

# Value Semantics of Multivector Behavior of Virtual Communities as a Psycho-Potential Hazard to Spiritual Foundations, Information Culture, and National Security

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## Summary

Virtual communities are not only an integral feature of postmodern modernity and cyberspace. They have also become a potential web platform for new opportunities to participate in various clubs - from temporary modern (like puppet groups or groups for psychological training) to established institutions like religious communities, ethnic history projects, university communities, etc. Information and cultural rules and standards of a country are a priority for domestic and foreign policies due to their broad social significance, which makes them a potential motivation in shaping the priorities of an individual's life. The postmodern world is determined by the tremendous upgrowth of the information sector. It results in unique cultural phenomena in communication and, therefore, new hazards and threats to the interests of citizens and society, government and security. The article is aimed at emphasizing the multivector nature and multicultural essence of virtual communities and at defining the distinguishing features of virtual communities to understand their operational principles in the frame of modern communication culture, to outline threats and risks for a society coming from virtual communities.

## Key words:

*virtual communities, semantic codes, communication culture, information culture, security, psychology of values, spiritual foundations*

## 1. Introduction

Any historic era is characterized by certain challenges and innovations that find their reflection in communication and culture. For one reason or another, they receive the status and role of values. The social aspect of the communication culture is a significant factor we need to consider when studying national security and, specifically, information security. We can observe how the postmodern society has changed and adapted to its needs the well-established rules and standards of life. The evolution of the digital and electronic space has caused a drastic change in major communication principles. It relates to all spheres of life – regular communication between people, ethical and non-ethical issues, public communications policy of the state, etc. “Issues of informational privacy are recognized as of increased importance with the advent of digital information, whose technologies offer, alongside positive affordances, opportunities for privacy harms” [3]. The choice of data transfer ways becomes of vital importance because it is directly relevant to security. Analyzing the area of information culture and, thus, information security, we pay special attention to virtual communities, which perform not only a communicative function but also work as a powerful combination of various postmodern elements including simulacrum, kitsch,

etc. All this along with the multicultural innovative character provides the basis for claiming virtual communities a unique yet specific postmodern phenomenon. Some researchers indicate that virtual communities are related to the system of public relations. It is something that can make life different even beyond the virtual reality [10].

In Ukraine, this phenomenon reflects the complicated existential vision due to military conflict in the East. It is often emphasized that the war between Russia and Ukraine has caused a national wave of patriotism in Ukraine while the war-related events have become the most discussable matters in the virtual communities. However, in Ukraine, the Internet is developing new virtual communities with feedback channels, and so they play a crucial role in generating new socially significant military history content [24]. The local experience in understanding the rules and roles of virtual communities can be used in professional training and development. Virtual communities are mostly studied as a social phenomenon that caused new culture coming with the help of the Internet. Also, the scholars closely analyze the psychology of these communities' participants, their information data, and generally their impact on people and society.

The specifics of virtual communities, their security issues, characteristic features of their structure and operation as well as their role as national security subjects have raised interest in researchers. The result of the recent studies shows a lack of information on the role of virtual communities in creating historical data.

Information security is a global problem now due to the globalization process in all vectors of life including social and cultural spheres. This current world tendency can be discovered in the political, economic, social, technological activities of a country. Information has become a crucial tool of social innovations due to new technologies and digital systems development, the uprise in conceptually new and high-impact methods of content sharing and influence [9]. American futurologist Alvin Toffler claims that in this day and age, knowledge and information are the most powerful resources of state authorities that make it possible to achieve the goals set when using the resources of the state power, make people take these goals as their personal, when enemies become friends [29, 30].

Infoculture is a potential reflection of the personal security content and projections of the national security situation in general. The researchers agree on understanding the core points of information culture in the modern world. "The ability of citizens to establish the credibility of information and information sources through critical assessment is often emphasized as essential for the upholding of a democratic society and for people's health and safety." [11].

## 2. Methodology

The set of methods used in the research integrates a multivector analysis of information security and virtual communities. The diversity of virtual communities is analyzed with the method of classification. The implicative method explains the connection of communication culture, information culture, and postmodern virtual reality. The scope of the research includes challenges and threats for information and cultural areas that become vital in virtual communities – in particular, in terms of information security of society and traditional cultural space of a country. Virtual communities influence counterculture and can be dangerous to traditional culture and conventional understanding of national security.

The structure of the article is aimed at presenting the issues of the analysis most logically and conveniently. The first section exhibits the degree of problem development focusing on the contexts of interpretations and definitions, mixed problems that were partially out of the scholars' attention. The second section describes virtual communities in the value system of postmodern information culture, representing the understanding of the axiological layer of significance and value of a virtual phenomenon in postmodern culture. The third section highlights incentives for creating virtual community culture, the determinants of a virtual subculture, and its specific values. The final section studies the problem of virtual communities as a postmodern version of the third-place culture (counterculture). It focuses on the problem of mixed sociality and hidden identity as a potential threat to national security.

## 3. Discussion and Results

### 3.1 The degree of problem development – analytical discourse

Howard Rheingold introduced the term virtual community in his well-known work of the same title and defined it as follows: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." [26]. The sociological analysis traces the research on virtual communities to Ferdinand Tönnis, who tried to distinguish between society and community [27]. Tönnis defines community as an association that emerged naturally and that has its values whereas society is a structure of conscious formation grounded on rational approach and logic. Later his ideas were further developed by sociologists Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others. Bell and Newby in their work "Community Studies" (1971) mention 94

definitions of the term 'community', which are all different, yet they share some similarity too. This similarity is well expressed by Barry Wellman, who claims that "Communities are networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity." [34]. Affleck and Kvan believe that "Virtual communities are usually formed organically by individuals who group together as a result of similar interests and depend on active participation, unlike many other informal learning environments in which the audience is traditionally passive or nominative groups in which audience members behave as collective individuals" [1].

However, modern communities (and virtual communities, too) should not be reduced to clubs that unite people with common interests. Some scholars believe that modern society is changing into a community or, basically, into a network of communities [7]. Some authors study virtual community as a way of communication and education (Korhonen, Taylor, and others). Such networking proves to be efficient due to the specific structure of the network – all participants, as a well-known American sociologist Nicholas A. Christakis claims, can add to the common goal, which makes the communication and results of this communication much more productive. Thus, online communication in virtual communities has some winning positions when compared to conventional offline mode. Among other advantages, sociologists mention the direct and indirect influence of co-workers and their circles, mutual adaptation, unique cooperative spirit, incredibly fast communication of ideas, and combinatorial increase in communicative behavioural stereotypes [17].

Ukrainian research has recently developed an interest in studying various aspects of virtual communities – their creation and operation. Works of Kravets, Serov, Peleshchyn focus on types of virtual communities and their peculiarities [25]. Fedushko analyses demographics (age and gender) when discussing online communication as well as language characteristic features related to these criteria [23]. Tymovchak-Maksymets considers communicative interaction in virtual communities as an opportunity for a polylogue and a topical dispute that will meet its author's desire for information [32, 33]. Maletka considers the phenomenon of video games as the embodiment of a multicultural cross-section of ideological innovations [13, 14].

In a universal context, there are reasons to state the multivector nature of the modern analytical discourse on the problems of information culture. Yalçın Yalçınkaya remarks that "Information becomes energy and the spectrum of the information is expanding in the vertical rise through the digital culture" [37]. It is necessary to consider information in a broad context as "the concept of information presents a complex body of knowledge

incorporating various views coming from such diverse fields as natural, social and computer science" [8]. A lot of theories prove the fact that information culture and information systems are "such a wide-ranging and multifaceted discipline that it is neither possible nor desirable for there to be a single, unified conception of information" [22].

### 3.2 Virtual communities in the value system of postmodern information culture

Cultural innovations today can turn society into communities. It has become especially common due to the era of information culture due to the development of information society. Different factors caused the transition to this new era, including new technologies and communication systems that can create interactive information and communication context. This transition was also a reason for changing the concept of culture in general, its moral values, language. It worked as a background for a new structure of socializing and creating a new personality identity. In the post-industrial world, human existence is determined by technologic characteristics, which help make the socio-cultural environment a virtual space. Also, a lot of usual social techniques and technologies fade, which means an individual has to adapt to a new socio-cultural reality with a new set of tools. Many cultural anthropologists, in particular Robert Leonard Carneiro, believe that new information, communication, and genetic technologies change the content of the following notions – "information, networks, identity". He raises issues that are important for every individual today. The person in the world covered with information networks must be ready for a number of scenarios, which sets new challenges and threats. Along with the opportunities for learning and experience, virtual communities and information culture require new levels of national security in terms of information. So, the world of information culture can become either a society of education or a society of secrecy. Carneiro can see the future of virtual communities in developing democratic traditions and strengthening social connections, which may result in vanishing or, vice versa, a revival of citizenship [5]. All these concerns are reasonable. We cannot reject the evidence of technological advances and the results of technical progress. However, the enormous number of innovations has adversely affected people in communications. The rules and standards of interpersonal communication have recently changed. Self-organized spaces of computer information worlds with their symbols have the strongest effect on a person, community, a whole society, and even humanity.

The virtual environment may have different contexts and aims. Thus, it can settle into various forms. Virtual space can work as a space for communication and

information or as a creative and artistic space. It can combine role modelling and, simultaneously, have elements of real life, which will enhance the sharpness of the current situation and will make this space a unique educational community. The virtual environment has resources to shape a unique mental mode that will help an individual to discover new emotions and feelings. The boundaries between real and surreal are blurred in a virtual community. Virtual space may also be a quasi-society with unrealistic social and cultural space, which is an existential mode of the so-called “homo virtualis” [2].

Virtual communities are characterized by bipolar context, which does not have unambiguous clarity. The information society today with its multiple realities has great opportunities for an individual who can realize these realities and use their resources via various technologies. At the same time, this individual is included in the realities and can comprehend the primary nature of real life in the physical and socio-cultural space. However, the digital information environment and virtual communities where communication is formed with technical means may substitute the reality in the future. It will blur the understanding of the factor of relativity. So, these communities, which appear and develop very intensively, will affect the formation of identity more actively.

### 3.2 Incentive resources for creating virtual community culture

New communication and information spaces cause the formation of virtual communities. These modern spaces, or environments, arrange communication between individuals via cutting-edge technology of multimedia, interactivity, low costs, and anonymity. Such global social communities are created when the users with common interests find points of intersection – this includes an interest in a certain topic of discussion, activity, educational or scientific area, conferences, etc.). Common interests work as a background for developing community structure and community values, which can be accepted as new values of existence by the member of this community. “These values may be applied in different ways within the community, but they ultimately chart the field’s direction” [12]. Later, these values may substitute values in real life. Values and interests are distinguishing features for classification of the virtual communities. There are communities of shared political, economic, socio-cultural, technological ideas/opinions. There are communities of fans or people with the same experience (professional, social, etc.). Geographically communities can unite people of the same local area. Virtual marketplaces unite users with commercial interest – people sell and buy goods, offer business services, find employees, promote their brands, establish partnerships. Commercial or business communities can be open for everyone or have a rule of

invitation by its valid member. This makes the space reliable and supportive. Social communities unite people with similar life situations or experiences – health, career, social status issues. These groups can help their members overcome the rough and tumble of life (loss of a family member, diseases, lack of communication in the family, breakup, divorce, etc.). Religion has always been about communities of various types. It would use all types of available media to promote its ideas. In modern era, virtual religious communities are “creating new social practices of communication” [6]. Finally, we can single out virtual countries – they work as a type of virtual community that operates differently from other communities due to the risk and security factors.

Virtual communities create a special subculture in cyberspace. “Many social stereotypes prejudices, and status conformities, which act as communication barriers in real life, lose their significance, because the Internet users cannot see their interlocutors in cyberspace – cannot know their gender, age, national and racial origin, their occupation, appearance, and income. The author can make these data public only if he (she) wants to do so.” [31]. Operating as a kind of subculture, a virtual community eventually reflects a rather negative context of its activities. We can observe a formation of a new generation of people who identify themselves with other people co-existing in two spaces – social and virtual. However, they find it better to work, communicate, and relax in online network mode. What is more, these people are not a part of socially ignored groups or oppressed minorities. Little by little virtual culture shape a personality whose development to a great extent is defined by the network intercommunion and its rules.

The culture of virtual communities influences children and young adults. Their mental health is still sensitive, and virtual reality with its personality clones and an ability to change roles and personalities as often as one can cause a further loss of interest in “real reality” [28]. It does not mean, however, that other age groups do not enter virtual space. They communicate in this imaginary reality and often take it as genuine socio-cultural reality. The more time they spend online, the better they understand the rules of communication in the virtual community. According to Dziundziuk, this is the reason for enhancing the coherence of virtual space, which increases the sense of presence in a different reality.

Thus, it is necessary to find out and analyze the possible negative effects society may experience due to virtual communities’ operation. Also, today it becomes vitally important to foresee risks and threats of virtual communities for the national security of a country. Experts repeat that “the number of crimes and losses from cyberattacks will only grow because offenders usually are at least one step ahead of the mechanisms which government authorities and individuals have to prevent

and solve such crimes” [19]. There are various approaches to handle these issues. Rheingold and Meyrowitz have a negative, or pessimistic, opinion on the effect virtual communities have on people. They conclude that virtual communities isolate people, deprive them of face-to-face interaction, cause moral degradation, lowering ethical standards [26, 21]. However, this approach proves the standard attitude to new things – in this case, it is the rejection of a new way of socialization in a new type of society – the information society. Another approach considers the formation of virtual communities as a logical reaction to the disintegration of traditional communities worldwide and conventional communication.

### 3.2 Virtual communities as a postmodern version of the third-place culture (counterculture) – a potential threat to information and national security

The culture and features of virtual communities are often related to the phenomenon of the third place. It is a space different both from work and home – some public areas such as café, restaurant, club, etc. In the process of suburbanization, the third-place has lost its position, and the communities related to them have dissolved too. However, the need for communities has not disappeared. The solution was found due to online network development and the formation of virtual communities. All ways of social exclusion (social status, gender, religion, race, etc.) decline in importance within the frame of virtual community [10].

An individual feels free of social prejudice in a virtual community as all types of social barriers come up as a result of the physical realization of identity. On the other hand, an individual must understand the rules of the community and respect them. This is the only condition this individual can become a member of the community. Also, virtual communities (and their participants) are rarely affected by external factors. Self-regulated network spaces define the vector of their formation and evolution. All this tells us about a new cultural unity of people. Of course, people in these communities have common interests and communication. However, their communication does not follow the strict rules even if there are certain rules established for each community. With a new name (nickname), an individual acquires a new role and makes new connections with other individuals that may find their realization into the real world (or may stay forever in the framework of a virtual community). Such individual “observes the outside world, communicates, and feels a strong, confident, energetic, and interesting person in this process.” [20]. Some researchers see a hazard in the increasing significance of nickname phenomenon because of changing, mixing, or neglecting local anthroponymy, which undermines the grounds of

civil society, local spiritual foundations, and traditional vision of a country as a guarantor of national security [15]. The postmodern reality of virtual communities attracts people with new values and new foundations. In virtual space an individual gradually loses fulfilment in the society. Also, there has been a substitution of personal freedom for access to information and opportunities for communication. The attitude to this information, its quality assessment changes dramatically. When social space becomes a virtual environment with free access to information of different value, vitally important information is mixed and often confused with minor, or insignificant, information. This variety of information, the increase of its flow, and, at the same time, the decrease of the channels of social communication complicates interaction and self-development [36]. This is very alarming. The number of people who tend to spend their time in virtual communities rather than in the real world is increasing. Now they implement their desires, dreams, and achieve goals in cyberspace (which adversely affects social culture and society in general). Culture of any society grounds on the freewill and creativity of its individuals. But it is a challenge for virtual citizens. Internet addiction, also known as Internet Addiction Disorder, is the destructive result of the virtual environment and an increase of computerized communication (chats, forums, messengers, computer games, teleconferences, etc.) [2].

A lot of people now combine social and virtual time, so that we can now talk about anonymous sociability. While spending time in the virtual world, an individual loses social features in the real world – this is a process of desocialization. On the other hand, it is usual for cyberspace to offer interaction on various platforms and levels. In virtual mode, communication becomes non-linear, complex, multilevel – for example, a user can synchronously take part in Zoom teleconference, communicate in direct messages, send emails, check social networks, and interact with the real world. It may seem captivating, yet some scholars see here a threat: the real is replaced by the virtual. It is enough to show up on the screen to attend a meeting; it is possible to have several accounts, which replaces identity with anonymity. The disguise becomes regular, or, as Leshchev remarks, “...it is a diagnosis of the information society where what is said is more important than how it is said, where the locutionary prevails over the illocutionary...” [18]. Risks and dangers of quasi-society must be the foreground matters for the country that cares for its citizens. Society is responsible for communication forms, information sharing, models of behavior that exist in virtual communities, which values shape the cultural development of a personality.

New values, risks, norms define the new challenges that arise in front of national and global security. “The representatives of postmodernism reveal that everyday

threats, despite their virtual reality, give rise to the need to develop new, effective technologies for ensuring personal security in modern conditions” [16]. The radical wing believes that virtual communities pave the way for people who want to get together aiming to seize power [35]. Terrorists and rebels use a virtual environment to create private circles to discuss plans related to criminal and illegal actions. This sort of communication can include people from all over the world. Being an attractive and useful tool in educational and business spheres, the online community may be a threat to national security. Comparing offline and online from this point of view, the latter is far more dangerous to country security and authorities. Core government basis can be ruined by virtual communities. So-called virtual governments possess many of the attributes of the state organization such as government, laws, flag, and coat of arms). There is no territory. But it is a question of time. If virtual citizens of such a “country” purchase some area, an island, for instance, this will be the last piece of a puzzle to create a traditional country. And not necessarily this territory must be on the Earth. If it becomes a new reality, people will refuse their traditional citizenship in favor of the virtual one [10]. This can cause the situation when countries will lose their citizens because they will belong to another country (virtual) run by another government (virtual).

Virtual governments just as virtual communities have a structure of democratic theocracy with the leader, or ‘god’, or moderator in charge, who can exclude any member of this community with one word or rather one click. However, the rest of the members of the group (the citizens of the virtual country) have equal rights, obligations, and opportunities no matter which status they have in the real community. In case of having wicked designs in mind, the chief of this community can come into possession of a great number of citizens who share the same values and are ready to defend them. This army can quickly share information and get ready to implement any decisions of the moderator. That is how the flash mob operates. Small and large groups of people quickly get together to perform a well-planned and staged activity. Of course, often flash mob is considered as a phenomenon of the modern mass culture with young people responding to someone’s invitation to go to a certain place at a certain time and perform certain actions. Usually, these actions attract the attention of the public, surprise or shock the passers-by. These people come from the same community and have common interests and the share same values. Flash mob philosophy is inherent in virtual culture. From this point of view, this phenomenon is not dangerous. Flash mobs tend to pursue a cultural and informative goal. They are seldom involved in political activity. The participants of this movement see attention as their main task. They do not want to be a security hazard. However, sociologists can see a potential risk to security due to the

hypothetical opportunity to summon a lot of people together with a certain task in mind. It is easy to do technologically, and it can have consequences – socially and politically. This task may be far from a cultural or social event. Using the values of a virtual culture, the leaders of the virtual community have all the technological tools to arrange riots in the real community and create an emergency for national security. Predictably, new technologies that will be able to organize people (in the real world and virtual space) according to virtual culture values are to appear in the nearest future.

Certain tools related to ‘information’ weapons (e.g., psychological operations) have been in use for a while now. Specific computerized tools came into operation only some decades ago. Yet they are all based on the same idea of indirect impact on the tangible world.

The third-party can influence the information image of a country, social consciousness, and subconsciousness. It threatens national security because it tries to force the third party’s opinion, values, solutions, and opinions on the country to control its political, economic, and social activities. Thus, it threatens the state authority of any country implemented via information resources [4].

#### 4. Conclusion

National security is a matter of primary attention of any country. Information security today is an integral part of national security that plays an important role in a country’s national and foreign affairs, effective resolution of conflicts, settling various issues in the political, economic, cultural, spiritual, and social life of a country. Information opposition is a strategic tool that can help to find a solution without introducing any armed forces. That is why it becomes vital that a country studies and controls the activities of virtual communities. It is not possible to perform this control directly, but government authorities should rather stand for partners when creating such communities and making them operational. For instance, government platforms can offer virtual space for various needs, including social advertising, promotions, and free information place. The operational activity of virtual communities needs special monitoring. Today, with a great influence coming from so-called opinion leaders, the government should have its own “agents” who will take an active part in the activity of the virtual community to monitor the current situation there, evaluate the risks, and minimize threats. The government must realize a potential hazard coming from quasi-society and take responsibility for behavioral roles, cultural norms, and values reflected in communication. Nowadays information security is a pre-condition for a successful society. If a government can secure information systems to ensure smooth operations of state activities, this government and society are ready for a partnership in the information world.

The information policy and communication culture of a country always support national security. Any country must provide for the defense of rights of all citizens, any individual who is a subject of information relations. The authorities face a challenge in establishing the correct information security of a country and setting the priorities (creating and resuming operation of key security elements in the information world, making these operations real and effective to support the activity of the country and its security system, predicting new threats and prioritizing them according to their potential impact). Virtual communities are a methodologically instrumental, psycho-cultural, spiritual, and ideological fact of postmodernity. The potential activities of these communities can be accepted, condemned, ignored, or used as a multivector methodological phenomenon. Almost every person, in one way or another, is adjacent to the virtual culture and has own experience of belonging to virtual communities and reasons for refusing to participate in their activities any longer. One terminates this activity unconsciously, indirectly while another one acts consciously and pragmatically. Virtual communities are a powerful factor in the communicative culture of our time and a serious player in the arena of political culture and security analytics.

Each virtual community has its own character, issues, psycho-cultural indicators, etc. A virtual community like handwriting can be beautifully calligraphic, flexible, harmonious, and understandable. And vice versa, it can be broken, crossed out, traumatic, unhealthy, illegible, and incomprehensible. A virtual community can become a protective screen against routine and ideological waste; it can become a tool for protecting an individual from the violent actions of society. At the same time, a virtual community can painfully affect those who seek close and trustworthy friendships.

All these factors make the ecology of communication culture a significant vector of interest. Virtual communities and any other new cultural groups should support the standards and values of communication to keep the continuity of the past and set the trends for the future.

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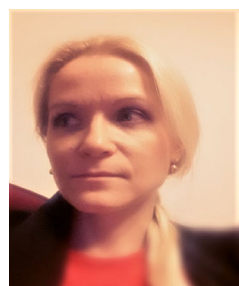
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