

Internet Communications and Political Mobilization

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Abstract: The paper is devoted to the consideration of the role of Internet communications in the political mobilization of citizens. Internet communications create new opportunities for interaction and association of citizens and significantly accelerate political mobilization. In the information age, the "orange revolutions", and other "colour revolutions" of the last century were replaced by high-tech "network revolutions". Among researchers, however, there is no unity in understanding the role of Internet communications in mobilizing the protest activity of the population. The article concludes that when assessing the role of Internet communications in political mobilization, it is important to take into account the fact that the Internet communications are not capable of causing revolutionary events, popular actions were generated by a number of socio-economic, political and ideological reasons. However, social networks and microblogging services have become new tools for mobilizing participants in protests, allowing campaigning and coordination among protesters.

Keywords: Internet, Internet communications, mobilization, political participation, online politics.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2009, the first protests organized using Internet communications have taken place in Moldova, Tunisia, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Syria and many other countries. Also, the possibilities of Internet communications were used in organizing the Occupy Wall Street movements in the USA and Great Britain, Indignados in Spain, Aganaktismenoi in Greece ("Outraged" movement). The rapid mobilization and unprecedented scale of these demonstrations provided a unique opportunity for researchers to study their organization and identify the mechanisms through which they were coordinated. Public participation in the exercise of power and its influence on the decision-making process is an essential feature of a democratic society. Today the Internet is a promising tool that provides ample opportunities for citizens to participate in politics. The worldwide network is developing rapidly and has a noticeable impact on all spheres of society. Today the growth rates of the World Wide Web are amazing: the Internet is growing on average by 18% per year (Goroshko, 2012).

Political Internet communications between the state and society are becoming the defining conditions for the development of networked civic engagement and political participation. Internet communications create new opportunities for interaction and association of citizens and significantly accelerate political mobilization. The interactive environment of Internet communications allows citizens to independently and at their one's discretion track and analyse the political

information of interest to them on the Internet. Internet sites are often used to conduct active discussions, to support the Internet activity of participants. Internet communications such as social networks, blogs and microblogs are actively used as a tool for expressing protest moods.

METHODS

The works of Goroshko (2012), Davis (1999), Morris (2001), Corrado, C. Firestone A., (1996) have methodological significance for the study of the role of Internet communications in politics. The basis of this research is a systems approach and a structural and functional method. The systems approach was applied to analyse communication interactions in politics. A structural and functional method was applied to consider the totality of stable relations and interconnections between elements of the political system in the context of the introduction of Internet communications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the information age, the "orange" and "flower" revolutions of the last century were replaced by high-tech "network revolutions" ("Twitter revolution", "Facebook revolution").

With regard to the political processes in the Arab East, they began to talk about the "Twitter revolution". But the very first protests organized using social networks and instant messaging services (Twitter.com) have been called the Twitter Revolution and took place in Moldova in April 2009. "Twitter revolution" is a set of local socio-political actions of civic activists, initiated mainly through social networks and aimed at a radical

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renewal of the state power vertical in the context of a globalizing high-tech information society (Buryak, 2011). In June 2009, several thousand people in Iran went to protest demonstrations with slogans "Down with the dictator!" They have been organized using Internet communications. To contain the riots, cellular communications were turned off and access to the sites Facebook.com and Youtube.com was closed. In Egypt, social media and blogging protests led firstly to the resignation of the government and then the president. Dissatisfaction with the president's policy in Tunisia in 2010-2011 caused massive unrest, in the organization of which Internet communications played an important role.

The possibilities of Internet communication were used in organizing the movements of Indignados in Spain, and Aganaktismenoi in Greece (the movement of "Outraged people").

It should be noted that the literature also presents the opposite point of view according to which the influence of social networks on revolutionary processes in a number of states is greatly exaggerated. According to the researchers, "the use of social services, primarily Twitter, was the prerogative of a narrow stratum of protesters, a significant proportion of which were journalists and emigrants". On the other hand, it is noted that "at the same time, Internet services became an operational source of photo and video content from the scene, which was picked up by traditional media with a large audience, creating an "information boomerang effect" (Kovalev, Faib, 2013). Indeed, when assessing the impact of Internet communications on the organization of protest activity, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the reason for the mass protests is not the growing popularity of Internet communications, but the population's dissatisfaction with the economic and political situation. But the resources of the Internet made it possible to coordinate the actions of the opposition and became an effective tool for mobilizing citizens.

Some of the most relevant types of Internet communication in the modern world are social networks and blogs. The practice of using Internet communications in politics suggests that it is social networks and blogs (microblogs in Twitter.com) that are the most effective tool for mobilizing citizens today. According to A. Loewenstein, the emergence of blogs and social networks has made the infosphere an even more significant resource for social change (Loewenstein, 2008).

As noted by (Voinov, Pavlyutenkova 2007) the political function of a blog can manifest itself in different ways:

1. As constantly reflecting the political position of the blog's author, where theses (articles) with an assessment of the current political situation and prospects for its development are placed;
2. As a response of a politically inactive individual to statements that particularly affected him/her in other blogs (dialogue model);
3. As a resource for expressing political solidarity.

Internet communications have become an instrument of mass action in Moldova, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia and other states. It is interesting to note that the reaction of the authorities in many countries was very similar: they began to block social networks, which were used as a means of communication and mobilization for joint actions.

SUMMARY

Of course, not all protesters are active users of social networks, so the question arises: how does online protest activity affect citizens' offline activity? We can agree with the opinion of a number of researchers who believe that Internet resources not only make it possible to express oppositional moods of citizens, but the Network contributes to accelerated communication between the participants of protest actions, which leads to an even greater activation of the protest movement. So, (Sherstobitov, Bryanov, 2007) note that news materials in the protest communities of the Vkontakte social network aim not only to directly mobilize, but also to disseminate information about events organized using Internet resources, actively discuss them and further communication. "Thus, we observe a close relationship between the mobilization of social action and the network activity of users. In our opinion, it manifests itself in the algorithm "mobilization - action - dissemination of information - mobilization". That is, the mobilization of offline activity of participants in social networks ultimately leads to the intensification of network communication, which manifests itself, for example, in an increase in the frequency of content updates in communities and on user pages immediately after events". Further communication on the Web can lead to an increase in offline activity.

Undoubtedly, the Internet provides ample opportunities for access to information and communication. The World Wide Web remained a

space free from government interference for a long time. However, the growth in the number of Internet users and the transformation of the Internet into an arena of political struggle led to the fact that states began to look for optimal mechanisms for regulating the new communication environment. As a result, digital barriers began to be erected between countries, which prevent citizens from accessing certain parts of the world's networks.

Censorship is the control of the government over the content of information in order to restrict the dissemination of ideas that are recognized by this government as harmful or undesirable. Internet censorship is control over the dissemination of information and the ability to restrict access to it on the Internet.

With the advent of Internet censorship, it became necessary to systematically study the issues of state regulation of the World Wide Web. Specialized centres for Internet research are being formed on the basis of the largest universities in the world; such international organizations as Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, OpenNet Initiative compile an Internet freedom rating of countries of the world, non-profit organizations implement scientific projects on the problem of Internet censorship with recommendations for individual states (Kovalev, Faib, 2013). Of particular interest is the report prepared by the Russian Foundation for the Development of Civil Society in May 2013 (Kovalev, Faib, 2013). This report analyses the experience of filtering Internet content in different countries of the world, systematizes the methods, identifies the models of Internet censorship, and examines the means of overcoming closed access to Internet resources.

According to the authors of the report, world practice allows distinguishing two large groups of methods of Internet censorship. The first group is technical methods. "The category of non-technical methods includes laws prohibiting the publication of this or that content, pressure on Internet providers, site owners and users in order to force them to remove unwanted materials or change them, and self-censorship". The second group can be combined with technical methods. "The category of technical methods includes blocking Internet resources by their IP addresses, distorting DNS records, blocking sites by URL, packet filtering, filtering through an HTTP proxy server, network operation disruption, and filtering search results" (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

Separately, the researchers highlight the methods of collecting information on the Internet, which make it possible to identify users accessing prohibited content, sites containing such materials, and ways to circumvent censorship. Experts include the preservation of information about users and the sites they have visited by Internet providers, surveillance of Internet cafes, and Internet surveillance systems (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

Blocked Internet content can also vary. Researchers distinguish several categories of Internet materials that most often become the object of filtration (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

Political content is one of the most frequently censored categories of filtered information. As the researchers note, such content includes information and sites containing data on the activities of the opposition, and also on criticism of the current government. In some countries, the dissemination of materials of a political nature can be classified as "anti-state propaganda" (Kovalev, Faib, 2013). Researchers also include sites of human rights organizations in this group of blocked information; sites of religious movements (by example, resources aimed at spreading Christianity in Muslim countries); materials containing data on ethnic minorities. The filtering of political content is of particular interest to researchers, since it is associated with a violation of basic human rights - freedom of speech and religion (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

Information that violates social norms may also be restricted: they include sites about drugs or alcohol, sites inciting ethnic and religious hatred and insulting the state religion, spreading slander against government officials, and also online casinos. Most of these restrictions are supported by the population, as they are carried out in order to protect the moral values of society (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

Experts will also include to the category of Internet materials that most often become the object of filtration the Internet resources that violate economic interests: sites that violate intellectual property, file-sharing sites, programs and services that allow voice transmission over the Internet (Voice-over-IP service in such programs as Skype, Mail.Ru Agent) (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

It is also necessary to highlight the materials blocked for security reasons: sites of extremist,

separatist and terrorist movements, military adversaries, online fraudsters and financial pyramids, resources with confidential data, mass mailing of unsolicited mail (spam), and malicious software (malware) (Kovalev, Faib, 2013).

Thus, Internet communications provide ample opportunities for conducting active discussions and supporting the activity of participants in protest communities on the Internet. The downside of the widespread use of the Internet in politics is the use by states of mechanisms for regulating the Internet. When assessing the role of Internet communications in political mobilization, it is important to take into account the fact that the latest technologies are not capable of causing revolutionary events; popular performances were generated by a number of socio-economic, political and ideological reasons. However, social networks and microblogging services have become new tools for mobilizing protesters, allowing them to carry on agitation and coordinate the actions of protesters.

The cases of countries such as Moldova, Tunisia, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Greece, Spain and many others allow us to explain the use of Internet communications in organizing mass civil actions. Such Internet communications as social networks, blogs and microblogging were actively used by opposition leaders as a tool for campaigning and mobilizing opposition-minded citizens. Various social networks and services allowed participants to coordinate activities and organize large-scale demonstrations. In sum, our findings indicate that digital media technologies allow activists to manage the information and to link rapidly to larger, personal-level action networks.

CONCLUSIONS

The Internet has and will have a significant impact on the political system of society. We can believe that

the World Wide Web will contribute to the establishment of a more effective connection between the authorities and citizens, the involvement of citizens in politics, the intensification of political participation, the evolution of modern representative democracy into a system of direct "electronic democracy". In this regard, the study of the role of Internet communications in political mobilization seems relevant and significant.

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