Integration of the Internet into social reality of contemporary Russian youth: current situation and potential consequences

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Abstract — The unusual speed of distribution of Internet in the life of Russian society made circumstances of growing up of contemporary young Russians very specific. Growing up in the conditions of rapid spread of Internet in the society, many of them are accustomed to perceiving the Internet as a natural and inalienable attribute of everyday reality. It is obvious that such a specific experience of growing could make their attitudes and behaviour specific. But the diagnosis of this specific requires a special sociological research. The author uses the materials of secondary data analysis and data of his own sociological research among Russian youth to identify the role of the Internet in social reality of young people and to clarify possible risks and opportunities that can be created by it. The empirical basis of the study is a questionnaire survey conducted by the authors in 2019 among the youth of the city of Yekaterinburg, Russia (N = 314, quota gender and age sample among the youth of 14-24 years old). The key conclusion of the paper is that the Internet is deeply integrated into social reality of contemporary Russian youth. The most of young people got used to spending a lot of time in the Internet and cannot imagine their life without it. The increasing importance of the Internet in their lives is a source of several risks, which include forming of Internet-addiction, rise of vulnerability of young people to the destructive content and forming of the communicative gap between representatives of different generations. But such importance of the Internet in social reality of young people also provides some opportunities. The Internet can be used for broadcasting of information for youth audience, for organizing of cooperation of young people, for popularization of positive practices and for other purposes.

Keywords — youth, Russian youth, Internet, «digital natives», Russian society

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of the Internet in social reality of contemporary young Russians has become one of the most popular vectors of current sociological researches. Probably, the remarkable interest of Russian sociology in this area appears because of the important analytical contradiction. On the one hand, it is obvious, that the importance of the Internet in the life of contemporary Russian youth is increasing: recent researches demonstrate, that majority of young Russians nowadays use the Internet regularly and spend for it at least several hours every day. But on the other hand, there are not many clear and detailed analytical models, which can describe possible changes, that might happen in attitudes and behaviour of young people because of the increasing role of the Internet in their life. Scientific intuition makes many sociologists think, that such changes are possible: the complexity of social functions of Internet allows to assume, that increasing of its role in the life of young people can stimulate transformations in their consciousness and behaviour. But what specific transformations can occur in consciousness and behaviour of young people under its influence? What risks are created by the increasing importance of the Internet in the life of contemporary Russian youth? And what opportunities it can provide for working with youth audience? This paper is devoted to the clarification of these complex questions. Using the materials of secondary data analysis and the data of our own sociological research, we will focus on the specific role of the Internet in life of contemporary young Russians in order to clarify its influence on their consciousness and behaviour and will try to identify possible consequences of this influence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

First, it is necessary to make an important clarification. Questions and discussions about the specifics of the Internet behaviour of Russian youth appear not because of the fact, that contemporary young Russians demonstrate unusual activity in using of the Internet. Recent researches of foreign scientists confirm, that there is nothing unique in this habit of Russian youth: young people in the USA and Europe also use the Internet very actively [3] and often tend to perceive it as the main source of information [26]. Moreover, some authors even mention specific cases of using the Internet for management of young people's attitudes and behaviour. For example, recent researches show, that the Internet and social media can be a very useful resource for civic education [10] and for popularization of healthy lifestyle among youth [6]. So, perhaps we can say, that there is nothing strange or unusual in fact, that Russian youth tends to use the Internet very actively.

The problem is that this specific Internet activity of youth is unusual for Russian society. The Internet has become an important part of social reality of Russia faster than it used to happen in the USA or Europe. A remarkable speed of its pervasion into the life of Russian society is mentioned both by Russian sociologists [25] and foreign researchers [12]. The statistical and sociological data confirm, that this process was extremely fast. In the early 2000s. the proportion of active Internet users in Russia was estimated only as 3-4% of the total population of the country [18]. This proportion remained stable during the whole period of 2000s and started to increase

only after 2009. The speed of growth of the number of Internet users was impressive. Already in 2012 [25, p. 174], more than half of Russians began to use the Internet regularly. Today, in 2018-2019, the percentage of active Internet users in Russia is estimated to be much higher: studies show that 84% of the country's population use it regularly [9], and at least 70% do it every day [21]. In fact, this means, that circumstances of growing up of contemporary Russian youth were significantly different from context of socialization of previous generations. Contemporary young Russians became the first generation of Russian youth, which grew up in the circumstances of intensive (and progressive) penetration of the Internet into various spheres of society.

In fact, we can describe contemporary young Russians as the first «digital natives» of Russian society. This concept was offered by sociologist M. Prensky for description of people, who grew up in the circumstances of total distribution of informational technologies in the life of society and became familiar in using of such technologies since the first years of their life. M. Prensky supposed, that attitudes and behaviour of «digital natives» can have a remarkable specific. The nature of this specific is related to the fact, that «digital natives» get used to the Internet as an important attribute of social reality since the first years of their life. «Digital natives» do not use the Internet only as a simple communication tool. It becomes one of the central elements of their life [13]. Even though there used to be some certain discussions about the validity and the accuracy of the concept of «digital natives» [19], it became popular in social science and was often mentioned in certain sociological researches [11]. And this concept is relevant for description of contemporary young Russians. Young people in the age under 24 years old used to grow up in a period, when information technologies were transforming into a very important part of life of Russian society. Unlike previous generations, they did not master such technologies at a conscious age. They got used to using such technologies since their childhood.

And it looks obvious, that discussions about the specifics of the Internet behaviour of Russian youth appear because contemporary young Russians became the first generation of «digital natives» in Russian society. These «digital natives» are a new phenomenon for social science, so it is quite difficult to find a clear explanation of their attitudes and behaviour without special diagnostics.

Now social science can only conclude that the Internet has a very important role in the life of these «digital natives». For example, it is possible to say, that they start to use the Internet very early. The data of special report «The child's Runet», which was prepared with support of the Ministry of Digital Development, Telecommunications and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, indicate, that Russian children and adolescents begin to use the Internet as early as 4-5 years old and by 8-11 years old, three-quarters of them have their own, personal device for this [22]. Besides, young Russians use the Internet more actively, than other generations. It was already mentioned above, that the average percentage of Internet users in Russia is about 80%. Among young people under 24, this percentage is as close as possible to 100% [15, p. 22]. Another important fact is that the Internet

helps many young people in solving of many of usual everyday tasks and problems: most of them use it for banking operations [2], for reading news in social media [4], for having fun [20] and for other purposes every day. So, it is obvious, that Internet has an important role in social reality of Russian youth. But what can we say about influence of the Internet on attitudes and behaviour of young people? Do we have a reason to believe, that such activity of young people in the Internet can stimulate changes in these attitudes and behaviour? The key problem is that we do not have a clear answer for this question.

Some Russian researchers believe that the intense presence of young people on the Internet does change their consciousness and behaviour and see this presence as a source of serious social risks. These researches mention certain kinds of risk: involvement in criminal communities [1], popularization of deviant behaviour [7], inclusion of extremist groups [14]. We agree that identifying and assessing such risks is an important scientific task. And even more than that – in our previous studies we ourselves dealt with relevant issues [17]. However, it is not clear how serious these risks are. Are there any special features in the consciousness and behaviour of the first Russian «digital natives» that give rise to these risks? And if these special features exist, are they only sources of risk? Perhaps they open up some managerial opportunities? It is difficult to answer these confusing questions without empirical analysis is difficult. So, in the next part of the paper we will focus on the empirical analysis of the problem.

III. RESEARCH MATERIALS AND METHODS

In 2019 we implemented a sociological research for clarification of mentioned questions. The research was carried out in the second half of 2019 in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The key aim of this research was to diagnose the current patterns of the Internet behavior of Russian youth and the factors, which can influence on them. The research was implemented in a form of questionnaire survey among young people.

The survey was conducted among young people in the age between 14 and 24 years. Representatives of this age group were chosen for research intentionally. In 2012, when the Internet began to receive mass distribution in Russia, representatives of this age group were from 8 to 18 years old. People in this age group represent the first generation of Russian «digital natives» more precisely, than any other.

The total number of respondents was 314. They were selected by simple quota-sampling, which was based on the criteria of age, gender and area of living. The model of quota-sampling was calculated was based on information on the sex and age structure of the population of Yekaterinburg at the beginning of 2018.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis allowed us to make several conclusions about the specifics of consciousness and behavior of young people.

First, the Internet is familiar for young Russians and it is perceived by them as an inalienable attribute of life. Most of

participants of the research describe themselves as active Internet users (96,5% of the respondents describe themselves in this way). Moreover, most of them do not like the idea of temporary losing access to the Internet. Such situation would not become a problem only for a few of them (31,0%) Al the others say, that it would be difficult for them to get through such situation. Probably, their answers to these questions can even be considered as an indirect symptom of the formation of Internet-addiction. But we believe that such an assessment is too premature. Addiction is a pathological and stable condition [5], and we need to have very strong arguments to prove its existence. So, we can't be sure, that this is an addiction. However, these answers show the intensive integration of the Internet into the social reality of young people. Even if they don't have Internet-addiction in the exact meaning of this term, they are used to using the Internet actively and constantly. So, it's difficult for many of them to imagine their life without being online.

The second important conclusion is that the Internet is integrated into the social reality of youth. Young people use the Internet very intensively and multifacetedly. The analysis has shown, that average time, which they spend in the Internet, exceeds 3 hours every day. The purpose of their stay on the Internet cannot be reduced to any one dominant foundation. In fact, they have many reasons to use it (see Fig 1). And the time they spend on different resources confirms, that they have many reasons for using of the Internet. At least 64,6% of them spend at least 3 hours a day on social networks. 43,2% of them spend the same time on educational and scientific sites. 31,2% of them spend 3 hours and more on gaming sites very day. In fact, the survey data show that the Internet is not just a resource for working with information for young people. It looks more like a basis for their social reality: it provides them opportunities for solving practical problems, entertainment, communication and for other needs and tasks.
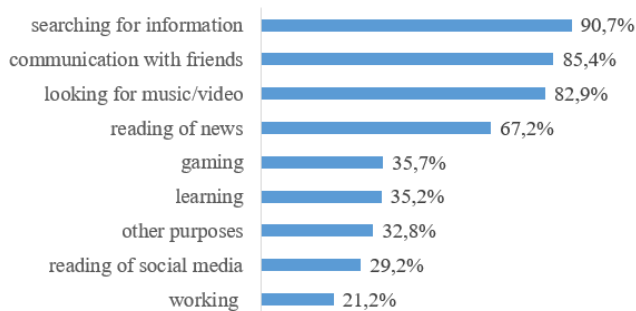

Fig. 1. Purposes for which respondents use the Internet (multiple answers)

The third trend that was identified during the research is that most of young people are opened for creation of new social interactions and cooperation in the Internet. The most of them do not see any problems in active communication with many people in the Internet. They are ready for communication with new people. Only 25,7% of respondents completely exclude the possibility of communicating with strangers in the Internet. As can be seen at Fig. 2, the rest of the respondents called different conditions for beginning of

communication with strangers. But they still do not exclude the possibility of this communication. In fact, this information shows, that the Internet for most of them is not only the tool for maintaining existing social contacts, but also a basis for the formation of new contacts.
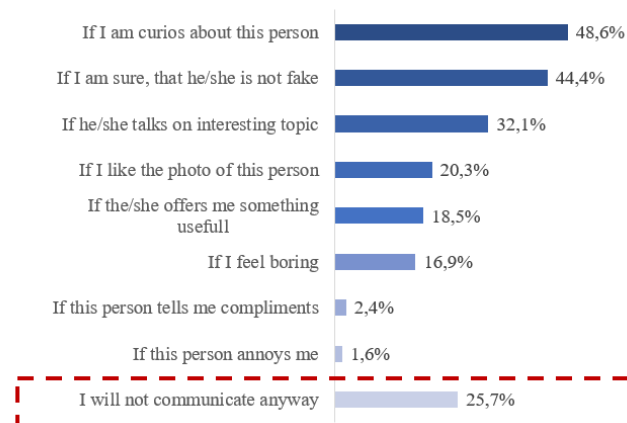

Fig. 2. Circumstances in which respondents can communicate with a stranger on the Internet (multiple answers)

The fourth important conclusion is that communication of young people tends to displace into the area of Internet. During the survey we used a combination of two interrelated questions in the questionnaire: *«Please rate how often you communicate with friends on the Internet* » and *«How often do you prefer to meet friends to talk to them outside the Internet? »*. The blurred category of «*how often*» was used purposefully: during the survey it was important to understand not the actual frequency of communication, but the assessment of these frequency by young people. Summarizing and combining the answers of the respondents to the questions posed, we have developed our own typology of young people, characterizing options for their preferences in communication (see Table 1).

TABLE I. TYPOLOGY OF RESPONDENTS' COMMUNICATION STYLES

Type	Description
Secretive people	Communicate a little with friends both on the Internet and beyond
Virtual people	Mostly communicate with friends via the Internet, rarely do it offline
Communicative people	Mostly communicate with friends via the Internet, but also often communicate offline
Traditional people	Prefer offline communication with friends, rarely use the Internet for this communication

The distribution of respondents between these segments looks indicative (see Fig. 3).
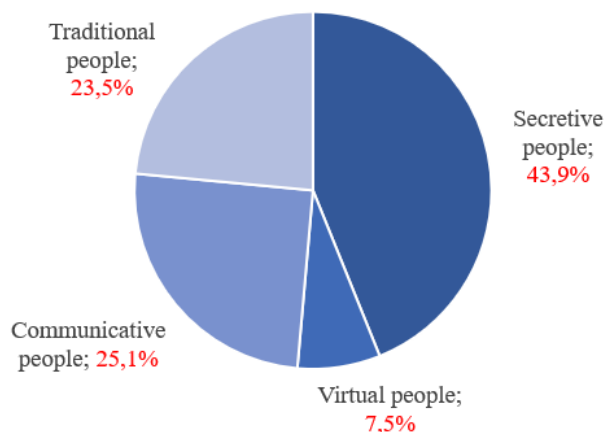
Fig. 3. Distribution of respondents between segments of the pypology

We can formulate at least two conclusions. On the one hand, communication on the Internet and outside the Internet represent alternatives for the most of young people: relatively small number of respondents in the group of «Communicative people» demonstrates, that only a few of young people want to combine these forms of communication, others prefer to choose between them. And on the other hand, many people in the segment «Secretive people» demonstrates, that avoiding of communication on the Internet does not guarantee, that young people prefer offline-communication. Many of them avoid both communication on the Internet and offline-communication. In other words, now it is impossible to say, that the Internet has replaced offline-communication in the life of young people. But the possibility of such replacement in the future looks quite high.

V. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Summarizing these single conclusions, we can note, that the Internet is organically integrated into the social reality of modern Russian youth. Both our own data and the results obtained by other researchers show that contemporary young Russians are significantly more active and versatile in their use of the Internet than representatives of other generations. Such a strong integration of the Internet into the everyday reality of modern Russian youth provides rich ground for reflection on the potential risks associated with the deep immersion of young people in virtual space. Of course, the description and assessment of such risks have a somewhat arbitrary character. Now, we can say that the Internet is intensively integrated into the daily life of modern Russian youth. So, any discussion of the long-term consequences of this situation is hypothetical: we can assume what problems may arise due to the integration of the Internet in the social reality of young people, but it is difficult to be sure in validity of such assumptions right now. But at the same time, it is still possible to formulate some ideas about probable risks in this area. And current scientific literature describes several serious problems that are often associated with integration of the Internet into social reality of young people. We can mention at least three risks, which are often mentioned in literature.

The first risk is a forming of Internet-addiction. We have already noted that now we should not talk about the formed Internet-addiction of Russian youth. But the developing such an addiction in the future remains possible. Some researchers note that the nature of communication on the Internet is very specific: exchange of information happens very quickly and it is based on sending of emotionally bright and simple content [27]. This informational content is simple for people. And it provides more pleasure, than any other form of information. So, the extensive using of such content can transform into pathological habit. And this is not only a logical hypothesis. Recent researches showed a direct relationship between the intensity of time that a young person spends on the Internet and formation of Internet-addiction: the more time, the more distinct the formation of addiction [24, p. 176]. Considering this effect, we believe that the risk of the formation of Internet addiction among modern Russian youth in the current circumstances is quite large.

The second risk is formation of vulnerability of young people to the destructive content that is broadcasted on the Internet. Such a vulnerability was mentioned in papers of many researchers [23]. The obvious root of this vulnerability is the high speed and unpredictability of information flows in the Internet. The Internet is convenient for the rapid and large-scale dissemination of any information: getting into the virtual space, it instantly becomes available to a huge number of users. And it is obvious, that the Internet can be easily used for distribution of negative or illegal information: extremist materials, forbidden content, «hate speech» and others. The high activity of young people using the Internet makes them one of the potential recipients for distribution of such content.

The third risk is a forming of the communicative gap between representatives of different generations. Researchers mention, that communication on the Internet is based on a specific series of symbols and on a specific rhetoric [8, p. 196]. Moreover, the Internet creates special problems that are both important for users and unclear for outsiders (typical example of such problem is trolling). Older generations of Russians are not eliminated from the Internet, but still there are many fewer active users among their representatives than among young people. Therefore, it is important to understand that the high intensity of immersion of young people in virtual space leads to the formation of special moods, concerns, and even a peculiar language that may not be known or understood by representatives of other generations. The increased activity of youth in using the Internet makes this risk obviously strong.

At the same time, as mentioned above, the deep integration of the Internet into the social reality of youth can create not only risks, but also important managerial opportunities. In our opinion, these opportunities are created by the same mass distribution of the Internet among young people, which also creates the risks mentioned above. The extremely high proportion of Internet users among youth makes it a convenient tool for quickly replicating any information with almost one hundred percent coverage of the youth audience. Their willingness to actively communication on the Internet (even with strangers) turns it into a convenient tool for the development of youth cooperation and even youth movements. The multifaceted integration of the Internet into

the social reality of youth creates a rich ground for the analysis of youth sentiments and requests: understanding the behavior of young people on certain Internet resources provides an opportunity to make conclusions about their needs and habits. Finally, the high activity of young people in using the Internet allows to use it for popularization of various socially practices of positive habits and behavior. For example, in our previous papers we have described a case of using of the Internet and social media for popularization of healthy lifestyle among youth [17]. We believe, that it is possible to use it for popularization of other positive habits and practices. The deep integration of the Internet into the social reality of Russian youth opens up significant opportunities for this.

VI. CONCLUSION

The key idea of writing this paper related to our attempt to trace the features of the integration of the Internet into the everyday life of modern Russian youth and to understand potential risks and opportunities of such integration. The performed analysis has shown us that fast and intensive penetration of the Internet into the life of Russian society really affected the peculiarities of the mood and behavior of today's young Russians. In fact, they have become the first generation of Russian «digital natives». They grew up in the conditions of the total spread of the Internet in the life of Russian society. So, now most of them are used to using the Internet very actively and even can't imagine their life without it. They are more active in using of the Internet, than representatives of older generations: they access the Internet more often, spend more time in it and solve many tasks with its help. In fact, the Internet has turned into some kind of basis of social reality of Russian youth. Most of them cannot be described as people with Internet-addiction. But it is quite difficult for them to imagine their life without the Internet.

One of the consequences of such intensive integration of the Internet into the social reality of Russian youth is the emergence of several social risks. Our research allows to conclude existence of at least three of these risks: forming of Internet-addiction, rise of vulnerability of young people to the destructive content and forming of the communicative gap between representatives of different generations. But at the same time, this deep integration of the internet into social reality of young Russians also provides come opportunities for working with youth audience. Internet can be used for broadcasting of information for youth audience, for organizing of cooperation of young people, for popularization of positive practices and for many other purposes. Current role of the Internet in social reality of contemporary Russian youth makes it a useful tool for decision of such tasks.

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