Social Media in Sociopolitical Processes

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the role of social media in sociopolitical processes; in particular, the use of such resources in mobilization technologies and their impact on the protest campaigns are reviewed. Social media change the shape and channels of devilering political information to citizens, they have their own alternative mechanisms of forming information on the agenda, and, as a platform of civil journalism, by definition take an active part in the mediatization of sociopolitical processes both at the national level and in solving global problems. In the meantime, such participation has both positive and negative connotations. The author analyzes political, cultural, sociological sources and information network resources that allow to identify the nature and essence of web 2.0. journalism.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Networks, New Media, Web 2.0. Journalism, Facebook, Twitter, Internet, Information Technology
JEL Classifications: O38, O33, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, numerous discussions are held both in the scientific community and among politicians and journalists on the role of social media in transforming not only the world's media environment, but also sociopolitical processes.

The evolution of social media and their inclusion in sociopolitical processes were one of the most progressive and at the same time ambiguous phenomena of the modern world. The potential of web 2.0. resources as unique hyperlocal information sources is huge and extremely interesting.

At the same time, while social media realizesuch key functions as recreation and active involvement of users, they are often a tool for various forms of political mobilization.

Social media in the modern political space is used by both public institutions and structures of systemic and non-systemic opposition, civil society structures, pressure groups and agents of foreign influence both to stabilize and destabilize the social and political situation.

However, the study of social media participation in social and political life, their transformation into the effective means of self-expression and a platform of political activity remain outside the scientific understanding.

The process of "revitalization" of the political involvement of citizens and civil society organizations through web 2.0. resources is of special scientific interest.

Social media at the present stage of development is not only a way of instant communication between people, but also modern, efficient tools in the hands of the active part of society and the state, which are increasingly being used for political purposes.

It is known that such platforms are primarily characterized by a low level of accountability and significant mobilization potential,

which promotes social self-organization of citizens. As the events in Arab states show, the dynamic growth in the number of social media users and the increasing number of such channels of communication, mobility and speed of information dissemination, as well as the practical impossibility of complete blocking of such resources create the necessary conditions for transformation of the sociopolitical environment.

Social media are actively involved in sociopolitical life, both domestically and internationally. However, apart from the positive impact, these trends also have the negative nature - quite often social media are a tool for certain manipulations and negatively affect the internal and external political climate.

Social media unlock significant potential for use of propaganda and manipulation activities of the various political events, the dynamics of which depends on the quality of marketing strategy and positioning of political actors. Development and testing of political technology in social media is now a priority for the participants in political life who compete for power.

2. METHODOLOGY

Theoretical and methodological basis of the article is driven by its topic. In particular, the comparative-historical method for the analysis of the development and functioning of social media was used. This method allowed to consistently considering the stages in the formation of social media.

In addition, scientific methods of research - systematic analysis, comparative and graphical methods, normative method, and the method of typology and classification - were applied in the article.

Content analysis was used to study the basic properties of social networks and their functioning in the present.

In the analysis of conceptual terminological apparatus, a multidisciplinary approach based on the use of theoretical achievements of sociology, philosophy, political science and communication studies was used.

3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Firstly, web 2.0. journalism is a full-fledged social institution that has the following characteristics: Direct involvement of usersin generation and retranslationof media content, available interactive communication, flexibility and mobility.

Secondly, social media change the shape and channels of devilering political information to citizens. The approach of distributing messages for these resources is based on social networks, which allows users to flexibly respond to current political events, shape and build social capital, becoming the leaders of public opinion in the virtual space.

Thirdly, social media have their own alternative mechanisms of forming information on the agenda, and, as a platform of civil journalism, by definition take an active part in the mediatization

of sociopolitical processes both at the national level and in solving global problems. In the meantime, such participation has both positive and negative connotations. For example, in many countries, social media allow to generate some civic activity, but are not involved in a productive dialogue with the authorities.

4. DISCUSSION

In our opinion, first the two main concepts of social media should be determined narrow and general. Narrow concept covers forms and technical functions. Considering the general categories, a greater emphasis is made on the nature and social functions. This meaning moves the concept of "social media" closer to the position of the mass media, and it should be noted that it takes a defining place in the Russian science.

Vartanova argues that the concept of "social media" is based on the participation approach, when the communication process is carried out with the equal participation of users and the media institute (Vartanova, 1999). S. Bobrowskypresents social media as "social structures of the Internet environment," the nodes of which are organizations or individuals, and the relationship between them represent the established interaction (Bobrowsky, 2005).

At the same time, the Western understanding of social media is based on the classical theory, more associated with new technologies. Sh. Kartonconsiders social media as a technology to help people communicate with each other (Potolokova and Kurysheva, 2013). German researchers Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a group of online applications on a particular ideological and technological web 2.0. base that allows the participants (users) to create content and share it (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

In the view of researchers from Petersburg, Bykov and Filatova, "social media are a kind of online mass media, where any person can be both an audience and an author. It uses software that allows anyone with no special knowledge of coding to post, comment, move, edit information and create communities" (Bykov and Filatova, 2011). From our perspective, this version of the definition most accurately and fully reflects the essence of this phenomenon.

As to the typology of social media, currently there is no consensus among professional researchers on what should be the criteria to classify them. Breslavets suggests to use the typological concept of periodicals in relation to the classification of social media (Braslavets, 2010), distinguishing the following types: Universal social media (Facebook); social media of a diary type (Live Journal) and social media specializing in objective interpersonal relationships (LinkedIn).

Ignatkina divides social media into: "Pure" social networks, some of which serve as the media; web 2.0. online media, the content of which (partially or fully) is created by the users of these resources; microblogging and macrobloging; photo hosting, audio and video hosting and lifecasts (Ignatkina, 2012). Right and Hinson divide social media into quality (blogs), news (Twitter) and communication (Facebook) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

At the same time, studies conducted by Bykov and Filatova allow to make the following classification of social media: Blogs, social networks, data interchange services, social databases, reference services and news social sites (Bykov and Filatova, 2011).

Social media gives their audience, which is largely disappointed in traditional media, totally new mechanisms of interaction and interactive participation. In this regard, it should be noted that currently the question is often raised in the scientific and journalistic circles of whether to treat social media as a new type of mass media. There are different views on this issue.

The concept, where social media cannot be considered the mass media because of the low quality of the information, is very popular. For example, Nikonov believes that such a phenomenon as social media claiming to be "journalism" does not exist (Nikonov, 2013).

Russian researcher A. Platov has a different view on this issue. In the article "Social networks: The phenomenon of collective intelligence" (Platov, 2007), he discusses social media users not as journalists, but rather as witnesses who deliver first-hand information to the audience, "paying no attention to TV, newspapers and news agencies they have lost remains of confidence in."

Platov considers unprofessionalism of social media users an advantage for two reasons. Firstly, users are not engaged. And secondly, it takes time for a professional journalist to "dig" into the topic, while a witness who covers events in social media lives in a situation he writes about. In addition, unlike traditional mass media, social media give the audience the most complete information picture due to the nature of network information dissemination.

However, in our opinion, it is too early to compare professional mass media and social media in terms of influence on public opinion. Traditional media continue to play a decisive role in the formation of information "agenda."

However, social media as an instrument of civil society have obvious prospects both in the global information space and within the framework of various states, where a low level of trust in traditional journalism is observed.

There is no doubt that social media gives people a unique communication platform. The right of expression shifts from the elite minority to the general public, and dissemination of information turns from concentrated into fragmented.

This, of course, has a great influence on the political situation both within individual countries and in the world at large. Social media, by creating "an era of e-democracy," change the political potential of each user.

In many states, the most active people "leave" to the Internet, where they create their own communities by initiating discussion of political and socio-economic problems. In fact, this is how a

new environment for a critical attitude towards reality is formed, which contributes to a more productive interaction between the authorities and citizens, including in emergency situations.

Thus, the network society has an opportunity to influence the formation and implementation of public policy.

In other words, a political Internet dialogue is "the process of symmetric or asymmetric communication of citizens with the government through the use of communication facilities, aiming to participate in formulation of political strategies of the society development and influence political decision-making" (Litvinenko, 2012).

Social media is sometimes the only opportunity for the society to be heard and to influence public political processes, both within a particular state, and of a global nature.

Of course, web 2.0. journalism involves certain risks, because at its core it is a democratic but anarchic phenomenon, which is often characterized by a large volume of fraud. In addition, social media are often a platform for organizing illegal, extremist and nationalist events.

Development of social media significantly weakens the ability of the government to control and interfere in dissemination of information. Consequently, many countries seek to regulate the Internet and change the environment to use the network for its population based on their domestic political challenges and foreign policy objectives.

A good example of "destructive" spread of negative emotions in social media and attemptsby the state to limit such processes is the wave of riots in the UK in August 2011.

The focus in the public discourse about the causes of the riots was made on the role of social media in provoking and destabilizing the situation. In particular, the need to control the spread of information in social media and reform of the state information policy were discussed. Thus, David Cameron acknowledged that social media played a negative role and offered to get the functioning of these platforms under better control (Fisher, 2011). Meanwhile, the opposition parties have advocated the view where social media are not liable, as they are just a communication tool.

Of course, social media have created some problems for law enforcement during unrest. Subsequently, however, the police became convinced that social media can also be useful. For example, potential crimes were successfully prevented thanks to tracking information in Facebook and Twitter (Mason, 2012). In addition, dissemination of information in social media allows to notify and warn the civilian population on the go. Consequently, the attitude of the police to social media gradually changed - from sharply negative at the initial stage to objective at the final stage.

According to the survey carried out by The Guardian, more than 90% of Britons did not agree with the government's proposal to limit the use of social media in emergency mode, citing the

fact that such an initiative would have a negative impact on the sociopolitical life of the country in the long view (Stratton, 2011). In addition, it is clear that the main cause of the riots was not network resources, but social problems in the first place: Financial and economic crisis, unemployment, low level of social services, poor relationships between the police and the community.

In the end, after lengthy discussions, the British government canceled the order to limit the operation of social media and announced that it would not give additional powers to block or remove certain network resources. However, the operators of social media were presented a list of requirements on the need of self-regulation and cooperation with law enforcement.

Riots in the UK in 2011 showed a destabilizing influence of social media on the dynamics of social unrest. Attempts by the British authorities to control information flows appeared effective only when the policy of strict restrictions transformed into a strategy of "indirect control" under public pressure, which simultaneously reduced the potential dangers of social media and guaranteed users the preservation of the right to express their opinions.

One of the main functions of social media - the opportunity to express their opinion - has become particularly attractive to users from the Arab world during the so-called "Arab Spring." For the closed civil society of the Arab countries, especially for a younger audience, social media were a mechanism for "breakthrough" in an attempt to change the political environment (Primakov, 2012).

The large-scale wave of protest was unexpected just because the authorities of the Arab states underestimated the power of social media. This was particularly characteristic of Egypt, where such resources immediately brought millions of demonstrators to the streets.

However, during the analysis of the impact of social media on the dynamics of protest movements and coups in countries of the Middle East and North Africa, we came to a conclusion that the role of social media in the so-called "Arab Spring" was generally exaggerated. In the Arab world, a more effective mechanism to mobilize and intensify protest movements is the approach of so-called "word of mouth."

At the same time, basic purpose of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube was to use them for informing, organizing meetings and providing legal assistance.

A thesis that social media intensified these sociopolitical processes also seems controversial (Demidov, 2011). On the contrary, attempts by the authorities to restrict access to the Internet led to even more devastating consequences.

Reason for the popularity of mass social movement against economic inequality Occupy Wall Street, which spontaneously arose in 2011 in New York and dynamically spread to other US cities, as well as countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America, is in many ways associated with extremely efficient use of social media, namely Facebook and especially Twitter.

In the case of Occupy Wall Street, perhaps for the first time a trend of full integration of social media into public life was seen (Hiltzik, 2011). Activists of the movementlacked traditional resources to attract the attention andcreatedan alternative information space, the characteristic features of which were "decentralization" and "fragmentation" of information.

In other words, mass nature and popularity of the social movement Occupy Wall Street are a consequence of the effective use of social platforms Twitter and Facebook, which actually formed the information "background" of protests and demonstrations.

It is undeniable that social media (in particular, Twitter) effectively delivered information to the audience about what was happening directly from thousands of active participants in the events, thereby offering competitive traditional institutions a new kind of social organization. In this meaning, "social media as a structural component of protest movements gained particular significance" (Baluev and Novoselov, 2012).

Protest movement Occupy Wall Street has quickly gone beyond its originally narrow audience. At the same time, the dynamics of the movement was observed almost in real time. Traditional mass media were a few days late with coverage of what was happening, and only after the public has demonstrated extensive and growing interest, actions of Occupy Wall Street appeared in the focus of media attention. Hashtags of the movement spread rapidly across Twitter, and Google News service was overloaded with different stories associated with OWS in one way or another.

It should be noted that communication in OWS communities was quite dense, and the saturation of these virtual platforms with new information was constant and continuous. The activity was on the one hand promoted by moderators and "opinion leaders" who constantly presented new information causes, on the other hand - by the users who felt the need for an independent discussion.

Nevertheless, the prevailing form of participation remained a passive form of virtual validation and dissemination of information.

The main aim of the Occupy communities in social media was to disseminate information about the protest actions and thus maximize the mobilization in different ways.

At the same time, the communities, of course, maintained a certain image of the movement: In spite of the radical demands, the protest was described as a peaceful public movement, which was united according to the principle of solidarity against the existing government and laws.

5. CONCLUSION

Obviously, web 2.0. fundamentally changes the nature of interaction between states and mass media. On the one hand, social

media are becoming a political tool by coordinating sociopolitical movements throughout the world. On the other hand, there are regimes that make attempts to restrict access to web 2.0. resources in order to reduce the influence of other states.

At the same time, the sociopolitical role of social media cannot be overstated. Formed in the absence of the needs of society in political changes, web 2.0. journalism is an ineffective tool.

Moreover, recent events related to the protest activity of the population in the Arab states show that social media rather perform functions of the effective tool for coordination, while not being a determining factor in the "Arab Spring." In other words, the use of such resources is not a substitute for real action.

The analysis of the features of social media functioning and their purpose in different sociopolitical processes allows to formulate a number of essential conclusions.

Firstly, web 2.0. journalism is a full-fledged social institution that has the following characteristics: Direct involvement of users in generation and retranslation of media content, available interactive communication, flexibility and mobility.

Secondly, social media change the shape and channels of devilering political information to citizens. The approach of distributing messages for these resources is based on social networks, which allows users to flexibly respond to current political events, shape and build social capital, becoming the leaders of public opinion in the virtual space.

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