Journal of International Scientific Publications:
Media and Mass Communication, Volume 1
ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

INFORMATIONAL MARGINALIZATION IN DIGITAL MEDIA AMONG PEOPLE OVER 45 YEARS OF AGE IN POLAND

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Abstract

The Internet non-use brings social and economic exclusion as consequences. At the same time Internet is a medium that is still a domain of young people. In Poland, there is a huge diversity in the Internet use depending on the age: the largest category of people not using the network, thus most at risk of digital exclusion, are those over 45 years of age. The research conducted among persons belonging to this age category that study the most popular Polish web portal onet.pl is to show that the website is not directed toward people over 45 and that the barriers resulting from maladjusted content, intrusive advertising and the way information is presented restrict the access to the benefits of global network to these people and cause their marginalization as information recipients. Moreover, the sense of exclusion among the respondents and their expectations towards the Internet and web portals as sources of information will be verified.

Key words: *information, Internet, online news portals, Polish media*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years Internet appears to have become an inherent part in human lives, both professional and personal. The computer usage and ability to *go online* has become a norm, especially among young people, who are now called the *net generation* (Tapscott, 2010). It is often emphasized that the changes of a technical nature will shift the commercial media in the direction of interactivity: communication via the Internet has the feature of being two-way, unlike the communication via traditional media. New digital technologies allow new forms of education innovation and creativity (Krzysztofek, 2011): the passive media messages consumer is becoming a prosumer, and may be able to affect the media structure. The information recipient is becoming active, he produces as well as consumes . The use of cultural goods has been becoming more individualized and subordinated to the needs of consumers, not producers (Krajewski, 2003). Moreover, there is a growing credibility of the Internet as a source of the first hand information. Tools of creation, however, are increasingly being concentrated in a small number of subjects, mainly in the hands of media corporations. As showed further in this paper, online web portals, like the Polish onet.pl are also primary Internet information sources.

The increasing speed of communication, interaction and networking can create innovation, but also force the continuous improvement of competence and adaptation to the fast-changing socio-economic environment. Those, for whom keeping up with the adoption of new technologies is most difficult are older adults, who are the so-called 'net migrants' (Tapscott, 2010). This paper presents the study that was conducted among people over 45 years of age and verifies their expectations and recognition of the Internet in general and Onet.pl web portal in particular, as modern and accessible information source. The Internet abilities of the respondents will be further on verified

2. THE 'NET MIGRANTS': PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH

2.1. Sample group

The sample group included 38 people who attended computer classes for seniors in 2011-2012. Among the participants there were 12 people who attended the course organized by Dom Kultury (Culture Club) 'Klub Skolwin' free of charge that was intended for inhabitants of the furthest north located residential district of Szczecin[1]. The rest of participants of the research came from commercial courses organized for seniors by a private firm 'Akademia 50+' where lessons were attended and paid for by a group who lived in Poznań. The research was carried out in the month of April in the course of the computer classes. The participants of both groups were asked to take part in the test voluntarily. The study had not been included in the course programme and the participants were not informed of such an intention earlier.

The study was divided into three parts; firstly members of the surveyed group were asked to fill in a questionnaire marked as a first stage which did not exceed the duration of 25 minutes. Then they started up monitors in which www.onet.pl website had already been logged in. The respondents were supposed to browse the website for 3 minutes to familiarize themselves with available pieces of information. Supervisors did not interfere with the process of selection nor suggested any choices. Afterwards monitors were switched off and the respondents set about filling in the second and third parts of the questionnaire.

Men constituted one third of the entire tested group. The average age of all participants was nearly 64. Every fifth respondent did not exceed the age of 60 and 6% were below 55. The youngest was 50 years old. Since the participation in the classes was voluntary and the classes were addressed to people who considered themselves older generation no limitations regarding the age (demographical), professional activity (economical), etc., were imposed. Over half of the respondents were people of the age ranging 60-69, every third person was over 70 but only 6% exceeded 75. In the entire group there were 50% with university education, 37% with high education but only 13% with vocational or primary education. People with vocational or primary education were present only in the Szczecin group, just one person in this group had university education.

Majority of the respondents had been recent computer users. Most of them, 26% pointed out that the year 2011 was the initial year of their adventure with computers and 16% gave the year 2012 for the same, which is the year of conducting the study. "Early pioneers" amongst the respondents were people who came into contact with computers already in the 1990s. Altogether nine people pointed out that they used a computer before the year 2000, which constituted 24% of the respondents.

The year 1990 is considered the beginning of the Internet in Poland. In November 1990, an email was sent from European Organization for Nuclear Research and received by Instytut Fizyki Jądrowej (Institute of Nuclear Physics) in Kraków. At first the access to the Internet was in the possession of scientific institutions and it was run by NASK, that is Scientific and Academic Computer Network. Up till 1995, NASK had been the only operator of the Internet network in Poland which served non-academic users [Rafa J. (1995)]. The access to the Internet was getting more and more widespread in

[1] Skolwin is a relatively small district of Szczecin (400.000 inhabitants) that has slightly above 3.000 inhabitants, however it is perceived as the most dangerous and antiquated as far as the development of infrastructure is concerned. The district resembles a rural enclave due to its nice geographical location (in Odra's estuary), distance from the city centre – around 11km from the City Hall and a low degree of urbanisation. Before the transformation of the state, Skolwin was rather working class in character. There were huge factories within and around the district - Huta Szczecin, Papiernia Skolwin, Cegielnia, etc. After 1989 most of the factories went bankrupt or decreased their production significantly which had a great impact on the district itself. Skolwin evolved from a district for working class to slums where there is quite a huge crime rate.

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

Poland since 1996, when Telekomunikacja Polska, the main company in Polish telecommunication market initiated the possibility of anonymous access to the Internet with the use of a modem. Amongst the respondents there was only one person who declared the use of the Internet first time in 1995, thus when the access to the network was still limited. This, however, is an exception among the respondents. Over half of the respondents had their first contact with the Internet as well as with a computer in 2011 and 2012, 27% and 24% respectively. None of them started using the internet in 2001-2004.

Despite the fact that for most of the respondents using the Internet was a relatively new experience, for some of them it became a daily routine. Almost a half, i.e. 44% of people, pointed out that they used the Internet once and more often than once a day. Seven people informed that they were just beginning the adventure with the Internet. Alongside with this information a note "at the course" appeared occasionally, which could imply that computer novices did not use the Internet outside the venue of the course.

In 2011 in Poland 60,7% of people over the age of 16 used a computer, slightly more than the Internet (60%) (Diagnoza Społeczna 2011), which means that using the computer is becoming nowadays nearly equivalent to using the Internet. Amongst the Poles who do not use a computer, a high percentage, almost 18%, includes people who have access to a computer yet, they do not boot it up. The authors of Diagnoza Społeczna conclude that one of the major barriers for using computers and the Internet is lack of underlying motivation and/or skills to use the technology.

A vast majority of the research group members (68%) possess a computer only at their own disposal. Amongst the respondents there appeared people who, in fact, do not have their own computer yet, they have access to a computer in their household. One person pointed out that despite having a computer at home he/she does not have access to it and does not use it. The lack of access to a computer in their households was pointed out by 5% of people. The substantial majority among surveyed people who possess a computer or have access to it is not a great surprise, bearing in mind that these are entrants of computer courses. Their participation is often motivated by the willingness to 'domesticate' the device which has already found its way to their household.

The respondents were asked about their associations with the Internet. The most frequent associations were; *information* (18%) and *accessibility* (17%). The Internet was also perceived by the respondents as *modernity* (15% answers), *freedom* (10%) and *clarity* (3%). The notion *easiness* with reference to the Internet received 6% of answers, whereas the opposite *difficulty* got 3%. Associations related to the Internet as a source of available information dominated over the answers pointing out the other side of the net. The respondents indicated that the Internet involves *threat* (7%), *influence* (5%), *manipulation* (3%) and *pushiness* (2%). Moreover, the participants added their own associations. The notion *comfort* was repeated. There also appeared entries such as *self-reliance* and *vast knowledge.* Moreover, the Internet is also associated with ' *the necessity to be on top'* and with '*quite aggressive modernity'*. The respondents' associations indicated that information and open nature of the Internet dominate. Despite lack of possible relevant experience as internauts their comments, first and foremost, indicate the accessibility of this medium, and to a lesser extent, its negative aspects.

2.2. The Onet.pl portal presentation

Onet.pl portal is a horizontal portal, supposedly targeted at a wide audience, that includes varied content, such as news, weather forecast, webpage catalogue, discussion forums, chats. Information portals are services which constitute "the gate to the Internet" as they are set as homepages so they are the first pages an internaut encounters when they open a browser.

Onet.pl, chronologically the second portal in Poland, was established in 1996 and is currently the most popular portal in Poland with more than 12mln users

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

Table1: Domain ranking in Poland according to monthly range; Source: Megapanel PBI/Gemius, March 2012, obtained from wirtualnemedia.pl, accessed June 2012

No.	Name	Users	Range
1.	google.pl	16 783 082	86,57%
2.	youtube.com	13 693 721	70,64%
3.	facebook.com	13 034 581	67,24%
4.	onet.pl	12 437 541	64,16%
5.	google.com	11 871 458	61,24%
6.	nk.pl	10 819 520	55,81%
7.	allegro.pl	10 813 256	55,78%
8.	wp.pl	10 740 978	55,41%
9.	wikipedia.org	9 470 456	48,85%
10.	gazeta.pl	8 437 184	43,52%
11.	interia.pl	7 241 887	37,36%
12.	chomikuj.pl	5 924 300	30,56%
13.	blogspot.com	5 272 146	27,20%
14.	demotywatory.pl	4 613 196	23,80%
15.	zumi.pl	4 220 484	21,77%
16.	blox.pl	4 124 521	21,28%
17.	ceneo.pl	4 073 947	21,01%
18.	o2.pl	4 025 484	20,76%
19.	otomoto.pl	4 014 381	20,71%
20.	dobreprogramy.pl	3 985 560	20,56%

The portal belongs to Grupa Onet.pl, who also includes services such as: zumi.pl, plejada.pl, sympatia.pl, digart.pl. Links to those services appear on the main page of onet.pl

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

Table 2: The ranking of group of non-clustered webpages under site-centric audit according to monthly hits; source: Megapanel PBI/Gemius, March 2012, obtained from wirtualnemedia.pl, accessed June 2012

No.	Name	Number of hits
1.	Grupa Allegro.pl	5 818 256 205
2.	Grupa Onet.pl	2 810 607 493
3.	Grupa Wirtualna Polska – Orange	2 560 266 328
4.	Grupa Interia.pl	1 238 845 665
5.	Grupa Gazeta.pl	1 223 055 040
6.	Grupa O2.pl	1 051 827 387
7.	plemiona.pl	759 289 968
8.	Grupa Spolecznosci.pl	563 553 514
9.	Grupa TVN	210 750 168
10.	filmweb.pl	209 468 209

Portal onet.pl was until recently the property of the ITI group, a big media group which has a major and stable position on the Polish media market. The portal is advertised by means of many types of media. Apart from internet campaigns which are typical for such products, the advertisements of the portal are also popularized by means of more conventional channels of promotion such as billboards, commercials and ads in the press. Due to the fact that it is one of the oldest portals functioning on the local portal market and it has been connected with a big TV programme, the result on the degree of familiarity with the portal is of utmost importance. Only every tenth respondent (9%) has never heard about onet.pl. The remaining participants have heard about the portal. In the second group there were also people who only recently embarked upon the adventure with the Internet which may point to the effectiveness of the advertising campaigns and brand recognition in the wider market.

Onet.pl's popularity is also visible in the fact that it was given as the most often visited webpage in the first part of the study among such pages as: wp.pl, interia.pl and tvn.24. Other pages that were visited include, apart from news portals, search engines, mostly Google.com, social networking portals Facebook.pl and NK.pl (also known by the respondents as Nasza Klasa), Allegro.pl (Polish auction service) and webpages of banks with online banking service. Sometimes the names of the webpages, especially in English, were misspelled. Nevertheless, some real domain addresses appeared that are in widespread use which points to the fact that they are recognised and ingrained in the group under study. There was also a group of participants who did not give particular addresses of pages but topics that they look for in the Internet. These were mainly news, local news, nature, culture, cooking, alternative medicine and health, learning English. Although the task was to name webpages there also appeared names of messengers, i.a. Skype and Gadu-Gadu (Polish instant messenger) among the answers. This can result from insufficient knowledge of the notions connected with IT which was to some extent visible in the answers from the first part of the study.

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

In this question the respondents were asked to provide their own names to one of the following four categories: przeglądarka internetowa (web browser), portal internetowy (web portal), wyszukiwarka (search engine) oraz serwis społecznościowy (social networking service). The respondents did not have problems in stating that Internet Explorer was a search engine – 60% correct answers. However, Mozilla Firefox only obtained 40% of correct answers. Google.com was attached to the category web browser correctly by 40% of the respondents. This page was usually taken for a search engine. Among the two social networking services Facebook.com and NK.pl, the second one was correctly subsumed under the right category. Facebook was classified as a social networking service by 36% of people. onet.pl, wp.pl, interia.pl, or other portals previously enumerated by the respondents, were correctly subsumed under the category of portals by every fifth person. This may mean that the recognition of pages in the Internet does not need to go hand in hand with the knowledge on their functioning. gazeta.pl. is the least recognized portal. This page did not appear among the most frequently visited pages so the respondents probably did not encounter it while surfing the Net.

2.3. Perception of the Internet

Regarding the sought contents the respondents pointed to the fact that the Internet was a source of information. They usually search for domestic and world news (15% of answers), local news (10%) and those that are related to the localization of certain services and shops (7%). An important category for this age group was also health related news with 10% of answers. The information aspect of the Internet obtained altogether 49% of answers. Also some transport schedule searches were given.

When it comes to the speed of information transmission, the Internet seems to be unrivalled. It enables very fast information transmission. The speed of the transfer and easiness of communication, usually treated as advantages, also have drawbacks as they can lead to unreliability of the information and mislead the reader, even though not always consciously. Half of the respondents say that the Internet is the fastest media type with TV scoring 30% and the radio 18%. When it comes to the value of the information presented in the Internet it was judged similarly to information in the traditional media types. The information presented in news portals was judged similarly as well.

Another reason why the respondents use the Internet is communication. The respondents find communication with friends and family (11%) the most important aspect of Internet communication. They are less prone to find new friendships on the Internet (2%). None of the people said that they were looking for *love* or *sex* on the Internet.

The respondents, although using the Internet for a short while, were also aware of the fact that it is a realm for service transactions. Looking for products that can be bought online was indicated by 9% of the respondents. They also point to contacts with the bank.

The Internet constitutes an alternative to traditional sources of entertainment. Searching the Internet for films, music and pictures were given 5% of answers each. Games are less popular among the respondents (2%). A small number of people admitted to looking for gossip in the Internet 1%).

The most frequent reason for choosing a particular page is the easiness of finding information ('I can easily find particular information' – 30% of answers) and page content ('Its content is of interest to me' – 20%). The way of presenting the information, their readability and accessibility are also of interest to the respondents. Only then come the features of the text on the page, e.g. whether they are interesting (10%). Merely 3% took into consideration the author of the text ('The texts are written by authors that I like'). The graphical aspect is more important to the respondents than the authorship ('I like the photos' - 9% and 'I like the graphical aspect of the page'- 3%). The pages are frequented by the respondents because they were shown to them by friends or family (7%) or by a close person such as the spouse.

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

2.4. *Onet.pl reception*

Perception is specific to the individual and depends on the age, social status, type of role and other factors. The portal presented to the respondents is very complex and divided into modules in which there is information on the most popular topics. On the main page there is gossip, scandal and information with emotional load. They usually refer to simple associations and aim at attracting the readership's attention. The central part of the page is covered with information about celebrities, gossip, TV series and curiosities. The content from this part is characteristic of tabloid press. On the right upper part there is information on social and political topics which cover the most important news in Poland and the world. Below there is the sport section followed by business and industry. The next module gives local information and the bottom part is occupied by topics such as entertainment, information on the lives of better or less well-known celebrities, lifestyles, etc. On the left side of the page there are permanent columns such as weather forecast, menu, horoscope, Stock Exchange and currencies and grouped advertisement modules. Advertising contents are placed all around the page and frequently constitute an element that separates topic blocks from one another. On the main page there are usually up to 30 advertising blocks of different character and size. Some of them are designed in such a way that they resemble the ordinary information blocks.

The respondents usually said that the weather forecast can be found on the page (66%) whereas 66% of respondents said that also sports news and information on celebrities are accessible. More than a half of the respondents said that articles on social issues (58%) and cultural news (55%) are accessible. Local news were noticed by half of the respondents and more than 40% found scientific curiosities and interviews with famous people. Only 5% said that there is business information on the page. The distribution of the answers point to the content that was remembered best during the three-minute presentation of the portal. Although the respondents saw the same portal which did not change its graphical design or the order of the pieces of information or blocks, the answers are quite scattered and there is no one topic that would be remembered by the majority of the respondents. Even in case of answers with high unanimity there was at least 33% of people who did not notice this particular topic. The respondents could circle one answer and the categories were quite general.

In the following questions the respondents were asked to determine the target group of the portal, its character and whether on the basis of their demographic characteristics a type of a reader of onet.pl could be established. First, the age range was established. Nearly 75% of respondents claimed that the portal is aimed at various groups of people ranging from children to 65 and more. Only 5% of respondents said that the portal is aimed at people below 50 years of age. Nearly 80% stated that the page is aimed at both sexes, 18% said that women are the target group of the content provided on the portal. They were usually men who pointed to the female character of this portal as they constituted 50% of the respondents to this question. Only 3% suggested that the portal is aimed at males.

More than half of the respondents liked the presented page, whereas 3% did not like it. 42% of the respondents could not decide. In the next question the respondents were asked to tick the notions – usually with positive associations – that according to them fit the content of the page that they had seen shortly before. They usually ticked 'You can read the most important information in a short time' (55%). The next most frequent answers were devoted to similar topics as 35% of respondents ticked two notions: 'nice graphic design' and 'very nice graphically, nice to read'. 23% said that the colours on the page are well matched. Other answers were ticked by less than 20%. The presented results show that the respondents did not rate the page entirely positively. Although they could choose an indefinite number of answers from the ones they were presented with, they ticked only two or three notions. The only negative notion that 'the page has too much gossip content and too little serious content' was ticked only by 5%.

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

The nest question was on the readability of the page and whether the respondents could see and read all the content on the page. 15% said the page is very readable, 61% said that it is readable. Nearly every fifth respondent had to focus in order to find particular content, whereas 6% of the respondents had difficulty in reading the content on the page.

In the last part of the study the respondents were asked to answer the open-ended questions on onet.pl. In the first question the respondents were supposed to write which information on the page were of interest to them. Among all the answers, only the ones that appeared most often and were possible to be categorized were taken into consideration. The respondents had charts that took up nearly half an A4 page format. The charts were divided into four segments each with two dotted lines.

The most common answer included content that was subsumed under the category "domestic and world news" (3/4 of the respondents). Every fourth respondent was interested in news on the weather, every fifth on sport and entertainment. News from the world of the celebrities interested 15% of the respondents and horoscopes and ads 8% of them.

Domestic and world news, though occupying a privileged place in the upper right column, are not of interest. From observing portal onet.pl one can conclude that the editors devote much attention to light information connected with the world of show business, the media, advice and scandals. Thus the content that is the most important on this page was not judged as being of greatest interest by the respondents. Analysing the results of this part of the study, it could be concluded that the editors do not fully fulfill this group's needs. Though the size of the sample or the study design does not allow to generalize the findings onto a bigger population, the results can be treated as a valuable comment and an indicator of the trends that can be present in this age group. In the next question the respondents were supposed to determine whether the presented content is up-to-date, whether the editorship keeps up with the events. The speed of information transmission is the main indicator in the assessment, quality, modernity and reliability of journalistic work. The respondents said that the content was up-to-date, with only an insignificant percentage with a different opinion.

In the next question the respondents were supposed to determine what they liked the best on the page. This question is different from the questions in part three in that they did not have to focus entirely on content analysis but they could express their attitude towards the page as a whole taking into consideration, e.g. the graphic aspect. Every third respondent said that the graphics of the page are neat and clear. A similar percentage claimed that the social and political topics caught their attention. Moreover, 21% of respondents emphasized that the portal is full of interesting news. 8% found weather news interesting. More than a fifth respondent did not give any positive aspect of the portal. The next question was about the aspects of the page that the respondents did not like. One fourth of the respondents did not provide any negative comment. More than a fifth (26%) said that they did not like the ads and a similar percentage said that the page is not readable. 10% said that the disadvantage of the page was the abundance of gossip. The other answers were too varied and related mainly to the content of the particular articles given on the page.

The next question was about the changes that the respondents would introduce to the page. A vast majority of the respondents did not give any proposals. The rest gave very varied answers but they can be categorized as follows: the first category is the font and the improvement in page readability. The second category related to decreasing the amount of gossip for the benefit of serious information. It was usually said that serious information should be presented more in-depth. The third category related to decreasing the number of ads on the page.

Finally, the respondents were asked to describe the page using maximum 2 sentences as if they were describing it to a friend. The answers were grouped into three categories. Every fourth respondent described the page as interesting. Nearly half of the respondent, i.e. 45%, said that varied information

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

and interesting news can be found on it. Merely 13% were negative description as the information is aimed at a less demanding readership. Nearly every fifth (18%) could not describe the page

2.5. The respondents attitude toward advertisement

In 2011 the share of the Internet in the global marketing market reached 16%. In 2014 the Internet will receive 21,5% of all advertising campaigns (Zenith Media Group 2012). The Internet is the third, after TV and the press, most popular medium for advertising. The biggest percent of expenses on advertising in the Internet is composed of expenses on advertisement in search engines and banners. When asked about the most frequent reasons of disappointment while browsing web pages, the respondents pointed to advertisements. Most usually they were *pop-ups* (31%) and screaming advertisements (26%). 24% of respondents when asked whether they mind advertisements on the Internet answered that they only mind the pop-ups. All respondents encountered the same problem. Pop-ups are most frequently closed (64%), but sometimes they do not do anything and the respondents think that the advertisement will disappear on its own (24%). A somewhat daunting way of fighting with the unwanted ads is closing the browser and reopening it. This answer was given by 7% of respondents.

The Internet appears to be overloaded with advertisement according to the respondents' judgement. Over one third claims that there is definitely too much advertising on the Internet. Nearly as many respondents claim that the advertisements disrupt the viewing of the page a bit and make it difficult to concentrate. There were also those who got used to the presence of advertisements on the Internet and treat them as a norm (7%). Merely 3% of respondents said that advertisements on the Internet do not bother them because they do not notice them. None of the respondents use any plug to block the pop-ups, none of them consciously clicks on the ad to see what it is about. From their point of view, one of the difficulties in browsing the pages is also connected with differentiating between an ad and the content of the article (12%) and also because it is difficult to find interesting information. What is yet another obstacle, is the pages graphic design, most of all, vulgar positions of models (8%), too small font (6%), and motley colours (4%). They mind the excess of information only to a small extent (2%) and the inadequacy of the titles with respect to the main topic of the article (also 2%).

However, more than a fifth of the respondents have not noticed any ads on onet.pl page whereas 46% claims that there are only few ads. For 18% the ads take a significant amount of the page, whereas 15% must focus in order to find content that is of interest for them. During the presentation, the proportion of ads in reference to the main content, irrespectively of the day, remained on the same level. The ads' content changed though not their character, structure, graphic. The high number of answers that there are no ads or that their presence is not a problem is surprising. The more experienced Internet users often complain about the high presence of ads and a distorted proportion. It could be concluded that, due to their low proficiency in computer skills, the respondents could not distinguish an ad from an article. Each time during the study there were 25 ads of different sizes, colours, etc.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The study participants, although cannot be described as '*digital natives'*, are aware of the informational potential that Internet comes with. Quick access to the information, facilitation of the communication, and positively evaluated modernity attract and encourages to join the digital world. Trust in Internet and web portals as thorough information source has been observed as well as positive attitude about them. Information inclusion, however, faces obstacles such as lack of knowledge on the principles of Internet services, lack of content specified to the respondents expectations, intrusive

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: http://www.scientific-publications.net

advertising and the way information is presented that is not transparent for the those who are making their first steps using the Internet.

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