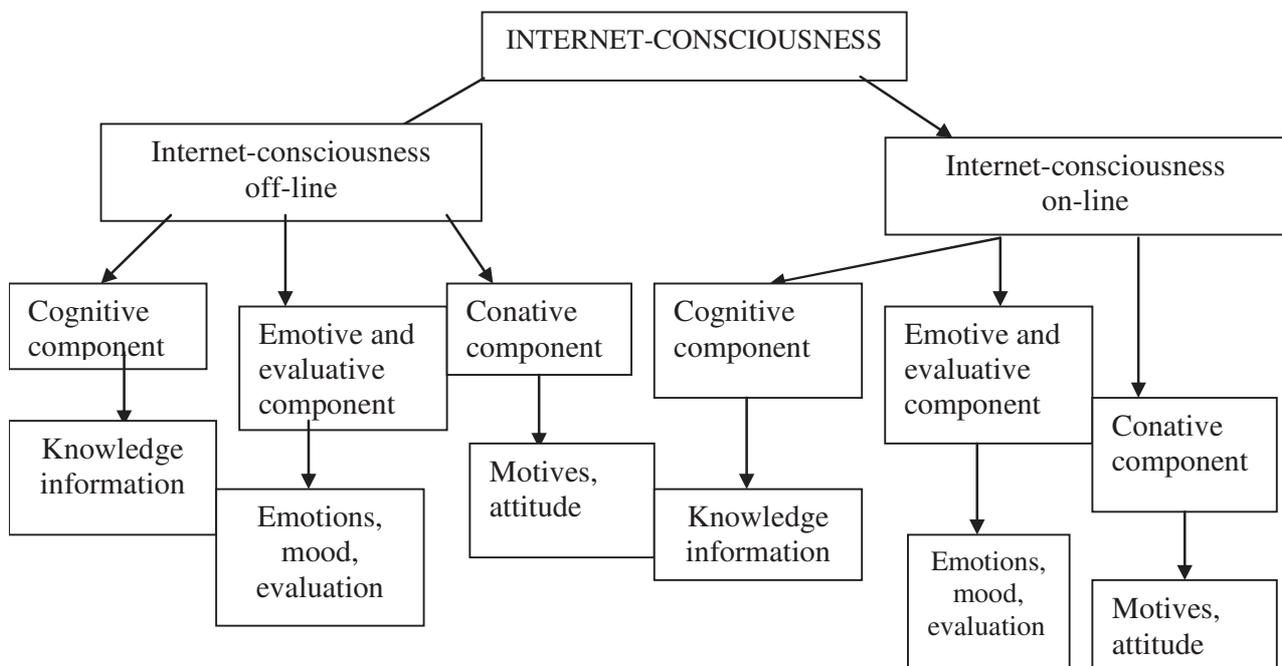
<sup>3</sup> Силаева, В. (2011). Об использовании понятия “виртуальный”. *Социологические исследования*, 2, 19–25.

These three approaches are accurately summarized in D. Deutsch's conclusion which is formulated in the following way: "this term refers to any artificially created situations, phenomena which evoke the feeling of being present in a certain environment ..."<sup>1</sup>.

The above mentioned arguments show that both terms have considerable drawbacks if they are to be used for denoting *the Network user's* consciousness. If the term "virtual consciousness", basing on the virtual reality (though the Internet is not the only possible virtual reality) as an object of a consciousness subjective reflection, emphasises "unrealness" (secondariness, ephemerality) of the object, the concept of "cyber consciousness", on the other hand, places the stress on computers, IT which may not include the Internet. Therefore to emphasize the Network as a special space which simultaneously is an agent of the interaction and the environment for other agents' interaction; and to identify its (the Network's) specificity in the context of an individual's consciousness, we suggest introducing the concept "Internet-consciousness".

Sociology includes many approaches to the organization of the scientific thinking (phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, conflictological paradigm, structural functionalism, etc.). We will conduct sociological conceptualisation of Internet-consciousness in the latter's framework.

The scientific discourse of modern sociology (and not only) traditionally includes different types of consciousness: political, economic, legal, ecological, etc. Each type has its own structure: knowledge, evaluation, motives<sup>2</sup>. They are based on corresponding spheres of social life. One of the relatively new spheres of modern person's activity is the Network, thus Internet-consciousness reflects conscious cognitive activity of the Network user. However, the Internet by its nature does not resemble any other direction of the society's life activities. "An ordinary" social consciousness reflects an agent's activity, accidental social connections and interactions as well as stable tendencies in this or that sphere of social life but Internet-consciousness shows an agent's perception of the Network's special reality while staying in it (on-line) and formulates knowledge, evaluation, attitude towards the Internet when an agent does not actually stay in it (off-line). Therefore we consider it reasonable to single out two main types of Internet-consciousness: on-line and off-line. The first type includes user's opinions, concepts and mindset about the Network; the second type contains knowledge, evaluation, emotions and motives of an agent who actually stays in the Network. The above mentioned typology also influences the structure of Internet-consciousness depicted in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1. The Structure of Internet Consciousness**

<sup>1</sup> Дойч, Д. (2011). *Структура реальности*. Москва: РХД, 102.

<sup>2</sup> Тощенко, Ж. (2009). *Тезаурус социологии. Тематический словарь-справочник*. Москва: ЮНИТИ.

I – cognitive component: users' awareness and knowledge of the Network off-line (general information about the Internet, knowledge of its infrastructure); on-line (interaction norms during the use of the Internet, knowledge about the use of the Internet, for instance, available attachments).

II – emotive and evaluative component: user's emotions off-line (when there is no access to the Network, the evaluation of the Internet as the whole (for instance, its importance for a user); on-line (emotions directly connected with the use of the Network).

III – conative component: motives off-line (the Internet as a motive for certain actions off-line (for instance, availability of the Network access as a motive for the choice of a holiday destination, user's mindset regarding the provision of a high-quality Internet); on-line (motives for staying in the Network, disposition to actions on the Internet).

As it can be noticed, the analysis of the above-mentioned structure allows us to single out two main types of Internet-consciousness and at the same time the components of its structure on the whole as a phenomenon overlap to a certain extent, although their content differs. It should be emphasised that both types of Internet-consciousness simultaneously represent a conscious component of the Network user's personality. If agents use the Internet (go on-line), they must at least arrange the access (know where and how they can find the Network, see about the subscription charge, etc.).

It should be noted that user's Internet-consciousness contains a certain individual proportion of rational (abstract and logical synthesis of an agent's previous experience) and emotional (direct reaction to an instantaneous stimulus) components. Consciousness is not a mechanical sum of viewpoints, ideas but the system of interconnected elements, a new specific phenomenon which objectively reflect perception and interpretation of an agent's life activities (micro level), and show strong tendencies, dynamics of social local and global consciousness (meso-, macro- and mega levels) in the Internet context.

Another important aspect of Internet consciousness research is the understanding of not only the phenomenon's structure but also its nature. At present there exist two main directions of researching consciousness. The first direction is dialectic and materialistic, the supporters of which view it as a reflection of reality in its ideal form<sup>1</sup>. This approach with some additions is quite widespread in the sociological circles of former Soviet countries. The second direction is subjective and activist, stemming from psychology, the supporters of which claim that consciousness is produced by agents (persons) and it is a reflection of their inner state that allows them to find bearings in outer actions<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the major contradiction between them (approaches) consists in what is considered primary and what is secondary: according to the first approach, the reality gives rise to consciousness, but it is vice versa in the second approach. Correspondingly, the subjective and activist approach emphasises an agent's creative role. Although we consider it proper to combine some aspect of both approaches: since their birth individuals get into a social environment which influences the formation of their viewpoints, values, motives and mindset. However, it does not mean that agents reflect an existing reality only passively. They perceive the environment, receive certain experience, reflect on it and as a result change on a cognitive as well as a behavioral level. Their own actions also influence the reality and, by interacting with other agents, change it. Although it should be kept in mind that sociology is primarily interested in an individual's typical features (on a micro level) which influence the formation of social consciousness on meso-, macro- and mega levels.

**Conclusions.** The term "Internet-consciousness" was introduced to define the Internet user's consciousness. As a result of the analysis, the conceptual model of researching a given phenomenon was developed which included elaboration of a corresponding conceptual and categorical framework. In particular, Internet-consciousness on a micro level of the analysis is a reflected depiction of on- and off-line reality (the latter refers to the Network) which induces a certain user to take some actions; on meso-, macro- and mega levels it is a type of group and social consciousness which constitutes the system of interrelated elements that convey knowledge, evaluation, ideas about the Network of certain social groups (depending on the agent of research) and is a driving force of actions on the Internet by shaping motives and mindset for particular behavioral models which allows to trace some tendencies in this sphere. The suggested definition is a combination of structural functionalism (cognitive, emotive and evaluative, conative components) and philosophy (subjective reflection of reality/existence). The two main types

<sup>1</sup> Бурдина, А.И. (1979). *Общественное сознание как проблема диалектического и исторического материализма*. Москва : Высшая школа.

<sup>2</sup> Рубинштейн, С.Л. О сознании. *Учебные статьи по психологии*. <[http://www.psyarticles.ru/view\\_post.php?id](http://www.psyarticles.ru/view_post.php?id)> (2017, April, 24).

of Internet-consciousness were singled out: on-line and off-line. Moreover, the adaptation of Zh. Toshchenko's idea about the three levels of consciousness served the basis for determining their structure (cognitive: information about the Internet, knowledge of its infrastructure; emotive and evaluative: emotions directly connected with going on the Network or lack of its access; and conative: motives for going on the Network, the Internet as a motive for a person's actions off-line, mindset for actions in the Network).

The article substantiates the statement that two distinguished types of Internet-consciousness are fulfilled simultaneously by the Network users which allows them to act in a certain way.

The idea was put forward about the differences in defining Internet-consciousness depending on the subject of the analysis: micro level concerns a reflected description of reality in the Network context; this reality can be changed by an agent. The system of viewpoints, motives and mindset regarding the indicated sphere of social life is formed on the higher levels of the analysis.

There was introduced the thesis that the Internet is simultaneously the environment, in which users do certain practices, and the motive for social actions off-line. Therefore Internet-consciousness and Internet-practices are closely connected. The idea was singled out that Internet-consciousness in a certain proportion combines abstract and logical as well as emotive components.

Internet-consciousness is not the term which was introduced only to describe a cognitive world of the Network user, but also a relatively undeveloped topic in sociology that needs further research.

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