



## **The Role of Internet Community in Political Elite's Sociopolitical Discourse**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The intensive development of information and communication technologies has caused various transformations in the sociopolitical discourse. The internet community has adopted a new role - that of an interactive platform which enables real-time communication for representatives of the government, political elites and electorate. Members of internet communities can exchange all types of information. So, the possibility of network interaction made possible public participation in the sociopolitical process. Thence, the internet community may be capable of influencing political elites and representatives of governmental structures. This mechanism makes it possible to citizens to influence the government. Many politicians have already realized that in the near future, refusing to maintain political dialogue with the internet community may lead to complete oblivion or even to their demission. Internet activity is gradually becoming one of the criteria of the efficiency of the political activity. The development of the political discourse shows a higher potential of the influence that the internet community has on the political elites and, thus, on the political processes active in a country and on the democratization of the political power. Political connotations of the internet community permit the political elites valueate the attitude of the internet community to main political events and main representatives of the political elites.

**Keywords:** Internet Community, Blogs, Network, Information Process, Network Policy, Political Elite, Informational Power

**JEL Classifications:** H11, O32, O38, Z13

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The network called internet is, by now, an efficient communication link between heads of state and ordinary citizens. The possibilities offered by the internet allow the political elite to maintain real-time consultations with the citizens. The network facilitates instant monitoring of the public opinion, of the citizens' needs and problems. We think the main function of the internet global network for contemporary political organizations consists in the promotion of permanent sociopolitical discourse with the possibility of real-time electronic feedback between the political elite and the civic community. It means more freedom for the citizens in what refers to collections, analysis and exchange of information, and also facilitates civic participation in the very directing of the state or influencing the state power apparatus.

So, thanks to the network policy technologies, anyone can easily contact the political elite to transmit to it his or her recommendations or criticize its work - may it be a concrete politician or the political system as a whole. An interaction of this kind makes possible real-time feedback.

### **2. METHODS**

Some researchers have been claiming for the last 10 years that "using new technologies will facilitate the creation of a dialog-oriented communication space of a 'government-citizens' type, which will mean receiving information rapidly on the public reaction to important governmental decisions and efficiently realize the idea of the civic participation in the solution of socially important problems. The creation of a dialog-oriented space based

on the 'government-to-citizen' model in the internet will favor the creation of a positive image of the Russian government with its users" (Dmitriev et al., 2002).

The political function of the internet, according to Westen's concept, consists in the promotion of permanent sociopolitical discourse with the possibility of real-time electronic feedback between the government and the citizens. It will make citizens less dependent on governmental functionaries, experts, political organizations, interest groups, associations and media in questions related to collection, organization and exchange of information. The network has the capacity to mobilize civic participation in the politics. The most ideal form would represent auto-government by means of electronic public opinion research, without any participation of professional political communicators (Westen, 2004).

### 3. RESULTS

Nowadays, state functionaries of all the levels must act as political communicators: Accumulating the public opinion, put it into practice. Such conditions are the conditions of the modern society. Many high-level state managers communicate actively with the internet community. For example, Dmitry Medvedev thinks it is important that heads of state have the skills of the internet communication. Responding to a question by a closed-circuit television journalist about the mechanism of President's dialog with the internet communication in his blog, he told: "It is certain that I have been using internet for quite a long time, I believe it is about 12 years, and I follow the development of the global information network" (Medvedev, 2009).

The interaction between the political elite and the internet community affects, surely, the process of the modernization of the political institutions, inclusively because of the connotative influence of the internet community on the political elite members.

It cannot be denied that politicians have realized it is necessary to communicate with internet users, inclusively by maintaining personal blogs. It is corroborated by the results of different polls that are regularly published by various sources. And even the politicians themselves confirm it, posting links to their blogs on official internet pages, in informational materials and social networks.

Researches have noted the citizens have been demonstrating less trust to official media (Nikonov, 2013). At the same time, the number of the citizens that search for information in the virtual network has been growing. And if a politician has his or her personal page on the Web, he or she provides the possibility of getting first-hand information. Also, the media react more and more to blog posts, quoting them or commenting on them in their articles. The political elites are admitting that in the near future, using virtual technologies, blogs and social networks will not only form the citizens' attitude to members of government, but also exercise real influence on the electors' preferences with high expectations for the elections.

Many politicians have already realized that in the near future, refusing to maintain political dialogue with the internet community may lead to complete oblivion or even to their demission. Internet activity is gradually becoming one of the criteria of the efficiency of a politician's activity.

It has also been noted that it were the politicians who first initiated their struggle for the virtual electorate's attention (Akopov, 2003). The efforts these politicians applied in the virtual space made official government recognize the necessity of the development of a network policy, as well as the importance of the politicians' communication with web users.

It should be noted also that internet is used by politicians of every level not only in the "government-to-consumer" model, but also in the interaction between politicians (government-to-government model).

There are cases when politicians or political elites of different departments or even of different countries maintain online discussions on their public blogs or social network accounts. Frequently, mass media also participate in these discussions.

Blogs gain popularity within the internet community, representing a platform for political debates. We must admit the Russian blogosphere has been seriously affected by the federal legislation that postulated that every popular blog should be considered a mass media organ; but we believe this fact is more likely to legitimize the blogosphere than to affect it negatively. "Blogosphere means the aggregate of all the blogs as a whole community or public network." Millions of blogs that exist are closely related, bloggers read and comment on other bloggers, post links to other blogs, creating in this way their own subculture. The notion of the blogosphere retrieves one of the most important differences between blogs and simple web pages and forums: Related blogs may compose a dynamic international informational jacket" (Russian Wikipedia, 2011). Internet blogging is a perfect PR instrument for the political actors, and which can provide various advantages. In the contemporary, blogs can represent the following for political actors:

- A quality source of information of different types
- A place for political debate
- A means to account for one's work
- A means of operative public information
- An element of communication and opinion exchange between allies
- A means of political provocations
- A means of attracting supporters and allies
- An element of communication with the masses and propaganda
- A means of online control.

At first, blogs were seen as online diaries with pictures and comments, but with further development of network policy, the massive enthusiasm of the citizens and political elites to create and maintain their own "online diaries" engendered a new means of "cyber communication." The main advantages of the blogs are instant transmission of the information and the integration of information with comments.

These unique qualities have made blogs sources of many important and interesting data and information needed to make important political decisions. Blogs dedicated to certain interest or profession represent informal civic communities. Being an element of the civic society, they are capable of forming determinate positions, and the participants of these blogs are political actors, assuming an active political position (because a person that is not interested in politics, will not be interested in following a political discussion in the blogosphere). And here we have a lot of information for political research.

But if we talk about blogs considering them personal "online diaries," where people exchange their opinions, it is possible to obtain all type of data, inclusively involving political preferences, reaction to different political events etc.

If we analyze correctly information posted in private blogs, we can understand civic attitudes and positions, political preferences and even political actions of citizens that use net technologies. Participation in online dialog not only permits to remove political tension by means of operative interaction with the political positions and providing well-based answers to the questions posed by the internet community, but also facilitates the forming of the very political attitudes and educating political culture of the internet users.

Leading mass media often analyze citizen's opinions they post to their blogs, and publish sensational materials based on them. Practice shows blogs publish content dedicated to events more rapidly than mass media do, and this is quite explainable, because the number of bloggers is higher than the number of journalists, and all they have to do is to post their content, and mass media professionals have to approve obtained data, coordinate it etc. Internet users often obtain information from blogosphere without prior searching for it in particular. Popular sites quote bloggers, making internet users not only pay attention to this information, but get interested in it. The blogosphere maintains permanent opinion exchange, an incessant dialog between representatives of the most different strata of the society. Nonetheless, bloggers do already actively influence the political life, they attend to events organized specially for them, meetings with higher government officials etc.

Blogs have become a place for political struggle and political dialog - government's dialog with the civic society as well as government's dialog with itself. Recently, a network called Twitter gained great popularity in the virtual space, thanks to its simple design and usability. Twitter is a system of microblogs where people publish short messages (up to 140 symbols). These messages appear instantly on the pages of all the subscribers - called "followers" here. A certain advantage of the service is that it not only permits publishing via internet, but also via SMS, e-mail, instant messaging etc. So it is natural that Twitter found its fans in the political life, especially for political discussions.

Twitter, created in 2006, became rapidly popular in the USA, especially among politicians and celebrities. Simple, fast and efficient, these are the main advantages of this means of

communication. The laconic blogs conquered American politicians during the elections of the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Barack Obama began using Twitter actively for his communication with his potential electors. Updating constantly his blog with new information about the course of the electoral struggle, about his meetings with the electorate, about his new ideas, etc. Experts say: "It was Barack Obama himself who posted to his Twitter. At least it was so until he understood he could relax: He was the host of the White House. The night after the election, he published this post: "We just made history. All of this happened because you gave us your time, talent and passion. All of this happened because of you. Thanks". Obama's example got viral. Many senators and congressmen created their own microblogs, frequently posting to them personally. The foreign practice was very fast adopted by their Russian counterparts" (Stepanova, 2010). Nowadays, every respectful politician has his/her own microblog. Many public personalities pay great attention to this means of communication, preferring to interact with the internet community with the help of a microblog. Often, microblogs are used as a teaser or a link to larger messages in traditional blogs or accounts in social pages, which does not contribute to lessen microblogs' popularity. Moreover, nowadays, many members of political elites from many countries have their microblogs. And the number of readers of such micro publications grows incessantly, thanks to the convenience of reading short messages, for example with smartphones.

Blogs have become the arena of political struggle, the means of exchanging politically important opinions and the place of circulation of political information and disinformation. The blogosphere is quite a popular place of political debate, and thence we can note the substantial influence of the bloggers as well as of the internet community as a whole, on political phenomena and processes that take place in the modern society.

Blogs are fundamental for the internet communication between the civic society and the representatives of governmental power, and they are also a means of informing for the government. Blogs allow, with minimal expenses, and in minimal time, informing the internet community of important events, and organize manifestations, meetings and protests. The blogosphere is a very popular place of political debate, a fact that permits to note the growing influence of the bloggers' political connotations on the political events and processes in the informational society.

We believe it is important to note that the practice of governmental interaction using the blogosphere is applied more and more actively in the upgrading political systems. For example, Twitter helped the USA get out from a situation which could imply a technical default. As White House's Public Relations Director, Dan Pfeiffer, said, "Twitter and e-mail helped pressure the Republican congressmen, boosting the agreement to raise the US' debt ceiling. Barack Obama spoke, from his Twitter, to more than 9 millions of his followers, urging them to influence their states' congressmen to make them accept the compromise. Then, Obama began publishing links to every Republican congressman's Twitter account. There are almost 300 Republican congressmen, and this kind of "spam" cost Obama's microblog about 36 thousand followers in few hours" (Voronina, 2011).

Political elite's interaction with the internet community is a delicate and complicated instrument, and it will take some time before the machine of the state will be capable of using internet communication with maximal efficiency in its immediate activity. A government's activity is reflected in three spheres: The political, the legal, and the socioeconomic. Every one of these spheres has its own traditions, values and work organization specificity. But with the development of the informational society, every one of these spheres will upgrade, changing its traditional parameters due to the influence of the information technologies. And each sphere of the government's functionality needs quality feedback, that modern information technologies (and blogs are a part of it) can provide.

The global communicational internet community is created and develops with the development of the innovative technologies we named. We are observing a transition from direct communication, or face-to-face communication, to indirect, mediated communication. Internet communities can easily be formed by people not present in a determinate place, the distance is not that important nowadays. United by a sole idea, the society's subjects can integrate consolidated communities, being present in the global network, which helps them to bypass barriers of time and space. Gotthard Bechmann notes: "The communication has practically separated from its corporal, psychological and social substrate" (Bechmann, 2010).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

With the advent of network communication technologies, subjects of the civic society gain unique possibilities of political participation in the life of the society (Zhang, 2014).

Almost 15 years from now, Oleg Shabrov wrote these prophetic words: "More and more importance is gained by the symbolizing function of the political system and the social function, which allow a person to feel his or her identity with the outer world, overcoming their estrangement. The legitimacy of the power, its public recognition becomes a condition not only of the political stability, but of the social development as a whole" (Shabrov, 1997). The scientist's opinion is corroborated by the political connotations of the internet community, which not only permit one to feel his or her identity, but also provide public recognition to the authorities or public confrontation to the political management.

Modern researchers give civic society two definitions:

1. The integrity of the system of non-governmental relations among all the members of the society which are not immediately controlled by state authorities.
2. Community of the most active civilians and their associations (movements, pressure groups, collectives, local self government organs, professional, ecological, cultural, national associations) capable of organizing the defense of their interests and demanding their satisfying by the state, according to the law. So it is not just a group of people, but a community of civilized, conscious and active citizens.

The concept of the civic society has experienced a long evolution in the history of political thought, almost always being seen as something quite opposite to the state (Akopov and Kisilitsyn, 2009).

In an era when information technologies spread and the informational society develops, the civic society may oppose state power demonstratively. Bykov speaks of such episodes (Bykov, 2013). Some internet users are capable of organizing special pressure groups. The consolidation of the population on the basis of new innovative political technologies allows the citizens to implement their initiatives with more efficiency and less labour.

Informational society provides maximum possible access to important political information to the citizens, thence, civic participation in the political life gets more active and organized. Using network policy technologies, citizens and public associations can efficiently influence the state government's apparatus, making it adopt political decisions that are vital to the society. This aspect is studied by the Russian researcher Georgieva (2013).

It was just several years ago that researchers stated that the majority of citizens must not only be politically conscious, but also free to have the opportunity of using the civic freedoms and make the civic society function efficiently.

Many representatives of the internet community comment actively on political news published at information portals, making thus their civic position public. This topic has been studied by Melnikova (2012). Moreover, news sites not only permit their users to comment on a news in special sections, but also recommend sharing the news and comment on it on one's page in social networks. Thus, millions of Russians are involved in the political process by means of discussing politically significant news.

Political scientists may analyze readers' commentaries to catch the attitude of the masses and prognosticate further development of the situation (Potolokova and Kuryshva, 2013). There are many examples of hundreds of publications that appear in the internet before mass disorders, calling to such actions.

Comments on news in the virtual space is, without doubt, a means of self-expression of young internet users, but their political connotations permit to value, with an experienced eye, the attitude of the internet community to significant political events and representatives of the political elite.

It must be noted that every news that is quite popular with main news sites' users can accumulate hundreds and thousands of users' comments. If we take the political connotations of the online commentaries on certain political realities and analyze them, we'll be able to make some conclusions characteristic of the internet community reaction to virtually any political event. It is notable that we could obtain such information from anywhere, it is only necessary to have access to the internet. Thence, virtually any political organization that has the capacity of wasting some time and labour to analyze online publications will have the possibility of making political prognosis. And professional organizations specialized in such analysis, can organize this type of content analysis automatically, with the help of special software.

No need to describe the possibilities that political consultants will have after they make such informational analysis, and this



analysis permits them to orient themselves correctly during the elaboration of information strategy - noopolitics, defined by the Russian scientist Nikonov (2013).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In modern life, people meet in the internet and, making public their political demands (mainly in the virtual space), they represent a real political force, capable of significant influence on political processes. Civic groups can use diverse means for achieving what they want: They maintain contact with the establishment, political parties and members of Parliament (who ask for their support in exchange of fulfilling their demands), publish newspapers and various types of propaganda, organize mass campaigns to help attract public attention to their problems, when they do participate, themselves, in legislative elections of state or local scale. Network technologies provide, in a perspective, the possibility of making elections online, without having to go out.

For initiative groups, which form the nucleus of the civic society, different forms of political protest is a substantial means of influencing the authorities. In the informational society, protests are organized and regulated via the internet, and, as we have already noted, social networks and blogs are frequently used for this, facilitating significantly the activists' job.

The massive expansion of social networks in the modern society catalyzed the protest potential that had been accumulated; manifestations organized via social networks appear regularly in different places. The world's most popular social network is called Facebook, it has more than a billion users, according to public data. So, about one person in five has a Facebook account. Russian networks have much fewer users, but still, their popularity is quite high - we may take Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte for instance. Official information made public by the Vkontakte administration quotes more than 100 million users. It is difficult to name another mass media with such an auditory. No XX<sup>th</sup> century politician could even dream of such a means of communication. The development of network technologies allows speaking of an enormous potential of the network communication and of the necessity to modernize the political process according to the contemporary reality.

It is clear that the political elites are literally doomed to interact with the online society, having to comply with their political connotations. The active expansion of the internet and the use of the information and communication technologies in the contemporary society make the elite use the net actively (and sometimes even aggressively) to gain political power and to maintain the manipulation of the public consciousness. In its turn, the internet community got the possibility of making public their political connotation and their opinions related to any events published in the internet. The development of the political discourse reveals a high potential of internet community's influence on the political elites and, consequently, the political

processes and the democratization of the political power in the country. Political connotations of the internet community permit the political elites examine the attitude of the internet community to significant political events and establishment. All of this enables the political activists to exercise significant pressure on the authorities, permitting to talk of the modernization of the political system. The implementation of innovative forms of opinion analysis enables new possibilities of the creation and development of a direct, immediate democracy, in which citizens will be able to influence the political elites and even make collective decisions of highest importance to the country.

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