The Forms of Expression of Society Virtualization as a Post-Historical Phenomenon (Ukrainian Aspect)

Vira OKOROKOVA¹

¹ South Ukrainian National Pedagogical
University named after K. D. Ushynsky,
Odesa, Ukraine, veraok888@ukr.net

Abstract: The article aims to study of one of the relevant issues in the field of the contemporary post-history, namely, the virtualization of society. The latter is considered as a result of the postmodern worldview and the simulative nature of knowledge about social reality. The subject of the research involves the forms of virtual culture reflected in today's Ukrainian society. Given the specifics of the identified issue, the author of the article draws attention to the specific methodological apparatus of the research. The narrative background of the research, as well as the principle of historicism, allows one to consider virtualization as a process of modelling social reality using computer technologies, whose image or prototype is a historical reality. It is important to note that the virtualization of society has a historical conditionality, which makes it possible to consider it as the next stage of the historical and cultural development of society. At the same time, the modern type of culture is a virtual culture, whose main creator and consumer is human. Its main feature is a pronounced innovative character. The main forms of Ukrainian society virtualization are focused on virtual communities and virtual states. Importantly, each of them mimics the social reality, whose prototype is an image characterizing the cultural identity of society.

Keywords: *virtualization, virtual reality, virtual community, virtual state, information society, micronation.*

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1. Introduction

The symbolic forms of cognition and reproduction of social reality in contemporary culture, which are not tied to the material-physical aspect, manage to express the postmodernist tendency of the world perception/construction. Consequently, simulacra, acting as images of a new reality (media culture), become a means of cognition of the environment, form a simulation consciousness or the so-called “clip thinking”. The illusory nature of the virtual world as a counterweight to social reality is fully consistent with the principles of the postmodernist paradigm. It promotes the absence of stable principles of cognition, somewhat blurred boundaries between the object and the subject of knowledge, as well as the historical relativity and non-linearity of time. Hence, modern science is focused on the spread of the prefix “post” (post-science, post-history, post-ontology). In such conditions, the phenomenon of virtual reality becomes the cornerstone of post-science since it contains those characteristics that are important for the postmodern culture.

The urgency of this issue is further enhanced by the fact that the virtualization of contemporary culture is increasingly becoming irreversible. In this case, it is enough to pay attention to the spread and implementation of information technologies in human life and society as a whole and also at the every-day and legislative levels (as a priority for modern countries). Therefore, this article deals with the study of virtualization in the modern Ukrainian social environment.

One should single out the following main legislative projects aimed at supporting and regulating the development of the information society in Ukraine”: “On the Basic Principles of Information Society Development in Ukraine for 2007-2015” (now, it has lost its temporal and significant relevance) (*Pro osnovni zasady rozvytku informatsiinoho suspilstva*, 2007), the order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “On Approval of the Information Society Development Strategy in Ukraine” (*Pro skhvalennia Stratehii rozvytku*, 2013), “On Approval of the Concept of the Development of the Digital Economy and Society in Ukraine for 2018-2020 and Approval of the Action Plan for Its Implementation” (*Pro skhvalennia Kontseptsii rozvytku*, 2018), the Draft Law of Ukraine “On Cloud Technologies” (*Proekt Zakonu Ukrainy “Pro khbarni tekhnologii”*, 2019). The presence of the new Verkhovna Rada Committee on Informatization and Communications, as well as the numerous expert and public associations and the existing world experience of “digitalization”, allows one to talk about the possibility of developing a

comprehensive regulatory approach to “digitalization”, that is “The Digital Code of Ukraine” (HiTECH Office, 2016).

The main studies aimed at considering the virtualization of the Ukrainian socio-cultural reality include the works of the following scholars: Hurkovskyi (2010), Gerasymova (2019), Onishchuk (2020), Ozhevan & Dubov (2017), Maksymchuk (2020), Melnyk (2019), Nerubasska (2020), Korytnikova (2007), Potereiko (2016), Pozhuiev (2009), Sheremet (2019), Shtanko (2017), Volynets (2019). They draw attention to the importance of this phenomenon in the Ukrainian social environment as a transitional one aimed at creating a virtual society. Considering the areas of the influence of Internet technologies on the political life of society, Korytnikova (2007) notes the widespread use of such concepts as “cyber-democracy”, “virtual democracy”, “e-government” (p. 141). In the context of culturology, Volynets (2019) defines the virtualization of culture as a new process, which creates new virtual phenomena of modern culture uniting users, consumers and developers in one information and communication space where all participants interact not tied to time and space, limited to technical means of access, though (p. 10). In their work “Homo ex Machina”, Ozhevan & Dubov (2017) state that the information technology industry, along with the agricultural sector, is strategically important to Ukraine since it plays the role of a locomotive promoting the transition of the economy to another stage (p. 201). The authors add that the Ukrainian IT market, in terms of technology exports, has the potential to become the fifth market in the world and the third in Europe.

Despite the above-mentioned aspects and the analysis of the historiographical foundation of the research (legal and scientific), the expression of virtualization in the Ukrainian socio-cultural reality has not been properly researched. This can be explained by the fact that the virtualization of society as a phenomenon is a complex transformational process aimed at creating a new model of social relations. It, in turn, requires the use of a certain sector of scientific interdisciplinary research methods (historical, sociological, philosophical). Besides, the presence of still unresolved aspects of this very issue (defining a virtual society and a virtual person; virtualization in general) creates the potential for further research.

Therefore, the article aims to study the forms of expression of society virtualization as a postmodern phenomenon on the example of the Ukrainian socio-historical reality. The objectives of the research include are as follows: 1) to reveal the post-historical principles of the virtualization of contemporary society; 2) to identify the level of information and communication participation of the Ukrainian population in the Internet

space based on relevant sociological data; 3) to analyze the forms of society virtualization on the example of virtual communities and virtual states.

2. The Post-Historical Conditionality of Society Virtualization and Its Indicators in Ukrainian Society

Before analyzing the forms of virtualization expression in Ukrainian society, it is essential to determine its historical conditionality. The point is that the rapid development of computer technologies and their implementation in the field of social communications have shown the effectiveness of their use in everyday life. Computer games have played a significant role here since they allow one to build a world different from reality with many possibilities, which cannot be realized in social reality. The main element of Internet networks contributing to their active spread was the lack of need for geographical localization. Without leaving home, one can participate in online organizations. The main attention is paid to common interests, ideology, directions. Social networks have become a kind of platform for expressing opinions about some event and discussing them.

As Kyrychenko notes in this regard (2017, p. 262), information culture is developed in the context of cultural development of civilization and represents the highest stage of its development. Thus, it can be explained as a socio-historical and ontological-evolutionary experience of civilization. It is not surprising, given that virtual reality is the essential result of human creativity and also a creative project to further improve life in all areas. Therefore, the increasing role of the network society was a kind of response to the further historical development of society in the postmodern era. Internet networks play a key role in the further evolution of society.

It is known that one of the ideologues of the information society theory is Spanish sociologist M. Castells (2000), who draws attention to the above-mentioned links. Namely, the scholar claims that the development of virtual communities can be understood as the culmination of the historical process of dividing location and communication in the creation of the community. Indeed, new electoral models of social relations replace the forms of interaction between people based on territorial ties. This is a very important point, as the scholar notes, since it is what he calls “communicative autonomy” (Castells, 2000, p. 141). People can communicate with each other, discuss, organize, make suggestions. It is rather vital since the Internet nowadays is equivalent to electricity in an industrial society, and everything works through social and computer networks (Alekseeva, 2013, p. 50).

Thus, one can conclude that the virtualization of society should be considered as a well-founded historical and cultural process. Although the elements of virtuality were rather hidden in previous historical epochs, virtualization has become an integral feature of the modern culture since the advent of computer technologies. Indeed, this is a new stage in the historical evolution of society from industrial to post-industrial, or informational, virtual. As for this perspective of Ukrainian society, the departure from the Soviet social system, as well as the focus on Western European culture, has only accelerated the intensification of joining the world social network (mainly the participation of active people) and the spread of information technologies.

Sociological indicators reveal the level of information culture in the social environment rather well. The indicators of Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), the data of the sociological company GFK-Ukraine and other sociological surveys are of great importance to the study of the basic principles of informatization and virtualization of Ukrainian society. According to GFK-Ukraine, Ukrainian Internet users, according to their estimates, began to spend significantly more time on social networks (*Using smartphones for online shopping*, 2018). According to KIIS, there was a slow growth of Internet users from 1% to 6% between 2002 and 2010. In the future, there are many more: further research by KIIS found that in September 2013, the share of Internet users reached 49.8% (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2012).

The fact that Ukraine has become a country where half of the adult population uses the Internet is evidenced by the results of a study by GFK Ukraine on online shopping. As of April 2018, the data indicate that 50% of Internet users across Ukraine aged 16 and older, who had experience in online shopping, searched for information about the product from smartphones, and 43% made orders using smartphone (*Using smartphones for online shopping*, 2018).

As for the statistics of social networks in Ukraine, the following indicators are revealed here. According to world statistics on the use of social networks in percentage terms in July 2018, the monopoly position was maintained by Facebook, which controls more than 60% of the social network market, about 6.5% belongs to Instagram. Competing services are Pinterest, Twitter (11% each), Tumblr (less than 1%) (2018). A similar situation is observed in Ukraine, where in 2018 the most popular social networks are Facebook 53.11% and Instagram 16.79%. YouTube is ranked third (9.1%), which keeps the positions unchanged both in time and on a territorial basis, ie everywhere and always. The fourth place belongs to a very

interesting social network called “Pinterest” (8.88%), which began to grow rapidly due to some innovations. Twitter also holds a fixed position (Yudin, 2018a; 2018b).

Since 2014, Ukrainian social networks have been experiencing a real boom. According to Martynenko (2018), several new networks appeared in the Ukrainian segment of the Internet literally in a few weeks in March-April, which, as developers noted, should be an alternative (pp. 23–24). The actual Ukrainian social networks that emerged between 2014 and 2017 include the following: UkrOpen, hurtom.com, ukrface.com.ua, <http://druzi.org.ua>, <http://vsitut.com/>, Ukraintsi, Ts.ukr (an analogue to Facebook), <http://www.uamodna.com/>, Yachudo, FamalyUA, SICH.UKR, CIMBOR, Ukrainians. Although some of them have ceased to exist today, such an abundance of social networks indicates the active participation of the Ukrainian population in the worldwide web.

Moreover, the rapid spread of the Internet has contributed to some transformations in various spheres of social life. In September-December 2017, KIIS conducted a survey on the working conditions of digital platform workers in Ukraine. It found that at least 3% of the Ukrainian workforce is involved in online work. At the same time, 18 % of Ukrainian office workers have already tried digital work and would like to switch to it altogether; one of the two sees this as an additional source of income. The results of the survey show that digital platforms have changed the way one works and changed the way work is viewed by both businesses and employees (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2008).

According to other data, the energy company DTEK, together with the startup Sensorama in 2019, has completely developed a virtual simulator of a thermal power plant, which will help to train employees under real conditions with the help of AR. Importantly, ARbrowser is the first platform in Ukraine to download 3D-models of various products in the AR-application. The service allows furniture stores, jewellery stores, consumer electronics sellers to show customers their products in their current size with the help of augmented reality (Tsentsura, 2019).

Thus, the above-mentioned results of sociological research contain valuable information since they indicate the existence of a new information / virtual culture in Ukrainian society. The latter has a great influence on people and society as a whole, creating a certain worldview aimed at identifying human life with the virtual world (for example, positioning with some virtual characters, events). In other words, a person as an active user of networks and consumer of information gradually delves into the new

virtual world built by him/her, losing the boundary between socio-historical reality and virtual reality.

3. The Forms of Expression of Society Virtualization in Ukrainian Culture

There is a virtual interaction, which opens a wide range of opportunities for the human realization of social needs, projects in general, thus activating the forms of expression of society virtualization. As for society, it is important to single out virtual communities and virtual states.

One of the forms of participation in cyberspace is virtual communities. According to some researchers, the virtual community is a social group of people who communicate and interact via the Internet through specialized services and sites on the WWW. They add that the virtual community is a set of social connections and relationships mediated by the Internet, whose purpose lies in establishing interpersonal communication between people and creating a network of friends to meet different social needs (Peleshchyshyn, & Huminskyi, 2012, p. 213). The main subject of interaction in virtual communities is a human user who has several profiles on social networks.

In this perspective, virtual communities should be seen as specific copies of the real social system, historical reality, which, unlike the latter, can multivariate the course of action (return to the original state, change participants, construct new rules of social behaviour and relevant institutional mechanisms of the virtual community). Unlike a real society, a virtual community communicates and coordinates with the help of network technologies.

Virtual communities in various forms are a necessary component of e-government systems, government control, distance education, as well as the creation of encyclopedic sources of information, e-business systems, e-media, cultural and ethnic centres in the network. The existing types of virtual communities focus on virtual communities based on web forums, which, unlike other types of communities, are characterized by openness, accessibility and informativeness (Okorokova, 2018).

Concerning virtual states, the question of the existence of such virtual societies is one of the priorities in the humanities. The main attention here is paid to the field of jurisprudence since their functioning does not have a clearly defined legal status. According to Shaposhnikov (2015), *de jure* they are an anarcho-commune, creative union, self-enthusiasm and historical and legal paradox, respectively (p. 33). This can be explained by the fact that the virtual state is the common name of self-proclaimed entities.

It can be located both in a certain territory and on the Internet, and, yet, it is not officially recognized by the country in which it was proclaimed or by the world community. Moreover, this network forms in its participants a certain identity and loyalty of “citizens”, having the capacity for motivation and attracting symbolic capital, for example, in the form of presentations for awards or the development of uniforms. On the other hand, it has the possibility of making exclusion under the laws of the virtual state, which are designed to preserve the viability of the virtual community (Khusiainov, 2019).

The main features of virtual states involve the following: virtual states – a phenomenon of the contemporary history (the 20th – 21st centuries); contemporary technologies, first of all, the Internet, are extremely important in the activity of virtual states; virtual states do not own a significant territory and do not attach much importance to it; virtual states are weak and “inferior” compared to real states, at least now (Shaposhnikov, 2015, p. 33).

In contemporary science, one can see the use of different variations of definitions identical to the virtual state, such as cyber state, digital state, micronation. The latter variation is the most significant one since, firstly, it allows one to talk about virtual states as a result of transformations of the geopolitical space of the world system, and secondly, it has a broader scope of such creations. Micronation determines the general name of any entity that declares its statehood. However, it is not a state since it only imitates their features. In this sense, virtual states are a kind of model of artificial states created in the Internet space.

The most famous micronations which in isolated cases still operate in the Ukrainian virtual space are the following: Irnaz (created by N. Gishchak in Ternopil region in 2017. It ceased to exist the same year); Andilonia (established in Western Ukraine in 2017); the Carpathian Union (established in 2017 as a regional union of four states: Andilonia, the Manticor Empire, the Kingdom of Ingretalia and the Kingdom of Sokovia); Ingretalia (established by D. Sokol in 2017); Sokovia (created in 2017).

It should be borne in mind here that these virtual states often do not correspond to any nation, do not have a national language. Moreover, they are built on the principles of “dual citizenship”. However, these Ukrainian virtual states openly declared the state status of the Ukrainian language, developed their coat of arms and flag. The “legal shell” of these virtual states includes the constitution, the law on citizenship, civil and criminal codes, a declaration that contains the relationship of the new virtual state to the documents defining the global legal space.

Conclusions

Thus, the conducted analysis allows one to draw the following conclusions. First, the virtualization of society has a historical conditionality since it is another link in the historical development of society. Virtual culture should be considered as a characteristic feature of the postmodern era, which has its roots, elements, and most importantly, relentless innovation potential. The subject of this culture is a person, namely, an actor (user), who combines both its creator and consumer. It is the active participation of a person on the Internet that is the driving force of further information transformation.

Secondly, as the above sociological indicators show, Ukrainian society today is deeply involved in the participation in international networks. This is not surprising since the audience of users is growing. Moreover, it is not just about communication but participation in other areas of communication (buying and selling, presentations, advertising, announcements).

Third, the involvement in this article as an example of expressing the virtualization of the society of virtual communities and micronations only underscores the previous points of conclusion. These are peculiar models of social relations, whose prototype is the real historical reality. In particular, these virtual states express some elements of Ukrainian culture (for example, language, some names emphasizing ethnicity). The presence of such aspects indicates a significant level of cultural identity in Ukrainian society, the creation and strengthening of the actual Ukrainian prototype images for virtual models.

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