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## SOCIAL DIGITAL HERMENEUTICS OF CYBER-TEXTS

*В статье представлен анализ основных принципов объяснения и понимания, используемых в социальной цифровой герменевтике, изучающей специфику кибертекстов; выявлены отличия цифровой герменевтической парадигмы от классической герменевтики; проанализированы интерпретативные практики социальной цифровой герменевтики.*

**Ключевые слова:** социальная цифровая герменевтика, стратегия понимания, стратегия объяснения, временная дистанция, деконструкция.

*У статті проаналізовано основні принципи пояснення та розуміння, які використовують у соціальній дигітальній герменевтиці, що вивчає специфіку кібертекстів; виявлено відмінності дигітальної герменевтичної парадигми від класичної герменевтики; проаналізовано інтерпретативні практики соціальної дигітальної герменевтики.*

**Ключові слова:** соціальна дигітальна герменевтика, стратегія розуміння, стратегія пояснення, часова дистанція, деконструкція.

*The paper presents analysis of main principles of explanation and understanding used in social digital hermeneutics that studies peculiarities of cyber-texts; differences of digital hermeneutics from classical one are determined; interpretative practices of social digital hermeneutics are analyzed.*

**Keywords:** social digital hermeneutics, strategy of understanding, strategy of explanation, temporal distance, deconstruction.

In modern «electronic» society, one can observe radical transformations of text forms: a classical written text is replaced by electronic writing; a printed book is replaced by its electronic version. Electronic texts are difficult to perceive in coordinates of classical hermeneutics<sup>1</sup> (hermeneutics of F. Schleiermacher, W. Dilthey, H.-G. Gadamer, and P. Ricoeur). Electronic texts require new conditions of understanding and a new hermeneutic paradigm that R. Capurro called «digital hermeneutics». Before we describe specifics of digital hermeneutics, let us try to formulate answers to some fundamental questions.

First, is it acceptable to use the term «hermeneutics» with respect to procedures of understanding/explanation/ interpretation of electronic texts that are originated in a computer-mediated reality and are in the permanent «writing» state on-line? If we take into account the thesis of H.-G. Gadamer, according to which hermeneutics must have interest to «literary texts» having completed form, the content of which should be comprehended, then a doubt can arise whether electronic texts that are in the process of writing on-line (which are «not written yet»), which are not completed, which are not «literary» and are «wrong» and often «meaningless» from a philological point of view, can be of interest to hermeneutics or can encourage interpreters to carry out work on their understanding and

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<sup>1</sup> According to P. Ricoeur, «hermeneutics is the theory of the operation of understanding of text» [12, p.1].

interpreting. If we take into consideration the concept of «non-text» by H.-G. Gadamer that should be excluded from the field of hermeneutics (in the category of non-text, H.-G. Gadamer included «antitexts», «in which the dominant factor is the situation of interactive speaking in which they take place» [8, p.37], «pseudotexts» with «the purely operational and ritual function of exchange through speaking, whether in oral or written form» [8, p.38] and «pretexts», orientated on lack of meaning in them, on «an ideology, to stand behind their interest for which messages are pretext» [8, p.39]), then it is natural to draw an analogy between electronic texts on-line and Gadamer «antitexts» and «pseudotexts»: they both resist meaningfulness and are superficial exchange of remarks that have a «rhetorical and functional» nature. On the other hand, if we take into account the thesis of universality of hermeneutics and universality of understanding (formulated by F. Schleiermacher, H.-G. Gadamer, and P. Ricoeur), according to which hermeneutics can (and should) learn very different texts – written or oral, literary and historical, verbal and behavioral – then it is possible to accept that electronic texts created on-line can be in the focus of hermeneutics.

If we take into account the distinction between hermeneutics of text and hermeneutics of social action proposed by P. Ricoeur [13], it becomes possible to present a somewhat different theoretical justification of digital hermeneutics. Since electronic texts are specific manifestations of social actions and interactions that A. Nocera called action-in-text [11] (actions carried out in the text and by the text), they can be treated as field/space which allows to combine these two hermeneutic models. Electronic texts on-line that combine oral and written forms of the language [4] can be studied both in the context of hermeneutics of text and in the context of hermeneutics of social action that investigates specific practices of social interaction in cyber-space.

According to R. Capurro, digital hermeneutics should deal, first of all, with studying the impact/influence of cyber-communications (electronic, computer-mediated forms of interaction) on the everyday human life, on the process of self-understanding which is carried out by a modern human who is forced to exist in two dimensions – real and virtual. «Hermeneutics faces today the question of the impact of the Internet not only at all levels of society but also with regard to the self-understanding of human beings, i.e., with regard to the ontological or existential foundation of the digital construction of reality» [3]. At the same time, it is worth to extend the understanding of the digital hermeneutics subject presented by R. Capurro: it must study (understand and interpret) not only the effect of cyber-communication on real social life, but also the process of forming cyber-texts, the contents of cyber-messages themselves that require special conditions of understanding, explanation and interpretation. Following H.-G. Gadamer, it should be accepted that, similarly to classical hermeneutics, digital hermeneutics should deal with describing the general situation of understanding cybertexts: «hermeneutics is not a method for understanding but an attempt to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place» [7, p.263].

Since, to our opinion, digital hermeneutics should be interested in specifics of social actions and interactions carried out in cyberspace (as well as their impact on real social life), we will use the term «social digital hermeneutics» instead of the term «digital hermeneutics». Social digital hermeneutics is hermeneutics that specifies conditions for understanding social actions manifested in text on-line. Since there are different modes of

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work in cyberspace divided into on-line and off-line modes each of which has its own characteristics, then we can talk about different kinds of hermeneutics studying conditions of understanding texts created on-line or off-line. In our study, we focus on hermeneutics that studies electronic texts on-line.

Let us try to describe basic rules of understanding used in social digital hermeneutics. What is the position of an interpreter acting in new hermeneutical paradigm? To begin, we describe the specifics of classical hermeneutic relation to text which can be treated in two reflexive contexts. The first position can be called «strategy of understanding by F. Schleiermacher and W. Dilthey», according to which an interpreter must strive to overcome the distance separating him/her from historic situation in which a text was created virtually putting himself/herself into historical life context of text. Adequacy/correctness of text understanding becomes possible only if an interpreter is able to «submerge» in intellectual atmosphere of events set out in the text and to understand the psychological state of the text author.

The second position of classical hermeneutics can be called «strategy of understanding by H.-G. Gadamer». According to it, the process of interpreting texts is always intra-historical; an interpreter understands the content of a text on basis of his/her historical situation (otherwise, his/her interpretations can be of little value for contemporaries). From the viewpoint of H.-G. Gadamer, understanding of text presumes not interpreter submerging into psychological and spiritual atmosphere of epoch of text creating but, on the contrary, the inclusion of the text into historical context in which the interpreter works. Just «fusion of horizons» that requires preservation of historical distance between the Interpreter and the Author of a particular text, is considered by H.-G. Gadamer as the basic condition for creation of meaningful and accurate interpretations.

A slightly other «strategy of understanding» texts has been proposed by S. Horuzhy. This strategy can be hardly called classically-hermeneutic. In the Orthodox «hermeneutics of experience», inversion of traditional philosophical hermeneutic statements takes place: not an interpreter understands a text, but, on the contrary, the text of the Orthodox tradition (the Bible and the works of the Holy Fathers) understands and interprets the life situation of believers [9, p.104]. Understanding in the Orthodox «hermeneutics of experience» is performed at the same time in both historical and trans-historical dimensions. On one hand, a person addressing to spiritual texts tries to understand his concrete historical situations. On the other hand, the temporal distance separating him/her from the text creators of spiritual texts is eliminated; they interact as co-present in the same spiritual situation – as living interlocutors that exchange by spiritual experience «here and now».

Despite obvious differences in these three strategies of understanding described above, it is still possible to find something in common that unites these approaches. The basis of each of the three conceptual strategies is an interpreted text that has a set of characteristics: it is «already» written by someone; it is created in a specific historical and cultural context; the situation of interpreting is separated from a text by certain temporal distance which should be either saved or overcome in the situation of dialogue of an interpreter and an author. Just in this point one can observe sufficient differences between the classical philosophical hermeneutics (as well as the Orthodox «hermeneutics of experience») and the new hermeneutic theory («social digital hermeneutics»).

Electronic texts (for example, texts of chat-communication) that are «written» in the present, that do not have a subject and logical canvas, that are created without a plan and a goal, that will not be saved in time (they are erased after a short time after their creation), is a kind of text performance and speech experiment that are short-lived and random. Cyber-texts are certain opposites to published works with which classical hermeneutics deals. In contrast, cyber-text is something elusive/ephemeral, it will never be «published», will never become a book, will not be found and read after a certain time. Cyber-texts cannot be considered out-of-time (as they are created in the living present, in a particular socio-historical situation that has significant influence on them). Meanwhile, they are also not historical since they are not saved in a historical perspective and disappear after their writing. Accordingly, social digital hermeneutics dealing with such «ephemeral» texts should develop special conditions of their understanding. It cannot be guided by the principle of «temporal distance», which is regarded in the classical hermeneutics as productive (according to H.-G. Gadamer, «that objective knowledge can be achieved only if there has been a certain historical distance. ... Temporal distance obviously means something other than the extinction of our interest in the object. It lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. The temporal distance that performs the filtering process is not fixed, but is itself undergoing constant movement and extension. And along with the negative side of the filtering process brought about by temporal distance there is also the positive side, namely the value it has for understanding. It doesn't only let local and limited prejudices die away, but also allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such» [7, p.297-298]). Social digital hermeneutics cannot take into consideration the temporal distance because it does not exist with respect to cyber-texts: «after a while» cyber-text ceases to exist giving place to other cyber-texts. Thus, new conditions for understanding appear in the social digital hermeneutics. Since the electronic texts do not exist as a «ready intellectual product», they can be understood only in the case of being their co-author.

Consider some hermeneutical approaches to cyber-texts that interpreters can use in practice. First of all, let us determine why social hermeneutics on-line (as well as hermeneutics of H.-G. Gadamer) have doubt concerning the method of congenial intuition proposed by F. Schleiermacher and W. Dilthey using which an interpreter must submerge and get used into personal world of an author of some text and gain an instant understanding of its meaning. In social hermeneutics on-line, the method of congenial intuition cannot be used since there is no personalized Author in cyberspace, there is no real personality into internal world of which one could «get used into». As a result of simulation of cyber-communication whose members act using nicknames that experiment with their sexual, social, age, and image identity, it becomes essentially impossible to access the true identity hidden behind virtual masks and to intuitively understand its internal-psychological state.

Interpretive practices that can be used in the social hermeneutics on-line can be divided into two groups: 1) those implementing the strategy of explanation and 2) those implementing the strategy of understanding.

In the process of explaining the action-in-text, an interpreter can, first, conduct linguistic analysis of cyber-text using syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic approaches. Secondly, one can carry out discourse analysis of cyber-actor messages: «the analyst has to

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work with what has actually been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality» [10, p. 21]. Through discourse analysis, the interpreter can try to figure out how cyber-actors perform their discursive practices, what is the nature of their discursive activity, what influences it and, conversely, what impact it may have on other communicators.

Discourse analysis is closely linked to a third explanatory model of cyber-text analysis – an analysis of social practices realized in cyberspace that can be studied using, for example, ethnomethodological approach. One of the main tasks of ethnomethodology on-line is execution of decoding activities aimed at detection of social and cultural codes/rules/norms governing behavior of cyber-actors. The ethnomethodological approach is aimed at studying the everyday rules of interaction between social actors. It is believed by E. Giddens and M. Chalmers that ethnomethodology is very close to the philosophical hermeneutics in their intentions: both disciplines seek to gain an understanding of the content of specific actions of social actors, which can be presented in verbalized and un verbalized forms. «Garfilkel's ethnomethodology has strong links with hermeneutics despite the former's focus on the more intentional task of generating an empirical research programme and the latter's expression in abstract philosophy» [5]. The introduced three-level scheme of cyber-text explanation practice (cyber-text linguistic analysis – discourse analysis – ethnomethodologic decoding) corresponds to three-dimensional model of discursive practices put forward by N. Fairclough that consists of 1) a text (speech, writing, visual image or a combination of these); 2) a discursive practice which involves the production and consumption of texts; 3) a social practice [6, p.73].

Let us describe the interpretive practices of social hermeneutics on-line which can be used at the level of cyber-text understanding. According to P. Ricoeur, in a situation of understanding the sense intentions of a particular text, you can use three interpretive methods: psychoanalytic (studying «archeology of subject», his/her unconscious instincts and desires that appear in the text); phenomenological (exploring «teleology of the subject», his/her reflective-conscious life) and eschatological (exploring trans-historical, religious subject existence) [14]. These methods of interpretation can be used in social hermeneutics on-line only with certain limitations. The psychoanalytic interpretation of actions-in-text of cyber-actors can give only indirect imagination about their underlying motivations, because in cyberspace there are no real persons but there are their «virtual twins» who pose themselves under nicknames, with fictional life stories, with theatrical self-presentations. Meanwhile, it can be assumed that in social hermeneutics on-line it is possible to practice a new method of psychoanalytic work – psychoanalysis of fictional characters and fortunes. Indirectly, such analytical practice can reveal the content of the psychological characteristics of real persons hiding under nicknames: the choice of behavior line by cyber-actors, preferences they have to some way of theatrical self-presentation in the Internet space can tell a lot about their secret desires and hidden interests.

Concerning the phenomenological approach, it should be applied in the social hermeneutics on-line in a different perspective than the one described by P. Ricoeur. Because of the same simulative cyber-activity of social actors, it is very difficult to figure out their true objectives, intentions and the nature of their subjective reflection. However,

the interpreter working on-line can try to understand the content of cyber-texts based on the phenomenological paradigm – he/she can reflexively «consider» and «observe» the phenomenon of cyber-communication in his/her own mind trying to identify its distinctive, essential features.

As for the third model of interpretation described by P. Ricoeur, the model of religious-eschatological understanding of texts: since cyber-communications avoid in-depth dialogue style focusing on supporting of surface «contact for contact», the eschatological-religious overtones of cyber-actors' actions cannot be identified. Eschatological interpretation becomes relevant only in a situation of hermeneutic analysis of the phenomenon of cyber-religion represented in religious forums and tele-conferences.

In social hermeneutics on-line, structural interpretation described by P. Sztompka can become very popular where it is assumed that the observed social situations, phenomena, events are not accidental but are emanation of some deep, hidden social structures [15, p.89]. Using structural method, cyber-text interpreter tries to find out what processes of real life are reflected/reproduced in cyber-text space, what social structures appear themselves in socio-cultural actions and interactions of cyber-actors. Alongside with the structural interpretation, one can use prospective interpretation having directly opposite direction: using it, the interpreter tries to find out how the social codes and standards applied in cyber-texts can affect real life and real forms of interpersonal interaction.

The described interpretative practices of social hermeneutics on-line can be used either separately or in some combination. Of course, they do not exhaust all possible interpretative approaches to cyber-texts showing only a certain intentional vectors of analysis that allow determining structural and meaningful specificity of cyber-texts.

**Conclusions.** In social digital hermeneutics, the role of an interpreter in the hermeneutic process changes. It is assumed in classical hermeneutics that an interpreter must always remain in the shadows, hiding his/her «I» behind the text author by performing a function of a reseller (H.-G. Gadamer) that translates verbal «goods» from one historical context to another. According to H.-G. Gadamer, an ideal interpreter must be fluent in speech that does not have individual sound aimed at correct reproduction of text meaning: «the interpreter has no other function than to disappear completely into the achievement of full harmony in understanding. The discourse of the interpreter is therefore not itself a text; rather it *serves* a text» [8, p.41].

However, in the paradigm of social digital hermeneutics, the role and importance of the interpreter becomes slightly other. Since the interpreter is a full accomplice in the creation of cyber-text, then his/her speech no longer performs secondary function of mediation «between» the author and the reader, but one of the leading parties in which his/her personality is not hidden but, on the opposite, is maximally stressed. In social digital hermeneutics, the interpreter does not act as a shadow figure, but as a full member of polylogue between the author, readers and interpreters of cyber-texts.

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