Methodological approach to qualitative research of depersonalization of moral agent in online environment

Františka Tomoriová

Comenius University in Bratislava

Abstract: Moral agent in online environment behaves differently than he would behave in offline environment. Moral agent's actions may seem to him to be not real and dream-like, perceived even as a role play and not part of real life (Floridi 2013). The reasons are numerous, for example anonymity in online environment. Depersonalization has been studied using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, focusing mainly on research of verbal communication in online environment in comparison with offline environment. However there seems to be more space for research done in the area of situational context and in the context of information ethics.

1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies have become part of everyday information behaviour of masses of users. User spends hours daily in specific information environment, online environment, which is different in comparison to offline environment. The term used in the paper is moral agent instead of the user, because moral agency stresses ethical dimension of the problem.

There are certain characteristics (for example environmental and psychological) that cause differences in moral agent's behaviour. He may behave differently online than he would behave in similar situation in offline environment. Terms such as flaming, trolling, hating, stalking and cyberbullying are well known and experienced on daily basis. These differences in behaviour were studied and researched as "online disinhibition effect" in social psychology or depersonalization of moral agent in the context of information ethics.

Depersonalization of moral agent is quite interesting phenomenon. Researching the problem may give answers to important question such as why the user behaves differently when he is in online environment in comparison with his behaviour in offline environment. As Joinson (2007, p. 75) commented on user's behaviour on the Internet: "They might be an outrageous flirt online, while being painfully shy offline." The user on the Internet is human moral agent. His behaviour online causes moral good or moral evil and as moral agent he is responsible for his actions. Specific characteristics of online environment cause that moral agent may not rightly perceive impact of his actions, which is quite difficult to predict in online environment. It is caused by information and communication technologies, we are not able to predict nor direction of actions towards possible moral patients (receivers of the action), nor the range (Floridi 2013). Moral agent in online environment therefore ought to be more careful and perceptive about his actions while on the other hand he is quite often more daring and courageous than in offline environment.

Reasons for depicted differences in behaviour are numerous. One of them is non-materiality of online environment, which seems as dream-like and not real and so do seem also actions of moral agent in online environment (Floridi 2013). The other cause is anonymity and connected problem of responsibility in online environment which is sometimes difficult to account for. There is also distance or some kind of barrier created between moral agent and his actions which do not seem as a part of reality (Dreyfus 2009). Floridi (2014) perceives reality in connection to interactivity - real is what is interactive, real action is interactive one. According to Suler (2004) another reason is separating one's actions in online environment from their identity. The user on the Internet perceives himself as insignificant part of the mass and likewise he perceives also his actions. Wallace (2008) describes this as deindividuation of moral agent. There are also personal causes which play an important role: moral agent's feelings and personal needs; someone may be more open and emotional while on the other side someone else is usually more restricted. It is tightly connected to personality styles (Suler 2004).

The aim of the paper is to describe depersonalization of moral agent in online environment from different perspectives taken by experts in the fields such as psychology (Suler 2004, Joinson 2007), information ethics (Floridi 2013), describe various qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to researching the problem (with emphasis on used qualitative research methods) and outline ideas for research that could be done in the area of depersonalization of moral agent in online environment.

2. Depersonalization of Moral Agent in Online Environment: Used Qualitative Research Methods

Depersonalization of moral agent or online disinhibition effect (term used e.g. by Suler (2004) describes specific information behaviour of moral agent in online environment, differences in his behaviour in online environment in

comparison with his behaviour in offline environment, which tends to be more open and courageous. For better understanding of the problem in Fig. 1 below is created visualization of depersonalization.

Depersonalization is illustrated as a blurred barrier between moral agent and his actions in online environment, resulting in weakened self-awareness of moral agent in online environment. The main cause is the anonymity in online environment which encourages moral agent to behave more openly and courageously. Important part of moral agent's daily information behaviour in online environment are in this context moral values incorporated in the field of information ethics, the need for which has become quite evident both in online and offline environment. Information ethics can be defined as application of ethical theory on information (Buchanan and Henderson, 2009). It is the field of study of ethical aspects of information lifecycle both in online and offline information environment.
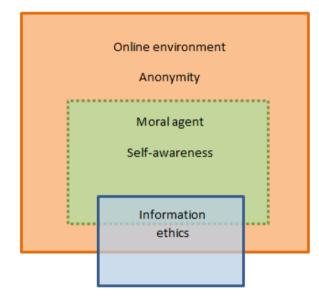

Figure 1 Depersonalization of moral agent in online environment

Joinson (2007) described online disinhibition effect as the difference in the behaviour of people on the Internet from the psychological point of view. As examples in differences in people's behaviour online names cases such as gossiping online, forwarding one's e-mails online (when they would usually act more discretely) or seeking online specific kind of information they would not

seek offline, such as pornography. Joinson (2007) also gives notice that definitions of online disinhibition effect are insufficient and the term is often used just as synonym to flaming, using impolite statements or exclamation marks. They are focused on demonstration of disinhibition effect in online communication.

Floridi (2013) views the causes in differences in moral agent's behaviour online in the perception of their online activities as games or intellectual challenges, as some kind of role-play. The reasons mentioned by him are: remoteness of the processes (already mentioned distance), immaterial nature of the environment and virtual interaction with other faceless moral agents. The online environment is being perceived by moral agent as magical, dream-like or fictional, "… agents may wrongly assume that their actions are as virtual and insignificant the killing of enemies in a computer game" (Floridi 2013, p. 59). The main reason is diminished direct responsibility of moral agent for his actions in online environment. Luciano Floridi discusses differences in the behaviour in online and offline environment in the context of information ethics and uses the term depersonalization, which is used also in this paper.

Joinson (2007) focuses on differences in behaviour in offline and online environment specifically in processes of communication and information seeking. According to Joinson and Paine (2007) it is important to also ask to whom the user is anonymous and in what form, because the increased surveillance on the Internet caused the "pseudonymity", when anonymity on the Internet is not secured in many cases; there are data mining techniques, cookies etc. They stress the role of gatekeepers who keep secure private information about users in the processes of registration, logs. It is needed to look also on wider context of the problem. There are three critical aspects that are needed to be taken into account: trust (the user trusts gatekeeper to keep his personal information safe in exchange for nickname and pseudonymity), control (the user has his online communication and actions under control, he can choose what kind of information and when he will disclose) and costs and benefits (online environment reduces the cost of action in comparison with action in offline environment, e. g. reducing the shame or embarrassment while stalking some person). These aspects are connected also with very easy accessibility of various kinds of information online.

Depersonalization of moral agent has been researched using different qualitative and quantitative research methods. Research has been focused mainly on flaming, verbal computer-mediated communication in comparison with verbal communication in traditional environment. Kiesler et al. (1984) researched different levels of uninhibited verbal behaviour in comparison with four different conditions: face-to-face communication, anonymous and non-anonymous computer conferencing and email. In the research groups of three, participants were asked to solve a dilemma and reach consensus. Researchers found the highest levels of uninhibited verbal behaviour in the cases when

computers were used for solving the dilemma and the interaction was anonymous. Castellá et al. (2000) used similar methodological approach to researching flaming, discussion of a dilemma using different communication platforms: e-mail, video-conferencing and face-to-face communication. The results showed that flaming occurred mostly in text-based discussions. Coleman et al. (1999) analysed discussions of 58 participants in face-to-face communication and 59 participants in computer-mediated communication. Positive or negative statements were rated with number 1, statements containing criticism and disagreement were rated with number 2 and hostile statements were rated with number 3. All cases of negative statements rated with number 3 occurred in computer-mediated communication. Aiken and Waller (2000) used the method of case study. The subject of the research was discussion of two groups of students with controversial issues such as removing of president Clinton from his office and local parking problem. Flaming comments were written in both cases by a small group of people, which confirmed the importance of personal characteristics in case of flaming.

There are also quantitative approaches to researching depersonalization, such as quantitative measuring of self-disclosure, when user discloses personal information about himself in online environment. There are however according to Joinson (2007) certain complications in the used method: it may not be always clear what self-disclosure actually in given situation is, for example expressing opinion in certain cases may or may not be counted as self-disclosure. Another complication can be seen in different levels of disclosed personal information for example between season of birth and actual age. Joinson (2001) used 7-point Likert scale expressing the vulnerability of utterance. But as Joinson (2007) stresses, it is important to incorporate also interactional context for measuring self-disclosure. Parks and Floyd (1996) asked participants of research to report the level of self-disclosure in their online relationships using self-report, however the lack of context is the problem also in this research.

There has been paid quite much attention in research of specific problems rooted in depersonalization of moral agent in online environment, for example of open communication, self-disclosure of moral agent in online environment. Research has been focused also on individual's characteristics from psychological point of view. There has been paid attention to environmental context, specific characteristics of online environment that encourage more open behaviour of moral agent, by authors such as Floridi (2013), Dreyfus (2009), Kiesler et al. (1984), Castellá et al. (2000).

Suler (2004) names these factors of depersonalization from psychological point of view: dissociative anonymity, invisibility caused by faceless communication and closely related to anonymity, asynchronicity in communication, solipsistic introjection, when moral agent views others through their representation in online communication, dissociative imagination, that implies creating imaginary

characters that exist in different space separated from real world responsibilities, minimization of status and authority and individual differences and predispositions. Listed factors are of psychological or environmental character, author stresses their importance: "...the self does not exist separate from the environment in which the self is expressed" (p. 325).

When we think of differences in moral agent's behaviour we may come to realize that there is at least one another factor that should be taken into account, situational one. Factors of depersonalization that have been researched are of psychological and environmental character. These factors describe psychological aspects of moral agent and environmental aspects focused on environment in which is moral agent situated, how online environment can influence his actions. The context of situation proved to be important but missing part in the research done in the area, as mentioned also by Joinson (2007). Joinson and Paine (2007) encourage asking to whom is user anonymous and in what form. There are different kinds of situations that may encourage depersonalization of moral agent or not, different activities where could be found differences, for example chatting, online shopping, writing emails, information seeking etc., whether the situation is formal or informal. The situational factor appears to be not less important than psychological and environmental ones. Psychological and environmental factors have been researched but situational context is an area that that deserves more attention of researchers. The important questions we should ask are not just how characteristics of online environment influence moral agent in case of depersonalization, what are these characteristics but also what kind of action seems to favour depersonalized behaviour of moral agent in online environment; compare different kinds of activities of moral agent in online environment in the context of depersonalization. The aim could be researching moral agent's individual experience in online environment in comparison with different activities of formal or informal character. Activities suitable for research could be for example activities connected to communication (chatting, writing emails, writing comments on social site) and/or other kind of activities such as information seeking (accessing pornographic material online), cyberstalking and cyberbullying.

Depersonalization of moral agent in online environment has in comparison with research of disinhibited behaviour also moral implications (see Figure 1). That is stressed in studying depersonalization in the context of information ethics, for example as Floridi (2013). The question we should ask, answer and research is: are moral values applied differently in online environment? Another factor we can add to already mentioned psychological, environmental and situational one is factor of information ethics (Figure 2). All these factors have important role in depersonalization of moral agent in online environment.
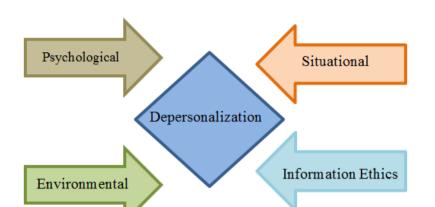
Figure 2 Factors of depersonalization of moral agent in online environment

3.   Conclusions

Researching depersonalization of moral agent in online environment can help us better understand phenomenon connected to communication such as trolling, flaming or another kinds of activities, for example information seeking, cyberbullying or cyberstalking. These activities are of negative character, may cause severe harm so there is need to research possible causes and factors that may influence depersonalized information behaviour of moral agent. Research done in the area was focused mainly on psychological and environmental factors of depersonalization of moral agent in online environment. There is need to focus also on other factors: situational and ethical ones.

The psychological factor, environmental factor, situational factor and factor of information ethics need to be taken into account when researching depersonalization of moral agent in online environment.

References

Aiken, M., Waller, B. (2000). Flaming among first-time group support system users. *Information and Management*, 37, 95-100.

Buchanan, Elizabeth A., Henderson, Kathrine A. (2009). *Case Studies in Library and Information Science Ethics*. United States of America: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers.

Castellá, V. O., Abad, A. M. Z., Alonso, F. P., Silla, J. M. P. (2000). The influence of familiarity among group members, group atmosphere, and assertiveness on uninhibited behavior through three different communication media. *Computers in Human Behavior,* 16, 141-159.

Coleman, L. H., Paternite, C. E., Sherman, R. C. (1999). A reexamination of deindividuation id synchronous computer-mediated communication. *Computers in Human Behavior,* 15, 51-65.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. (2009). *On the Internet: Thinking in Action*. United Kingdom, London: Taylor & Francis Ltd.

Floridi, L. (2013). *The Ethics of Information.* United States of America: Oxford University Press.

Floridi, L. (2014). *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Joinson, A. N. (2007). Disinhibition and the Internet (J. Gackenbach, Ed.). USA: Elsevier Inc.

Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self-awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 177 – 192.

Joinson, A. N. and Paine, C. B. (2007). *Self-disclosure, Privacy and the Internet*. (2017, April 20). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249697543_Self-disclosure_Privacy_and_the_Internet

Kiesler, S., Siegel, J. McGuire, Timothy W. (1984). Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication. *American Psychologist*, 39(10), 1123-1134.

Parks, M. R., Floyd, K. (1996). Making friends in cyberspace. *Journal of Communication*, 46, 80-97.

Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 7(3), 321-325.

Wallace, K. (2008). Online Anonymity (H. T. Tavani, Ed.). United States of America: John Wiley & Sons, Inc