

# Digital Determination and Manipulative Strategies\*

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**Abstract**—Acquiring knowledge in the digital world is connected with transformations in meanings, orientations and values of modern existence. This paper reveals the features of digital determination and related manipulative strategies. The article relies on contemporary research into the issue in the context of interdisciplinary research. “Digital optimists” and “digital pessimists” are discussed. The paper analyses such concepts as “network sociality”, “digital persona”, “data shadow”, “double updating”, “content viewers” and “borrowed knowledge”. The research also reveals specific features and hidden mechanisms of manipulation, which involves passing the external goal to a chosen subject. It is argued that manipulation contains intention which seeks practical implementation and forces certain orientations upon a subject.

**Keywords**—*digital determination; manipulative strategies; subjectivity; scientific narrative*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, social processes are heavily influenced by digital determination. That is the fact that has to be taken into consideration when discussing the issue of acquiring new knowledge. The new technological stage is characterized by “computerization” of life itself [1], when digital determination penetrates into people’s personal space. Thus, we can speak of a new digital world. Rapid development of digital technologies and massive implementation of intellectual systems bring significant changes to the pace of life, contemporary life practices and orientations. That is why developing digital skills becomes one of the main priorities. It is the younger generation that gets actively involved in Internet technologies. However, young people are quick to master innovative digital technologies but slow to acquire cultural heritage aimed at intellectual development. And since the Internet becomes an integral part of our lives, it starts to define all our life practices. At the same time, digital determination has a potential of unilateral manipulative influence. Sitting at his computer, a man turns into a “docile tool”. A visual message may induce both tolerance and oppositionism, and may be a source of labeling, selection of facts or generate antitheses. Idolatry may also be the aim of manipulation. Internet communication imposes certain feelings and decisions upon a person who is absorbed in virtual reality. Manipulation contains intention which seeks practical implementation and

forces certain orientations upon a subject. Manipulation is connected with shaping opinions and emotional outlook, imposing desires and moral priorities. Internet addiction has been recognized as one of the most powerful manipulative technologies and a 21st century evil. This article reveals characteristic features of digital determination and related hidden manipulative strategies. The paper relies on contemporary research into the issue and interdisciplinary approach.

## II. “DIGITAL OPTIMISTS” AND “DIGITAL PESSIMISTS”

Digital world penetrates all spheres of human existence, creating an “invisible layer of modernity” — the new “network sociality”. This digital environment offers an unparalleled visual experience and invites people into a World Wide Web dimension. Nowadays there are two schools of thought with regard to massive digitalization, namely “digital optimists” and “digital pessimists”. According to optimists, digitalization improves communication, enhances all kinds of interaction, and distributes online services. “Digital optimists” welcome a new style of consumer behavior, online financial transactions, online consultations, online entertainment, reading online, watching films online. Online learning platforms, online medical services and distance management is also welcome. R. Collins views social networks as a specific indicator of whether or not various innovations are accepted by the general public [2]. “Digital optimists” believe in the “availability effect” as a result of digitization of human culture. Contemporary scholars raise the question of interconnection between the social and the digital; social and humanitarian research tend to extend the scope to include information technologies [3]. Thus, “digital optimists” see no (or little) harm in manipulative strategies imposed by the Internet.

“Digital pessimists”, on the contrary, emphasize negative effects of digitalization and hidden manipulative strategies. They argue that digital determination gives rise to such phenomena as “content viewers” and “borrowed knowledge”, which might lead to significant cognitive distortions in psycho-mental sphere. The above-mentioned phenomena involve superficial level of perception, when received information does not contribute to personal knowledge and professional skills. According to contemporary scholars, “clip thinking” is aimed at perceiving separate “pieces” of reality [4], causal relationships get lost and the puzzle never comes together. The so-called “content viewers” with their

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peculiar rationality tend to randomly borrow information and visual images instead of semantic immersion. However, raw information data cannot be converted into valuable personal experience and knowledge [5].

It is worth mentioning that western scholars have adopted a critical view of the new digital generation arguing that young people are narrow-minded, they neither need nor want to discover the outer world, and they have poor reading and interpretation skills. Digital generation is straightforwardly called “the dumbest generation” [6]. The notion of a “digital native” is based upon the premise that digital technologies are changing human brain functions. Passive perception of information leads to cognitive distortions and can damage brain functions connected with intellectual development and emotional sphere [7]. Since online behavior differs radically from offline real-life behavior, “digital natives” appear to be socially immature.

In the digital world a person is offered ready-made information resources, and hence, most of the time a person just simulates reflection. However, online content does not automatically become a person's knowledge. And since online content does not equal a person's intellectual property, digital skills lead to a reverse effect. The “borrowed knowledge” effect is based on quick Internet search from any device, with no reflection on the content, which makes a digital content consumer a pseudo-intellectual. But intelligence is believed to be the main feature of Homo sapiens. It is creative thinking that enables people to identify regularities, systemic qualities and set long-term goals. It is creative thinking that turns communication between people into mutual understanding [8].

Content processing involves the whole range of a person's cognitive abilities: motility and sensory capabilities, on the one hand, and feelings, emotions and rational aspirations, on the other. Cognitive processes are also influenced by cultural norms, social ties and relations.

### III. DIGITAL ALIENATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF SUBJECTNESS

“Digital world” generates new socio-codes and creates new ontology that is an overwhelming force beyond human control, which turns a man into an effected object. The phenomenon of digital alienation is closely connected with the above mentioned processes. Ontologically, digital alienation is rooted in the fact that online interactions pretend to be self-sufficient existence, replacing genuine relationship, live communication and self-fulfillment. Digital alienation makes people disconnected from reality, makes their values and aspirations dependent on the digital world.

When discussing the problem of digital alienation, contemporary scholars focus on the process of exploitation of the “digital self” and one's digital footprint in online world. They emphasize that nowadays this powerful mechanism of dominating and even exploiting personality is mainly used for commercial purposes [9]. However, P. J. Rey comes to a different conclusion. The author argues that using a digital self for commercial purposes does not mean exploitation in the full sense of the term, since products of digital labor in

the Internet are not alienated (which is the main feature of exploitation in Marx's theory). Strictly speaking, Internet users produce digital content for communication rather than commercial purposes and their final aim is self-fulfillment in the digital world. Creation of this content is freely chosen and creative. Producers of digital content get compensation in other non-commercial forms. Moreover, Internet users retain access to the products of their digital labor and thus, can use it to generate social and cultural capital [10]. This means that creative energy of a person's self-fulfillment can be transferred to an online dimension and still remain the meaning of his existence.

We argue that it is “digital alienation” that gives rise to a “new type of subject”, which lacks rational basis for existence. This new form of subjectness is sometimes called *Homo Interneticus* meaning a creature that inhabits the living space of a new digital era. It is worth mentioning that taking part in global information and communicative interaction, this actor tends to remain anonymous and is content with a “user name”. Hence, we may speak of a specific super-individuality of the inhabitant of a digital world. Western scholars point out that the relations and transactions between human agents and those that exist between humans and their artifacts have important ontological similarities. According to J. Dewey, we are in a ‘transactional’ relationship with all of contemporary technologies within which we discover and construct our world. (Here it should be mentioned that Dewey had an expansive definition of technology which included not only common tools and machines but information systems such as logic, laws and even language.) That might mean that ethics and morality are computable problems and therefore it should be possible to create an information technology that can embody moral systems of thought [11]. Thus, the actor of a digital world will thoroughly rely on information technology in terms of moral values; there will be no need for sound reasoning, critical thinking, independent judgment and memorizing.

The new “self-sufficient” type of digital existence brings changes in motivational priorities. The number of followers and “likes” in social networks turns out to be the greatest value. Cultural practices become dramatically simplified: live face-to-face communication is substituted with smileys (emoticons) and message icons as a symbolic way to express feelings, personal relationships and self-reference. It has become common practice to expose one's private life online. And if a fact is not widely covered in the Internet, it does not exist. Given the priority of such values as “digital image” and “digital reputation”, the author's self-consciousness and the meaning of his intentions are called into question.

According to J. Svensson, the actor of a digital world has to be constantly updated in the double sense of the word – to be updated of the doings in the network as well as update the network of his doings, thoughts and feelings [12]. This double updating defines another important value orientation, namely the status in an online community. V. Miller proclaims content is not important any more, but keeping in touch is, further underlining connectivity and responsiveness as important values in the emerging “network logic” [13]. The urge to manage lists of friends and linkages to others

leads us to a shift from the narrative as a key form of cultural expression to the database as the prominent cultural form in digital late modernity. Databases are always in progress and thus the management of them can never be finalized [14]. Hence the emerging network logic disciplines us to build and maintain our networks: to codify, map and view relational ties between ourselves and others [15]. One's "self" becomes the entity that can be constructed and modified.

Contemporary scholars differentiate between two notions — "the digital persona" and "the data shadow". The digital persona is created by an individual for self-expression and communication. Digital persona includes the whole body of digital material created by an individual through acts of online communication: blogs, comments, product reviews, tweets and other social network postings, together with any other conscious communication by an individual within a digital context.

The term "data shadow" refers to the information generated by someone as a side-effect of their use of digital technology. Thus, the term "data shadow" refers to all digital information pertaining to an individual which they did not consciously and intentionally create for communicative purposes [9]. The combination of the two characterizes the actor of a digital world, revealing his interests.

#### IV. CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF MANIPULATIVE STRATEGIES

Network communication technologies raise a wide range of issues concerning a digital native's consciousness, mentality, body and soul. The effect of Internet technologies is frequently compared with brainwashing or even zombification. But it is manipulative strategies, which are inbuilt into a digital message, that are particularly disturbing. Generally speaking, manipulation means passing the external goal to a chosen subject and using hidden mechanisms of influence. When this happens, the recipient is experiencing a "gap" between comprehension and goal setting, which creates a specific space of unconscious incompetence. The "moderator" or newsmaker plays the leading role in this process.

Digital manipulation is based on influencing the audience by means of Internet-product with a powerful visual potential and has a perlocutionary effect. Besides, there is also "substitution effect" in this case, which involves underestimating or overestimating an event, its defamation or resignification. Defamation strategy involves allegation, devaluation, fraudulence and even abuse. Threatening is also commonplace. If creating a positive image is the aim of manipulation, the key strategies are defence and positive reinforcement. Glorification appears to be very effective. Involvement in the illusion is an integral part of manipulative strategies.

As we demonstrated before [16], manipulation, as viewed by a well-known methodologist G. Schedrovitsky [17], coexists with such types of communicative strategies as presentation and convention. Researchers distinguish between two main goals of manipulation, which are aimed at either motivating or preventing an action. The effect of

achieving this goal is provided by the means of specific tactics of manipulative communication. Six tactics of manipulative communication are the most widespread. 1. Persuasion, request ("I am asking you to do this, because ..."). 2. Retreat, regress ("I'll be crying unless you do this..."). 3. Coercion ("I demand ..."). 4. Flattery ("You are a wiz at that ..."). 5. Humiliation ("I will be kneeling unless you do this..."). 6. Silence (until the recipient makes a concession) [18] [19].

At present a powerful manipulative effect is attributed to the so-called "datafication", which means transformation of social action into online quantified data. "Datafication" is considered to be an effective means of manipulative influence. After being structured and interpreted, data is used to generate behavior patterns. At the same time, the object of manipulation should carry the illusion of making his choice since "facts speak for themselves". Contemporary scholars tend to speak of a specific "datafication" turn, which brings essential changes in theoretical basics of "the social" as a category [20].

According to M. Spitzer, understanding the mechanisms of memory, attention, learning and intellectual development helps us reveal all the dangers of digital media. In Germany, according to statistics, around 250000 young people aged 14 to 24 are Internet-dependent, while another 1.4 million people are considered dependence-prone Internet users. In the USA a representative survey involving more than 2000 young people aged 8 to 18 has shown that teenagers spend more time on digital media (7.5 hours daily!) than sleep. As a consequence, cases of cognitive deficits such as memory impairment, poor concentration and emotional deficit are becoming more frequent among both young and older people. The author emphasizes that the symptoms described above make it possible for doctors to define a new disease — digital dementia [21].

Thus, digital determination together with manipulative strategy as its integral part becomes an object of axiological reflection, accompanied by evaluative discourse. In this context the only way to build a psychological profile of our contemporary is to resort to interdisciplinary approach, which refers to neurosciences, social and humanitarian disciplines: axiology, linguistics, psychology, sociology, philosophy.

In our opinion, an effective discussion of digital determination and digital alienation can be ensured by an open scientific narrative that enables one to speak about the situation in plain language. The scientific narrative as a kind of "mapping science" is aimed at overcoming the "semantic trap" of a complex disciplinary language. It should be emphasized that the scientific narrative contributes to a clearly articulated understanding of the problem. Its advantages are due to "smart techniques" of conviction and expert decisions.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The main conclusions of the research are as follows. Digital determination calls for on-going development of personal digital skills. Younger generation tend to master

digital skills quicker than traditional cultural heritage. Digital alienation is due to the fact that online interactions pretend to be self-sufficient existence, which replace real life communication and genuine relationship.

Digital determination is based on manipulative strategies, which impose a certain outlook upon a person and give it a practical effect. Interdisciplinary approach to studying digital determination shows that integrating scientific achievements in the form of an open scientific narrative is the most effective way to reveal consequences of digital determination.

And finally, nowadays we witness the introduction of new terms and notions in scientific discourse around digital alienation. They are “digital persona”, “data shadow”, “double updating”, “datafication”. Expanding terminology illustrates the attempts to find appropriate intellectual instruments to conceptualize the phenomenon.

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