SELF-ORGANIZATION AND ON-LINE EDUCATION: SOCIAL VALUES IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

***Yurii Mielkov**, Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Higher Education of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8186-0357, email: uka7777@gmail.com.*

Keywords: *social self-organization, virtual communities, social values, openness, online education*

Introduction

The on-going development of information technologies has radically changed the way humanity lives. Philosophical reflection has paid its attention to those phenomena for quite some time already, and almost twenty years ago investigators have noted that the Internet (or, should we rather say, the World Wide Web?) has to be considered not as a purely technological system, but as a socio-technological system that features self-organization (Fuchs, 2003). The recent dynamics of virtualization of more and more types of human private and professional activity, especially evident under the situation of Covid-19 pandemic, has led to the emergence of new forms of online communication and cooperation, especially in the field of education, – and to recognizing the importance of analyzing and reconstructing the values of emerging virtual communities. In my previous report at the "Days of Science" conference (Mielkov, 2021), I have already discussed some problems of self-organization in the sphere of online education. This short paper intends to develop the said topic further, particularly by stressing the axiological aspect of comprehending virtual communities.

Methodology

Philosophical comprehension, approaches and definitions of virtual communities and the ways to consider their values are presented in this short paper.

Results

In 2003 the already mentioned Christian Fuchs, who was one of the first authors to put up the question of self-organization of the Internet, had considered just emergence of new websites being a result of such a socio-technological system featuring self-organization (Fuchs, 2003). However, it could be argued that creation of websites is not actually a kind of self-organization, as they do not appear all by themselves, not even like mushrooms after a rain, but are consciously created by humans – programmers, web-designers and simple users. So it is quite natural that the focus of the researchers has gradually shifted towards different types of social communities that arise as a result of self-organization (see: Fuchs, 2006) – not of the Internet itself as some mysterious autonomous entity, but of humans engaged in communication with the help of the Internet technologies, although still not just because of the latter.

That nuance could lead us to another quite broad topic of discussion, that of the nature of the self-organization medium and the possibility for a machine to self-organize, up to the classical question of the possibility of a thinking machine and the Turing test. For the sake of brevity it would be appropriate to leave this question for another time – however it is worth noting that, on the one hand, the discourse on the development of the IT sphere in general and virtualization of social life in particular features certain misbalance by focusing more on technologies rather than on competences of humans who use those technologies – and one of the task for the philosophical reflection on the said topic is to overcame that misbalance. On the other hand, the phenomenon of virtual reality, virtualization and even virtual communities does not refer to the Internet realities only: the concept of *the virtual* has a rich philosophical history (Mielkov, 2008), and different kinds of 'imaginary communities', for example, are also virtual in their nature albeit having nothing to do with the information technologies.

The very term "virtual community" was coined in 1993 by Howard Rheingold, American critic, writer and sociologist, who was probably the first scholar to study the emerging forms of computer artificial reality as a whole and their social impacts. Rheingold defined virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 2000). That stress on forming some kind of

relationship becomes clearer in later investigations of the topic – thus, according to Jenny Preece (2000), virtual community is a group of people who are coming together online for some purpose and who are governed by norms. That is, virtual communities are grounded on both shared purposes and norms as well as on the Internet technologies.

The purposes and norms in question are what constitute the value background of social self-organization in virtual reality. I would also argue that those two axiological entities represents values of the two different types: the purposes are, so to say, "external values", while norms are "internal values". That is, the external purposes explicate those goals that the virtual online community was formed in order to achieve, and the internal norms are social values of lower order that intend to prescribe the way that virtual community should function (down to the 'netiquette' norms). That distinction, in my opinion, well corresponds to the duality of ethics – the distinction of autonomous morality that and heteronomic ethos (Mielkov, 2022). The main threat here is the possibility (or even probability) of the means taking place of the ends, that is – the case when values aimed at preserving the functioning of communities precede the values aimed at achieving the global goal those communities are to purse: the results of such sad substitution could be unfortunately seen in many traditional social organizations.

However, there also is a distinctive feature of online communities that differ them from traditional ones by both promoting their self-organization and allowing them to overcome the noted threat – and it is their *democratic openness*. No one is forced to become part of a virtual community – and no one is forced to remain there if its internal values are not suited for one's own purposes: «[W]ork teams must be not only self-governing but temporary» (Jarche, 2016). In his times, Howard Rheingold used to express some fears as for the censorship in the Internet and for consumerist and even political propaganda hindering the efforts of virtual communities in revitalizing democracy. Some of those fears, like the possible monopolization of the online sphere by commercial services, are now luckily out of line. But the censorship in the Internet that seemingly follows the newly fashionable notion of "informational security" is unfortunately still evident in our days, in the form of governmental decisions on restricting access to specific web-sites for citizens of certain countries: those measures surely contradict the openness of the Internet and are practically useless, being an example of archaic

administrative compulsory methods applied to a sphere of open self-organization.

Still, the combination of external organization and inner self-organization is in no way an unusual thing today even in the Internet. That's what we see if we turn more closely to a very specific type of virtual communities – those that are formed in the field of online education. Not many people form a community in order to study something together – but millions of people are engaged in different types of distance e-learning, ranged from school-based platform active in times of pandemic or a state of war to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The latter case is indeed the most interesting one, as the massiveness of MOOCs is well complemented with their openness that far exceeds that of other types of online education: "Seen from the learner's perspective, the openness is characterized by open choice of topic and learning resource, free access, the open and self-directed organization of learning activities and possible collaborations" (Roller-Wirnsberger et al., 2019, p. 991).

And that's why it is possible to make a conclusion that MOOCs present the most striking example of self-organization in virtual communities: they are open and free (well, mostly free, as some of them just charge for the optional certificates), almost exclude the threat of internal values taking part of external ones (as the goal of learning is being set quite straight) and still require a decisive lot of self-discipline and self-organization on the part of the students in order not to disengage. Of course, as noted by Herald Jarche: «Self-organization is a major challenge for people who constantly have been told what to learn at school and later what to do at work» (Jarche, 2016), – but we can indeed hope that under the on-going development and proliferation of online activities more and more people are learning not just what they are supposed to study in their virtual activities, but also the means to achieve those goals by self-organization in open and democratic communities.

References

Fuchs, Ch. (2003). *The Internet as a Self-Organizing Socio-Technological System*. Human Strategy in Complexity project papers.
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=458680.

Fuchs, Ch. (2006). The Self-Organization of Virtual Communities. *Journal of New Communications Research, 1(1)*, 29–68.

Jarche, H. (2016). *Self-organization is the future.* https://jarche.com/2016/05/self-organization-is-the-future/.

Mielkov, Yu. (2008). Virtual Reality as a Phenomenon of Culture. *Theoretical Virtualistics.* Moscow: Nauka. P. 110–139 (In Russian).

Mielkov, Yu. (2021) Democratization of the Higher Education System: Open Science and Self-Organization Online. *«The Days of Science of the Faculty of Philosophy – 2021», International Scientific Conference : Abstracts.* Kyiv: Publishing center «Kyiv University». P. 465–467. http://dsphd2021.knu.ua/DN_2021_preprint_02.pdf.

Mielkov, Yu. (2022). The Duality of Ethics and the Value Dimensions of the Contemporary Open Science. *Матеріали Міжнародного круглого столу «Казимир Твардовський і сучасна етика» 11 лютого 2022 року, Львів.* Львів: [б. в.]. С. 5–10.

Preece, J. (2000). *Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability.* Chichester, UK etc.: John Wiley and Sons.

Rheingold, H. (2000). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press. DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/7105.001.0001.

Roller-Wirnsberger, R., Zitta, S., Herzog, C. et al. (2019). Massive open online courses (MOOCs) for long-distance education in geriatric medicine across Europe. *European Geriatric Medicine*, *10*, 989–994. DOI:10.1007/s41999-019-00252-7.