Impact of Social Media Influencers on Public Policy and Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the study of the impact of social media influencers on social networks on the formation of the political agenda. The main problems and tendencies of using the potential of social networks for the formation of public opinion are identified. It is emphasized that an active public and civic position creates favorable conditions for the formation of leadership qualities of modern thought influencers, skills of effective interaction with a polarized audience. It is emphasized that the virtual space creates opportunities for publicizing one's position, agreeing and uniting around common opinions, increases opportunities for involving people in various activities and events, participating in discussions on topical social issues. Attention is drawn to the fact that, in the conditions of active development and dissemination of social networks, the role of traditional mass media is decreasing, which has led to the emergence of hybrid media systems. The perception of messages of social media influencers of social networks is analyzed. It is emphasized that with the expansion of the audience of social media users, social media influencers have more opportunities to introduce, strengthen and support topics that dominate political discourse, thus influencing the citizens' actions, political discourse of politicians and public, political decision-making.

Keywords: *social networks, public opinion, opinion leader, social media influencers, phenomenon of leadership, political discourse, public policy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, it is impossible to imagine modern communication without social networks, – an unique phenomenon of the twenty-first century–, which is firmly entrenched in the modern information society. A social network means a platform, online service or website designed to build, display and organize social relationships. Since its founding in 1996, social networks have managed to reach most people in the world. Social networks have long ceased to be exclusively services for the exchange of messages and impressions – today they are powerful information platforms that shape the modern social processes' agenda [1-3]. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, even messengers combined exchanging functions with the features of social networks, as well as information channels, which actually became a parallel world and the main source of information for many people around the world [4]. Today, social networks are one of the most important tools for shaping public opinion, and their impact on users is only growing every year. Social networks are becoming an effective means of communication and coordination, as evidenced by such historically significant events as Brexit, the Arab Spring and the Revolution of Dignity [5].

The formation of public opinion is significantly influenced by the phenomenon of leadership, which draws public attention to socially important events and problems. Of particular interest is the study of the impact of social media influencers who are socially active persons and act as repeaters of information, interpreting and changing it at their own discretion. Social media influencers have their

followers on social media, so they can have a significant influence on individual decision-making on various social issues. It is believed that in 2013 the indefinite protest in Kyiv began on November 21 after the publication on Facebook of journalist's post and politician Mustafa Nayem, who collected thousands of reposts in a matter of hours and reached an audience of over 100,000 people. On the first evening, Nayem's post gathered about a thousand people on Independence Square in Kyiv.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological basis of the research is the work of domestic and foreign scientists related to the analysis of formation and assessment of development of social media influencers on social networks. The research is implemented based on the classical methodology – from general to partial, from theory to practice. First of all, general philosophical and general scientific methods, methods and principles of analysis of dialectics and logic, system-structural, functional, statistical methods, methods of system analysis and comparative method are used as the main approaches to comparing the studied processes. The axiological approach allowed the authors to analyze the social media influencers on social networks, on formation of certain preferences and attitudes. Analytical and prognostic methods allowed to identify the main problems and trends in using of social networks' potential for the formation of public opinion. The method of system analysis allowed to determine the features of modern system of mass communication, the comparative method was used to compare traditional and new media, their impact on the political agenda. Empirical research methods are PEST-analysis, content-analysis of publications on social networks, content-analysis of accounts of social media influencers, comparative analysis of key indicators of media systems, materials and results of sociological research obtained by domestic analytical and research institutions, some foreign sociological and sociological centers, etc.

3. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The question of opinion leaders and social networks' role in shaping the political agenda remains open. The dynamic spread of social networks has a significant impact on the formation and conduct of political campaigns, active civic position of opinion leaders can bring to power even presidents. Examples from the political sphere of society (election campaigns, initiatives), including Ukrainian and other foreign presidential and parliamentary elections, have shown the opportunities created by Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, YouTube to promote a candidate, political leader, ideas and opinions. Dissemination of popular blogs of opinion leaders created on social networks can be an

additional tool in PR campaigns in particular, and in the formation of public opinion in general. For example, the protests in Belarus in 2020, which led to the results of the next presidential election, were called the Telegram Revolution. Opposition citizens received information and coordination through a network of telegram channels, mostly Nexta.Live.

In October 2021, according to a global statistical report published in partnership with We Are Social and Hootsuite, the quantity of social network users worldwide amounted to more than 4.5 billion people - more than half of the world's nearly 8 billion people. The number of social media users has tripled in the last decade. Over the past year, it has grown by about 13%, i.e. the number of social network users'funs has increased by 400 million people. This growth trend is happening for the second year in a row, in particular due to the pandemic [6].

The leading social network in the world is Facebook, which as of July 2021 had 2.85 billion followers, which is more than 60% of users of social networks worldwide (Figure 1). Next in popularity are YouTube and WhatsApp with more than 2 billion, followed by Messenger, WeChat and Instagram, which have 1 billion or more users. TikTok (732 million users) is in seventh place, Telegram (550 million) is in tenth place, and Twitter (397 million) is in sixteenth place [7].
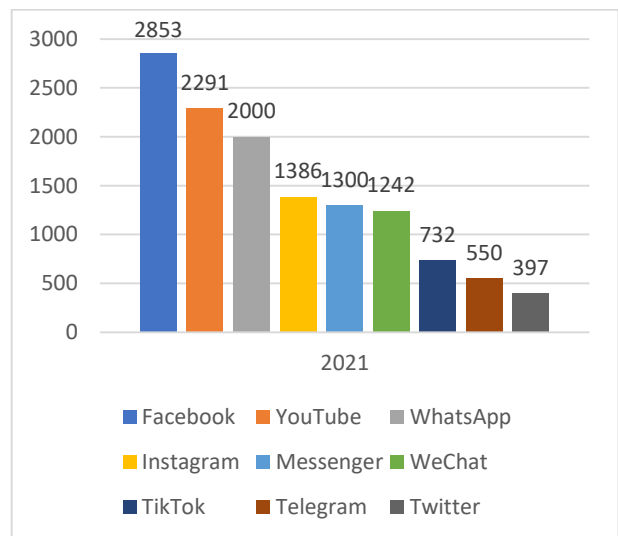

Figure 1 Most popular social networks worldwide as of July 2021, ranked by number of active users *(in millions)*

According to the study, Ukraine meets global trends: almost 60% of Ukrainian Internet users are fans of Facebook (Figure 2). Next in popularity are YouTube (43%), Instagram (30%) and Telegram (17%). This is evidenced by the results of an all-Ukrainian public opinion

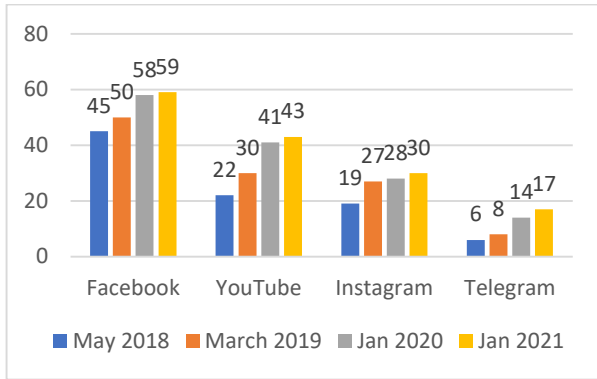poll published by Research & Branding Group in January 2021 [8].

Figure 2 Social networks Ukrainians use on the Internet /May, 2018 – January, 2021 / % of respondents /

Since 2018, there has been a significant increase in the number of users of such social networks as Facebook (from 45 to 59%), YouTube (22-43%), Instagram (19-30%) and Telegram (6-17%), which is primarily due to the ban Russian social networks. According to Brand Analytics, in September 2021, the active authors of Facebook in Ukraine are 7.14 million people who left 57.26 million messages. That is, every day on Facebook there are about 1.9 million new posts [9].

Until recently, traditional media (newspapers, television and radio) occupied a dominant position in the dissemination of information and, consequently, in the ability to influence on the political agenda's content. Although the Internet and social networks allow the public to share information, traditional media continue to play a mediating role. Modern technologies and social networks have created new media systems that are able to shape political discourse and the agenda. According to a survey by Research & Branding Group [8] (Figure 3), in early 2021, half of Ukrainians (51%) prefer the Internet as a source of information, while 44% prefer television and only 2% prefer radio and the press. For the first time in Ukraine, the share of those who prefer the Internet as a source of information has exceeded the number of those who prefer television.

The media and social networks have the tools to create an information and media background in society. Accordingly, they have the ability to manipulate information flows and create interest only in certain events or factors. In 1974, American researchers M. McCombs and D. Shaw put forward a theory of the influence of news media on public opinion. Scientists have made the predicted conclusion that views on the event are largely formed by the media. "Agenda-Setting Theory" describes the media influence, forcing subjects to consider some of

the phenomena and events they become acquainted with through the media more important than others" [10]. That is, events become important at the moment when they are covered in information flows.
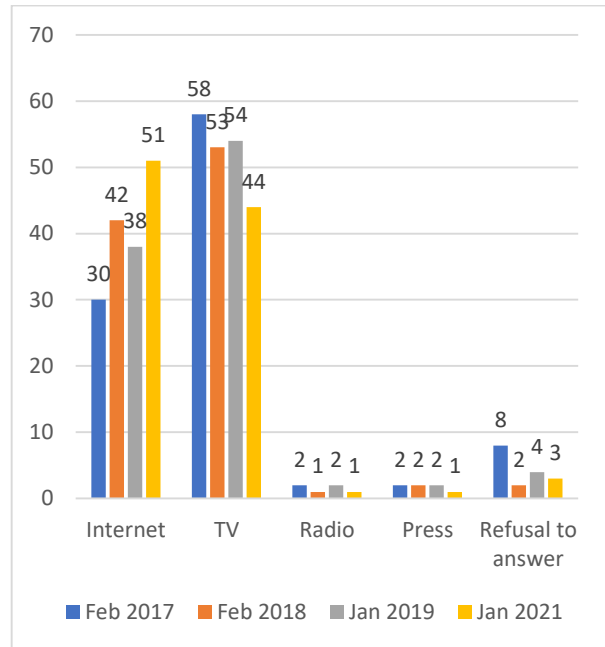

Figure 3 The mass media's sources the Ukrainians used more /February, 2017 – January, 2021 p.; % of respondents/

The active development of the information society, globalization of the communicative space have led, according to philosophers M. McLuhan and K. Fiore, to the formation of the so-called "world village" [11]. This phenomenon is characterized by an increase in the amount of TV channels, radio stations, online versions of printed publications, the emergence of online publications, and the expansion of the global information space due to modern communications in the Internet environment.

Using interactive mechanisms of interaction of social networks, users can influence the opinion of others or be exposed to external influences. Active users of social networks, who are able to inform society and influence the formation of other people's opinions, are considered opinion leaders.

Using the trust of supporters, they can reorient the social agenda, promoting their personal position, values and lifestyles. With the expansion of the audience of social media users, informal leaders of this kind have been given greater opportunities to influence the actions of citizens and political decision-making.

The concept of two-step leaders was first put forward by the American sociologist Paul Lazars Feld in 1944. As part of research at Columbia University, Lazars Feld

conducted so-called campaign studies, i.e. he studied the media influence on the audience during election campaigns [12]. Lazars Feld collaborated with American sociologist Elio Katz, a professor at the School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, to study electoral behavior. In 1955, scientists presented a model of the "two-stage movement of information in the process of mass communication", according to which the media do not directly affect the mass audience, but are opposed by the flows that occur in interpersonal communications [13]. Information is transmitted from the media to opinion leaders who interpret the message in the media and disseminate it to the public. As a result, people have more confidence in leaders of public opinion in comparison with mass media.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Opinion leaders are influential people in their audience who are well versed in their field, often share their knowledge on social media, interpret and disseminate information, and their views matter, respect and trust among followers. It should be borne in mind that a certain part of society is active in the use of social networks, information collection and dissemination, the other on the contrary – focused on opinion leaders of reference groups, respectively, their position is interpreted and expressed as their own point of view. Today, opinion leaders are called trendsetters, influencers, brand ambassadors and lawyers, it-girls and opinion leaders. Information perceived through opinion leaders is then discussed or spoken in interpersonal communication in small social groups.

Opinion leaders have a higher social status among their followers, so they have a strong influence on the choice of their audience. Opinion leaders are considered the most trustworthy of their followers. For example, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Pavel Durov are leaders of opinions that not only influence but also create world trends. According to a study by the Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Report, 83% of people agree that recommendation of friends and people they trust, i.e. opinion leaders, is the most credible form of advertising and influences their position [14]. Audiences may perceive the reliability of published reviews and ratings differently depending on the channel on which they are published. The trust and reliability of information channel is influenced by the company reputation (brand), quality of the information provided, the ease of access to it, usefulness of the information provided, and so on. For example, audiences trust reviews and ratings posted on Google or Facebook rather than Tripadvisor.com. [15].

These factors have led to the fact that thought leadership has become a profession in today's information society.

With the advent of social networks, opinion leader have learned to present information in a new form, which helps them reach a new audience. A blogger, politician, journalist, TV presenter, TV show participant, director or any other active user on Facebook or Instagram, whose posts and lifestyle gather around crowds of followers on social networks, such a person is defined as a social media influencer.

Leaders of public opinion on social networks (top bloggers) are people with a large audience (the number of followers is at least 5 thousand). In certain situations, leaders of public opinion can be considered people who, although they do not have many followers, but have authority in a narrow field, are professionals. In general, opinion leaders are those people who can promote the necessary messages to the target audience. The point of determining the success of opinion leaders is the information spread on social networks, which is included in the media monitoring of political elites, which can change their point of view on events that have gained resonance, or falls into the field of view of journalists and spreads in the media.

Naumova M. notes that "comparing the profiles of those who focus on network resources and do not watch socio-political programs on TV, and those who, on the contrary, remain a fan of television, we see the expected differences in socio-demographic characteristics and regular Internet use. Almost two thirds of Ukrainians, for whom the Internet is the main source of information on events in the country and who do not watch socio-political programs on TV (63.1%), are people under 40 years of age. However, among those who focus only on TB, citizens over 50 years of age predominate (71%)" [16]. Thus, it becomes obvious that the opportunities of opinion leaders in Ukrainian society are growing through the active use of the Internet as the main source of information. If the consumer of information trusts the professionalism and openness of such a leader, their value orientations coincide, his/her position will be taken into account.

Conventionally, social media influencers can be divided into three types. Social media influencers who write something for the customer on social networks (they may be covered by some kind of activity, most often – journalism, political science or volunteering). Social media influencers who work for a specific customer, but are real players in some other field (i.e. are real journalists, well-known political scientists). Social media influencers who trade their posts on social networks from various customers.

According to the Nimax school, opinion leaders are classified by the amount of followers into: micro-influencers, nano-influencers, macro-influencers and

millionaires. Micro-influencers are called niche opinion leaders, and the amount of their followers ranges from 10 to 100,000 people. Nano-influencers have a small audience (from 1 to 10 thousand), but they are listened to. These are most often ordinary people united with their public by common interests. Macro-influencers (over 100 thousand) and millionaires (from 1 million followers) are media personalities, experts with great authority, top bloggers who value reputation and are reliable in cooperation [17].

Professional opinion leaders (influential people, politicians, public activists, bloggers) make efforts to constantly increase their audience, carefully adhering to a certain topic, gaining practical experience. They have some influence and can create or destroy any brand (reputation) only by their public position. There have been cases where a single Twitter post or Facebook post of opinion leaders resulted in significant material and reputational losses to business structures and political forces. A striking example is the scandal that unfolded on social networks around the healthy food brand YARO through a post by its founder Yulia Privalova on Instagram with a photo on Red Square in Moscow and an anecdote about Bandera. On October 17, 2021, blogger Serhiy Sternenko posted a screenshot of his publication on his Facebook page and criticized Privalov for a "Ukrainophobic anecdote." This information was spread by other bloggers and Ukrainian activists, including blogger and politician Boryslav Bereza. Bloggers Serhiy Sternenko and Boryslav Bereza are opinion leaders, are among the top 50 Ukrainian bloggers in the FOCUS online rating [18] and are the winners of the Politics and Economy categories of the Top 100 Ukrainian Bloggers rating on ICTV Facts, completed on September 30, 2021 year [19]. Bloggers pointed out that many Ukrainian companies sell YARO products, proposed to abandon cooperation with the brand and boycott YARO products. As a result, YARO brand products are disappearing from online stores, and publications by Ukrainian social network bloggers have hit the headlines of leading media outlets, including the BBC [20].

5. CONCLUSIONS

Social media channels are an ideal tool for politicians, as opinion leaders, to form their own profile and show experience in certain areas that are of great interest to them. Social networks are relevant not only for political communication in general, but also for determining the agenda. The rapid growth of social networks, including the Facebook and Twitter platforms, demonstrates the significant influence of social networks on the formation of political discourse and public policy. Messages on social networks become a public record and allow opinion leaders to place certain emphasis on formation of political agenda, in particular, during legislative activities and during election campaigns. The results of the study "Social networks about the election: what Facebook, Instagram and VKontakte vote for", conducted in 2019 on the eve of local elections showed that Instagram was the undisputed favorite in this period was and remains the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky and the Servant of the People». About 82% of all political posts on Instagram were dedicated to this political force [21]. In 2020, the political force "Servant of the People" won the local elections by the number of seats received.

Social media influencers use social media to communicate with journalists and the public to interact (or even attack) with their political opponents. Politicians, as opinion leaders, are less restricted in expressing their opinions than, for example, in parliamentary speeches or parliamentary issues. On social networks, there are no restrictions on the time of speeches or control by party leaders from top to bottom.

Through social media, politicians, as opinion leaders, can potentially reach an audience that goes far beyond social media users. Journalists closely monitor the social media influencers' activities and use messages on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter to cover political events. Therefore, politicians, as opinion leaders, can really hope to influence the traditional media agenda through social media. For example, the content's source for influential media was the tweets of former US President Donald Trump, who is known for his Twitter activity. On average, Trump wrote 5.7 times a day during the first half of the White House and about 34.8 times a day in the second half of 2020. In total, the number of Trump's posts in 2018 was approximately 3,500 times, in 2019 - 7,700 times, in 2020 - more than 12,000 times [22].

Social networks as a communication platform create new challenges and opportunities for defining the political agenda. They not only add a level of complexity to the dynamics of determining the agenda, but also serve as a relevant channel for political communication, especially during election campaigns. Opinion leaders, using social networks, have the opportunity to change the dynamics of political discourse and shape public policy. By using social networks as appropriate channels of political communication, politicians, as opinion leaders, can potentially reach a wider audience than through traditional media.

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