New Media and the Internet in the Regional Stability Design Process

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Abstract: *The paper presents the results of a number of author's studies on the possibilities of using new media and the Internet to design innovative social reality in the conditions of such a polyethnoconfessional region as the Republic of Tatarstan. Using an example of an analysis of online discussion and practices around two problematic cases (the obligation to learn the Tatar language by schoolchildren of the republic and the construction of a new incinerator in the territory of Tatarstan), we managed to obtain results, firstly, regarding typical areas of using the Internet by users, and models for their responding to online information; secondly, an assessment of the main sources of information about the Republic of Tatarstan in the network, representations of the positive and negative aspects of the life in the republic in the context of online discussion; thirdly, to identify groups of factors that determine the degree of activity demonstrated by users of social networks online and offline; and, finally, describe strategies for linking online and offline activity when discussing socially significant problems of the republic. The conclusions indicate the factors and necessary conditions for mobilizing users of online discussions for specific actions outside the Internet (participating in meetings, flash mobs, and charity events, joining various kinds of communities, and establishing new personal contacts).*

Keywords: *Tatarstan, regional stability, regional identity, new media, online communications.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of information technology in the last third of the 20th century entails the formation of a new sociocultural environment where both information and online communication are made available to a large part of the world's population. The Internet gives rise to new forms of human interaction and expands the boundaries of given identities and the possibility of constructing them through communication practices [1]. The wide-spreading of virtual communication environment has led to the emergence of new social media based on the use of such forms of communication as forums, chats, blogs, social networks, which become the field for the formation of an individual identity of a person, its attitudes and values [2]. These dynamic agents using the latest technologies (both in technological and humanistic aspects) affect the values and consciousness of a significant part of the population, but,

above all, young people, characterized by researchers as the "digital generation" [3]. Often, such an impact takes on the character of manipulating individual's consciousness, becomes one of the main channels of socialization and can have a significant impact on the practice of all networks, such as, for example, civic activity [4].

In the conditions of the Republic of Tatarstan, one more specific aspect must be taken into account. As international practice shows, in a stable society, the processes of integration and differentiation proceed in a balanced manner. Moreover, the key factor of social stability is the formation of positive, unifying macroidentities. The Republic of Tatarstan is a polyethnoconfessional region of Russia, where in the post-Soviet period it was possible to prevent the incitement of ethnic and religious hatred thanks to the competent policy of the regional authorities. At the present stage, a large part of the population of all age cohorts demonstrates a high level of interethnic and confessional tolerance, although there are certain problem areas, especially in terms of the interaction of the local population with migrants. To further maintain a high level of interethnic tolerance in Tatarstan, it is necessary, in our view, to preserve the socio-cultural continuity of generations in order to maintain an optimum combination of macro-social and various social group identities concerning both well-established traditional forms and also forms introduced "in the wake of" upgrades. One of the conditions for achieving this goal is the analysis of the influence of new media and the Internet on the socio-political activity of the population [5], as well as on the interaction between the public and the authorities [6] and production relations [7].

II. METHODS

The research methodology involves the joint use of quantitative and qualitative methods of sociological research: mass surveys of the population in the Republic of Tatarstan within a representative sample; a series of interviews with active participants in online communities (N = 20) in the most popular social networks and focus groups (N = 5) with ordinary Internet users of different age categories. In addition, monitoring of social networks, blogs and comments on electronic publications was used, based on the analysis of texts that are related to the most acute problems of the region, a search service for mentions with text messages on the selected topics in social networks, blogs, news feeds, as well as comments was used for each type of source.

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III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the results of a mass survey of the population in the Republic of Tatarstan in 2018 showed, there is an inverse relationship between the age of respondents and the frequency of their use of the Internet - the older generation is still less included in online communication. However, over the past five years, the number of people over 55 years old using the Internet every day has doubled. At the same time, the number of Tatarstanis who are practically not using the Internet was reduced.

Thus, the results of a mass survey indicate that the prevalence of the Internet in the territory is significant, and, therefore, it can be argued about the high degree of influence of information and communication technologies and new media on the moods and values of people, and generally on socio-political stability in the region. In such conditions, the researchers' appeal to the analysis of the virtual activity of the population associated with regional problems becomes more relevant. To analyse the types of online activity, two cases of thematic discussions of new media relevant for Tatarstan users were selected: this is the problem of bilingualism and the need for compulsory teaching of the Tatar language in the schools of the republic, and the construction of an incinerator in Tatarstan. According to the research methodology, there was made a selection of messages containing the mentioned topics on social networks, blogs, news feeds, as well as comments on each type of content source (more than 10,000 sources of online media, Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, My World, Instagram, 4sq, LiveJournal, LiveInternet, Google+, YouTube, RuTube and several others). The search languages are Russian and Tatar, the period under review is the last year. The first case is devoted to the study of national languages in schools of the region. All the actions of federal and regional authorities in the framework of the problem and the reaction of the population of the regions to them have demonstrated the existence of a hidden ethno-linguistic contradiction that requires adequate analysis. An active discussion began in Tatarstan society; it took on the character of a contradiction between supporters and opponents of the study of the Tatar language. Dynamics of messages for 2017-2018 regarding the problem of regulating the situation with the study of the Tatar language in the schools of the republic indicates an increase in the activity of online discussion of the topic. The tone of messages on the topic was distributed as follows: negative messages - 33%, neutral - 51.5%, positive - 10.8% and mixed - 4.4%. The main sources of posts on the topic are social networks. In general, the coverage of groups covering the problem of teaching the Tatar language is very wide, which indicates that this problem worries a significant part of the population of the republic. The most active participants in the discussion were representatives of the middle generations - 26-35 years old and 36-45 years old. However, users of the older generations - 46-55 and 56-65 years old, and the schoolchildren themselves (the age group of the authors - 16-25 years old) are included in the online discussion. Thus, the problem of bilingualism and the study of the Tatar language in the republic, which was activated in 2017, continue to be relevant for network users.

Our study has shown that another important regional discourse which significantly affects civic engagement in the region is environmental issues. Due to the increase in the volume of waste, the construction of a waste incineration plant was planned near Kazan; this served as the beginning of discussions in the network and protests by the population, who feared the negative consequences of living next to this type of enterprise.

A fifth part of the messages within the framework of the topic (23.7%) are neutral news texts. Mixed messages (9.3%) were most often news posts and posts on social networks, in which the topic was reflected as a complex one and requiring consideration of the arguments of each side. Messages on successes in communication between the authorities of the republic and activists opposed to the construction of the incineration plant were evaluated as positive (27.2%). Negative messages were considered texts about specific cases of ineffective decisions, illegal conclusions of commissions, hiding information and detention of environmental activists, ignoring the opinions of scientists and ecologists. The most common age of message authors within the framework of the topic is 26-35 years old, 36-45 years old and 56-65 years old. As part of this study, we analysed data from a series of interviews with active participants in online communities (N = 20) in the most popular social networks and focus group participants (N = 5) with ordinary Internet users in Tatarstan. As the results of the study showed, most often users use the Internet for everyday communications, both personal and professional, for shopping and reading news. For the age group up to 35 years, the Internet is the most significant source of information; for informants older than 35 years, a number of federal and regional mass media (in particular, newspapers and radio stations) are also significant. The most popular channels are social networks and instant messengers. Moreover, the information received on the Internet arouses more confidence among users than materials from federal and regional television and radio channels, as it can be double-checked at several independent sources. Least part of all respondents trusts television.

Using the Internet as a source of information is effective only with the active and critical participation of person themselves. This is partly due to the algorithms for selecting information within the social networks themselves, which make it possible to configure flexibly and exactly what records will fall into the user's field of vision. Today, users pay great attention to setting up topics and headings that will occupy their news feed [8-11-14]. More often than not, preference is given to professional content, followed by entertaining content (films, music, humour, travel, etc.), social and political content gets into users' feeds less often. In some ways, we can talk about the tendency of fencing off most users from political messages; a discussion of this area is considered meaningless. Users are sure that if a really worthwhile event occurs, messages about this will be broadcast so actively that it will be impossible to miss it.

In general, regarding federal and regional news, the most attention is attracted to messages with shock content, or an analysis of topical events. For many, watching the news on the Internet is part of their morning ritual, while the news will simultaneously be a record on a friend's social network about a personal event, and a message about regional news. Both that, and another will cause an equally low back reaction, and the main reason is the oversaturation of the information background.

Users focus mainly on those posts that they searched on their own. Other factors of attracting attention to the message can be mass (the simultaneous appearance in many networks and sources where the user is present), shocking content, the appearance not in the tape, but in personal messages from people significant to the user. User self-selection of messages occurs through subscription to opinion leaders (the content authors who are authoritative for the user) and thematic communities. However, it is recognized that the role of online communities has been significantly reduced recently; a community devoted to a particular issue attracts users most often in a situation where its topic directly relates to its experience and personal problems.

Most users believe that it is impossible to get an objective idea of the situation in Tatarstan through information on the Internet. Despite this, users believe that communicating with the authorities on the network and discussing local improvement problems is more effective than simply contacting various city authorities. The "hype" on the Internet is becoming an effective way to attract attention and speed up the solution of any problems, except for political ones. It is noted that topics such as environmental problems (in connection with the construction of a waste incineration plant), housing and communal services and infrastructure are interesting; discussing political issues are most often "unfashionable"; most users are convinced that this is useless. The following aspects of the life of Tatarstan are highlighted in a positive manner: sporting events, the development of park zones and roads, the activity and creativity of the residents of the republic, a positive assessment of the work of the republic's leadership in attracting investment in the region. However, in general, coverage of positive aspects is much less intense and mainly among online activists.

The main types of activity in the discussion of a topic on the Internet are reposting oneself on a page, likes, commenting on posts and reposting in private messages to friends, followed by discussion. At the same time, ordinary users admit that they are ready for activity of any kind in real life, except for political ones (for example, charity events, flash mobs, community work days, etc.), because they do not want to get a fine, and they think that anyway nothing can change.

Just activists point out that the Internet affects the changing social reality, but there are different vectors of influence. On the one hand, the Internet is a platform for obtaining various information concerning things that are happening. This is an opportunity to mobilize, find people with a similar position, agree on actions, and create a community. We can promote the problem and gain support, for example, launch a petition, and quickly get feedback. But on the other hand, there is another effect - people who are active in networks often do not get to actions. The common name for such users is "critics sitting a sofa." Internet activists recognize the high mobilizing potential of social networks, but they are confident that the authorities will try to control this. Also, a new generation of Internet users is recognized as rather apolitical [9-13]. The materials of all focus groups confirm the conclusions about the low level of youth's interest in discussing political issues on the Internet, which is related to the belief that it is impossible to change anything and the fear of sanctions, however, young people recognize many of the issues that are being actively discussed online.

In general, the level of Internet activity increases the understanding of the discussion platform security, the presence of a personal connection with the problem., Thanks to the total volume and mass of messages on the topic, a concise, clear and vivid form of the messages, the activity of friends of the user, thanks to which likes and reposts of the messages the content appears in the feed more often, the activity and fear of sanctions by the state, and also the range of own subscriptions with "comfortable topics" are reduced.

Most often, "friends" and subscribers on social networks with which ordinary users communicate on the Internet are their friends in real life. In general, people who are actively devoting time to a particular issue in real life, are in most cases also active on social networks and the Internet: they create and distribute a variety of content. Those who are active, primarily in the network, most often do not perform any actions in real life. Real practice is a two-way communication: it is durable; there are endless stimulus reactions, prolonged in time. [10-12] Internet practices are one-way communication, users throw out their emotional intensity through posts, likes, reposts and comments, and stop there, i.e. in fact, they do not affect the immediate solution of social problems.

IV. SUMMARY

An analysis of the presented cases demonstrates confirmation of the fact that in modern conditions the Internet acts as a system-forming information field for the formation of social activity of citizens. Information and network technologies form specific discourses for the attitude of the population to pressing regional problems: both the implementation of bilingualism and the construction of an incinerator.

Based on the analysis of the data obtained, several typical models of Internet users can be distinguished, allowing describing the nature of the relationship of their activity online and offline in the context of socio-political problems of the region. The first type is "observers" (the largest group), they actively read the news, are ready to mobilize for charity, community work days, but are not ready for anything related to politics because of irrelevance regarding personal interests, disbelief in the possibility of changes, and fear of sanctions by the state authorities. The second group is "involved depending on", their activity is tied to finding information and solving a specific regional problem that affects their own world of life. The third scenario of activity belongs to the "critics from their couch" group, they are not ready for any action on the discussed issues offline, but are aimed at self-expression and self-affirmation in the framework of Internet discussions, and they are active, especially in discussing political issues. The last type is professionals, they are ready for any kind of activity (meetings, flash mobs, etc.), both legal and unauthorized (but without the use of violence), focused on a specific problem or a specific range of problems. Their main offline activity or profession is related to civic activity or areas close to it, they may have experience of encountering official sanctions.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Currently, the analysis of the Internet sphere is actually lagging behind its development, therefore, critical discourse analysis can provide the most suitable tools for the theoretical

understanding of such phenomena as the influence of the Internet and new media on building individual life trajectories and creating user identities in virtual space. It is the new media, representing the new format of the discursive system, that best reproduce the traditional dialogical structure of human communication.

The presented user models can be considered as "ideal types"; a specific user can partially correspond to them, or combine the practices and settings of several models at the same time.

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