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RUSSIAN YOUTH AS AN OBJECT OF DESTRUCTIVE AND EXTREMIST ONLINE COMMUNITIES INFLUENCE

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Abstract

The article presents a critical analysis of the development of information technology and the Internet in terms of social security issues at the individual, group, and national levels. Features of interaction in the Internet space are a high level of anonymity, accessibility, and replication. These features of interaction in the Internet space make it possible to develop and popularize various kinds of extremist and destructive movements and groups. The implementation of criminal activity creates the need to tighten legislation in offline space. A combination of qualitative and quantitative sociological methods allow identifying the types of destructive groups and communities in the Internet space, the technologies for the dissemination and transmission of information about them, as well as methods and techniques for generating interest from consumers of information. Thus, over 30% of active users encountered various forms of extremist activity in the most famous Russian social network VKontakte, according to respondents. Given the age specifics of the respondents, this situation can be considered as a new threat to social security, which is updated as information technology develops. The most popular resources of the Russian segment of the Internet are the illegal Hydra trading platform, the Saw game project, resources popularizing the criminal subculture, suicidal, and self-destructive behavior. The conclusion is drawn about the need for more careful monitoring of extremist manifestations on the Internet. The purpose of control is to suppress further diversification of content that threatens security at all levels of social functioning.

Keywords: Social security, youth, extremism, destructive communities.

1. Introduction

The modern world is in the active phase of transition to the post-industrial (informational) phase of development, when information and communication technologies are actively penetrating the sphere of society and the individual. These trends are more or less characteristic of almost all countries and regions. In the life of modern youth, as the most active part of society, network technologies, online communities, and social networks play an increasingly important role, gradually replacing not only real communication but also as a whole acting as an alternative to the real world (McGillivray, 2015). The level of technology development allows communicating with people almost anywhere in the world successfully, but also working, realizing our interests, finding friends, and like-minded people. At the same time, the influence of the Internet and social networks on modern youth has not only positive but also negative features. In the context of globalization processes, the "erasure" of traditional borders, and the strengthening of overall technological interdependence, young people are becoming one of the most vulnerable segments for the impact of various destructive movements and ideologies (OSCE-ODIHR, 2012). Young people are most susceptible to any changes in the framework of socialization and adaptation to existing realities (Haddon, 2010; Krotov et al., 2017). At the moment, an important task is to analyze the existing and potential consequences of the spread of information and communication technologies, and the constant increase in the influx of young people into social networks (Brown, 2018). For the Russian Federation, the issue of popularizing various extremist and destructive practices in online communities is also relevant. Their followers actively use new technologies to attract new members or to recruit performers (Kuchukyan, 2017b). Together with existing socio-economic problems, the activities of virtual network communities pose a significant threat to the security of individuals, society, and the state.

2. Problem Statement

The increasing importance of information and computer technologies in the modern world is difficult and even dangerous to ignore. The gradual formation of two worlds, real and virtual, leaves its mark on the interaction of people, especially young people, and the surrounding reality. At the same time, it is the development of the Internet space that provides new opportunities for various extremist and destructive movements and ideologies to carry out their activities very effectively and safely. The Internet and social networks for modern youth are not just a "window to the world," blurring the boundaries between countries and continents. The Internet and social networks neutralize gender, age, cultural, religious, and other differences. The possibility of depersonalization allows creating a virtually new personality on the Internet, which causes considerable interest among young people. These factors are used in their practice by representatives of destructive communities, the spectrum of which is very extensive in the modern world. Such cities are terrorists, extremists, radical nationalist groups, religious cults, actively recruiting potential supporters in the network, the "death group," whose activities are aimed at introducing suicidal ideology among children and adolescents. There are online communities that incite hatred of non-traditional sexual orientation, promoting activities that involve a significant risk to life, for example, and "hooks" – teenagers riding on the roofs or couplings of electric trains. The network contains communities promoting cruelty to animals or deviant prison culture, for example, "AUE." In the context

of toughening the national legislations of different countries in relation to such destructive organizations and associations, their representatives are actively exploring exactly the Internet space. This is due to the fact that the Internet is still one of the least regulated from a legal point of view, difficult for practical control. Other reasons are the anonymity and depersonalization on the Internet already mentioned above. This circumstance complicates the identification, suppression of activities and criminal prosecution. Besides, Internet technologies allow destructive communities expanding the geography of their operations, save their own financial and human resources, and effectively promote and advertise their values, principles, and interests. The seriousness of the problems led to the actualization of this topic in Russian and international researches.

Along with general theoretical and philosophical works touch upon the problem of the "dark side" of the Internet (Cocking & Van den Hoven, 2018; Klayma, 2012). There are also more highly specialized and practically oriented publications devoted to the study of the specifics of youth organizations, including and destructive communities (Kuchukyan, 2017a), mechanisms, and features of the damaging impact on youth through the Internet (Zhuravleva et al., 2017), methods of counteracting destructive communities. Particularly noteworthy are works that examine the role of social networks in the dissemination of extremist and harmful practices and ideologies. This platform is one of the most popular in terms of use (Ivanov et al., 2017), as well as identifying destructive communities as one of their threats to the national security of the Russian Federation. Particular attention should be paid to the fight against these manifestations, since their activities are aimed, among other things, at the decomposition and destruction of the younger generations (Amelina, 2017). Thus, the problem of the impact of destructive communities on young people using the information and computer technologies actualizes the study of the specifics of their activities. It is necessary to identify the main ways and mechanisms of the impact of destructive communities on young people, the development of new ways to suppress their activity or level their influence as much as possible.

3. Research Questions

The subjects of this study are the techniques and technologies of functioning in the Internet space and social networks. In particular, information content related to destructive communities and groups is examined in the context of youth perception of this product. The work was organized in studying the empirical base obtained as a result of students' survey of a higher educational institution. The study is based on an analysis of "focused" and "in-depth" interviews with groups and individuals. We studied the types and types of destructive groups and communities whose content is present in the Internet space. The technologies of disseminating and transmitting information about them, methods, and techniques of forming interest from consumers of information are studied.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is to study on materials of an empirical nature the totality of forms, practices, techniques, and approaches of dissemination in the Internet space as a whole, in social

networks, in particular, information content related to the activities of groups and communities of a destructive nature, focused on involvement in these kind activities of youth representatives.

5. Research Methods

The stated topic of the study determined the use of various methods in collecting empirical material. The questionnaire method was used for the formation of a general picture of the involvement of respondents in the Internet space to identify the content that is most attractive to them, solved by the respondents in the Internet space, to assess the place and role in the process of communication of social networks. However, the questionnaires were designed not only in the format of "choice" questions or monosyllabic in their structure, allowing giving a quantitative assessment. The purpose of the study is the specificity of the resources, communities and groups identified in the problem field of the study, which respondents encountered in the process of using the Internet space. Questions were also used, implying a detailed answer, which allowed making a qualitative/meaningful analysis of the respondents' answers to study their specificity.

The research topic is information that reflects the respondents' knowledge about the resources availability on the Internet that provides information and the activities of destructive groups and communities, and familiarity with the content of these resources. This fact influenced the answers of respondents who did not seek to advertise the fullness of their knowledge. Some detailed questions of the questionnaire were formulated in such a way that they cover the ones that the respondent answered earlier with their problem field. The reformulation technique was applied, the attention vector was shifted somewhat, other characteristics, traits, manifestations of the search object were put into the proposed answer options. Also, to obtain complete information, the methods of "focused interviews" were used when working with formed focus groups and "in-depth interviews" during individual interviews. These methods make it possible to identify specific general trends, adjust the position and statements of individual focus group members, and form, kind of, mutual support that stimulates respondents to detailed answers (Shlyapina, 2016). However, when working in groups, and individually, these methods made it possible for the interviewer to show their positions – they determined "the most significant aspects for themselves ... of the situation" (Merton et al., 1991, p. 63). In the process of managing the dialogue/conversation process, changing the vector, the interviewees could reformulate the questions, carry out reverse transitions, return to the topic within the framework of the planned scenario. In processing the obtained empirical data, their correlations were also analyzed with the achievements of representatives of the scientific community on related issues.

The object of the study was students of two humanitarian departments of the Nizhny Novgorod State University, namely, the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Institute of International Relations and World History. It was used either with questionnaires or with the format of a focused and in-depth interview. A comparative approach observed the equal distribution of respondents among structural units and their age characteristics. Researchers sought to cover all the courses of students (1–4 courses of undergraduate programs, 1–2 courses of master's programs) in approximately equal proportions with a total number of processed questionnaires of 211 units. The focus group of classmates within a separate structural unit consisted of 15–20 people. About a third of the total number of respondents with an

inclusiveness relative level was involved in the formats of "focused" and "in-depth" interview discussions.

6. Findings

The study yielded the following results.

Firstly, the place and role of the Internet and social networks, in particular, in the life of students, can be identified. In one of the questions, respondents were asked, by choice, to indicate the average time they spend on the Internet during the day. Almost 50 % of respondents chose the option "3–4 hours a day"; 45 % – option "5–8 hours a day." The option "1–2 hours a day" was chosen by only 4 % of respondents, and only 1 % spends, according to personal data, on the Internet for less than 1 hour per day. Thus, we can say that the vast majority of respondents spend from 3 to 8 hours a day on the Internet. All respondents have accounts on social networks. Everyone is registered on the Russian VKontakte network.

Further, in descending order of demand, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Twitter were listed. Besides, almost all respondents (97 %) have accounts in the Viber and WhatsApp messengers. 37 % of respondents are registered in the Telegram messenger. Slightly more than 15 % of respondents said that they have more than one account relative to the leading, the most attractive social network for them. Moreover, absolutely everything on the VKontakte social network, for example, are members of 3–10 corporate groups or communities. About 5–12 groups are included in the "interest" community. Students solve a range of questions and queries in the Internet space. One can state in the circle of their problems all the opportunities provided by the information space: communication, news, entertainment, games, blogs, online banking, online stores, and more. Separately, you can highlight such a resource as You-Tube. You-Tube involves an active search for the required information; it is regularly visited by 64 % of respondents.

Secondly, within the framework of the declared subject of research, a specific problem field of questions should be designated. So, in the list of extremist and destructive organizations of communities and groups, respondents identified a wide range of such. On the one hand, the breadth of examples indicates a subjective position; on the other, the lack of a clear understanding of this term among students. Respondents gave examples of such communities and groups as "Blue Whale" (25 % heard/know, which is mostly due to the media company), "Run or Die," "Fairy of Fire." However, the target of these structures are representatives of younger ages. Also, in the list of those mentioned in the questionnaire can be listed various banned extremist and terrorist organizations in Russia and the world, new religious organizations, nationalist communities.

As specific examples of destructive projects, the most well-known respondents presented on social networks include:

- The online platform for the sale of narcotic drugs "Hydra", which "acts as an intermediary between sellers and buyers. 2.5 million accounts were registered on the site, 393,000 of which made at least one purchase. In addition to drugs, on the site you can buy fake bills, hacking services, false documents, and other prohibited goods" (9AXD, 2019; Edition, 2019);
- The game project "Saw," which has an anti-LGBT orientation, implemented within the framework of network communities, encouraging illegal activities (Khasimova, 2019);

- Communities and groups united by the nickname "RRP" (the name is connected with the events in Udmurtia when in 2016 six workers tried to cut their veins in protest against the payment of wage arrears); have a suicidal nature;
- Groups on the social network "VKontakte" "I'm losing weight", upholding the idea that anorexia is good.

Examples of extremist communities cited by respondents include the following:

- MDK, the base group and the VKontakte community, which is popular among young people (before the blocking of the leading page/resource in 2016, it had more than 6 million subscribers), which contains materials including humiliation of the person by racial, gender, religious component, clothing, lifestyle and more (Danilovich, 2015);
- "Dvach" entertainment resource, which has an official Telegram channel containing materials considered and rated by respondents as extremists.

Regarding the general indicators of the study, it can be said that 33% of respondents indicated that they encountered similar extremist or destructive content on the Internet. However, this indicator should be wary. To the question "where is it most often possible to find such content," the respondents gave the following answers: on You-Tube and Instagram – 8 % each, in Telegram and Internet games – 4 %, in social networks in general – 19 %, in "VKontakte" – 44 %. The discrepancy in the indicators (compared with 33 % of those who "encountered" such content) may indicate both secondary data on similar content available to respondents and unwillingness to record their acquaintance with such content.

The following can be cited as specific examples of such "acquaintance" (statements by respondents, syntax, and punctuation preserved):

- "I came across a neo-Nazi group ... got there by deception, specifically, answering the question: "would you like to talk with "knowledgeable" people on the subject of tradition and conservatism";
- "They invited me to a conversation in VK (the author's note – VKontakte social network), then they actively tried to invite a revolutionary party to the group ... and a friend strangled himself with a package under the influence of such a VK group";
- "Distribution on Instagram (in particular, a direct request to be added to conversations that contain correspondence of an extremist nature)".

Thirdly, it can be noted that the very principle of the functioning of social networks contributes to the spread of this kind of content. For example, the technology of disseminating information in the format of a combination links to the original resource, accompanied by their comments. In most cases, upon the posting of any primary data in the network community (group), a discussion develops with the participation of participants of information known to them (links to resources, posts) on the debate. Moreover, as a rule, the initiator of the polemic/discussion does not, in any way, pursue the goal of agitation, the directed dissemination of information about the plot/event. He is motivated by simple interest and the desire to share "interesting for himself" with other members of the community/group. Thus, naturally, information on any destructive groups and communities, as well as events of a similar

nature, for example, everything connected with the "columbine," can be distributed in network communities. And no blocking of destructive (in this case, related to the Columbine topics) resources and network communities, according to the researchers of the problem (Arkhipova, 2019), can fundamentally change the situation. This circumstance is due to the fact that the Internet community has a large number of various sites (from You-Tube to media agencies) that seek to convey to the users all the events that have occurred. And a modern user from the youth category, having become interested in something, is able to find almost any information on the Internet. And share with your community. Similar technologies for disseminating information are also used by interested actors engaged in targeted "stuffing." Given the specifics of relaying information on social networks, "stuffing is spread by the reactive method" (Gusarov, 2016). The study showed that respondents within the system of interest groups are quite strict about the initiatives of the newly joined, seeking to disseminate information related to actions, ideas, and communities of a destructive nature. Such efforts are suppressed. In most cases, having the right of the administrator removes such an account from the community. However, modern youth in the field of social networking is present in more than one community, many of which are open – corporate, professional communities, for example. Thus, it remains possible to obtain information about events/incidents, groups, and organizations of a destructive nature.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can conclude that the Internet and social networks, in particular, are currently a right tool for influencing modern youth. From the formation of public self-awareness, the issues of ensuring the security of the information and communication environment of everyday Russian reality should be one of the leading places in the state's domestic policy. The analysis, carried out as part of a survey of students in higher education, showed a high level of youth awareness of the destructive elements and impact technologies that are broadcast through social networks. The Internet network will create conditions for influencing the minds of young people through various information portals that act as guides. On the Internet, organizations are imposing destructive and extremist ideas on both the younger generation and society as a whole. It can also be noted that the technological apparatus for the formation of an unstable intra-social environment via the Internet network is notable for its enviable variability and scale. Visualization, adjustment, and propaganda of destructive ideas are implemented at a high level; it stands out for its accessibility/ease and straightforward perception. This aspect is noticeably manifested on the scale of the audience, perceiving given ideas. Directly, this aspect of the work of the Internet space indicates the urgent need to provide in-depth control of both the Internet content itself and the content-forming elements. The implementation of an active policy of monitoring and identifying destructive trends in the virtual life of Russian society is a way to minimize and level internal threats of a sociocultural nature. The implementation of this practice is possible within the framework of comprehensive preventive measures to counter destructive ideology and training at the junction of the real and virtual worlds.

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