

Study of the Impact of Social Media Technologies on Political Consciousness: Specifics of Russian Approaches

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the phenomenon of political consciousness and social media. The authors pay attention to existing approaches to study of political consciousness and modern social media in Russian science. According to this article Russian scientists actively consider the problems that are connected to social media. There is a number of works where authors consider terminological aspects of modern social media. There are also many investigations that are devoted to the problem of political consciousness. Russian scientists draw attention to modern social networks support platforms as tools of socialization and emphasize the need for the system-based theoretical and applied researches of political and social phenomenon of modern social networks support systems in Russia. The authors of this paper suppose that social media may enhance the feeling of modern Russians potential involvement in socio-political sphere. Moreover these media may contribute to changing political and social institutions perception by users.

Keywords: social media, “new” media, political consciousness, network, Web 2.0

1. Introduction

Growth of access to Internet via mobile devices leads to the increase of the number of social media users. There is 228 million users of Russian social media platform VK. Russian audience of Facebook was 26.7 million in 2013. In turn, it helps to increase the scale of social media impact on society functioning. The political sphere is also experiencing the increased role of social media (Baluev & Kaminchenko, 2015). This state of affairs is also true for Russia. In the course of recent political events in Russia the social media have demonstrated their strength and importance for contemporary political processes and relationships. In particular, the social media have proven to have a high degree of effectiveness and usefulness in processes related to organization of political participation (for example various political rallies of 2012). They have also shown various abilities for social media users to influence decisions making processes. However, the most important is the question associated with effects and results of social media impact on political consciousness. For the Russian research tradition this influence does not typically require any evidence and is accepted a priori. It is believed that before deciding to participate in a political event in social media (online), a user, at the level of his (her) consciousness, finds a certain motivation to participate in a particular political action. Considering the possible impact of social media on political consciousness (and consciousness as a whole) Russian authors try to answer the questions related to political role of social media.

The objective of this study is a critical analysis of works of Russian researchers in order to consider possible outcomes and consequences of the social media impact on political consciousness in modern Russia. This objective requires performing a number of tasks. Firstly, it is necessary to examine the categorical and conceptual framework used by Russian authors and its correlation with Western researchers' terminology. Secondly, it is necessary to analyze how the features of political consciousness in modern Russia are reflected in Russian authors' works. Thirdly, we have to review the evaluation by Russian authors of opportunities of social media technologies influence on Russian political consciousness and the results of such influence.

Russian scientists pay much attention to terminological issues related to modern social media technologies. D.G. Baluev considers social media as media that enable communication between people, groups and organizations and forming networks (Baluev, 2013, p. 611). G. A. Shakhnov writes: "Social media is a set of technologies based on a network principle, allowing users to freely carry out social communication and exchange of

information content" (Shakhanov, 2012, p. 172). N. I. Melnikova remarks: "The "social media" term is used to describe a set of tools of computer networks that facilitate people interaction, discussion of various topics, co-creation of content and organization of virtual communities" (Melnikova, 2012, p. 254). A. B. Shalimov remarks: "At present the social media is one of the most complex social mechanisms of production and distribution" (Shalimov, 2012, p. 974).

In relation to interpretation of the "social media" concept, the Russian scientific thought often focuses on the network principle of their organization, as well as on interaction of people at working with information.

Moreover, the Russian literature expresses the issue of relationship between social media and social capital. G.A. Shakhanov draws attention to the way the weak relations supporting system of social media technologies is functioning as allocation of social capital (Shakhanov, 2012, p. 178). N. I. Melnikova writes: "Web 2.0 technologies allow saving emerging weak social relations and using them to build social capital" (Melnikova, 2012, p. 256). N. L. Sokolova emphasizes the importance of Web 2.0 technologies: (Web 2.0 gives ordinary users vast opportunities for cultural expression and direct "participation" in mass media" (Sokolova, 2010, p. 30). "Social media", based on mass users' online creativity, fit in the modern cultural production model, which enhances the role of creative practices" (Sokolova, 2010, p. 31).

In relation to the influence of social media technologies in contemporary society Russian authors emphasize their relationship with social capital, giving accent to Web 2.0 technologies.

In order to analyze reflections of the features of political consciousness in modern Russia in Russian authors' works, it is necessary first of all refer to objective data on the state of this social consciousness. Opinion polls data may be considered the most relevant and possibly reliable sources of information on the political consciousness. In 2011, the official website of Russian Public Opinion Research Center published a press release number 1728: "The mass political participation in Russia: elections only or something else?" In particular, it showed that the majority of Russians were not interested in social and political life (61%, in 2008 was 45%), while the rest were involved in it mostly by election (27%, in 2008 - 40%). The main argument of the low involvement in political sphere was the lack of interest in social and political life (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2011). Low involvement of Russians in social and political life, as well as lack of interest in this area as such mean to a certain extent the apolitical nature of modern Russians political consciousness, this poll data points to admissibility of such conclusions.

Russian literature pays much attention to issues that anyway have to do with such categories as "political consciousness". E. B. Shestopal says: "The political consciousness is a subject's perception of a part of reality associated with the politics, issues of power, authority, the state and its institutions" (Shestopal). According to N. A. Baranov: "The political consciousness is related to sensual, subconscious, rational, theoretical, axiological ideas, which mediate a person relationship with political sphere" (Baranov, 2007). "The political consciousness is also produced on the basis of own or other people experience of political participation" (Baranov, 2007). Y. V. Bespalov remarks: "The mass political consciousness is a part of the mass consciousness, therefore, has many similar characteristics with it" (Bespalov, 2009, p. 186).

Therefore, the works of Russian scientists often consider the political consciousness as perception and ideas of a person associated with politics in general and in particular his (her) actions in the framework of political sphere.

Furthermore, Y. V. Bespalov believes that at unsteady processes mass political consciousness seriously differs from the same at stable periods by politicization (Bespalov, 2009, p. 188). According to Y. A. Alexandrova, "In the 1990's and 2000's political consciousness and behavior of the citizens of Russian Federation represented and continues to represent a syncretic structure in which coexist, with varying degrees of manifestation, contemporary focus on spirituality and paternalism and postmodern principles of individualism and hedonism" (Alexandrova, 2012, p. 104). She also remarks that the Russians consciousness "could adopt the basic principles of postmodern era - dialecticism and variability, manifested in the process of individual values ranking and in relationships of ideological and political spheres, having become the space of postmodernism principles realization" (Alexandrova, 2012, p. 107). R. Gromova, based on a number of criteria, distinguishes 3 types of political consciousness:

- "rational consciousness" ("characterized by a "desire for logical alignment of cause-and-effect relationships, relative consistency of articulated position, understanding of own interests and interests of other collective agents and tendency to explain the processes by rational reasons");
- "mythological consciousness" ("characterized by presence of formed and absolute explanation of situations, fatalism and perception of self and others not as independent agents, but participants of a programmed action");

- "apolitical consciousness" ("denies active attitude to political institutions") (Gromova, 1999, pp. 11-12).

Thus, Russian literature emphasizes duality of modern Russians political consciousness, reflecting the principles and guidelines of modernity and postmodernity.

2. Methodology

In Russian literature there are a lot of studies on Internet and modern social media influence on political consciousness. D. S. Martyanov carried out a sociological analysis of Internet users' political consciousness in the focus of paradigm shift of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. He came to the conclusion that, in comparison with Web 1.0 technologies, the Internet environment of Web 2.0 technologies era "almost has no common trend to replace real political actions by imitation political processes" (Martyanov, 2013, p. 202). He also remarks that among Web 2.0 technologies users "Internet users identity duality" is more rarely observed (Martyanov, 2013, p. 202). "Social networks at the present stage of their development are the main "deanonimisor" of Internet" (Martyanov, 2013, p. 197). V. P. Cherkasova considers television and Internet as channels of citizens' political consciousness formation. She observes: "... television and Internet are to some extent antagonists: Internet is bilateral, interactive, makes allowance for feedback mechanism, teaches to interact, allows both consuming and creating information, TV is unilateral, unidirectional, not designed for response, teaches only to listen" (Cherkasova, 2013, p. 162). Comparative analysis of Internet and television as information channels is presented in the work of A.A. Maslova. She writes: "Internet allows you receiving, storing and distributing huge amounts of information, and speeds up their processing, resulting in possibility of impact in real time, complexity of information attacks warning and non-information ways to counteract them" (Maslova, 2014, p. 136). A. G. Ananeva and I. N. Bryantsev remark: "Social networks are an effective tool of socialization, formation in society of certain attitudes and groups sharing these attitudes" (Ananeva & Bryantsev, 2011, p. 114). "Lack of system-based theoretical and applied researches of political and social phenomenon of social networks in Russia does not allow developing reliable tools for providing necessary information impact on Russian network society to neutralize hostile manifestations in Internet and conduct counter-propaganda" (Ananeva & Bryantsev, 2011, p. 115).

Therefore, in Russian literature, the works related to Internet and modern social media impact on political consciousness, often draws attention to comparison of such distribution channels as television and Internet. They also include comparative studies of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies impact on consciousness formation. The Russian authors draw attention to modern social networks support platforms as tools of socialization. At the same time, the works emphasize the need for the system-based theoretical and applied researches of political and social phenomenon of modern social networks support systems in Russia.

3. Result

We are evaluating possible results of modern social media and "new" media influence on political consciousness. We took as a basis a few empirical facts, namely the project "Russian public initiative" (Rossiyskaya obshchestvennaya initsiativa) - RPI, and web-broadcasts of voting in course of the presidential elections on March 4, 2012. As a result, the author came to a number of conclusions: social media contribute to formation of a greater degree of observability of political processes and phenomena in which they are involved, which, in turn, may contribute to appearance in people minds of the feeling of potential involvement in these processes; this feeling is able to increase motivation of people to political participation, and ultimately strengthen the political participation through "new" and social media technologies (Kaminchenko, 2014). Furthermore, the author concluded that certain factors (greater degree of observability of political processes and events, as well as a sense of potential involvement) may have an impact on strengthening of the power legitimacy (Kaminchenko, 2014).

As noted above, the political consciousness of contemporary Russians is characterized by a low level of involvement in social and political life. Such involvement is often expressed exclusively in elections participating. In this case, what impact may social media and "new" media technologies have on political consciousness of Russians? What might be the effects and consequences of such impact? First, social media and "new" media technologies may enhance the feeling of modern Russians potential involvement in socio-political sphere. In this case potentiality means people awareness of having real mechanisms for participation in public and political life, but it does not mean they use these mechanisms for such participation. The idea of a possible enhance of feeling of potential involvement may be supported by specific illustrative examples of successful interim results of participation in social and political life through the media studied (for example, in the "Russian public initiative" (RPI) system there are applications and projects that received necessary support by user's voting and were sent for consideration, and some of them have already been taken by the relevant authorities and are implemented). Many users may potentially take part in such activities. Awareness of availability of such

mechanisms and examples of their effective functioning (albeit often at intermediate results levels) can theoretically have a positive impact on raising Russians' interest to social and political life, and corresponding change in the political consciousness.

Second, social media can help changing political and social institutions perception by users. This is confirmed by the fact that presence of real mechanisms of participation in social and political life via social media can help changing attitudes to existing social and political institutions. For example, various city web-site, where users can obtain necessary information relating to work of government agencies. Therefore, we can state an impact of social media on Russians' perceptions of social and political institutions, in terms of their degree of openness and readiness for greater interaction, which, of course, is directly related to political consciousness. This, in turn, may have a positive impact on rising Russians' interest to social and political affairs.

4. Conclusions

According to most studies by Russian authors, social media technologies may have an impact on modern political consciousness of Russians, on the basis of a number of positions. They can enhance the sense of potential involvement in social and political life of the country, and as a result - to promote increased interest of Russians to the policy as a whole. In addition, such media can exert a certain influence on Russians' perceptions of existing social and political institutions in terms of their readiness for more active engagement and greater openness via such media. Moreover, social media may probably have a significant impact on overall policy perception by their user. This impact may reflect the features of such media. For example, users of these media are actively involved in creation and generation of content, including political content. Such active involvement may be reflected in overall policy perception from a perspective of greater activity, primarily through social media.

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