The Influence of the Destructive Internet Content on the Legal Awareness of the Youth

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Abstract. The paper analyzes the ways in which destructive internet content influences the legal awareness of youth. Young people use the Internet most actively, so they are the most subject to the influence of both positive and negative internet trends. Various means of legal education will be inefficient if the character and learning styles of the younger generation are not taken into consideration. The authors define the specifics of the perception of the information by Generation Z, aka “zoomers.” Also, they briefly survey some features of internet content, especially those that are significant for perceptual psychology. The authors draw conclusions about trends in the sphere of education, as well as offer some recommendations about how to use the knowledge of the specifics of Generation Z in the legal education process.

Keywords: Law, legal awareness, internet, social network, generation z (zoomer generation), perception of information, destructive content, higher education.

The main idea of public legal consciousness today is the law's high social value, the need for its unwavering observance, and strict adherence to legal requirements [2]. Such attitudes should be the focus of attention in young people’s legal education. However, in practice, everything is much more complicated.

The most important factor in the formation of legal awareness is legal education. Generally, legal education leads to the formation of an individual's legal consciousness and culture under the influence of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and other factors. Legal education in the narrow sense is defined by experts as a systematic, purposeful, controlled educational process of influencing people's consciousness in order to form deep and stable legal ideas, knowledge and beliefs [3]. However, the characteristics of manageability, purposefulness, and systematicity are more related to legal training, the effectiveness and scale of which for youth audiences are quite relative. Formal legal education is only one type of actual legal education, and rather narrowly focused, while sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors, among others, have much more influence on the...
youth audience, especially considering the period of impact on their consciousness. The Internet and information technologies are today the most important complex factors affecting young people's consciousness.

In a certain sense, one can say that in modern reality, an individual is responsible for his own legal education. More precisely, the main form of legal education is spontaneous self-education, which is associated with the lifestyle and typical modern youth pastimes. The main source of information for a modern person is now the Internet, so it also becomes the main “source” of the individual's legal education.

According to the Digital 2020 study, at the beginning of 2020, more than four and a half billion people in the world are using the Internet, and the audience of social networks has exceeded the mark of 3.8 billion. Statistics show that almost 60% of the world's population is already online. In this regard, experts have very reasonably concluded that by mid-2020, half of all people on the planet will use social networks. In Russia, the number of Internet users was 118 million. This means that 81% of all Russians use the Internet.

Of course, the most active Internet users are the younger generation. They are the first to pick up trends and start using them in their daily lives. This is quite logical, since users from 13 to 24 years old are the first digital generation, whose growing up was inseparable from technology. These are the zoomers, Generation Z. In their habits, values, and behavior online, they are fundamentally different from millennials (Generation Y) and previous generations. Most importantly, they spend much more time online than do 25–34 year-old users.

The main source of information, news, communication, and entertainment for the new generation is social networks. According to the Digital 2020 study mentioned above, social networks have already overtaken search engines as the most popular way to get information online in the group of 16- to 24-year-olds.

The zoomer generation is receiving information in a whole new way. These features of perception change both the form and content of information intended for young people. A different perception of information is not just a fact, it is important for their psychology. Far-reaching conclusions follow from this, and these conclusions affect various spheres of social life, including the educational system, the media, public administration, the cultural industry, the labor market, and the economy. Let's take a closer look at these features of information perception by Generation Z.

First, they are visual. Video blogs have become the main source of information and acquaintance with any material. Online videos perform entertainment, education, and many other functions for teenagers and young men.

Second, unlike other generations, Generation Z has the property of “photographing” information. Voluminous research and detailed articles are a thing of the past. The picture is what is really relevant now.

This is due to the active spread of so-called “memes” in the Network. The history of Internet memes began around 2006. Almost instantly, they gained the attention of the younger generation, becoming more widespread every year. The last few years have been the peak of funny pictures’ popularity. Now a meme is not just a reason to smile; it is a source of news, a popularizer of science and art, a way to express oneself, even a tool for passing exams of varying complexity. Their specificity lies in the almost lightning-fast reflection of reality: one minute this or that event happened, the next minute the “meme” on this occasion has already spread on the Network.

For more than a decade, young people have become accustomed to this way of perceiving information. As a rule, the text contains a lot of additional information; to remember them, you need to understand what exactly you need to remember. The picture makes it easier to perceive: it reflects the text essence and, therefore, is better remembered. “I saw ("I 8photographed") a picture = I remembered the material.” This is a new reality formula for zoomers. The consequences will be discussed below.

Third, zoomers are influenced by video bloggers. Young people are guided by the recommendations of bloggers not only when buying goods and choosing services, but also when determining the concept of their own appearance, attractiveness, and “status” ways of spending time, attitudes toward things or people when forming assessments and beliefs, life expectations, etc. In fact, these “opinion leaders” form the worldviews and mentality of young people; legal training within educational institutions cannot compete with them. Moreover, the blogger's competence and qualifications, the
degree of their involvement in the topic under discussion, and quality of the information provided, remains “behind the scenes,” i.e., almost without affecting the audience’s trust.

Fourth, Generation Z consumes information very quickly. This factor is fundamentally important, since the Internet and, in particular, social networks are quite a toxic and stressful environment. Facebook and Instagram posts, for example, generate not only joyful emotions, but also envy. Read messages in a social network, V Kontakte, often go unanswered, and Facebook posts draw a lot of negative comments. All of this becomes an occasion for emotions, changes in self-esteem, and the search for new forms of psychological protection.

Of course, we do not pretend to put an end to the controversial impact of social networks on young people’s psyche. It’s necessary to understand that many people perceive criticism completely indifferent- ly. For some, ignoring and being optional in virtual communication is already a “new etiquette” and goes unnoticed against the background of many communications. For some, “a better life” becomes a motivation, but not a reason for envy. For some, but not for all. Virtual communication carries over all the characteristics of live “offline” communication, including needs and expectations. Consequently, all the complexes and experiences that could be inherent in an ordinary young person in the communication process will manifest themselves in virtual communication. On the other hand, the distance and isolation of the subject during Internet communication, as well as occasional anonymity, bring completely new features to the interaction, manifestations, and consequences of which have not yet been studied. Such communication conditions contribute to forming a false sense of security and impunity, a loss of responsibility and empathy toward others, and a manifestation of selfishness and aggression. All of this suggests that the experience of communication in social networks (and virtual space in general) can be very traumatic.

Associate Professor Christian Mayer of Bamberg University, who collected data from Facebook users, drew the following conclusions about the impact of social networks on users’ emotional states and behaviors. “Social networks offer such a wide range of functions that they simultaneously act as stress factors and as a way to distract from this stress,” says the scientist. When people use [different features] of the same platforms in order to cope with stress, they eventually develop compulsive behavior, and with it addiction is developing.6

Considering the speed of information consumption, unpleasant impressions, reproduced behaviors/responses and actions to overcome stress are remembered and very quickly become habits.

The speed of information consumption has two types of consequences: emotional and psychological (mentioned above), and rational. At the rational level, the early-formed speed of information perception (as a vision, in a single bright, simplified way) negatively affects other intellectual operations. Instant perception does not involve analysis, comparison, critical reflection, correlation with one’s experience and the formation of one’s own opinion. As a result, such a feature of perception will prevent the practical application of information, its transformation into knowledge, and useful skills for other life situations. In addition, it seems that the speed of perception without proper completeness of content perception makes it difficult to form a systematic thought process and perception of reality, already a serious problem in society. Insufficient development of system thinking does not allow for forecasting and planning on a personal and social scale, to perceive the whole picture and recognize all the influencing factors. It generates short-sighted and obviously erroneous decisions. Whether this is the case, we won’t know for years or decades, when the typical representatives of Generation Z will fill the labor market and reach the level of decision-making on a social scale.

But, even if such negative forecasts are not justified (let’s hope), the conclusion at the moment is obvious: the rapid consumption of information (including toxic information) leads to an instant and uncritical assimilation of destructive attitudes.

By themselves, the features of perception are unappreciated, in the sense that they can lead to both positive and negative consequences in different areas. Naturally, the peculiarities of perception generated by environmental factors allow us to form some fundamentally new skills and also force us to change the overall standards of activity in some areas. But this is a separate topic of research. In this paper, identifying the mechanisms of the destructive content impact, we will focus on the possible negative consequences that may be associated with the peculiarities of the Generation Z psychology.

From the point of view of schoolteachers, university teachers, and those employers who have already faced Generation Z in working relationships, representatives of the new generation are not able to concentrate on one topic for a long time, do not have stable preferences, suffer from a narrow outlook and idealize multitasking, replacing it practically with a dispersed attention and a superficial perception of any object, from educational videos to human relations.

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Another consequence of the digital age is memory loss. This applies to a certain extent to representatives of any generation who actively use the Internet in their daily business and private lives. The fact is that the need for memorization under the conditions of the information society infrastructure practically disappears. Getting this or that piece of information (note: not knowledge, but information!) is a second-long task solved with a single finger tap. In such a situation, there is simply no need to remember, since the “necessary” information is always available. Obviously, this is more relevant for zoomers than for others, because they were originally raised in this milieu of receiving information, including learning at an early age (this period is very important for the development of cognitive skills and intellectual activity).

In order to navigate a huge array of information, one needs to learn how to filter it, discarding situationally unnecessary information, which, in turn, extinguishes the desire to acquire fundamental knowledge. In this process of “natural selection,” truly necessary information is often lost, while the horizons of young people are significantly narrowed, and critical thinking does not develop.

The main reason for the formation of these perception features and their negative consequences is the huge amount of information available to zoomers and increasing every year. The more information one has, the more difficult it becomes to analyze it. Nor is there need for independent analysis, since it is much easier to find ready-made answers than to formulate independent analyses. And young people actively use it, trusting Internet sites and social networks for information which often fails to correspond to reality and common sense.

The Italian writer and philosopher Umberto Eco, in conversation with Jean-Claude Quarre, expressed the interesting idea that it is difficult for a person to abandon the mental habit of trusting a written text, such that readers habitually trusts what is written, but the former authenticity requirements are no longer imposed on what is written [4]. T.V. Chernigovskaya, a researcher in the field of neuroscience and psycholinguistics, corroborated this concept, saying, “The brain is not a sieve. We, roughly speaking, do not forget anything; we just shift most of the data to the ‘Other’ folder. Everything is left there, and it spoils all other information.” This is directly related to the digital generation: it turns out that the younger generation independently feeds the brain with false information.

This is not the worst of it, though, because, in addition to inaccurate and false information, a lot of dangerous information lies in the open access Internet, which researchers call destructive content. The General Director of the Center for the Study and Network Monitoring of the Youth Environment, during a round table in the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation said, “Currently, approximately 25 million accounts with destructive content are registered in the Russian segment of social networks”.

“Destructive content” is a fairly new concept, and even experts find it difficult to define. According to Andrey Richter, Director of the Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the law does not know such a term, and the concept is even contrary to international law. “We can only guess that we are talking,” he says, “apparently, about content that destroys something”.

In the scientific community, destructive content is understood as information with a negative assessment of a particular person, social group, and their relationships, including via the disparagement of reputation and calls for destruction [5]. These can be closed groups that call for inciting ethnic wars and sectarian strife, extremism, separatism, promoting anorexia, bulimia, suicide, etc.

According to the study “The Internet as a Medium for Satisfying the Individual’s Needs,” conducted by the State Management University, such content increases the general social level of aggression. In addition, in the Internet environment, deviations in the behavior of social network users are much more often manifested and revealed, which ultimately destroys the established norms of morality and ethics.

From all of the above, the question logically arises: how can such information affect citizens’ legal consciousness?

As already noted, the individual’s legal consciousness and legal culture are influenced by numerous factors. Moreover, what is fundamentally important, the subject’s legal consciousness is formed under the influence of his social relations and connections, and the

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8 In the Russian segment of social networks, there are about 25 million accounts with destructive content. URL: http://rapsinews.ru/human_rights_protection_news/20190530/299835996. html (accessed: 10.06.2020).


10 The influence of destructive content: a study by the GUU Department of Sociology and Psychology. URL: https://guu.ru/news_ru/58742 (accessed: 11.06.2020).
system of his value-normative orientation and social practice [3].

The fact that children and young people are much more susceptible to external influence, and lack the capacity for critical and systematic analysis, has long been known and obvious. In combination with the peculiarities of the Generation Z perception, the suggestive impact of destructive content increases significantly.

If a young person falls under the influence of, for example, extremist organizations banned in the Russian Federation, his world perception is significantly distorted. Any destructive content is characterized by extremes, radicalism of beliefs, and monovariance of behavior. If it is a religion, it is the only religion; if it is justice, it is the only concept of justice; if it is a struggle for ideals, there is only this way of struggle; if it is an expression of beliefs, only one point of view is acceptable; if someone is not with us, then they are against us...

Actually, given these characteristics, the destructive nature of its information and, more often, the ways of its presentation are manifested. The unambiguity (simplicity), brevity, imagery, and “sloganishness” of the destructive content presentation make it “meme-like,” i.e., very familiar and attractive for assimilation from the point of view of the young digital generation. The radicalism of any destructive content creates narrow thinking, rejection of the values of tolerance, pluralism, evolutionary development, and mutual respect for members of the society at large. On the other hand, destructive content, i.e., information that motivates delinquent behavior, is addressed to the consciousness with such characteristics as narrowness, sketchiness of perception, lack of tolerance, and pluralism. In other words, it is again the young who “get hit.”

In relation to the legal consciousness, the distortion of the worldview is expressed in disrespect for authority, disrespect for others and, in fact, disrespect for human life, and, as a result, in disrespect for the state and the law that protects those denied values. Such a destructive sense of justice has one feature: the people who demonstrate it do not seek to replace the denied values with others, which, in general, would be logical. Their rapid assimilation of radical attitudes is caused by short-sightedness, uncritical perception, and lack of their own beliefs’ formation.

Against this background, it is easy to deviate from the main idea of public legal consciousness, which consists in recognizing the high social value of law, the need for its unwavering observance, as well as strict adherence to the legality requirements.

The classic question of N.G. Chernyshevsky “What can we do?” is again on the historical agenda. What can we do (and what should we do) with the generation that does not want to learn the fundamentals and is focused on false knowledge?

What can we do with the daily growing number of accounts with destructive content? What should we do about the young generation’s distancing from state-legal and ethical-social issues?

The ancient Roman principle of homeopathy—“the medicine should be like illness”—is quite applicable in the social sphere. Or, we can say in another way, “If the mountain does not go to Mahomet, then Mahomet goes to the mountain.”

We mean that we should speak to the zoomers in their language. Only then will they be willing and able to understand other “social languages” (the characteristics and needs of different social groups). The development of the knowledge economy and the boom in artificial intelligence technologies are fundamentally changing global educational trends [6]. In the leading countries, the need for digital transformation of the education system has been recognized for a long time. For example, in the United States, this issue has been one of public policy priorities for more than 15 years [7].

With regard to Russia, we regret to say that sites with destructive content perfectly use the rule of Internet marketing: understanding their target audience. However, legal propaganda and legal training apparently do not possess the same understanding.

It is quite possible to resist the toxic effects of the virtual environment if a person is able to distinguish destructive ideas from constructive ones, true ideas from false. Has the person developed responsibility (for themselves, their behavior, their loved ones, at least), and formed their own beliefs and understanding of social values? The involvement of zoomers in the Internet environment makes them vulnerable to destructive influence. However, at the same time, this involvement makes them available for interaction in their Internet world and opens up new opportunities. For example, it is possible to use the “complain” or “block” function in social networks if you encounter potentially dangerous information; ignore such accounts in the same way as you would react to viral mailings; report pages with unethical or aggressive information to the competent authorities via an electronic reception. All these actions are accessible, understandable, and easy for avid Internet users. Any activity in the digital space generally appeals to both zoomers and millennials. Electronic petitions and protests, and elections and appeals, are behavioral forms that young people choose. Electronic reaction may well be a new form of social responsibility in the digital world.

However, in order to demand these actions from young people, it is necessary to properly train them. After all, conscious behavior in social networks is a reflection of upbringing and maturity in real life. There is a serious problem when the old approaches to education have exhausted their
usefulness, and new algorithms have yet to be developed.

Speaking about legal education, we should admit that the Internet contains very little information about the law that is acceptable to zoomers. Of course, there is a lot of legal information on the Internet. The question lies with the quality of the information (considering the legal reliability, and the possibility of its assimilation). For the most part, the information is incomprehensible and of little interest to digital youth. It is not enough to write good articles about the law and information quality. We need to make sure that these articles are read by the zoomer target audience.

From the point of view of legal education in general, Instagram accounts of government agencies and educational organizations can be good tools. In the conditions of active social network use, this approach of presenting information is much more effective than official sites used for the same purposes. Socially active students who present legal information through social networks in an accessible form and in a clear youthful language have all the chances for success.

The pandemic experience has revealed the underdevelopment of the online learning system in Russia. The mechanical transfer of educational activity forms to the Internet is a senseless and inefficient idea. Video conference mode will not turn a conversation or lecture into an online learning experience. Other requirements for education are due to the new generation specifics, as described above, and must be taken into account when drawing up new programs. “The digitalization of our education system cannot be limited to the creation of textbooks, digital copies, or the transition to a virtual communication environment, by replacing real teachers with online courses.” Experts have been saying so for several years. “The general approach to education should be changed” [6].

This is fully true for legal training. The society has an urgent need for a completely new quality educational product reflecting the realities of modern society. It is a product that should be developed at all levels of education, from preschool to university. Dr. E. Deming has formulated the general goal for education as follows: “…To increase the advantages and reduce the disadvantages so that all students retain the thirst to learn” [8]. Educational content in an interesting presentation, created according to the specific features of young people’s perception, may well compete with video blogs “about life and nothing.” A fresh wave of “constructive” Internet content should weaken the influence of destructive content on the legal consciousness of young people and ensure the continuity of social values.

References

Влияние деструктивного интернет-контента на правосознание молодежи¹

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Аннотация. В статье проводится анализ влияния деструктивного интернет-контента на правосознание молодежи. Молодежь — самый активный пользователь интернет-пространства, поэтому именно она оказывается наиболее восприимчивой и наиболее подвержена воздействию как позитивных, так и негативных интернет-трендов. Все формы правового воспитания будут недейственны, если не учитывать специфику молодого поколения. Авторы формулируют особенности восприятия информации «зумерами». Кроме этого, дается краткий обзор некоторых особенностей интернет-контента, которые имеют принципиальное значение с точки зрения психологии восприятия. В заключение формулируется авторская позиция по поводу тенденций развития образования, а также даются рекомендации по использованию данных о специфике поколения Z в процессе правового обучения.

Ключевые слова: право, правосознание, правовое воспитание, Интернет, социальная сеть, поколение Z (поколение зумеров), восприятие информации, деструктивный контент, высшее образование.

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