The Role of Social Media in Implementing the Concept of "Soft Power"

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the role of social networks in social and political processes. Today, social networks are an effective tool for the implementation of "soft power", having a significant impact on the political agenda, international relations and social processes within states. In fact, social networks create new formats of interaction between social groups and institutions, as a rule, unlimited by the territories of individual states. The results of such interaction can be both constructive and destructive in terms of their impact on the existing strategy of social development. With an increase in the proportion of the country's population actively participating in social networks, the risks of social and political threats associated with the massive use of these communication technologies increase. The article examines the main global factors that determine the pace and direction of development of social networks, as well as the features of their operation in Russia. The authors analyze changes in the structure of users of the largest Russian-speaking social networks in 2014-2018, that is, during the period of their stabilization after rapid development in 2011-2013. The article also raises the problem of targeted informational impact on users of social networks and the formation of personal information capsules for them, allowing them to form a significant manipulative potential in the field of socio-political communications. According to the results of the study, it was concluded that the processes of development of Russian-speaking social networks continue, they are gradually being politicized, accompanied by the formation of a manipulative potential. Consequently, the role of social networks in the implementation of "soft power" is growing, but the nature and vector of action of this force will depend on which specific social groups or institutions will have an effective informational impact on users of social networks.

Keywords: media, social media, soft power, social engineering, cyberspace

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of social networks and media technologies in the life of a modern person can hardly be overestimated. The development of social networks affects all spheres of society: culture, science, economics, politics [1]. Family, environment and social status are increasingly inferior to mass communication technologies in influencing the views of people. At the end of the last century, sociologist N. Luhmann argued that for a person of the 20th century, and even more so for the 21st, the media is not just a source of information, but the main tool for shaping his views. the world [2]. With the development of the Internet, social online platforms began to intensively accumulate people's attention, taking it away from other objects and subjects from the human environment. In the context of today's realities, social networks play a significant role in society,

including in the field of domestic and foreign policy, as an effective tool for implementing the country's "soft power". The influence of online platforms on the political agenda, international relations and social processes within states is increasing every year, which is clearly demonstrated by the results of research in the field of sociology and political science [3]. The dualism of the role of digital technologies in modern society leads to the fact that in some situations they are considered as the main factor of social development and access to them is positioned as a fundamental human right [4, 5], in others – as a source of threats of various nature and severity. According to P. Kolozaridi and A. Shubenkova [6], the priority of assessing the role of digital communication technologies in society is determined by the political system and the stage of economic development at the level of an individual state. At the same time, the results of other studies [7-9] indicate the presence of general global trends in the perception of various social groups and institutions of digital communication. Thus, the question of when and under what conditions digital communications begin to be perceived as a threat to society, and not a guarantee of its development, remains open.

The aim of the study is to assess the scale and direction of the development of Russian-speaking social networks as actors in the socio-political processes taking place in the Eurasian space. As an additional research question, the task was to identify political and social threats and risks associated with the digitalization of interpersonal and mass communications.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main factors of a global nature that determine the development of social networks can be divided into several groups.

Firstly, these are factors, the influence of which is due to the rapid development and spread of information technologies. Informatization applies to all industries, but in the context of this work, the most important is the penetration of information technology into people's daily life and interpersonal communication. The availability of personal computers, gadgets and smartphones (in the first place) has become the norm even for developing countries [7]. Together with almost universal access to the Internet (including mobile communications and Wi-Fi access points), mobile devices that constantly accompany a person are beginning to radically change the way people think and behave.

Any information – news, rumors, opinions – instantly begins to spread among the population. People get the opportunity at any time to check something or find a fact of interest using a smartphone. Communication between people also increasingly begins to take place in the virtual space [10]. For large structures such as states, transnational corporations, international organizations, communication with the population is simplified, new opportunities appear for receiving feedback from the viral (or, as they say among marketers and SMM specialists, "viral") distribution of content. when people voluntarily and actively share with the environment any content on social networks [11]. All conditions have been created for this. So, in Russia, by 2018, the share of citizens who regularly use the Internet reached 80%, and the number of active users of social online platforms – 55%. Moreover, among young people, the share of regular visitors to social networks exceeds 90%, at least 98% of Russian youth use the Internet every day, spending about 5 hours a day in various social networks (All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center, VCIOM) [12].

The second group of growth factors for the importance of social media in domestic politics and international relations is related to the process of globalization. The lack of borders on the Internet and the transnational nature of the largest social online platforms create the conditions for constant intercultural and personal dialogue between representatives of different countries. Users of social networks get the opportunity to independently find out information about what is happening in the world, moreover, in real time and through direct contact with foreign citizens. Thus, there is a mutual influence of residents of different countries on each other. Communication through online platforms can also convey political values and sentiments. For states, this opens up opportunities for influence and creates risks for stabilizing the internal situation from the outside [11].

Globalization and the development of the information society open up opportunities for the participation of new subjects of international relations – transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, terrorist organizations, recruiting supporters in social media. J. Nye also wrote about the need for states to reckon with new actors, developing their concept of soft power and proposing a new integrated approach with the equally vivid name smart power [13]. For the last two, social media is becoming the most accessible and effective tool for influencing the global agenda.

While traditional media (such as television, radio, and newspapers), especially large ones, are closed to influence, and the editorial policy is largely determined by shareholders and the state, then social media, with full openness, can provide significantly greater audience reach. This is doubly relevant for non-governmental organizations that are actively using online platforms [14].

States do not lag behind in this matter and are also actively starting to use various services to communicate with target groups in countries for which there are certain interests. For example, the US embassy in La Paz is actively leading its page on Facebook. In a country whose population does not exceed 10 mln people, more than 30 thousand citizens are subscribers to the embassy. Diplomats regularly communicate with the local population, hold various rallies, organize discussions, etc. This allows the diplomatic mission to engage citizens in the generated agenda, increase loyalty and successfully broadcast certain meanings and values [15].

Every year, public diplomacy in different countries develops, including ever new ways of "soft impact" and information technology, which forces other participants in international relations to join this race.

The third group of factors should include behavioral factors related to motivational and cognitive aspects of digital communications. For example, as a factor in the growing relevance of social media as a tool of "soft power", sociologists consider the growing "fatigue" of the audience from traditional media. In Russia, sociological research shows a decrease in the level of trust in traditional and state media. At the same time, there is an increase in the share of citizens who draw information from the Internet and social media [16]. At the same time, Russian-language segments of the Internet are gradually losing their characteristic entertainment and apolitical orientation, which was noted by researchers in 2000-2010 [17, 18].

The same group of factors is associated with the formation of the multiple "echo chamber" effect [19], as a result of which entire network communities are involved in circular relaying of a limited set of views and ideas supported by their participants. Over time, the effect of the echo chamber intensifies, since the commentary activity of like-minded people strengthens the value-semantic basis of the initial idea, which already leads to the emergence of "information capsules" and "hyper-communities" [8, 20].

Modern technologies for collecting and analyzing user data (digital footprint) make it possible to analyze in detail the structure of information requests of individual user groups regardless of their national or social affiliation [21, 22]. Such a comprehensive and systematic work allows you to gradually prepare the target audience to accept any information or take action. The implementation of such campaigns is facilitated by the fact that all the mechanisms described above are built into the paid functionality of many online platforms. This approach becomes even more effective with the development of big data technologies and information processing using neural networks. Together, these technologies allow creating algorithms for prompt and timely delivery of a unique "message" (key messages) to each segment of the target audience. Such interference is an obvious threat to state sovereignty and democratic principles. On the other hand, with the long-term effect of such "filters", it becomes possible to change the political and cultural values of the target audience. For example, with regular automatic inclusion in the category of "best" or "popular" content that contains pronounced political or cultural values.

3. RESULTS

By 2014, the world outlined the contours of the Russian-speaking segment of the audience on social networks. The five most popular online platforms in Russia and the CIS countries: VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. These platforms are of most interest to our study. Next, we will consider the dynamics of their development and the main informational issues related to social media data from 2014 to 2018.

In 2014, VKontakte took the first place in popularity; its monthly audience is 54.6 mln people. Odnoklassniki in second place with 40 mln people. The number of users of other social networks is less: Facebook – 24.2 mln, Instagram – 13.3 mln, Twitter – 8.7 mln [23]. Among the leaders are also the My World and LiveJournal platforms, but in the coming years their performance will begin to decline.

By 2014, each social media also had its own specific distinguishing features and characteristic user behavior. Of VKontakte's 54.6 mln monthly visitors, 23.8 mln showed public activity. In Odnoklassniki, this figure was lower – 1.7 mln out of 40 mln monthly users. Approximately the same proportional distribution of active authors and passive observers on Facebook: there, only 800

thousand people regularly published content for public access. The number of active authors on Twitter was 2.1 mln, and on Instagram 2.7 mln. As for age, the most "youngest" site in 2014 was VKontakte, where the share of active users over the age of 24 was 6%. The most "adult" platform is Odnoklassniki, where users from 24 to 44 years old formed the active core of the audience, and people over 54 provided another 20% of all users [24]. By gender distribution, women dominated quantitatively in all social media.

The main trends after 2014 can be formulated as follows:

1) The rapid growth of Instagram popularity in Russia. By the share of active users of the platform, it took second place after VKontakte.

2) More and more adults are registered in social media; the proportion of users under the age of 18 is decreasing.

3) Social media in Russia slowed down the growth rate, but so far they continue to increase the audience. Instagram retains the greatest potential, Twitter falls off.

In 2015, the VCIOM conducted a survey of Internet users to identify attitudes, goals, and familiar patterns of using the Internet and social networks. 60% of respondents said that in general they positively assess the impact of the global network on life, one of the most frequently noted positive features is the ability to communicate (communicative component). For 44% of respondents, the Internet is needed for communication and dating. Along with this, the share of people visiting social media from mobile devices is growing, and the average time spent on the network is increasing. The most visited mobile application VKontakte, it is installed in 18% of smartphone users' devices [25].

In 2016, the number of Instagram users continues to grow, their activity is growing. Facebook is developing more slowly but steadily, a clear feature of which is a bias towards business contacts, business, and political discussion. Twitter continues to lose popularity among users [26].

By 2017, access to the Internet through mobile devices, according to VCIOM, exceeded 50%, and the number of Russians over 18 who began to use social media on a daily basis increased among the respondents to 45%. More than 1 time per week, online platforms were visited by 62% of respondents. Instagram is one of the three most popular services. At the same time, among the users of this platform was the highest proportion of people using mobile devices to access the Internet (92%) [27].

Data suggests a dramatic increase in the role of mobile devices and visual content. This is a fundamental and system-changing process. The availability and distribution of smartphones with built-in cameras allows users to constantly create new visual content on their own. The number of photo and video content captured on a mobile phone is increasing, which forces the creators of online platforms to rebuild the interface.

For example, Instagram opened the possibility for publishing vertically oriented photos, which increases the convenience of viewing content from gadgets, and not from personal computers or laptops. This process enhances the development of "clip thinking". Firstly, in mobile versions of social media, users have a habit of more intensively "flipping through" a tape, bright pictures and videos quickly jump before a person's eyes, just click on the screen ("tap") to evaluate the content, it's maximally simplified and accelerated called "surfing" (surfing the net). Secondly, the availability of social media and the ability to create content (take pictures of what is happening around) creates an incentive for constantly distracting a person from the real world, everyday activities, quiet reading, watching movies, and thoughts, which leads to an even greater decrease in concentration.

It is noteworthy that this process takes place with the simultaneous awareness of most people about deviations from the norm with regard to communication and self-expression of people through social media. According to the Levada Center, 69% of respondents believe that people publish too much information about themselves on the Internet [28].

In the same period, government bodies and security services began to deal more actively with the issue of control and regulation of social media in their areas of responsibility, and more and more news from the web appeared in the media. However, the authorities see threats in social media not only in the opportunities for the development of extremism and terrorism there, but also in destructive movements (Blue Whale, AUE, etc.).

Period 2016-2017 in the history of social media, it was marked by scandalous leaks of user data and expert forecasts about the inevitable increase in

people's distrust. This trend has also affected Russia. In parallel, a process of gradual politicization of social platforms.

4. DISCUSSION

In the text of the works of P. Kolozaridi and A. Shubenkova [6], the authors identified three stages of representing the Internet as a socio-technological phenomenon in Russia. According to their theory, since 2011, at the state level, the Internet has ceased to be perceived as a valuable phenomenon and is seen as a conductor of social and political benefits and threats.

Starting in 2011, as other researchers note [3], the active use of social networks, in particular Facebook, begins to support protest movements in the Russian Federation, the formation of echo chambers and information capsules of anti-government and asocial focus on social media. Nevertheless, the main Russian-speaking social networks (VKontakte, the Russian-speaking Instagram segment, Odnoklassniki) retained a predominantly entertaining orientation. A study of the thematic preferences of students of St. Petersburg universities – VKontakte users conducted in 2018 [10] showed that the most interesting representatives of this social group are viral popular information presented in a humorous way, information related with entertainment and leisure, travel and job search. In general, in 2018 in Russia, the use of the Internet for political purposes occupied one of the last places in the ranking of user interests (3.3%) [29].

This suggests that with the increasing politicization of social media (and this seems inevitable in the current situation), the risks of using this potential for destructive purposes will increase. For example, as a result of the targeted formation of information capsules of socio-political groups in the online space, the effect of social consolidation can be artificially directed against representatives of certain social groups or entire social institutions, which will lead to destructive behavior of a large number of people in the real world.

5. CONCLUSION

In modern society, online culture changes the social environment of a person, forming an "artificial sociality" in which other subjects participate along with people. By "other objects" Malsch [30] meant artificial intelligence, but the development of social networks shows that the role

of such objects can be played by various external and internal effects operating within the framework of digital communication technologies.

Our research shows that the rapid development of social networks in Russia in 2010-2015 was associated with the global processes of penetration of digital technologies into the sphere of interpersonal and mass communications. At that time, the Internet was perceived primarily as a source of social benefits and a new factor of socio-economic development, which was reflected in the strategic decisions of the government [6].

The further development of Russian social networks in 2016-2018 took place under the conditions of a more wary attitude of the state and society as a whole to Internet technologies. Nevertheless, the number of active users of Russian-speaking social networks continues to grow, primarily due to the elderly. The structure of interests of users of social networks is changing: the global trend of transition from viewing content to creating it is complemented by trends in the politicization of network communication. At the same time, a kind of hypersociety is being formed in social networks – communities of users with similar interests and values and participating in certain groups. For these hypercommunities, the echo chamber effect is particularly pronounced, making their members ideal targets for targeting. It is the high targeting vulnerability that is the main threat in modern social networks. In addition, it should be noted that a significant part of users tend to completely trust the information disseminated in social networks, and young people often "sacrifice" their real life in favor of social networks [31]. In conclusion, we can quote the work of Bernard Barber: "Technology should not inevitably destroy democracy, but its potential for soft domination cannot be ignored" [32].

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The authors made an equal contribution to the study: collection and analysis of material; definition of goals and objectives, research methods; formulation and scientific substantiation of conclusions, registration of key research results in the form of an article.

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