

# Online petitions of the German-language platform “openPetition” as a form of modern protest communication

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**Abstract** — The article presents the results of a linguistic study of online petitions as a relevant form of citizens' political participation on the Internet, and the analysis results of the characteristics that were studied in this new protest communication genre, constituting its complex, hybrid nature. The author describes the positive and negative factors of electronic democracy, testifying to the influence of this new interaction format between the authorities and citizens on modern communication protest practices, determined by the medialization trends and technological determinism. The phenomenon of political participation is fully described in terms of its forms, levels of interaction of the parties, types of response, conventionality, groups of online participants, motives and users' behaviour models on Internet platforms. According to the results of the analysis, the author makes a conclusion about the high media potential to realise personalization of socially significant topics as a part of a petition; about the complex nature of studied discursive practices (hybridity of discursive characteristics, multi-functionality, multi-intentionality, stylistic syncretism, special dialogism, complex addresser and addressee, transposition of mass addresser and addressee).

**Keywords** — *protest communication, electronic democracy, political participation of citizens, online petition, petition platforms..*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Modern protest communication functions under active development of information, communication and social technologies, as well as electronic democracy. It is a relevant (but still slightly examined) object of study for its social significance, wide spreading and the role of crisis and conflict situations as manifestations of individuality, identity, public freedom and severe consequences of poor communication in appropriate situations. This fact, against the background changes of mass communication and its participants, arising from the current instrumental remediation, determines the relevance and necessity for a comprehensive study of the communicative dimension of protest (involving the advances of linguistics, sociology, political science and media psychology). It is necessary to comprehend the protest in the context of changing the information and communication space not as a pathological

phenomenon, not as an anomie phenomenon, but as a developmental factor.

Modern information society is characterized, first of all, by new forms and significant changes in the process of communication (due to the globalization of the media); transformations of the structure of communicative experience of a subject or subjects; new attitude to information, its value, reliability and personalization; multiplying the subjects of modern (electronic) mass communication and changes in their rationality; new format of relationships and new mechanisms for organization of collective action (virtual-mediated interaction).

In social studies modern protest is considered from perspectives of structural-critical approach (A. Touraine, E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, C. Offe, I. Wallerstein, M. Castells) and resource-mobilization (D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, M. Zald) approach. It is comprehended as a new form of self-organization and political participation of citizens. However, modern researchers proceed on the basis of self-reproduction, autopoiesis and self-validation of protest [1].

The significant influence of new formats of interaction between the authorities and citizens on modern protest communication is associated with the implementation of current trends in the mediation of politics, personality and technological determinism, with new opportunities and dangers of electronic democracy.

Most actively involved sociologists and political scientists include the following factors to the advantages of e-democracy as part of the study of this phenomenon: speed of information flow, lack of temporal and geographical boundaries, reduction of resource costs, increased citizens' access to information and practices of political participation; new solidarity practices; increasing the effectiveness of government feedback with citizens; representation by citizens of their own interests at different levels without intermediaries [2]; the possibility of a softer conflict management [3].

The following phenomena and trends are related to the risks of electronic democracy: digital inequality (a paradox - the availability of knowledge is increasing, but the gap between the volume of knowledge of groups is also increasing) [4]; the formation of neocracy; new

opportunities for increasing state control [2; 5; 6; 7]; the divergence of the structures formed in the networks of communities and the structure of society; the transience and variability of communities [4]; “the spiral of silence” as an attribute of public opinion [8]; the aggravation of the crisis of representative democracy [4; 9; 10]; the danger of reincarnation of electronic democracy into “probing democracy” [7]; spreading of practices of political participation with minimal responsibility (“clicktivism”/“slacktivism”/“coach activism”); strengthening of virtuality as a social state [4; 7; 11]; cyber-threats [2] and technological determinism of authorities, complication of the “state-citizen” relationship with the “client-server” relationship) [7].

As part of the undertaken research, the phenomenon of political participation of citizen is being characterized; The characteristics of online petitions as a modern genre of protest communication are being studied, determining the complex nature of the addresser and the addressee, the hybrid nature of this form of online political participation of citizens.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS (MODEL)

Within the broad interpretation, we understand *political participation* not only within its organized by the state, legislated and institutionalized forms but also as all direct, indirect, unconventional forms (with varying degree of organization), in order to influence authorities, their decisions and actions [Mülling].

Among *the identified levels of interaction between government and citizens* we consider those given below (by decrease in the degree of participation): 1) participation; 2) taking into account the views of citizens; 3) a request by the authorities for information on the citizens’ needs; 4) informing citizens; 5) the persuasion of citizens in the security, necessity and advantageous decision of the authorities; 6) the manipulation of citizens’ positions; 7) ignoring the citizens’ opinion [12]) the studied form of protest communication, i.e. petitions, can be attributed to the level of participation with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the status of the petition platform.

By “protest communication” we will understand a specific type of proactive-reactive communication at the public level with a catalytic function, structurally associated with a system of political communication; aimed at substituting thematisation of a certain situation/circumstance as it seems threatening to objective reality, as a problem (from the socio-culturally determined positions of protest agents - observers), aimed at turning it into a social factor; characterized by system-communicative autonomy, their own spatial-temporal, subject and collective-personal dimensions, the extensive use of new media and technologies.

We consider a petition a mobilising and conventional form of political participation and as a form of response – an active constructive protest (by the combination of parameters “degree of citizens’ activity on changing the situation” and “degree of adequacy, full awareness of the situation”) [7; 12].

The catalytic function of petitions is reflected in the fact that themes replace or manifest reality and also that they are determined by the perspective and actual needs of the observer; the communication turns a circumstance into a social factor, therefore, into an objective reality, while the reality/objectivity of the subject reality is provided by an index of a threat to society.

Following Norbert Körsting, we distinguish 4 groups of online forms of political participation (representation forms; direct democracy forms; deliberative forms; demonstrative forms) and attribute online petitions to direct democracy forms [13].

Users of petition platforms differ in their behaviour and motives (*new lobbyists* (neue Lobbyisten) - are interested in a particular topic and use the platform as a tool for participation; “*Hit-and-Run*” *activists* (Hit-and-Run Aktivisten) - short-term interest in the platform, attention to certain topics; *activism consumers* (Aktivismus-Konsumenten) - interest in different topics, lack of long-term interest in certain topics, emphasis is on the demonstration of participation; *stakeholders* (Stakeholder) - classical signatories interested in one topic, for example, with their area of competence or personal interest, seeking to use petitions to communicate with the authorities [14]).

In terms of expended resources and intensity of participation, online participants can also be assigned to different groups of the participation pyramid, from passive users or “clicktivists” to the most active participants creating their own protest initiatives [4; 15].

The study was based on the petitions from the German-language platform for regional and federal civil initiatives, petitions and openPetition campaigns (<https://www.openpetition.de>), which has 4,710,704 participants, providing multi-search (by the status of the petitions – active, new, expiring by date, in processing, completed after dialogue with the initiator of the petition on his initiative, rejected by the platform, successful, not reaching the goal; by addressing level – district, community, city, community association, administrative district, federated state, state, EU; by source – placed on this or other platforms; by topic – a wide range of political, economic and public topics).

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that each petition contains the following information, arranged in separate headings: 1) debate about the petition (the arguments for and against, expressed by users of the platform, the rationale for why they sign or do not sign the petitions); 2) news (future of the petition, changes in the text of the petition, public response, the reaction of the authorities and thanks from the initiator of the petition); 3) comments from users of the platform; 4) signatories (names of signatories with classification by countries and regions, with marking of participants from a quorum region and non-certified signatories); 5) questions to the initiator of the petition; 6) statistics and maps (map with the distribution of signatories by place of residence with corresponding tables for federal states, districts and other administrative units; graph of quorum ratio and number of signatures; number of signatures by each day in the last two weeks; chart of the petition relevance with the

number of signatories affected: personally, through friends, potentially, in the future, not affected, feeling responsible, interested in the topic; chart of the activity of the position of signatories with the numbers of those who are: ready to organize or participate in joint actions, ready to convince others to distribute a petition online, willing to follow the news on this petition, do not consider this initiative an urgent); 7) repost recommendation.

The allocation of petitions on the openPetition platform reflects the areas of the most intensive political participation, problematic areas that concern the active part of society the most. Initiating petitions (Bildung (education) - 10.60%; Verkehr (transport) - 9.40%; Soziales (social sphere) - 9.30%; Kultur (culture) - 7.60%; Tierschutz (animal protection) - 6.70%; Sport (sports) - 6.10%; Umwelt (environmental protection) - 6.10%; Bürgerrechte (citizens' rights) - 5.80%; Gesundheit (health) - 4.60%; Bauen (construction) - 4.50%; Familie (family) - 4.10%; Medien (media) - 3.80%; Sicherheit (security) - 3.00%; Außenpolitik (foreign policy) - 2.70%; Wirtschaft (economy) - 2.00%; Internet (Internet) - 1.90%; Minderheitenschutz (minority rights) - 1.90%; Verwaltung (administration) - 1.80%; Steuern (taxes) - 1, 70%; Migration (migration) - 1.30%; Verbraucherschutz (consumer protection) - 1.30%; Wohnen (housing) - 1.30%; Energie (energy) - 1.15%; Wissenschaft (science) - 0, 85%; Landwirtschaft (agriculture) - 0.34%; Datenschutz (data protection) - 0.16%). The largest number of petitions relate to such areas as education, transport, social services, culture, animal protection, environmental protection and sports. At the same time, the largest number of successful petitions relate to the following headings: social sphere, culture, sports, transport, foreign policy, health and mass media. These headings are characterized by the most active comments and active participation of platform users in the debate over petitions (mass petitions from these headings can have more than 7,000 comments).

The target addressees (the subject of authority they apply to) are often the country or state - 34.7%, federal state - 20.2%, region - 19.8%, city or municipality - 19%. This fact indicates the orientation of German citizens, when it is necessary, to address issues to higher authorities in the country (the frequency of appeals decreases with the level of authority of the political subject; appeals to district authorities are little relevant; the level of petitions focused on the EU is extremely low). At the same time, the most successful petitions are oriented on the level of the country or state - 38.9%, regions - 23.4%, federal state - 17.11% (which indicates the feasibility of the above-described orientation of citizens on high-level authorities and on the validity of their expectations).

The analysis shows the complex nature of the studied genre of protest communication.

The studied texts are characterized by multi-functionality, combining the features of directive, information-evaluative, agitation and propaganda genres:

- a wide range of communicative goals of the author: the expression of civic engagement; the problematisation of a situation, circumstances and the formation of the community relationship and the official addressee-authorities; giving solidarity and receiving support from the community;

proposing a solution to the problem and encouraging the addressee-authorities to take a specific action;

- a wide range of language means with imperative semantics: performative constructions (*Wir fordern den Senat der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg auf* [19], *Wir plädieren für die Umsetzung des Kindergartens ...* [25]); imperative sentences (*Bitte unterschreiben Sie diese Petition; Bitte helfen Sie Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani!* [20, 21]); modal constructions and modal verbs (*es ist ein deutliches Zeichen zu setzen ...* [19]; *Die Dinscheder Ruhrbrücke ... ist baufällig und muss erneuert werden* [22]);

- active use of language units with evaluative semantics (*menschenverachtend, schädlich, verzerrt, drastisch, gequält* [19], *vernachlässigt, heftig* [20], *verrückt* [21] and many others);

- request; appeals to a mass audience; the argument, built on the values, needs and interests of the mass addressee; (potential signatories);

- active use of psychological reasoning, the presence of different forms of agreement, including indirect ones (for example, rhetorical questions - *Sind wir nicht alle Menschen? Haben wir nicht alle ein freies Leben verdient?* [23];

- the slogan nature of the headlines (*BEHELFSBRÜCKE für Oeventrop! (4), Musikverein vom Zentralcafé: Keine Sperrzeit für Kultur!* [24], etc.);

The manipulations of facts, the use of suggestion and emotional impact, which is quite typical for propaganda (for example, the following reasons are often cited by the platform as a cause of withdrawing the petition: «*subjektiv urteilen*», *eine sachliche und begründete Kritik an öffentlichen Personen oder Gruppen in Bezug auf ihre öffentliche Tätigkeit ist zulässig*»; «*Petitionen mit falschen Tatsachenbehauptungen bzw. Tatsachenbehauptungen ohne geeignete Quellenangaben*»; «*Beleidigende, herabwürdigende und diskriminierende Petitionen werden beendet und gesperrt*» - “subjective judgments without substantiated, corroborated data”; “presentation of incorrect facts without reference to the source of information”, “discriminatory, humiliating content”);

- implementation of the educational function through forming values and the citizens' position; for these purposes they often use the opposition of value concepts, referring to the values and anti-values of society: for example, *konstruktiven Dialog, Vernunft, Friedfertigkeit, Freundschaft, friedliches Miteinander, Wiedervereinigung* (constructive dialogue, reason, peacefulness, friendship, peaceful coexistence, reunion) - *Schuld, Krieg, Isolation, Konflikt, Kriegsgefahr, kalter Krieg* (guilt, war, isolation, conflict, danger of war, cold war);

- clear formulation of a proposal to solve the problem [2].

The studied genre of protest communication is characterized by discursive hybridity - a combination of characteristics of political, public, business discourses, Internet discourse (distinguished by reference, subject, instrumental features), which is also reflected in the syncretic stylistic organization that confirms that online petitions are connected with journalistic genres (open letters



against or in defence) and genres of business communication (request, petition) [see 16], but differ from each other by the categorical nature, the presence of a negative evaluation, the substantiation of a specific requirement. Discursive, stylistic hybridity is manifested in the following:

- an appeal to the authorities with the demand or request, accompanied by the report of facts and opinions;
- a combination of personal and social features in the author's image;
- a combination of heterogeneous arguments (actual, logical, ethical, emotional reasoning);
- a combination of appellative, informative, contact functions and the function of self-expression; a combination of business and conversation signs;
- compositional integrity, reproducible text model with components: a) addressing (an appeal to the subject of authorities, which often characterise business communication - *An die Abgeordneten des Deutschen Bundestages*; to the mass addressee - *Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, wir bitten Sie um Ihren Einsatz für ...* [21], b) the main content (problem, assessment, requirement - *Diese Petition soll aufrufen, endlich für Veränderungen im Schulsystem zu kämpfen* [26], c) substantiation of the requirement - *Begründung*), d) the final formula with the request or appeal to sign: *Unterstützen Sie uns mit Ihrer Unterschrift* [25], *Gib deine Stimme für die sofortige Beseitigung der Missstände in den Schulen!* [26], e) signature and date - *Im Namen aller Unterzeichner / innen* (...).

The analysed genre is distinguished by a presence of complex addressee and addresser, that is associated with a special dialogism with two-vector addressing (firstly, petition is a request to the mass addressee or potential signatories, and secondly, to the target addressee or responsible authority). After the petition is signed, the mass addressee is transformed into a collective or mass addresser.

The features of argumentation, the selection of linguistic means are determined by the combination or prevalence of one of the addressing vectors and their corresponding orientation (to seek the support of the community or to convince the authorities), which determines the dominance of features of journalistic genres or genres of business communication.

Each petition has an individual addresser who initiated or created the petition.

"Personal-Me" can be represented in different ways:

a) in the form of giving a full introduction: *Mein Name ist Dr. Wilfried Benner. Ich bin der "offizielle" Petent dieser Petition. Ich bin deutscher Staatsbürger und stamme aus Wendlingen bei Stuttgart. Zur Zeit lebe ich in der Schweiz in einem kleinen Dorf namens Boppelsen bei Zürich. ... In dieser Angelegenheit sehe ich mich jedoch als „Zornbürger“ um der politischen Vernunft und der Friedfertigkeit in diesem Konflikt dienstbar zur Seite zu stehen ...* [27];

b) individual signature: *Initiatoren: Thomas Gehring, MdL (Sprecher für Bildungspolitik der Grünen im Bayerischen Landtag) und Eike Hallitzky (Landesvorsitzender der bayerischen Grünen)* [29];

c) the presentation of their own individual position or motives using the singular personal pronoun of the 1st person and / or the corresponding possessive pronoun: *Ich bin selbst noch Schüler und erlebe jeden Tag am eigenen Leibe, wie ich mich teilweise in der Schule langweile, da mich manche Fächer einfach schlichtweg nicht interessieren und diese auch nie eine Rolle in meinem späteren Berufsleben spielen werden. Zudem bin ich der Meinung, dass auch mehr lebensnahe Themen unterrichtet werden sollen. ... Dies war dann endgültig der Anstoß für mich, eine Petition für ein zeitgemäßes Schulsystem ins Leben zu rufen. Ich fände es echt sehr schade, wenn ein Land wie Deutschland ... weiter dabei zuseht, wie .. die Schüler ... die Freude am Lernen verlieren* [31];

d) in the means of identifying oneself and the mass addressee, appealing to the individual experience of the addressee, reducing the distance and stimulating the separation of positions: *Während dieses Thema ganze Länder beschäftigt, sterben Menschen. Menschen wie du und ich* [23].

An individual addresser may explicitly identify oneself with a group of like-minded people in the petition, acting as their representative; one appears as a collective addresser and gets the denotation through the use of the personal pronoun 1st person of the plural form or by specifying the composition of the members of the group: *Wir OEVENTROPER fordern ... mit Nachdruck die Errichtung einer einspurigen BEHELFSBRÜCKE während der Bauzeit!!!* [22]. *Wir als Interessenvertreter des Faches fordern eine verantwortungsvolle Entscheidung zu Gunsten der Schulgeografie.* [28]; *Wir – die Schülerinnen und Schüler, deren Eltern, die Schulen und die Kommunen – brauchen jetzt Klarheit über die Zukunft des bayerischen Gymnasiums* [29].

As noted above, the addressee of the petition is complex. Among the addressees are potential signatories, like-minded people, all users of the petition platform. The author of the petition assumes that he has the same attitudes, values and motives as the addressees. The image of the addressee is regularly reflected in the final phase of the petition, in addresser's calls to sign it: *Deshalb bitten wir Sie um Unterstützung unserer Petition: Die Zeit ist reif. Treten Sie jetzt ein für ein reformiertes neunjähriges Gymnasium in Bayern!* [29]; *Wenn euch das geistige und körperliche Wohlergehen eurer Kinder am Herzen liegt, dann: Unterzeichnet diese Petition!* [32].

After the petition is signed, the signers turn into its co-authors, co-addressees, since the petition will then act "on their behalf". This transformation, the new status of signatories is reflected in:

a) comments where co-addressees explain their motives: *Johanna Karpenstein (Berlin). 16.11.2016 20:53 Uhr – Die Arbeit ist sehr wichtig für den Betroffenen Personenskreis!;* *Ingo Birkholz (Berlin). 23.11.2016 18:39 Uhr – Weil es dabei um Taten geht, Worte gibt es reichlich* [20];

b) in the arguments “FOR” of each individual signatory in the heading “Debate over the petition”: *Ich finde es schlimm, dass dieser Mann und vielleicht auch viele andere, umgebracht werden soll. Es darf nicht sein, dass Menschenrechte unterdrückt werden (Zivilisation, Menschenrechte)* [21];

c) in various statistics on this petition (territorial map of signatories, chart of the quorum and signatures ratio; chart of the petition relevance for signatories; chart of signatories’ proactivity).

The author of the petition takes on the function of moderator in the information space to achieve communication between political authorities and citizens, to get feedback from citizens to the authorities [see 16].

As it was mentioned above, the author’s self-presentation can be carried out with a predominance of journalistic or business type of stylistic organization of the petition. Also, the topics themselves characterise the addresser and reflect the social dominant of their discursive behaviour. The identity of the addressee and the addresser is given through being a part of a community, a group of like-minded people. In this case, a number of researchers mention a special type of solidarity, i.e. online solidarity [see 17; 18].

The target addressee of the petition is the authority of different levels (*Ortsteil / Bezirk, Gemeinde / Stadt, Gemeindeverband / Amt, Landkreis, Regierungsbezirk, Bundesland, Staat, Europäische Union*), which is explicated:

a) by specifying it in the letter header: *An: Abgeordnete des Bundestags* [21]; *An: Erster Bürgermeister Olaf Scholz* [19];

b) in the main body of the letter, where the purpose or requirement of the petition is expressed: *Wir fordern den Senat der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg auf, die bestehende Städtepartnerschaft zwischen Hamburg und St. Petersburg auszusetzen* [19].

The presentation of the target addressee in the main body of the letter is often accompanied by personification of the government institutions and by negative evaluation of their activities, which contributes to the unification of the addresser and the mass addressee: *Wir bitten den Hessischen Landtag und das Kultusministerium: Geben sie unseren behinderten Kindern, den sozial Schwächsten, die Zeit ihren Beruf ... in Ruhe auszuwählen. Machen sie nicht wieder den Fehler, Kinder durch Verkürzung der Schulzeit (G8) aus finanziellen Gründen zu benachteiligen! ... Dies steht absolut im Widerspruch, diesen Kindern aus finanziellen Gründen auch noch Zeit für ihre Entwicklung zu stehlen – hier wird mal wieder an der falschen Stelle gespart.* [30]; *Es wäre schön, wenn auch das Kultusministerium und der Hessische Landtag diesen Kindern diese Zeit zugestehen würde* [30].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Online petition as a genre of protest communication is a modern, mobilizing, conventional form of online political participation of citizens as part of direct democracy, with

high media potential and a plebiscite function (in view of the personalization of socially significant topics).

Participants differ in motivation and behaviour, expenditure of resources and intensity of participation. The petition initiator takes on the function of a moderator in achieving communication between the authorities and citizens and in the implementation of feedback.

The most frequent objects of petitions on the openPetition platform that reflect the complex, problematic areas of society’s life (from the point of the petitions’ initiators - the most active part of society) relate to the following headings: education, transport, social sphere, culture, animal protection, environmental protection and sports. However, these headings do not fully (50%) coincide with the areas characterized by the largest number of successful petitions (which obviously indicates an incomplete coincidence of interests, needs, evaluations of petitioners and members of the community of users of the petition platform).

The analysis of the frequency target addressees indicates the justified orientation of German citizens to the German authorities of a higher level.

The studied online petitions are characterized by discursive hybridity, combining the signs of political, journalistic, business discourses and Internet discourse. Multi-functionality and multi-intentionality, as well as stylistic syncretism reflect the integration of the characteristics of directive, information and evaluation, agitation and propaganda genres, the genetic connection of online petitions with journalistic genres and genres of business communication.

Online petitions are notable for their special dialogism, manifested in the transposition of the mass addressee and addresser, in the complex nature of authorship and addressing (appeal to potential signatories and the subject of power, the transformation of the mass addressee into a collective addresser). Thus, the implementation of a targeted impact in online petitions is determined by the ratio of the two orientations named above.

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