On-line Communication as a Part of the "Symbolic Politics"

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the role of the "symbolic politics" in improving the design of on-line communication. Such explanations are beyond a classical paradigm as assuming the existence of various ways of supporting and an emotional involvement of users into the process of creating and consuming of political information. The concept presumes the analysis of rational forms that differ in their emotionality but can be united into symbols for creating the *certain image* of political world. The analysis of users' behavioral features enables to evaluate democracy condition at the moment. It is particularly essential for developing countries and countries with a transforming political system.

Keywords: symbolic politics, convergence media, political marketing, legitimacy, institute.

1 Introduction

At the early stage of the Internet development the potential of on-line communication was evaluated as an alternative type to off-line. Especially it took place in authoritarian and post-authoritarian countries looks like Russia with a big influence of the official institutes. The growth of usual Internet users is supposed to consider individual genres as well as forums, blogs, chats as some sort of a "new communication". This was evident in influence of the official mass media to be presented both ways. While lots of mass media had been presented off-line, it was not so much sources on-line.

The modern stage demonstrates that on-line communication can integrate different genres of off-line mass media. Increasing advertising incomes cause an interest in big media companies in transferring its resources on-line [1]. It enables research to define the Internet as a part of "convergence media". The development of on-line as some sort of multimedia communication when off-line media genres have possibilities to be united via modern technology is supposed to make correlation between created content and previous. Participation of professional journalists and official mass media representatives in on-line communication decreases the significance of individual communicative forms. As a sequence, most users, who consider the Internet to be as a sort of "alternative political tool" at first, need to change their attitude today.

Despite of the problems mentioned, the early period helped to recognize some specific Internet features. This is evident in discussion about a legal regulation of electronic mass media and blogosphere by Government and official institutes in Russia. Within the support of "Electronic Russia Programm" the item concerning "institutional and legal status" of on-line mass media has become an important part of "public discussion" to be argued by representatives of science, journalists and usual users. A lot of Russian users are interested in the fact how the electronic mass media would be registered: what sequence as well as preferences, opportunities and responsibility while creating "news" can be got as a result of the institutional regulation?

2   Theoretical Background

In recent time communication-study demonstrates an interest to the "symbolic politics" concept. In the middle of the 20th century, term was introduced by American and European scientists as a more positive definition of "propaganda" which had lots of negative connotation at the post-war period. Such authors as Murray Edelman and Ulrich Sarcinelli defined symbolic politics as a *mass communication* phenomenon. It suggested that mass communication for them was a "new instrument of propaganda" resisting the traditional political institutes and agents.

During the past two decades, the "symbolic politics" has received additional interpretation among researchers of post-authoritarian countries. The authors suppose that symbols can be defined as a main tool of political legitimacy for countries which haven't a long tradition of institutions' development [3]. The case-studies of Russia of 1990s demonstrate how lack of formal institutes has caused "mediatization" of politics [4]. In contrast to traditional rational features, such describing of institutional condition enables research to explain how mass communication becomes a part of "public discourse" and "public expressions". Such explanations are beyond a classical paradigm as assuming the existence of various ways of supporting and an emotional involvement of participants into the process of creating and consuming of political information.

Concentration on analysis of political symbols allows scientists to define "symbolic politics" as a source of political legitimacy [5]. The concept presumes the analysis of rational forms that differ in their emotionality but can be united into symbols for creating the *certain image* of political world. It supposes that political symbols can be not only an "instrument" of propaganda and manipulations for political leadership or the competing elites [6], but can be used for interpretive function, by which both political leaders and people try to grasp an understanding of the political universe.

Symbolic features of the Internet are becoming an important subject of scientific discussions in political science nowadays. In contrast to *commercial features*, symbolic and cognitive conditions enable research to explain on-line communication as some sort of *knowledge* about the political reality [7]. It is shared by both scientists who focused on the role of the Internet in formulating official political agenda and scientists who try to explain how usual users can articulate their private opinion concerning a current political process. Two points are directed to explanation of two problems:

- Where will the limits of participants' responsibility be?
- How new individual form of communication as well as blogging, twitter and forums will coexist with traditional mass media?

Besides, several aspects of symbolic politics are used in modern political marketing theory. Interest in politics by audience can be presented not only as the quantitative growth of on-line users but also as a sequence of individual choice by "consumers" [8]. Statistical measurement of different online genres, frames and discourses as well as advertising, politics, entertainment, feedback sites, social network and individual sites demonstrates how users' choice is reflected in political preferences. It is evidence in correlation between users' choice and electoral behavior in some European countries and USA in recent years [9]. Moreover, marketing effect takes place in analyzing of "convergence media" that allows keeping connection between specific of on-line discourse and off-line sociological data. The analysis of users' reaction to development and changes of a "new media" assumes use both qualitative and amount research.

The empirical base of research includes results of the largest Russian sociological canters: Fund of "Public Opinion" (FBO), VCIOM, Levada Center, Rambler, Gullop Media, Spy Log, Fund "Effective policy".

3 Case-Study: Symbolic Politics of the RuNet

3.1 Objectives

The development of the Russian Internet (RuNet) shows how participation of mass media and official institutes has transformed on-line symbolic politics. At this case, the important subject of the observation is evolution of an individual on-line genres and discourses at the RuNet-content in the last ten years. In addition to that, the behavioral of online participants is presented as the second subject of observation. Sociological data achieved in recent years helps to understand how transformations of the RuNet are reflecting in users' opinion and intentions.

Research aims in studying of correlation between RuNet-discourse and sociological data of the users' behavior. Approach is supposed to use both quantitative and amount methods where statistical data supplements the content-analysis. While the behavioral of on-line participants is an important part of a normative (institutional) approach, the analysis of users' reaction to development and changes requires qualitative and amount research that would explain the RuNet contemporary circumstances. Both subjects are presented as a part of "political legitimacy" problem in the post-Soviet countries. An attempt to show symbolic politics of the RuNet as a part of a normative model can be useful for understanding what place different symbols and discourse take in studying political legitimacy.

3.2 Results

The early period results help to understand some RuNet features. The majority of researchers concluded that quantity of users at the beginning of 2000s was much less than in another type of communication. It was the reason why most authors tried to

define "potential" of the RuNet as a "new communication channel". A lot of researchers of this period made an attempt to opposite on-line and off-line communication – to define on-line communication as "alternative political tool" [10]. According to this point, some results revealed that users of the RuNet had their interest in political on-line information, but had close access limits.

Since 2005 the growth of users' quantity (total RuNet users included 28 million – almost 30% of population; constant users (daily using the Internet) included 11 million) allowed political actors to make use of the Internet as a tool in their activities. As sequence, most mass media (Kommersant, NTV, Nezavisimaya Gazeta) and official institutes have begun to open their representatives and "site-cut-aways" into RuNet. According to the 2005 and 2007 research, the on-line content looks like the content of off-line mass media at the early stage; especially in the case of political content [11]. While on-line content has become more thematically various, orientation of users to entertaining and commercial genres has keep the same traditional directions.

Despite of the innovation environment, the modern stage demonstrates how examination of on-line communication in the context of political legitimacy problem can be useful for explaining the RuNet evolution in recent 10-15 years. Consideration of the Internet connecting with the convergence media, where the Internet is defined not only as an "alternative political tool" but also as affiliation to off-line communication, allows finding out correlation between changes in the amount participants data and participants' behavior. It is presented in research of bloggers' attitude to their participation in on-line communication. According to the research of Levada Center, the "behavior model" of a Russian blogger is presented as a "tool for verifying his own environment" [11]. The participation user at this case is presented as attempt for identification [12].

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