

Social media and political discourse in Russia

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Research question and discussion

The issue of social media impact on political deliberation is articulated in two alternative approaches. The first is connected with the belief that social media proliferation generates so called *new visibility* [Thompson, 2011], which enables users to monitor the Other and encourages political discussion close to deliberative discourse [Castells, 2010]. The second approach presupposes an opposite effect: selection of information sources tends to fragmentation of the social network audience [Habermas, 2006; Sunstein, 2007].

These theoretical hypotheses can be tested in Russian case, which seems controversial for both approaches. There are two proliferated social networks in Russia (Facebook and VK), which generate different outcomes. For instance, participants of rallies against electoral fraud in 2011-2012 were predominantly active Facebook users; active VK usage was not a significant predictor for participation in rallies [White, McAllister, 2012; Gerber, 2013; Reuter, Szakonyi]. Thus the research question is why there are no visible political effects of VK active usage?

Basing on rallies participants surveys other authors conclude that social network generates political effects only if it was primarily politicized. That's why Facebook generates political effects (for instance, effect on awareness about electoral fraud), while VK doesn't [Reuter, Szakonyi]. Such explanations do not consider specific features of *the political* and ignore some possible forms of its manifestation.

Methodology and data

To reveal these forms we consider users' opinion formation and decision making processes. According to N. Fairclough *political* discourse is an inclusive and transparent exchange of arguments for a purpose of collective decision [Fairclough, 2012]. Only such type of discourse encourages rational (i.e. political) opinion formation.

On the basis of users' comments to news, related to Crimea crisis, on Vedomosti public page we reconstruct discourses of communities in Facebook and VK. We test which of two discourses (VK or Facebook) is more close to Fairclough's model of political discourse.

Hypothesis and argumentation

Following McLuhan's idea that media transforms communication according to its internal logic [Маклюэн, 2003], we argue that differences between VK and Facebook could explain its different political effects.

H1: VK encourage political discussions, while Facebook undermines it.

The main difference between Facebook and VK as mediums is that the latter contains much more entertaining content (movies, music, etc.), than Facebook. This feature of VK facilitates the politicization of discussions in this network for two reasons.

First, VK users are more autonomous in their social beings than Facebook users. The dominant form of being in Facebook is social being, i.e. user's presence in his friends or subscribers timelines. If Facebook user posts something which is not approved by his friends and subscribers he can be banned and disappear from their timelines. Thus Facebook generates «the spiral of silence» effect, which undermines political deliberation. In VK the autonomy of user is provided by the multiplicity of forms of being.

Second, VK users use social network predominantly for private communication and reconstruct pre-existing primordial social ties. Plenty of entertaining content undermines generation of public spaces and communities which are united by common political views. This tends to formation of timeline which is full of cross-cutting views, interests and values. Thus, VK user has an actual opportunity to monitor the Other; such type of timeline increase the probability of cross-cutting political talk [Mutz, 2006]. Vice versa, Facebook user tends to establish links with users, who share his interests, views and values. He needs a timeline, which provides him by interesting information. That's why he excludes all sources of undesirable information. Sunstein called this effect «*daily me*» [Sunstein, 2007].

Results

In VK-discussions practical argumentation prevails over epistemic and deontic argumentation, while in Facebook deontic argumentation excludes participants with dissimilar political positions from discussion. In VK comments to news usually contained answers on political question (what we should do?). Discursive representation of *we/they* relations was constructed by mass-media: *we* mean *Russians*, *Russian state*, *they* mean so called *banderovits*. Nevertheless discussions were transparent and inclusive: there was no discrimination of users, who did not support Crimea annexation. Such users were often called *banderovits* or *fascists*, but reference to *them* was rather argumentative, than discriminatory («*They* are fascists, *they* are going to start genocide, you are not like *them*, aren't you?»). Users predominantly tried to reach a consensus. Users, who just abused others and did not tried to reach a consensus, were ignored by other users.

In Facebook *we/they* division was constructed according to government support principle. Those who supported the government policy toward Crimea crisis were discriminated because they were *them* – *regime supporters*. The question of the government (regime) support was deontic, not practical. Those who

supported the government were ignored or discriminated because of their internal immorality. Thus discussions in VK were more close to political discourse than discussions in Facebook.

Conclusion

We reveal the political effect of VK. Participation in discussions facilitates political opinion formation. Arguments exchange and practical modality of discussion generate rational political opinions. Our findings contribute to the literature of deliberative potential of social networks and revise the role of social media's features in perspectives of political communication.

Literature

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