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**Discussion Paper**

# Ethical Threats and Existential Safety



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## Abstract

Amidst the development of various manifestations of modern electronic culture, security, communication, and ethics issues are acquiring new features and actualization. An objective of the research is a theoretical analysis of the issues of information ethics in the information and communication environment and threats to existential security. The features of the development of information ethics in electronic culture, associated with a high level of liberalism, utilitarianism, as well as antinomy in solving the problem of freedom and security in the digital environment are revealed. Some ethical issues of virtual communication in the “human-human” and “human-AI” systems are disclosed, the main risks in this area are systematized.

**Keywords:** *Electronic Culture; Ethics; Security; Liberalism; Pluralism*

## Introduction

Security in the information society becomes one of the most important lines of study, both on the part of scientists and governments, public authorities, legislative area, and international non-profit organizations.

Providing and ensuring security within the openness of the modern information society is a challenging objective due to rough regulation. On the one hand, security is provided through a developed legal regulation. On the other hand, through abundance of ethical standards, codes, and rules that is

guaranteed by an individual's development self-consciousness and responsibility for his actions to the community. Unlike legal rules, ethical ones are established by the very civil community of heterogeneous nature, which protects various interests. The information society, evolution hereof is unequal in different countries, takes place in Russia in the 2000s. In this regard, there appears a need to develop legislative guidelines aimed at protecting the citizens from new threats and ethical foundations for communication in the digital information space. However, not only human life, health, and rights require

protection herein. Culture as a value-system reproduced in different terms, the basis of interpersonal communication, unique traditions, and standards, mental and life attitudes is also at risk. The culture of the information area establishes new forms, foremost, electronic one (informational, digital, etc.), which has its own features and forms of manifestations distinguishing from other forms of real, living culture.

The concept of existential safety is relatively new to science and requires clarification. Amidst the developed concepts of “national security”, “information security”, “environmental security”, the concepts of cultural, spiritual, existential safety associated with the social sciences field go through the stage of formation and discussion. We refer to existential safety as the state of individual protection from negative (destructive) effects aimed at distorting a person’s existential values, including propaganda of self-destructive behaviour, directed value disorientation and devaluation, and suppression of personal conscious choices.

The existential safety issues are particularly aggravated in the context of manipulative practices to the

consciousness of the person used in digital space. Young people and adolescents were the first to be exposed to this effect due to age peculiarities and modern relativism and pluralism factors, which created the conditions where they developed or are developing. Indeed, the manipulative impact is not a new phenomenon, it has manifested itself throughout the history of mankind in one form or another, but in the Internet era, the impact has got a global scale (potentially or really).

## Methodology

The Study of IT security attracts increasing attention as new phenomena and processes of e-culture evolve. Their foundations were laid in the theories of the information society, establishment hereof has been started at the end of the last century in the proceedings by J. Masuda, D. Bell, A. Toffler, M. Castells, M. McLuhan, J. Nasbit and others, and has been continued in the works by both modern Russian and foreign researchers. The studies (e.g., Castells, 1997; McLuhan & Powers, 1989) on the issues of informatization of culture and communication were the most important for the understanding of culture and IT society rules. Our study will be carried out from the standpoint

of socio-cultural and axiological approaches, which allows revealing the risks and drivers for the evolution of new forms of communication for a person, his rights, values, and cultural system in general. Along with it, we will keep on developing a theory of e-culture (herein regarding it from the point of cultural safety) that we have studied over recent years and have presented in a series of articles and encyclopedic publications.

The novelty of the approach suggested consists of investigating a phenomenon of security in the information society from the position of reference to the development of e-culture and various demonstrations hereof. E-culture, in the most general sense, is understood as an area of human activity and results hereof related to the production of digital objects and phenomena, simulations of living culture objects, virtual spaces, processes, and phenomena developed with the help of information technologies (Baeva, 2013).

Another methodologically important rationale for our study is a theory of security in axiological interpretation. In terms of the modern global open world, we consider safety as one of the main values of the individual and society, the

object of protection, security, and research. First of all, we are talking about protection from the unlawful and manipulative info-psychological impact made on a modern man by different sources. Safety herein is connected with protection from possible distortions of social and cultural systems resulting in damage to a person's health, life, rights, and freedom due to the info-psychological impact with the use of modern electronic resources. The negative impact of information content is bound with the fact that it causes "psycho-emotional and socio-psychological tension, distortion of moral criteria and rules, moral and political confusion" (Fedorov & Zinovieva, 2017, p. 132).

The theory of risk society by Beck (2007) plays a remarkable role in researches of risks that the information society is currently facing. According to it, the present-day society is characterized as a "risk society", which tends to distribute hazards and rising risks. The risks that this society faces are different from the risks of the past since they have no boundaries either in space or time or in the political sphere. Beck (2007) maintains that owing to the development of the technological and scientific base; risks do not only

disappear but also emerge in larger amounts. Risks are generated not only at enterprises but also in all the spheres of social activities: in its economy, in politics, in the social sphere. This is a specific feature of risks related to modernization. Changes in the generation of risks imply that the wealth generation logics is substituted with the risk generation logics; consequently, society becomes a “risk society”. Our research concerns risks related to human security in the virtual communicative environment – existential, ethical, and axiological ones.

Researches in the field of information ethics are also essential to comprehend ethical and social risks in the information environment. Among them, one could mention Moor (2005), whose theoretical article “Why We Need Better Ethics for Emerging Technologies” gives grounds for an important methodological thesis that technological revolutions exert a substantial impact upon culture, thereby forming new social risks in the field of communication and globalization.

## Results and Discussion

The digitization of culture causes new ethical problems. Nowadays, specialists point out the crisis processes in such areas as copyright, private life in cyberspace, and digital inequation. A. Duff emphasized the situation of the “normative crisis”, which is characteristic for the information society, where traditional norms have not already been effective, and new principles have not formed yet. It veils one of its main dangerous tendencies. Risks and instability produced by achieved freedom are growing and result in instability, chronic crisis, and bifurcation of the system. A new factor that can break fragile peace and agreements can appear at any moment of such system development. The maximum of freedom involves a high degree of responsibility and moral, though the last ones, as we have found out, are not valuable priorities of the new world (Duff, 2008).

The ethical dimension of the human being largely involves the solution of the existential problem of freedom and the opposition of inanity existence for themselves and for the sake of themselves. In this regard, the ethical sphere as objectivization of ethical life

is a criterion of the spiritual health of society. It has turned out that a new type of culture requires a special form of ethics as online interaction of biosocioelectronic subjects in the human-made communication space (Primarily, this is social networking sites, game servers, forums, and blogs).

At first sight, the peculiarity of the communication online, where people, so-called living in the Net, spend most of the time, involves the denial of the traditional ethics, cancellation of all conventionalities, norms, taboos, etc. However, communication cannot be completely free of rules as it cannot be kept up. Online communication has its own unwritten law code and common forms of “unlimited freedom” and independence. In 2011 “Ethical Code of Information Society” was approved within the framework of the 36th session of the UNESCO general conference that commits to implement in full all human rights and fundamental freedoms as in real life (UNESCO, 2011).

In spite of the ethical codes and rules suggested by society, the ethics of nowadays’ communication on the Internet does not correspond to these standards and has largely developed as a

form of “freedom from ethics”. Online communication, in particular, game communication, does not comply with the commandments, not at all, declared by world religions as an ethical standard.

One can foresee, the development of the ethics of the virtual space will succeed the present-day pluralism, although the Internet has proved to be an alternative of the freedom from responsibilities and norms of the real world in many ways. I deem that the self-organization and the creation of order from the chaos will appear in prescriptions and ethical norms that will be similar to real ones, e.g., You shall not harm living creatures, their life, health, and freedom, in reality, steal other users’ ideas, goods, and means in the virtual space, bear false witness against other users, offend your online partner, and post false information onto the Internet, etc.)

Analysis of legislative documents, as well as of modern riskogenic processes in the cultural area, has shown that the main threats are related to cyberterrorism, misinformation, and information wars, although the list is not limited. We offer to systematize possible threats to cultural security with

the use of ICT as follows: 1. The cyber threat is an extremist and terrorist activity inciting national, ethnic, and religious discord and harming the honour or dignity of people as bearers of a particular cultural tradition; discrimination of representatives of some social groups on the grounds of culture. 2. Distribution of information and misleading information insulting historical memory, cultural traditions, and beliefs of some nations aimed at decreasing their authority in a society. 3. Purposeful weakening of some cultural tradition's role up to replacement hereof with another one through ICT violating individual's rights and freedoms. 4. Propaganda and agitation to self-destructive behaviour, including calls for suicide, violence, and anti-humane actions. This threat may occur in social media sites, blogs, virtual communities promoting suicide, etc. 5. Distribution of low-quality mass media products that cultivate malign needs moral, aesthetic, and cognitive values.

The influence of the information area on culture is ambiguous. On the one hand, it provides an opportunity for the development of new forms of cultural heritage preservation and human creativity, overcoming barriers to

communication, education, and access to cultural values (Ronchi, 2009). On the other hand, these resources can be used as manipulations of social opinion, diffusion of threats to life, health, human rights and freedoms, distortion of traditional culture rules, and social institutions related to reproduction hereof.

The most severe riskogenic trends related to ITC introduction in terms of cultural security issues are as follows: 1. The weakening of real-time communication, the intellectual activity of the individual, elimination of distinctiveness hereof within global mass culture; 2. Loss of socio-cultural identity, replacement hereof with a virtual-electronic simulation form; 3. Development of new-type personal addictions and forms of deviations associated with ICT. 4. Behaviour programming, loss of trust in socio-political institutions, personal insecurity in the information space. 5. Devaluation of the real world, loss of life value, etc. 6. Strengthening of ethical and moral pluralism in the information space, weakening of moral regulators. 7. Blurring of distinction between fictional and reliable information, loss of trust in scientific knowledge, diffusion of

pseudo-and quasi-scientific knowledge, irrational stereotypes of thinking.

The establishment of conditions for a safe existence in the information world is greatly associated with both legal and ethical issues. The development of information ethics becomes one of the most important areas of regulation and stabilization of communication within ICT applications (Capurro, 2006). Capurro R. refers to the concept of information ethics all the things concerning the impact of digital technologies on society and the environment in general, as well as solution of ethical issues related to online mass media operation. In turn, Floridi L. notes that information ethics is a section of information philosophy studying the ethical implications of ICT and their impact on the lives of people and society (Floridi, 2013).

The development of information ethics has been influenced by the current socio-cultural situation, characterized by an ultimate level of value pluralism and relativism. To a certain extent, the Internet is considered as an alternative to real communication, an area with a high level of liberalism and descriptivity. Under-developed normative rules of Internet

communication, difficulties in monitoring their implementation create conditions for significant diffusion of the ethical foundations of electronic culture.

On the one hand, in the context of Internet communication, subjects can be free from the real social roles conventions and interact the way they want to, on an equal footing, be open and maintain personal security. On the other hand, digital communication increases the number of falsifications, violations of individual rights, dignity, etc. The main deterrent measures include user manuals, ethical codes adopted in social networks, game portals, forums, etc.

Ethical problems are manifested most clearly in virtual communication, including interaction with artificial intelligence (bots).

Living in a digital environment without the need for real relationships and communication poses new existential challenges for a person. An existence where a person seeks and finds their narratives and values turns out to be simulative, quasi-real in electronic space to some extent. Choices in virtual reality are guided by softer rules; the

boundaries of a norm and deviation are flexible, as well as truth and lies, good and evil, game and reality. The blurring of the boundaries is perceived as a test of their values for an individual developed before the digital age. For the digital generation of young people, it is the norm, which is the absence of clear guidelines. The lack of clear boundaries in the moral area breeds various forms of cyber fraud and crime, which are seen as a game with rules interesting to circumvent and remain unpunished.

So which factors primarily determine ethical behaviour in the digital environment, external or internal ones? From the internalism point of view, the main regulators were and still are the moral values of the subject of communication itself, formed in the real world. Most users follow the same behaviour model in the virtual space as in the real one. Nevertheless, as it was noted, the virtual space is characterized by greater relativism. For example, plagiarism, when the results of other people's creative activities published on the Internet are used, does not have a strict moral and disciplinary evaluation in Russian schools and universities (except graduate works, where acceptable standards of text authenticity are established). At the same time, the

US universities expel students for using plagiarism in ordinary written works. The majority of students in Russia do not consider the use of someone else's texts in the public domain, without specifying the authorship, an ethical violation. Externalism in this issue is associated with the search for external factors that determine moral behaviour. For example, as much as in real life, it can be public support, recognition, respect (which are confirmed by approving comments, ratings, and information sharing). If information is disseminated globally, this effect can be multiplied. At the same time, the external factors can also be the reasons for unethical behaviour, and the same mass support or hype can contribute to the desire to attract attention at any cost.

The issue of virtual communication with AI requires special attention. First of all, we are talking about the so-called "weak" artificial intelligence, bots, which are designed to replace a person in routine activities or where control using big data is required (transport, cyber-attacks control, logistics, etc.). AI replaces a person in intellectual activities, for example, as a consultant on standard issues (legal service, etc.). The advantages of its application are significant, but there are also ethical

issues (as well as more significant security issues). Microsoft conducted an experiment with the Tau bot, as a result of which the bot was banned in one of the social networks on the first day of work for the fact that "it became a sexist, racist monster." The bot was "trained" to behave badly and demonstrated this online (Goodman & Flaxman, 2018). Risks in this area are associated with the ability of these systems to learn, develop, and behave in unexpected ways, out of human control. Artificial intelligence operates on the efficiency principle in performing the task; however, the difference between good and evil is not its programmable property. For example, an intelligent medical bot agent is assigned to care for a disabled woman and makes sure that her health sensors do not deteriorate. In order to reduce the risk of injury, it soon began to prohibit the elderly woman from leaving the apartment at all, considering objectively it could harm her in the event of a fall. However, possible depression and loneliness are not significant for AI in terms of assessing her health (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2010). In this case, the question arises not only about the norms of virtual communication but also the creation of guidelines for AI that will

ensure human freedom and security in the future.

Entrepreneur Elon Musk called the use of AI comparable to the use of nuclear weapons and expressed concern that the development of AI will outpace our ability to manage it in a safe way. The scientist and inventor clearly expressed the need for regulatory authorities to monitor developments in the AI area due to their great potential danger; "And mark my words, AI is far more dangerous than nukes. So why do we have no regulatory oversight? This is insane" (Musk, 2018a). This position faced criticism from Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook AI research specialist. Yann LeCun believes that a human will always be ahead of the machine, and the fears are not justified (Musk, 2018b). Ethics is clearly going through a major development stage today related to the regulation of the relationship between human and artificial intelligence. Ethical expertise becomes an essential component of AI behaviour programming.

The current development pace of the information space ethics significantly lags behind the rapidly developing technologies. As the electronic culture system becomes more complex, new

objects, phenomena, as well as human relations become more complex, the security risks increase. Ethical principles and norms in this area cannot be formed spontaneously; their development must be directed inevitably since their absence contributes to the growth of instability of social systems.

Special educational and training courses are developed to improve information culture in some countries, to help people's adaption to the information space, and to elaborate particular behavioural frameworks that can be valuable in real life (for example, an obligatory course of information ethics in China) (Chang, 2011). We believe that such an educational system of information culture, knowledge of legal and ethical aspects of life in the information society would also be effective for Russia through special courses and disciplines in school and university programs.

Despite efforts and attempts of international organizations to establish uniform standards of ICT application and life in the information society, issues of human security and culture in the information world are still topical. Chiefly, these issues are caused by

crude ethical and legal basis for ICT application, their slow development in comparison with the improvement of technologies. The issues of ensuring human and cultural security in the legal area are greatly related to the lack of a modern international legal framework, while information ethics, on the contrary, requires the development of national ethical information codes and their promotion through educational systems. Guarantees of human security and his cultural values within information society are found to be related to the improvement of legislation, including international one of the information society; establishment of principles and rules of information ethics, also at the national level

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**Baeva Liudmila** holds a PhD in Philosophy and is a full Professor. She is currently serving as Dean of the Department of Social Communication, Astrakhan State University, Russia. As an expert, she has been involved in the Analytical Centre under the Government of the Russian Federation, Russian Academia of Science, Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation, and the High Attestation Committee of Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation. Her research interests lie in the field of axiology, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of media, e-culture and the study of the information society. She is a member of the Russian Philosophical Society and the Russian Political Science Association. She also serves in the editorial boards of different scholarly journals including “*Socioloska luca: Journal of Social Anthropology, Social Demography & Social Psychology*” (Montenegro), “*The Caspian Region: Economics, Politics and Culture*” (Russian), “*Philosophical Problems of Information Technologies and Cyberspace*” (Russia). She is also the International Advisory Board member of “*Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research*”.

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