

SOCIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF CYBER-COMMUNICATION

В статье представлена социально-феноменологическая концепция киберкоммуникации, разработанная в контексте теории А. Шютца. Проанализированы негативные эффекты безтелесности киберкоммуницирования. Невозможность видеть тело собеседника ставит под вопрос личностность взаимодействия, исключает возможность восприятия киберпартнера как уникального Человека.

Ключевые слова: социальная феноменология, не-телесность, социальная дистанция, мы-отношение, они-отношение, киберкоммуникация.

У статті представлено соціально-феноменологічну концепцію кіберкомунікації, розроблену в контексті теорії А. Шютца. Проаналізовано негативні ефекти безтілесності кіберкомунікування. Неможливість бачити тіло співрозмовника ставить під сумнів особистісність взаємодії, унеможливорює сприйняття кіберпартнера як унікальної Людини.

Ключові слова: соціальна феноменологія, не-тілесність, соціальна дистанція, ми-відношення, вони-відношення, кіберкомунікація.

The paper presents social-phenomenological concept of cyber-communication developed in the context of theory of A. Schutz. The negative effects of cyber-communication without a body have been analyzed. The impossibility to see the body of an interlocutor calls into question the personality of relationship, excludes the possibility of perceiving a cyber-actor as a unique Human.

Keywords: social phenomenology, no-corporality, social distance, We-relation, They-relation, cyber-communication.

Phenomenon of cyber-communication is actively studied in the context of virtual sociology (A. Buhl, M. Paetau, A. Kroker, M. Weinstein, D. Ivanov), psychology of virtual behavior (A. Zhichkina, K. Young), philosophy (S. Khoruzhiy, I. Akchurin, V. Arshinov, M. Lebedev, etc.). However, social-phenomenological analysis of virtual communication has not been carried out yet. The task of social phenomenology is the description of «subjective activities of alter egos» [7, p. 46] and understanding of their social action sense. Let us present social-phenomenological concept of cyber-communication developed in the context of theory of A. Schutz (we will focus on considering specifics of on-line communication and, first of all, chat-communication).

Cyber-communication «without a body» and «with a body»

A. Schutz has pointed three types of social relations: 1) social face-to-face relations and interactions or We-relationship which presuppose body co-presence and spatial proximity of social actors (which «shares with me community of space and a community of time» [8, p. 163]); 2) social relations that presuppose the possibility of only indirect, mediated, distanced co-presence (They-relationship) characterized by the presence of formalized, «typical» functional links between non-close «contemporaries»; 3) social relations between corporally non-present «predecessors» and «successors» [10, p. 176-214]. What of the aforementioned forms of social relations can be regarded as the most adequate

in the situation of describing the nature of cyber-communication on-line?

At the first glance, it might seem that just the form They-relation between unfamiliar «contemporaries» is optimal for this purpose. Indeed, chat-communication is carried out between anonymous contemporaries that are bodily non-presented to each other, spatially non-close, separated by barriers of computer screens. However, at the same time, one can assume possibility of transforming such anonymous relations into non-anonymous ones if cyber-actors meet in real life. But such a choice is not obvious. If we focus on pure process of on-line cyber-communication between anonymous partners (which is most often limited by virtual borders of computer rather than by real communication), then just the first model (the We-relation model, albeit in a slightly modified form) can serve as theoretical compass in the phenomenological comprehension of cyber-communication culture.

Indeed, participants of chat-communications can spend quite a long time in cyber-communication with each other feeling themselves «aboriginals» or «honorable citizens» of «electronic village» and showing a disdainful attitude towards «newcomers». According to S. Konoplitsky, «in many chats there is a tendency to build a special, almost family circle of communication» [2, p.169]. Despite the fact that permanent members of chat communities know each other by nicknames remaining anonymous actors, despite the fact that the models of virtual behavior used by them are often fictitious, relations of some proximity are established between them. This proximity can arise only between «fellow-men» (and not just «contemporaries») connected by life situation who voluntarily and synchronously overcome the same live problems.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between We-relation of fellow-men in cyber-communication and We-relation described by A. Schutz. According to A. Schutz, We-relation consists not only in the community of time; it also consists of community of space, that is, in the bodily presence of a fellow-man face-to-face with me [8, p. 163]. Concerning cyber-communication on-line, its distinctive feature is no-corporality of communication, communication is not face-to-face. Participants of cyber-communication do not physically see each other (although they mentally model images of their «vis-a-vis»); they cannot observe eye expressions, reactions of the body, instant emotional movements of their «fellow-man». On one hand, this can ensure the full symmetry of cyber-communication while live, bodily communication necessarily assumes some unequal conditions of communication described by E. Goffman. According to E. Goffman, each of participants in communication can perceive his/her fellow-man through two channels of communication – governable (that involves «verbal symbols or their substitutes» [4, p. 2] and is controlled by a communicator consciously) and unconscious (that includes «the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior» [4, p. 7] as mimics, gests, shouts and other uncontrolled body reactions). According to E. Goffman, «...in this a fundamental asymmetry is demonstrated in the communication process, the individual presumably being aware of only one stream of his communication, the witnesses of this stream and one other» [4, p. 7], being in a privileged position due to this reason. The fact that in the process of cyber-communication the possibility of observing involuntary emotional and bodily forms of behavior of each other is initially excluded, that all its participants can perceive only verbal-designed messages, places them in equal conditions providing a certain level of egalitarianism and democratic cyber-communication.

On the other hand, the «no-corporality» of communication can lead to certain negative consequences. The impossibility to see the body, the eyes of an interlocutor calls into question the personality of relationship, excludes the possibility of perceiving a «fellow-man» as a unique, irreplaceable, living Human. Communicating with nick-alternates of living personalities, participants in cyber-communication inevitably and necessarily create the images of «typical» actors that are typically reasoning, typically acting. Thus, in We-relation in cyberspace, there appears an aspect of typicality inherent in They-relations since «in the They-relation my partners are not concrete and unique individuals, but types» [9, p. 45]. Another element of They-relation, which in extremely hypertrophied form is manifested in the We-relation of cyber-actors, is the anonymity of communication (if in real social relations one can speak only about a certain degree of anonymity («the world of contemporaries is stratified by the relative degree of concreteness or anonymity» [9, p. 48]), then in cyberspace the authority of total anonymity is asserted as an absolute principle).

It is noteworthy that there is a close connection between the characteristics of typicality and anonymity noticed by A. Schutz: «a fellow-man, who can be apprehended only as an ideal type – is anonymous in this sense» [9, p. 48]). Precisely because the cyber-actors try to present themselves in an altered, idealized, typical (rather than personal-real) light, they choose an anonymity regime that allows them to hide their true faces. Thus, it would be correct to talk about blending of two forms of social relations within cyber-communication – We-relation of the fellow-men and They-relation of contemporaries the elements of which are simultaneously present in a chat room. Undoubtedly, they can be connected to the third form – They-relation with «predecessors» and «successors», which in virtual space can act as real interlocutors (their physical non-presence becomes not noticeable with respect to no-corporality of cyber-communication).

Another feature of the «no-corporal» cyber-communication can be called superficiality, «no-involvement» of communication between cyber-actors. True involvement and interest in communication are possible only between bodily co-present, seeing each other, close people who do not and cannot «suddenly» interrupt communication without any reason, refuse to communicate with a fellow-man. As for cyber-communication, the easiness and indifference of its no-bodily contacts presupposes the possibility of a special mode of interaction, which D. Ivanov defined as «freedom of entry/exit», «providing the possibility of interruption and renewal of existence» [1, p. 19] and «the ability to periodically «turn on» and «turn off» environment/context of interaction» [1, p. 61]. Such easiness of exit from communication space, the freedom to interrupt the interaction and refusal to extend a chat contact produces foundations for new forms of interaction in real sociality characterized by a non-involved and non-responsible attitude to social partners that do not exclude the possibility of their real or psychological elimination from life space if they become boring.

With the help of phenomenological method, it is possible to mentally visualize the situation of distancing of participants in cyber-communication. On one hand, We-relationship implies the possibility of proximity, psychological affinity of a cyber fellow-man, discussing common problems and meeting in the same virtual rooms. In addition, virtual communication allows to completely remove the problem of physical distances

between interlocutors, «squeezing» space into an indistinguishable point of here-communication. However, this problem can be revealed a little differently if we apply to its analysis the concept of R. Park's «social distance». According to R. Park, the degree of proximity-distancing of social actors can be measured with the help of an indicator such as «reserve», which means reserved personal zones accessible to his/her self-consciousness and inaccessible to the consciousness of others [6, p. 340]. The wider the «reserve», the greater the distance separating social actors. «We know, also, that under certain circumstances reserves may be «broken down» and that with this break-down social distances dissolve and the most intimate understandings are frequently established» [6, p. 340]. If we apply the concept of R. Park to the analysis of the nature of cyber-communication, we can draw the following conclusions. It is quite obvious that the «reserve» of cyber-actors is excessively extensive: it is bodily unavailability, personal inaccessibility instead of which reflexive accessibility of thoughts and opinions of cyber-interlocutors is proposed, as well as accessibility of the nick virtual image invented by cyber-actors. Taking into account the fact that there are large-scale «reserves», we can assume that «social distances» separating inhabitants of an «electronic village» are extremely large. That is, the apparent, superficial closeness/familiarity of cyber relations in reality can hide the lack of true understanding of the interlocutor's personality (just because the interlocutor is absent as a person with a body; instead of it, there are virtual double-gangers).

However, if cyber-communication is carried out «without a physical body», then maybe it proceeds with participation of a «phenomenological body» or «digital body» [5, p. 6], which does not really exist, but at the same time is experienced as existing? As for the cyber dimension of computer games, there really is an imitation of corporality that «as if» is felt, «as if» moves and «as if» exists. Similarly, in the situation of interactive cyber-communication, actors create their own «digital body» and «digital body» of interlocutors. They invent virtual bodies that are used as a tool for interacting other cyber-actors; they create avatars, animated images that help symbolically visualize some features of their real person (for example, gender, race, color of hair and eyes; if a cyber-actor uses an already ready pictures, other people's or animal's photos, the very choice of this or that photo-image can tell something about character or preferences of this cyber-actor). Cyber-bodies and avatars visualize cyber-communication, facilitating the possibility of phenomenological observation of relationship between cyber-actors. At the same time, visualization of communication with the help of avatars does not restore the modus of communication face-to-face, generating a new type of communication – contact between digital bodies. The cyber-actor communicates not «in the body», but «with the body», or rather, «by means of virtual body», manipulating it as an external object or tool to achieve his/her goals. However, not all researchers treat the new type of interaction between social actors as post-humanism [11, p. 6]. For example, L. Nakamura tries to prove that visualization of the racial and gender characteristics of a person with the help of a digital body and an avatar can help «re-materialization» of virtual communication [5, p. 203], can make it more visible, obvious and understandable.

Obviousness and non-obviousness of cyber-communication

One of the main themes of phenomenology is the problem of obviousness of

perception of external world. The term «obviousness» is considered in phenomenology as a synonym for the self-evident, «in sight», comprehended directly. According to E. Husserl, phenomena that are present in the observer's mind can be called obvious. If an actor sees certain objects (noemes) in his/her consciousness, he/she can bracket the fact of their existence (or nonexistence) in reality. If we try to consider the nature of cyber-communication in this context, we can conclude about phenomenological obviousness of cyber-communication, which is reflexively perceived by cyber-actors and represented in their minds (and, therefore, becomes unquestionable for them). However, it should be recognized that the obviousness of cyber-communication has a specific nature that distinguishes it from the obviousness of live communication.

Live oral communication, taking place in a situation of bodily co-presence of interlocutors, suggests the possibility of an instant, pre-reflexive comprehension of the meaning contained in the words and bodily reactions of communicating personalities. Being in communication, the interlocutors become witnesses to the birth of meaning, which is accepted as obviousness, as self-evidence, which is beyond doubt. According to E. Husserl, M. Merleau-Ponty, A. Schutz, in the process of communication, a person does not reflex, he/she simply experiences, lives, simply «sees-clearly» the essence of what is happening. Reflexive comprehension of communicative process comes *after* its completion, assuming inevitable «falling out» of an individual from communication and its perception «from outside». «While I was engaged in the We-relation, I was busy attending to you; in order to think about it, I must break off the immediate rapport between us. Before I can reflect about our common experience its vivid phases, in which we were jointly engaged, must have come to a stop. Straightforward engagement in the We-relation is possible only in the ongoing experiences of a face-to-face situation, while reflection is *ex post facto*. It begins after the concrete We-relation has come to an end» [9, p. 27]. If the bodily communication is carried out in a two-phase mode – the immediacy of experience is replaced by detached-reflective comprehension – then cyber-communication is fundamentally one-phase. Since the immediacy of experience of a fellow-man in cyber-relations becomes impossible (precisely because his body, his living reactions, his involuntary movements are absolutely inaccessible), since cyber-communication is performed in writing form (inevitably delayed with respect to oral-direct forms of reaction to the process of communication), then on-line communication always assumes only one modus of perception, namely, reflexive modus. Actors can perceive cyber-communication somewhat «from the side», as a visualized text «object». Being «in the process» of communication, they, at the same time, are always «late» for its natural flow, comprehending its meaning *ex post facto*. The fact of this temporal bias of cyber-communication in relation to the live process of communication allows us to speak about non-obviousness of virtual communication on-line (since obviousness can only be the result of a synchronized rather than delayed staying of a person «inside» a certain event, «inside» event time, but not «out» and «after» it).

Just because of the delayed nature of cyber-communication, it is accompanied by a risk for a person to be «interrupted», «excluded from communication». If live communication makes difficult a sudden and unreasonable interruption of communication, if bodily co-presence presupposes a certain order of interaction that can not be «suddenly» stopped,

cyber-communication can move to the «out» mode, when cyber-actors can leave the communication for some time, postpone their response or even keep «silent»; they can react to the communication process after a certain time when the situation «has already cooled down» and will be perceived not directly. The existential riskiness of cyber-communication can impose a certain imprint on live communication giving it characteristics of detachment, alienation, objectivity, and instrumentality.

Conclusion

One of the central features of cyber-communication is that it is carried out in written form. Writing, as N. Luhmann believes, is always «potentiated» [3, p. 99]: it can be read and «reanimated» by the reader, and it may be also preserved for many years in anticipation of its audience. «Potentialization» of cyber-communication appears itself in the ability to retain a response, ignore a message, a superficial understanding, or even non-understanding of information contained in it. On one hand, non-intrusive character of cyber-communication should be assessed very highly since it creates a non-repressive space of free cyber-communication. On the other hand, the «potentiated» nature of cyber-communication leads to the situation of existential sluggishness, relaxedness, and unavoidability of relationship between cyber-partners, who may delay, «postpone» the interaction.

The communication process can be carried out according to strategies of vision or observation. The strategy of vision implies the possibility of considering the real state of things in a particular situation, being personally involved in it. The observation strategy assumes a detached, objectified perception of reality «from the outside», from a certain distant point that provides a good overview of the social landscape. An observer is not personally involved in the observed; he/she does not empathize with contemplated events. In cyber-communication that is always somewhat delayed with respect to live communication, the technique of detached monitoring of actions and messages of social actors dominates. The observation technique practiced by the cyber-actors is carried out in the mode of «first-order observation» (N. Luman), when each of the participants in cyber-communication attempts to track the virtual actions of their partners. At the same time, cyber-actors can also participate in «second-order observation», involving «observation of other observers».

References:

1. *Иванов Д.* Виртуализация общества / Д. Иванов. – Санкт-Петербург : Петербургское Востоковедение, 2000. – 96 с.
2. *Коноплицкий С.* Сетевые сообщества как объект социологического анализа / С. Коноплицкий // Социология: теория, методы, маркетинг. – 2004. – № 3. – С. 167–178.
3. *Луман Н.* Медиа коммуникации / Луман Н. [пер. с нем. А. Глухова, О. Никифорова]. – Москва : Логос, 2005. – 280 с.
4. *Goffman E.* The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life / Goffman E. – New York : Doubleday anchor books, 1959. – 251 p.
5. *Nakamura L.* Digitizing Race. Visual Cultures of the Internet / Lisa Nakamura. – Minneapolis ; London : University of Minnesota Press, 2007. – 248 p.
6. *Park R.* The Concept of Social Distance As Applied to the Study of Racial Attitudes and Racial Relations / R. Park // Journal of Applied Sociology. – Vol. 8. – 1924. – Pp.: 339–344.
7. *Schutz A.* The Theory of Social Action: The Correspondence of Alfred Schutz and Talcott Parsons / A. Schutz [ed. by R. Grathoff]. – Bloomington and London : Indiana University Press, 1977. – 166 p.

8. *Schutz A.* Phenomenology of the Social World / A. Schutz. – Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1967. – 255 p.
9. *Schutz A.* Studies in Social Theory: Collected Papers II / A. Schutz [edit. by A. Brodersen]. – The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1976. – 303 p.
10. *Schutz A.* The Phenomenology of the Social World / Schutz A. [trans. G. Walsh and F. Lehnert]. – Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1967. – 255 p.
11. *Foster T.* The Souls of Cyberfolk : Postgumanism as Vernacular Theory / Thomas Foster. – Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2005. – 344 p.

Надійшла до редакції 07.02.2017. Розглянута на редколегії 20.03.2017.

Рецензенти:

Доктор філософських наук, професор кафедри філософії Національного аерокосмічного університету ім. М.Є. Жуковського «ХАІ» Кузнецов А.Ю.

Кандидат філологічних наук, доцент, доцент кафедри документознавства Національного аерокосмічного університету ім. М.Є. Жуковського «ХАІ» Медведь О.В.