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Grasping the virtual:

(geo)politics, economics and privacy in a digital era

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{ The Glass Man identity created by normative virtuality

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This paper examines the communication problem with creating online identity and saving private space in the era of data turn when every step and click is recorded and stored in databases. This article aims to present a new concept of human identification – the Glass man identity. The problem arises in the field of virtual communication when users have to be visible for the Other, i.e. a machine, and when everybody can be described in terms of database content and algorithms. The Glass man identity highlights the impact of social norms on the transformation from the cultural vision of self-representation in virtual space to surveillance culture. This concept is presented in the historical perspective on the Russian case of the normative use of language and phenomena of power as abilities to re-establish norms including moral ones. This study attempts to reveal the current trend of the ongoing changes both in human identity and ethics in the era of data turn. Glass man identity means a new type of human, a new type of balance between control and power. Glass man means a person who does not need to hide anything. Nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of – this is a new mode of communication and power. When Big Brother isn't just a metaphor anymore.

The case of Glass man identity means transparency by default. A tightening control over virtual space is accompanied by the steady growth of the number of Internet users

in Russia. The appearance of SORM-1, SORM-2, and SORM-3 (Lewis, 2014) has not affected the growth of the audience (SORM is an abbreviation for System for Operative Investigative Activities). It is possible that users perceive control as an access condition. They believe having access to the internet automatically means being controlled or monitored. Documents published by Wikileaks (Wikileaks, 2017) describe in detail the mechanisms for implementing this control.

It seems to me that it is not possible to use the two basic ways to control communication (namely restricted access and surveillance of access) at the same time. A choice needs to be made and it was made. In 2014, an idea to create Cheburashka, their own internal Russian network to reduce dependence on western technologies and influence, was presented. The project was not, however, implemented. This logic fits the understanding of the danger and vulnerability to external influence (Balashova, 2017). RosKomNadzor (a Unified Register of the domain names, website references and network addresses that allow state bodies to identify websites containing information which it is forbidden to circulate in the Russian Federation) is responsible for maintaining blacklists with forbidden sites.

Glass man identity signifies a new type of human being. It can be an ethical issue. For Jean-François Lyotard the critically important question was: "Who will know?" (Lyotard, 1984, 6). Now this question can be rephrased: Who will know tomorrow what you said (wrote, liked, commented...) yesterday? We need to remember, and we lost a right to forget. How to push such a "troubled identity" (Donskis, 2009) into a tiny national framework, especially in Russia, where, for example, it's hard to distinguish between Russian citizens (Rossijane) and the Russian ethnic majority?

Gianni Vattimo described this new condition of the post-modernity as the "transparent society" (Vattimo, 1992). It occurs when the decision-making process needs to be more transparent and it is possible to understand how the society itself functions. And human identity isn't fixed by default. Zygmunt Bauman proposed the concept of liquid modernity: "To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that

task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance" (Bauman, 2013, 31-32). And it is a challenge for everyone to create their own identity. However, transparent society will require transparent individuals, and this process will take place by re-establishing normative practice.

For the Russian case, it is the metaphor of the glass that has its own historical and literary context. I am referring to We, a dystopian novel by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1921), in which all houses are built of glass, and people are always exposed to control/monitoring. His text was the "first novel of warning that admonished humanity about where modernity would lead if no one stopped its totalitarian and totally emancipated version, with its system of complete surveillance, transparent glass buildings, the demise of the family and the end of the humanities in their world of human studies: all this issuing in a society governed like a technological project from which what early modernity knew as love and friendship had vanished" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, 195).

This article is about radical changes in the condition of access to the Internet in Russia and inevitable challenges in the role of its users. There is absolute transparency and a total lack of privacy in the era of a Big Brother that watches you, serving as a metaphor for global surveillance culture. Still, as Kammerer argues, "as important as Big Brother may be for an analysis of our contemporary culture, the difference between television entertainment and social reality must not be forgotten" (Kammerer, 2012, 104). The Big Brother concept has gone a long way from being a utopia in the glass to representing the politics of transparency (McQuire, 2013, 106-109). Big Brother invades a closed and limited private space, and a glass man in a glass-walled house is simply deprived of privacy by default. The Western model of Big Brother suggests a Panopticon, voyeurism, surveillance, and the like. This is where we find ourselves now, under surveillance that may seem benign enough but which nonetheless asserts a dark, controlling power over us, the watched (Preston, 2014). In other words, it can be a question of re-establishing of norms or just normativity.

Normative Virtuality

Nowadays, critical theory offers a wide range of explanations about how privacy has

become impossible. From my point of view, we need to pay attention to several specific practices of online media consumption. Glass man identity is created by the new normative practice, when a person needs to be online. Normative virtuality can be interpreted as the next step in the development of network sociality (Wittel, 2001) when part of the social life moved to the virtual space. As Wittel argues, the "concept of a network sociality: it is a sociality based on individualization and deeply embedded in technology; it is informational, ephemeral but intense, and it is characterized by an assimilation of work and play" (Wittel, 2001, 71). Also, it is about establishing new normative practices for being online.

The concept of normative virtuality has its own previous history from pre-internet times. Then, virtuality was practically synonymous with fantasy, fictional universe, or something not directly set in our reality, and this is part of the process of building the cultural identity. Roland Barthes, writing in his article entitled Language and Clothing (Barthes, 1959), made a reference to Principles of Phonology, a text by Nikolay Trubetzkoy (Trubetskoi, 1958) and underlined, that "Trubetzkoy suggests applying the Saussurian distinction between language and parole to clothing; like language, clothing would be an institutional system, abstract and defined by its functions, and from which the individual wearer would draw their apparel, each time actualizing a normative virtuality" (Barthes 2013, 25). Normative usage of language means the normative vision of social reality since we need a language to understand social space.

Jean Piaget in 1970 repeated the term "normative virtuality" in the introduction to the French version of Main research areas of social and human sciences: "It goes without saying that in so far as man is no longer conceived as given once and for all from an absolute beginning, all the problems concerning his activities arise in entirely new terms: instead of being able to refer to an initial status concerning (in the preformed or predetermined state) the set of normative virtualities that determine human nature…" (Piaget, 1970, 12).

We consume media content and produce our own symbolic representation to construct ourselves in the eyes of Others. In the 1980s Alan Toffler proposed a term "prosumer" (Toffler, 1981) and at the beginning of 21st century, Christian Fuchs (Fuchs, 2011) adopted

and conceptualized it to describe the condition of current virtual social networks. Now it's harder and harder to reject an invitation to be online as it is a new restriction from virtual normativity. The need to be in the Internet, to create a log and trace of your presence online and to be visible, is a new norm, which is required by normative virtuality. And at the same time, it does not require any moral choices as to which information to consume and which to reject.

Point of the Glass Man

I propose using the metaphor of Glass man to explain the condition of the current cultural identification process. In Russian this term came from medical terminology, where it means "Imperfect osteogenesis" when bones are weak and are not able to provide the needed level of support. The body lacks the stamina and resistance needed to function properly.

The rise of a new kind of human identity – the Glass man identity – will be seen, firstly by discussing the "eroding" changes (Opsahl, 2010) in private space and then, examining the concept of normative virtuality. In many cases we cannot say "no" to corporations, because we need to continue to use this service. Today web browsers are designed like credit cards. They make it easy to "swipe" the credit card for our time and take out a loan against our future selves (Harris, 2014). Even more, Tristian Harris proposes ten cases of "hijacking people's minds" while surfing in virtual space (Harris 2016). We have the ostensibly "free" choice to be presented online, but the corporations need to keep our attention for as long as possible. "Technology will not allow you to remain on the sidelines. 'I can' transmutes into 'I must'. I can, therefore I must. No dilemmas permitted. We live in a reality of possibilities, not one of dilemmas. This is something akin to the ethics of WikiLeaks, where there is no morality left. It is obligatory to spy and to leak, though it's unclear for what reason and to what end" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, 6-7). This phenomenon can be understood in ethical terms of moral blindness, when "nobody has a monopoly on truth in politics, and the same applies to virtue and ethics in general" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, 76).

Glass man is a person without the need to hide anything. Nothing to hide, nothing to shame – it's a new mode of communication, without taboos and ethical limits in topics of

conversation.

But Glass man identity means transparency not for a person but for a corporation which acts into the mediated public space. We are able to hide something about ourselves from other users, but not from service owners. We need a medium to be presented in this new virtual public space or inside the "culture of connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013).

Glass man means a life without the backbone of hidden past, in sense of "skeletons in the closet". We cannot be flexible anymore because we are like glass: coded and fixed in a hard form. Our history is the history of tracking our external skeleton. And we cannot change or modify it. We have no total control over the representation of ourselves any more. The psychological mechanism of deleting "bad" uncomfortable memories, when we were able to forget them, does not work anymore now. After the data turn, we are not able to forget any facts in our life. Blockchain technologies take control of our memory of our own past and impact ethical issues. The metadata and algorithms of our online behavior tell about us more than about ourselves than we personally know. And according to algorithmic identity, "cybernetic categorization provides an elastic relationship to power, one that uses the capacity of suggestion to softly persuade users towards models of normalized behavior and identity through the constant redefinition of categories of identity" (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, 177). Metadata defines who we are.

User verification has become the norm in professional environments, and now this rule applies to all users in general. Everything can be verified in a couple of clicks; the past cannot be changed or reinvented. In Russia (and worldwide) users of telecommunication technologies can be transparent for providers accumulating metadata and contents. This refers not only to the Internet but mobile communication and public Wi-Fi, too. A Foucauldian Panopticon occurs when we are visible and controlled by disciplinary practices. The Glass man identity is based on the lack of dilution – there is no trust anymore.

The focus of the text is not on an individual level, since everybody faces the problem of identification. And it is not about a group or collective identity. It is about how a

corporation looks at us, how a corporation sees a human. There is a steady trend of growth of internet users in Russia. In this case, user's communication activities after July 2018 (when new restriction according to Yarovaya-Ozerov Law will be adopted) will be completely different in comparison with users ten years ago in the sense of understanding privacy and anonymity values. Maybe this shift will be the starting point of creation of Glass man identity? Now we can only try to anticipate the scale of the changes. However, judging by the Draft of the Order with the description of the strict requirements for the equipment and transmitted data in Internet (Regulation.gov.ru, 2017) submitted for public discussion, they will be significant. Together with the resumed user names, IP-addresses, and email, they will accumulate data on the languages the user owns, passport data, and even the list of the user's relatives.

It is possible to argue that the old technical ways to guarantee anonymity on the network: TOR, VPN, ssh-tunnels, proxy, and the like are still there. But in June 2017, the State Duma of Russia began to discuss a draft law that would oblige the owners of anonymizers, VPN, and other services to block access to prohibited sites, and the owners of search engines to remove links to prohibited sites. If this law is adopted, Russian users may be banned from being anonymous when surfing online. Advanced users will still resist turning into a glass man, but most users will not notice the transformation. In other words, it is as if residents of a glass house were forbidden to use curtains. New media, Big Data, and the like turn us into transparent "creatures" for the view of the Other. The Other isn't meant to be a real human being as usual. It is a corporate machine-based approach to supervise human activities. How can we change our ideas about what is ethical, and what is not in such a situation? Who can perform the function of an external conscience (moral measure) for an individual? What will be the morality of the new glass man, which cannot have included any secrets? Or can it be outsourced like any other hard task? All those quantitative benchmarks from different methods of calculation of users and their online activity didn't capture the current transformation in the human identification process. We are identified with our history of purchase or consumption. And there are cases when this consumer logic can be interesting not only for the corporation but for the state as well. We can mention a Chinese experiment that looked at the creation and implementation of a system of social credit or social trust. This system would, "with the help of artificial

intelligence technologies and Big Data, [...] analyse data of every official such as party attendance, education, marital status. The system will compare data on the incomes of the official and members of their family with data on purchased real estate and luxury goods. [It will make such calculations] based on these data, as well as information on the trustworthiness [of the official]" (Kovachich 2017). In a society in which ethical boundaries are constantly blurred, individual identity is disintegrated. No trust, no moral doubt. Only records in databases make sense and bring profit.

Conclusion

Users accept new terms of services because they need to be online. Today in Russia (and beyond), normative virtuality means a need to be online and the impossibility of not being there. "Tracks" of normative virtuality have to be collected in databases. And we see the birth of a new type of human identity worldwide and among Russian Internet users – such a Glass man is as transparent as glass, hard, but simultaneously fragile. He is not ashamed and/or has nothing to hide. And it is not our own decision; sometimes it may be the law. One of the possible reasons for this is the lack of ability for users to monitor their own data. Electronic traces of our activities do not belong to us but are a commodity (object of purchase and sale) for marketers and data brokers. The identity of Internet users will be lost, as will privacy as a characteristic by default when all information about users will be stored in databases. There will be absolute transparency and total lack of privacy. If the Big Brother invades a closed and limited private space, then the Glass man will simply be deprived of privacy by default. And at the same time, the ethical question can be outsourced. Prosumers will be able just to click 'like' or 'dislike' without moral troubles. We know that they know what we know.

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