

Digital political practices of Russian youth: YouTube top bloggers

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Abstract—The relevance of the proposed research is, firstly, based on the complexity of youth as an object of study (indefinite age limits and a high level of youth individualization make it difficult to research the identification of practices). Secondly, how virtualization and mediatization effect new political practices in the digital space, including blogosphere, comparing it with continuing real political passivity of the Russian youth. As part of the study, digital political practices are considered as a form of interaction in the blogosphere resulting in the reproduction and transfiguration of political relations by young people, the acquisition of civic identity and the realization of civic agency. The purpose of the study is to identify the repertoire of digital political practices of young people. The focus of this study was youth YouTube-channels that occupy top places in the national rating. The study revealed that the youth environment is a non-politicized vlog segment with the audience from 5 to 14 million subscribers (opposed to 1–5 million for the vlogs, dedicated directly to political personalities and events). It was defined the repertoire of digital political practices of young people according to the analysis of video with Russian YouTube top bloggers. We may state their peripheral and marginal nature with the risk of destructive exposure.

Keywords—digital political practices, the blogosphere, YouTube-vlogs, marginality, youth, Digital Natives.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the features of the modern sociocultural situation is the transformation of traditional political systems: institutions, processes, practices. The development of digital technologies makes the political sphere more accessible and democratic, so the social and demographic boundaries become blurred. For young people, who are one of the most

active social-age groups - Internet users – traditional and institutionalized forms of political participation are nowadays not a popular tool for realizing their own social position. At the same time, various political phenomena and processes (including political conflicts) give rise to a whole spectrum of political practices of modern youth in the Internet environment. Digital political practices of young people, as non-institutionalized and often marginalized forms of political interaction, are poorly amenable to conceptualization, classification, normative assessment and management.

The relevance of this study is due to two main trends of our time.

First, it is the erosion of the chronological and meaningful boundaries of youth as a social group.

Currently, the classic approach¹ to determining the age characteristics of young people is being revised due to the processes of infantilization, emerging adulthood and continued maturation, erasing the upper boundaries of adolescence, prolonging youth- so it leads to the new nominations such as Big Babies, kidult, youthhood, middlescence, adultescents, middle youths, etc. [1, 2].

According to the «theory of generations», modern youth is a heterogeneous group, whose representatives have mixed characteristics of two generations - Y and Z, millennials and centennials, Generation Me and Generation I, with varying chronological age limits. Thus, the Pew Research Center refers to the Y-generation those who were born from 1981

¹ According to the State Youth Policy of the Russian Federation young people are 14-30 years old.

to 1996, to the Z-generation – between 1997 and 2012². As part of the Strauss – Howe generational theory, Centennials or Homeland Generation replaced the Millennials (born between 1982 and 2004) in 2005 and to a certain extent became the culmination of Millennial trends [3, 4]. Jean M. Twenge believes that MeGen (born between the 80s and the mid-90s) in 1995 is replaced by IGen - by the generation who do not remember time before the Internet [5, p. 59]. Russian researchers and specialists (mainly sociologists, economists, business consultants, and marketing specialists) who adapt the theory of generations to Russian realities (V. Radaev, A. Solodukhina, E. Shamis, A. Antipov, E. Nikonov, and others) count down new generational cycle from 2000-2004.

In general, the age of the eldest Y and the eldest Z is determined by the boundaries (upper and lower - respectively) that may be accepted as the «youth». However, the characteristics of a generation are not limited only by biological age. The formation of the personality of the younger generation is coupled to the Internet – from childhood (for Y, Me) or from birth (for Z, I). M. Prensky, for example, characterizes the modern youth as Digital Natives (digital-born), contrasting them with Digital Immigrants. Prensky argues that the emergence of digital technology is a singular event that divides two generations [6]. In our study, we will consider modern youth as Digital Natives. This concept avoids chronological confusion, schematization when drawing boundaries between generations and age periods, and is the most generalizing to define the characteristics of modern youth as a heterogeneous group.

And secondly, it is the mediatization of politics that transforms the political space into the space of complicity, participation, where grassroots initiatives take on special importance, where the role of user communities involved in digital space to solve the problems of coexistence is increasing. Today, the media is not only “external extensions of man” (M. McLuhan), not just a “media”, a tool, a communication channel, but acts as a catalyst to emerge new forms of civil self-organization - “electronic swarming” (W. Mitchell), network political practices of solidarity [7]. In the digital space, political blogs and authorities become popular to disseminate political views (both government-oriented and opposition). This increases the level of political activity of citizens, ensures the growth of political reflexivity, which plays a significant role in expressing and creating political values while participation of the population in political decision-making is reduced. [8, p. 13]. The blogosphere becomes a kind of non-institutional digital space for manifestation of civic agency and political participation, contributing to the formation of political attitudes in society and predetermining vigorous actions of citizens. Acting as “small deeds” principle, blogs and vlogs gain quickly the authority of users, in turn, the authorities do not have total control over the blogosphere and, therefore, and cannot prevent bloggers, subscribers, followers to join political societies or managing their activities.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The development of digital space and the blogosphere determines the main trends of Digital Natives as a specific social and age group:

- The unforeseen and simulative nature of the blogosphere leads to the disappearance of the boundaries between the real and digital worlds. The world in which modern youth lives is hybrid and digital– the access to information and the ability to establish contact with any person at any time, regardless of one’s position in the physical space, are of the greatest importance. Modern youth is a generation of technophiles, digital nomads and can be characterized by super connecting and plugging, territorial and deterritorial (virtual) hypermobility [9], manifested in the plasticity of Self, the ability to change their social roles in the network, as well as the formation of global identity.
- The blogosphere as hyperreality contributes to the formation of iBrain. Modern youth are visuals who are used to get information very quickly, they like to switch attention, think nonlinearly and with hyperlinks, interactivity-oriented, networking. As M. Prensky believes that Digital Natives possess such cognitive skills as multidimensional visual-spatial skills, mental paper folding, inductive discovery, attentional deployment as a monitoring multiple locations simultaneously and responding faster to expected and unexpected stimuli [10, p.2]. This is how cognition of the surrounding reality takes place as well as the formation of a media-centric world view of today's youth.
- Modern youth is Homeland generation. The status of homelander is explained by the insecurity of the environment, the risk society, and individualized «life in a smartphone» becomes a strategy of safe behavior. However, «online life» does not lead to social exclusion of young people. The blogosphere is interactive. There is a constant exchange of thoughts, judgments, meanings, and emotions in the digital space. According to PRC survey, young people tend to associate their social media use with feeling confident rather than insecure (69% vs. 26%) and feeling included rather than excluded (71% vs. 25%). They see digital environments as important spaces for youth to connect with their friends and interact with others who share similar interests³. As the researchers note, digital communication also performs the basic functions of communication, and the Internet can be a source of support and realization for social connections⁴.
- The blogosphere polyphonic and varied nature transforms the world of youth into a highly personalized screened and streamed one. With the proliferation of social media, the growing popularity of blogs and vlogs, including live broadcasting, we

² URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/generation-z>.

³ URL: <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/11/28/teens-social-media-habits-and-experiences/>.

⁴ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSHw74LxDqY>.

may attribute the end of privacy, the transformation of private life into public one. So, J. Twenge names modern youth as a generation of complete transparency [11]. In addition, modern youth is distinguished by hard work on creating their own image, Internet self-presentation and searching for followers, subscribers [12]. As N. Howe notes, homelanderers are not only successful with achievements, but also with how others like them [13].

- The modern blogosphere is creative, the “living on the Web” youth is a do-it-yourself-generation. The DIY principle is widely distributed through blogs containing instructions, lifehacks and allows to “pump” a wide variety of skills. The desire of young people for independence, self-education is combined with confidence in opinion leaders, perception of the world through the prism of others' experience - bloggers who become figures of influence and so-called «significant Others» in the process of personal development.

Russian Digital Natives meet all these features. Thus, according to the research of GfK Group, in 2018 the Internet penetration among the Russian youth (16-29 years) has reached a value close to the limit and was 99%⁵. According to a joint study by Google and Ipsos, 98% of young Russians (13-29 years old) use the Internet daily, and most often - social networks⁶. In addition, more than 15% of users aged 13 to . watch videos more than 3 hours a day and spend more than 5 hours on social networks, more than 30% subscribe to bloggers' channels and the same amount trust their advice and recommendations⁷.

At the same time, the negative assessment of the blogosphere is becoming a common place in the arguments of Russian researchers. Most of the works dealing with the blogosphere and media space bring to the forefront the problems of online security, prevention of cyber vandalism and Internet addiction among young people, social exclusion, escapism, alienation of youth and addiction, cyber extremism and digital violence, which indicates a one-dimensional view about blogosphere resources.

In turn, we believe that the blogosphere has great potential for the formation of an open political system that ensures equality of political participation and the development of civic agency of young people. Creating their own blog, viewing or reading someone else's, young people experience and become aware of the changes taking place in society, get acquainted with alternative points of view on the situation in the world, in the country, in the region, in the city. The blogosphere is a space where a system of political values is being tested, the characteristics of one's personality and the personalities of other participants as subjects of politics, the space of political criticism,

discussion and creation are realized and evaluated, where young people are not afraid to express their assessment of political events, offer solutions to various problems, formulate forecasts of the future development of the country, region, city and themselves.

The blogosphere is rarely seen as a space of political practices of Russian Digital Natives. In Russia, the Youth Study and social surveys in this area⁸ are of a general nature. The revisions are mainly subjected to typical, most common forms of political interaction (mostly vertical in the “power-society” system) without separation into trends and rare cases, digital and traditional practices, marginal practices and practices that have a universal regulatory assessment. Studies of digital political practices of young people are mostly fragmentary. Basically, as a trend, researchers record such digital practices of young people that are implemented outside of formally existing political institutions, namely, the representation of citizenship through a post on social networks; ignoring information, repost or comment on the network (for example, in response to messages of an extremist nature); consumption and discussion of news on the Internet, viewing political talk shows, battles, etc. and participation in online discussions; online protest organization, virtual flash mobs, petition activity; practices of “small deeds”, volunteering, as well as deliberate disregard of the political agenda [14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

However, there are those practices that remain on the periphery of researchers' attention, such as vandal political practices (including replication of political memes), streaming social networks with political actions, political crowdsourcing, the creation and distribution of fake news, political trolling, political «holy wars», etc. This is explained by the fact that the development of digital political practices of modern youth is significantly ahead of the development of methodological approaches to their description, systematization and evaluation of effects. In addition, Russian researchers use the concepts of «practice», «participation», and «activity» interchangeably; moreover, the descriptive approach prevails when these concepts are defined through the description of a set of empirically detectable trends in the youth environment.

As a conceptual basis for the study of the youth political practices in the digital space, we propose the following approaches and principles:

- Anthropological approach (B.V. Markov, A.A. Popov, S.A. Smirnov, G.L. Tulchinsky, S.S. Khoruzhy and others.). The concept of “practice” goes back to the «practitioners of themselves», «taking care of themselves» by M. Foucault [19]. In our study, we will rely on the understanding of digital youth political practices as a form of interaction in the digital space, when young people reproduce and transfigure (create or destroy) political relations, acquire and implement their own civic identity (negative or positive).

⁵ URL: <https://www.gfk.com/ru/insaity/press-release/issledovanie-gfk-proniknovenie-interneta-v-rossii/>.

⁶ URL: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/ru-ru/insights-trends/user-insights/novoe-pokolenie-internet-polzovatelei-issledovanie-privyчек-i-povedeniia-rossiiskoi-molodezhi-onlain/>.

⁷ URL: <https://rusability.ru/infographics/vsyo-o-rossijskoj-molodyozhi-v-internete-infografika>.

⁸ See for example URL: <https://fom.ru/Politika/13285>,
URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9020>,
URL: <https://fom.ru/TSennosti/13286>.

- The synergetic principle to study the social processes: the statement of nonlinearity and variability of the future, the study of bifurcation points. Special attention, in our opinion, should be paid not only to trends, mass political practices of young people who have received a normative assessment, but also to study marginal practices that have borderline evaluative status at the «social norm – deviation» scale, the power of influence on which is often underestimated, and effects are poorly predictable, although the possibility of their existence is well known. These practices can be viewed as practices such as “Black Swan” (N. Taleb) or “wild cards”, “jokers”.
- Socio-conflictological approach (R. Park, E. Stonequist, A. Gusev, S. Skorynin, etc.) is based on the nature of marginality as a conflict phenomenon, that is, any manifestation of marginality is a conflict - political, cultural, national, etc. Following this approach, political practices are considered as a way to form the normative-value patterns for the existence of young people. Political practices act as a demarcation of the «marginal – non-marginal», «extremist and anti-state – socially approved». The Internet forms completely different conditions for interaction, different from real life, young men and women count on its anonymity, minimal consequences and the impossibility to identify them by usernames and logins. However, any kind of activity with proper reinforcement (cognitive, emotional, material, etc.) may transform into stable forms and is fixed firstly in the individual behavior of a person in the network, and later is transferred into the real life. Serious consequences for society are brought by the process of transformation and the distorted transfer of marginal political practices that young people have “worked out” in a virtual environment and are ready to implement in the real life. It is extremely difficult to predict and measure the scale of that process, thus, it is almost impossible to prevent the negative effect.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital space is highly differentiated, heterogeneous, and develops unevenly, therefore its segmentation is necessary to study the repertoire of political Internet practices of young people.

The empirical basis of this study was the content of the non-politicized segment of youth Youtube-channels of Russian top video-bloggers (channels with the most numerous audience)⁹. In Russia, YouTube is the 3rd place (after Google and Yandex) in the rating of resources by the number of visitors¹⁰. 15% of Russians aged from 13 to 24 use YouTube more often than another search engine¹¹.

⁹ According to the rating by the number of subscribers. URL: <https://whatstat.ru/channels/top100>.

¹⁰ URL: <https://webindex.mediascope.net/top-resources>.

¹¹ URL: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/ru-ru/insights-trends/user-insights/novoe-pokolenie-internet-polzovatelei-issledovanie-privyчек-i-povedeniia-rossiiskoi-molodezhi-onlain>.

Gradually, online video, including vlog, become the main source of information for generations of millennials (Y) and centennials (Z)¹². At the same time, YouTube is viewed by Runet (Russian segment of the Internet) users as space where everyone can express themselves, where new ideas and trends appear and develop, people can inspire each other and fight for changes¹³. In this sense, YouTube, like the blogosphere, video blogging in general, can act as a digital space of youth political practices.

Based on the content study of the youth vlogs in Youtube, we have identified the following political practices of young people in the digital space:

- *The practice of political indifference* characterized by an indifferent attitude to political events, the political situation in the country and the world. For example, Sasha Spilberg – famous Russian vlogger (6.4 million subscribers) said: “I know little about Putin and about Obama and I don’t want to know more”¹⁴.
- *The practice of political non-engagement* – a conscious refusal to discuss political or socially significant topics in their vlog. Even though the political theme may attract a great number of subscribers, Kate Clapp (6.5 million subscribers) said that she is not interested and that there would never be any policy in her vlogs¹⁵. In addition, on the eve of the 2018 presidential elections in Russia, Kate Clapp opposed the participation of bloggers in political agitation, popularization and promotion of elections among young people¹⁶.
- *The practice of political indifference (absenteeism)* is characterized by the absence of socio-political themes in the content of the YouTube channel. In this case, the vlogger does not demonstrate a conscious rejection of this topic, it is characterized by an apolitical outlook in which politics simply has no place. So, BrianMaps (10.5 million subscribers) tells about games he played and events, about his cat, he answers questions, writes parodies, so he doesn’t even have a hint of interest in events in political sphere¹⁷.
- *The practice of social surfing (nomadism)* “is consequence and a peculiar reaction of the individual to the transitivity of the informative society” [20, P. 610]. This practice is characterized by interest in the events of the country in which the vlogger is now located. “I do not have my own country. I feel like a citizen of the planet Earth ...”, - Sasha Spilberg

¹² URL: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/ru-ru/insights-trends/user-insights/5-generations/>

¹³ URL: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/ru-ru/ad-solutions/video/youtube-for-everyone/>

¹⁴ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKK-j8qivI8>.

¹⁵ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqAJwNIDlwI>.

¹⁶ URL: https://twitter.com/kate_clapp/status/973159180835217409.

¹⁷ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyJrhZm9KXrzRub3-wD2zWg>.

convinces her subscribers¹⁸. The practice of social surfing, nomadism, becomes monetized if the content of the vlog becomes advertising and reflects the state or corporate order. For example, EeOneGuy (14.3 million subscribers), answering a question from journalists about whether he has real estate and where it is, said that he was a nomad and his house was in the country where he had orders from advertisers¹⁹. The main purpose of the of Sasha Spilberg's interview with the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation Vladimir Medinsky (according to the assumptions of the Internet audience) is to promote the projects of the ministry, including films that were released in Russian distribution²⁰.

- *Political online contacting practices* that are episodic, such as the above-mentioned interview of Sasha Spilberg with Vladimir Medinsky in the format of the "dialogue of generations" or her speech at parliamentary hearings on youth policy and conducted as part of the work of the authorities with online opinion leaders²¹.
- *The practice of self-improvement* - participation in politics, talking about politics as a way of self-determination, the search for oneself, one's civil and personal identity. So, after accusations from bloggers and YouTube audiences of excessive loyalty to the Russian authorities, Sasha Spilberg stated the following: "I spoke in the State Duma because I am looking for myself ... I try to improve myself, to be better."²²
- *Political memo-practices* - turning politics into a youth meme. In EeOneGuy videos, political leaders, homeland, events become memes, and sarcasm or criticism are combined with love, sympathy and anxiety for the fate of the country, region, village²³. Political memo practices may have a less "soft" form, transforming into political trolling practices – banter over the actions and statements of officials – for example, Adamthomasmoran's (9.9 million subscribers) ridiculing of the dance of the Head of the Chuvash Republic, the opening of a water tower in Tomsk, or the sidewalk in Samara²⁴. This practice can be considered as a type of network vandalism [21], threatening reputation of statesmen and social stability. However, Internet memes also act as a "safety valve": the memes' irony contributes to relieving social tensions. In addition, the meme is a practice of mass self-observation and deconstruction of political reality, providing self-reflection and feedback in the system of political relations.

- *Solidarity practices* - identification with the events taking place in the country, empathy for the citizens of the country (expression of sympathy and declaration of mourning for the tragedy in Kemerovo on the Sasha Spilberg and Adamthomasmoran blogs); rejection of jokes and sarcasm on socially significant topics (when analyzing an online game, EeOneGuy refused to joke about the Holocaust. Moreover, he was outraged by the sarcastic attitude of the game developers to this event).
- *The practice of political nihilism and negativism*, the rejection of the idea of citizenship, patriotism as a system of national values, destructive criticism of social reality. Most of the vloggers declare their weak ties with the homeland and plans to emigrate. Thus, in her video "How I went to a Japanese school," Maryana Ro (9.8 million subscribers) stated her disrespect and dislike for Russia and her desire to leave the country for good soon²⁵.

IV. CONCLUSION

When analyzing a rather diverse range of digital political practices used by young people in the blog- and vlogosphere, we pointed out their diffusion remains weak. Politicization of the youth Internet space does not occur. YouTube gives young people, above all, a sense of self-worth, leadership position; the ability to personalize the content of the channel and chronicle their own life, to feel like a professional, adviser, guru, to share and express emotions easily, get feedback. However, the main objectives of the top vloggers include: moneymaking; generating revenue from increasing subscribers and views; branding: promotion of products, brands, a certain lifestyle among the followers; self-branding, satisfaction of ambitions; hype: artificial creation of excitement around oneself, surrounding people, situations, events in order to form prejudged public opinion and increase subscribers and views; consumerism: positioning of hedonism, fashion, shopping as key values of modern youth; demotivation: the formation of an opposition to socially significant values and rules, a call for their conscious violation, bravado with their anti-social behavior, to shock people; devouring time – chronophagy: popularization of empty, meaningless pastime on the web.

Thus, the entire repertoire of youth political practices used by Russian top non-political YouTube channels is peripheral, marginal and risky. Top bloggers don't represent the standard, norm, socially approved trend and, as a rule, are not aimed to increase the level of political culture or to develop the constructive forms of political participation – so they don't form the civic agency of Russian youth. Basically, the study identified digital political practices that reflect negative tendencies of the virtual youth environment: civil escapism, replacement of creative potential and initiatives by network vandalism, policy memeization, and popularization of haterism.

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²⁵ URL: <https://youtu.be/hTnuSLFX0fQ>.

¹⁸ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKK-j8qivI8>.

¹⁹ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrxNS6oLwC8>

²⁰ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVLzn0NSSGc>.

²¹ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2AqNYPhFhw>.

²² URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I74Hfmb4-HI>.

²³ URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gieEA4GfPSg>.

²⁴ URL: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-27_Szq7BtHDoC0R2U0zxA)

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