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**DIGITAL ESCAPE OR ESCAPE FROM THE DIGITAL**

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**Abstract**

The article presents an analysis of the transformations of the social role of digital communications in the context of their connection with the phenomenon of escapism. In this case, escapism is understood not as an exclusively negative psychic phenomenon, but as an inherent need of a person to search for novelty. It is shown that interaction with the virtual space of the Internet has long been regarded as the cause of escapism, since the Internet provided the opportunity for psychological “escape: into a fictional world, the possibility of anonymity, avoiding responsibility, constructing alternative identities. The article demonstrates that the more accessible digital communications become, the more the virtual and real spheres of human activity intertwine and become inseparable from each other. It is shown that this circumstance leads to the loss of the attractiveness of the Internet for escapism, since escapism is associated with the search for novelty, with the search for distraction from everyday life. Thus, it is demonstrated that the escapist appeal of the Internet and other digital communications was not associated with their specific nature, but with their novelty for human experience. When such novelty is lost, the Internet also becomes the place from which a person seeks to escape. The reasons for escaping from digitalization lie not only in the routine of Internet communications, but also due to the fact that the Internet is causing information overloads in the human psyche, from which a person is trying to break free by escaping it.

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## **1. Introduction**

The problem of escapism has been discussed in psychology, philosophy, and other sciences about a human and society for more than half a century, although the roots of this problem go much deeper. The most widespread understanding of escapism sees it as a “flight reaction” - a person’s need to avoid everyday problems and flee to the world of illusions. Most often, escapism is seen as a negative phenomenon, as a person’s unwillingness to solve the problems and to escape them. Nevertheless, escapism can be understood as a much more complex phenomenon, reflecting the fundamental features of human nature, responsible for a person’s need to constantly go beyond the ordinary, imagine, supplement the world with new meanings (Trufanova, 2014). In the current situation, escapism is often discussed in connection with the penetration of new digital technologies into the life of a person, which are considered as contributing to the manifestations of escapism. However, with the development of information and digital technologies, their role in social life is changing, which lead to a decrease in their attractiveness for escapist activities.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The main problem is the need to reassess the social status of information and digital technologies, and to demonstrate that digital technologies are an instrument of escapism, but not its cause.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main questions posed in this study concern:

- 3.1.** The main characteristics of the digital environment which make it attractive for escapism.
- 3.2.** The reasons why during the development of digital communications this attractiveness is lost.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to show that the social role of digital technologies, when they became open for unprofessional access, initially came down to the sphere of leisure, but due to the growth of their accessibility and their penetration into all spheres of society, they become an integral part of present-day social life of, and instead “outlets” or “distractions” from everyday life digital technologies become daily routine, asking for an escape.

## **5. Research Methods**

General scientific research methods specific to the social sciences and humanities, first of all - analysis of texts devoted to the problems of information technologies and digital media, and content analysis of Internet communications were used. In particular, a comparative analysis of the content and style of messages in Internet communities and on Internet forums in the late 1990s and comments in modern social networks (Facebook, Instagram, VK, etc.) was carried out.

## 6. Findings

From the moment computers enter people's daily lives and become common household items like a refrigerator or a TV, they are called the cause of escapist behavior. There are complaints that children spend too much time playing computer games, which are not only addictive, but also cause a desire for cruelty and violence. Already at the onset of the Internet, in the mid-1990s, American psychiatrist A. Goldberg uses the term 'Internet addiction' (A. Goldberg spoke about the concept of Internet Addiction Disorder in one of his posts at the professional psychiatric online forum PsyCom.net), which, although it has not become a full-fledged term in the medical dictionary, is nevertheless used everywhere. Goldberg himself offered this term in jest, but many took it seriously and still continue to take it seriously. Goldberg, of course, could not have foreseen that very soon Internet access would become not a special event, but everyday life. If previously it was necessary to have a computer, a modem, a lot of patience in order to wait for the modem to connect to the network, etc., and the communication sessions themselves were relatively short, now a reasonably inexpensive smartphone with the same tariff allows a person to access the Internet with the click of a button from almost anywhere in the world and be online constantly.

As a result, a person is gradually replacing participation in real life with life in another dimension through social networks, messengers, computer games that require less intense mental and spiritual work and at the same time provide an opportunity for easy leisure with its bright colors. Under the influence of this modus of electronic culture, there is an increase in the non-authenticity of everyday life, a split of reality into two: virtual, which is vibrant and convenient, and real, everyday, which is not easy to adjust for oneself. (Kasavina, 2018, p. 133)

The discussion of the problem of escapism becomes more active when the daily life of a person enters a new reality - the media reality associated with the rapid development of the media (Evans, 2001), especially such audiovisual media as TV and cinema, which can create the effect of direct presence, observation of unfolding events. Further, the development of technology begins to provide interaction between a person and a virtual environment, i.e. a person is able not only to observe what is happening on the screen, but also to influence it. It concerns video games and popular polls in TV shows, and, finally, modern communication means, which even those people, who never imagined they would, need to master in the era of pandemic "self-isolation". For a long time, "virtual reality", with which a person interacted through a computer interface, was opposed to the "real world", but now - not least not least in connection with the advent of mobile communication means that are constantly with a person - virtual reality merges with the "real world", becomes an integral part of it, and the opposition of these two realities is removed. As Dobrinskaya (2018) notes, "the new opportunities that information and communication technologies offer to humans have virtually erased the border between the real world and cyberspace" (p. 64). At the same time, the sense of "control" of the virtual world also disappears - it becomes too complex and developed to completely depend on the will of the individual, and due to this it also loses its appeal.

What is the reason for the original escapist appeal of the Internet? In the initial period of its existence, the Internet was a space of anonymity and permissiveness. Early Internet users may recall the unusual

sensations they experienced when they first met in real life with online acquaintances, which previously were only lines on the computer screen for them. It was then that the slang verb “devirtualize” appears, which primarily meant the removal of a person’s anonymity disguise. Now, the level of anonymity on the Web is becoming much lower, and there are much more tools to “devirtualize” without a face-to-face meeting – it is enough to start a video session with any of the users. Even before the advent of the Internet, video and computer games were very popular, now, as they are becoming more complex, they create an increasingly attractive virtual space. However, the Internet creates fundamentally new conditions: if in a computer game a person initially interacted only with a digital interface, with a program, then with the advent of the Internet, other people are added to the interaction structure: digital space becomes a meeting place and a communication place. Nevertheless, the anonymity of such a communication attracted a large number of people, as well as the possibility of creating an imaginary personality, the possibility to be someone else, to pretend that your current worries stayed behind, and you temporarily lived some kind of someone else’s life - probably brighter, more intensive and careless than yours. Attractive was the fact that anonymity essentially allowed permissiveness, lack of responsibility for the words and deeds. Virtual flirting, virtual “verbal duel”, a lie to your virtual interlocutor - you don’t need to answer for anything, flirting does not entail moral obligations related to “serious relationships”, courage is not required to express something unpleasant to your interlocutor on the Web - because you are not afraid to get a slap in the face, and if you lie or tell the truth about yourself, it’s impossible to verify. Anonymity, according to the famous Russian researcher of Internet psychology Voiskunskii (2016), was the cause of all sorts of deviant behavior on the Internet (Voiskunskii, 2016).

It does not mean that such features of network interactions were used exclusively with malicious intentions, with the aim of insulting or deceiving with impunity: often the active Internet users were lonely, shy introverts; at the same time, for people with disabilities and sick people staying in their apartments Internet could provide a real salvation, compensating for the lack of live communication (presently, it performs the same function during the period of self-isolation for a much larger number of people). Moreover, often a special identity specifically configured for its use on the Web appeared:

as Voiskunskii and his colleagues describe, “among the most obvious characteristics of network identity is the ease of its modification, up to a complete replacement with something opposite in some sense, as well as infrequently encountered in everyday life phenomena of not just multiple, but alternative identity in the full sense of the word” (Voiskunskii et al., 2013, p.101).

Another feature of the “early” Internet was anarchy and spontaneous self-organization of users in various kinds of communities. Network interactions from the outside were minimally controlled, were deprived of restrictions and prohibitions. It was the time of “filibuster romance”, when illegal activities such as Internet piracy and hacking flourished on the Internet, simultaneously, however, various professional and creative communities were formed, interest groups, etc. Moreover, these communities often brought together previously unfamiliar people who did not plan to get acquainted in “real” life. According to Carr (2005), one of the researchers of modern information technologies, the early Internet was connected with hopes for existence in a certain transcendent, in this case, digital world, where a person

can finally be completely liberated, cast off physicality, becoming only a symbolic entity that a person constructs from scratch at will. Thus, an important attractive feature of Internet communications was the ability for many to be not-themselves, and therefore the opportunity to get away from everyday life, to dive into the “depths”, as the Russian science fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko figuratively described in 1990s in his famous science fiction trilogy *Labyrinth of Reflections*. This trilogy is an ode to the early Internet, its mystery and temptation, which the present-day user is unlikely to understand.

The Internet transformations were noted by researchers already in the early 2000s. The author of the first popular works on the Internet, O'Reilly (2005) notes that the development of the Internet is on the path to increasing the degree of interactivity and offers the concept of two stages of the development of the Internet - early (Web 1.0) and modern (Web 2.0). O'Reilly (2005) calls the widespread use of blogs and the increased number of interactions between users one of the main distinctions of Web 2.0. He suggests comparing the Internet with a kind of electronic brain, a collective mind, and the blogosphere with an internal voice that reflects the thinking of the entire Web. Another symbol of Web 2.0 is Wikipedia, in which any Internet user can create his/her own encyclopedic articles or edit the articles of others, thereby also contributing to the collective mind of the Web, and therefore to all humanity involved in the Web, the number of which continues to grow. Carr (2005), however, is skeptical of O'Reilly's praised collective mind, and believes that presently the Internet is a field of activity for amateurs. Wikipedia, for example, from his point of view, is a profanity and gives only superficial, not always accurate knowledge; moreover, it is often sloppy written. Carr (2005) calls for being on guard and not taking amateurs for a quality source of information. He argues that there is no need to deify the Internet, in fact, as Carr (2005) insists, the Internet is soulless – it's just a set of technologies that serve consumption.

Undoubtedly, the subdivision proposed by O'Reilly is already significantly outdated over the past fifteen years, but it has not lost its basic essence - indeed, changes on the Internet were largely associated with an increase in interactivity, but blogs were replaced by even more interactive forms - social networks and instant messengers. However, the main change is due to the fact that it is at the Web 2.0 stage that the Internet begins to be considered as the most effective advertising and trading platform, and in recent years, taking into account digitalization, Internet shopping has become the simplest operation that can be done at the click of a button. Thus, the Internet is becoming not just “another” area of human life; it is becoming an integral part of all spheres of society, an instrument of economics and politics. As Petrova states (2017b), “judging by the amount of time we spend working at a computer, surfing the Internet, in social networks or in the virtual space of computer games, the information environment is gradually becoming the main human environment” (p. 79).

Its role as a “space of escapism” and even as a “collective mind” goes by the wayside: using the term of M. Weber, the Internet is becoming “spell-unbound”. This process is not unusual - as psychologists Zhuravlev and Nestik (2016) say, any “technologies first act as “ toys ”, then they become a “ mirror ” for society itself, when the technical side of the product itself becomes habitual and fades into the background, and users' attention focuses on useful properties, moves from form to transmitted content” (p. 8). The Internet loses its charm of novelty, becomes mundane, and, becoming a part of public life, it loses its escapist appeal; moreover, it becomes the place from which a person seeks to escape. The Internet is not only a part of oppressive everyday life, but also one of the main sources of excess informational “noise”

that presently accompanies a human (Pronkina, 2020; Trufanova, 2019), and from which a person seeks, if not to get rid of at all, then at least to fence oneself off. Today the Internet space leaves few opportunities for trust; a person gets used to living in a situation of “post-truth” (Trufanova, 2018).

As Chistyakova (2016) argues, there appears a problem of obtaining objective, true knowledge, or the possibility of its “recognition” in an endless stream of media images, messages, meanings, symbols, simulacra ... The individual is forced to perceive simulacra, imitating copies, replace real social actions with virtual analogues or mistakenly perceive them as true without any understanding. (p. 95-96)

As a result, the information environment of a human needs a serious work in the field of information ecology in order to get rid of information pollution (Petrova, 2017a). But it is not so simple to solve this problem - it requires the consolidated efforts of society, whereas for an individual there is always the possibility of another way out - escape.

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that the Internet, although it creates new opportunities to meet escapist needs, is not a cause of escapism. Having become routine and mundane, it lost the attractiveness that was its earlier feature. Moreover, now involvement in Internet communication, on the contrary, rather serves to expand the social activity of a person, rather than avoiding it. So, now an escapist will be more likely a person who does not have accounts on social networks and minimizes online communications. Instead of “escaping” to the Internet, we are striving to “escape” from the Internet, to a world where online communications cannot reach us, where we are free from digital technologies, where we can simply turn off the smartphone.

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