

Digital Government Communications in Russian Public Sphere: A Trend Study

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Abstract: The paper presents the results of two studies conducted with an interval of 9 years, which allow us to identify trends of government communications in digital public sphere of Russia. We analyzed the sites of all government bodies of Russia at the federal level, as well as state communications in social media. The authors draw conclusions about the active, but generally ineffective development of such communications that do not allow citizens to actively participate in political decision-making, as well as the ambiguous development of the digital public sphere of modern Russia as a whole. The wide interactive possibilities of social media, which imply the priority of bilateral and multilateral communication, remain generally unclaimed. Despite the growth of channels, tools, and services provided by Internet technology, they are used by public authorities mainly for information purpose only, without facilitating two-way communication with the public.

Keywords: political communications, public communications, digital public sphere, e-participation, social media, Russia

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1. Introduction

Last few decades, the concept of "public sphere" has become so widely and frequently used that there are few intellectuals who did not know who is Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1982, 1989) and how his works are related to this concept. However, starting from the period of active development of social media, the subject of intense theoretical debate and numerous empirical studies is the emergence and existence of the digital public sphere as the online equivalent of the traditional, seemingly imperfect, "old" public sphere. The advent of the digital public sphere has attracted a lot of attention in recent years because it has been conceptualized as an addition or even replacement of a previously existing, "classical", "old" concept of the public sphere as an essential element of modern democracy (Schaefer 2015). The digital public sphere is mainly defined as the sphere of

online communication, participation in which is openly and freely available to everyone who is interested in discussing issues of common interest (Dahlberg 1998). The contemporary studies show that a distinctive feature of the digital public sphere is the visibility of the discussion or the results of the joint work of all actors in the network and that at least sometimes they affect the decision-making by other people (Gerhards 2010). Among these studies are the ones presented in this paper.

In 2011, we carried out a structural analysis of public communications of the authorities in the Web 2.0 space at the federal and regional levels of government as part of a grant project of the Faculty of Applied Communications of St. Petersburg State University (Report 2011). To compile a sample of the study, a list of servers of state authorities was used, available on the Official Russia website at www.gov.ru. We analyzed 62 sites of all branches of the federal government: legislative, judicial, and executive, as well as blogs, microblogging (Twitter), social networks, video hosting (Youtube). Only 7 federal authorities had official blogs. 6 authorities did not have official blogs, however there were personal blogs, blogs of the public persons, or simply officials of the department. As for microblogging, it turned out that they were much more popular than regular blogs: 15 ministries had official Twitter accounts. 12 official YouTube channels were identified during a 2011 study. The most popular was the Russian social network VKontakte, on which 17 official pages and two personal pages were registered. The local authorities had 12 pages on Facebook in 2011.

In general, the analysis showed that Twitter is the most convenient communication tool for the authorities on the Internet. VKontakte was a popular network. Although it is difficult to talk about any mass activity of federal government bodies on the Internet, because, as it turned out, only a little more than 10% of government departments at the federal level went beyond the boundaries of their own site. Thus, the use of Web 2.0 technologies in public communications of the federal authorities of the Russian Federation in 2011 could not be considered effective. The wide interactive possibilities of social media, which imply the priority of bilateral and multilateral communication, were generally unclaimed.

In January 2020, we conducted a new study, which allowed us to identify trends in the development of government communications in the digital public sphere of Russia. The 2020 study can be called a trend study, since it was carried out on the same sample and relied on the same methodology that was used in 2011.

The main research questions were resolved during the study:

- 1) Can we see the growth of channels, tools and services used by public authorities to communicate with the citizens?
- 2) Do social media really open up wide opportunities for communication between public authorities and the audience, or is this just a political myth?
- 3) Do the authorities have an adequate and effective set of means of participation and cooperation with citizens for making democratically sound and technically rational decisions in the interests of all citizens on the one hand, and creating the image of a modern and effective government on the other hand.

Below we will try to answer these questions.

2. Research Methodology

The study of government communications was developed by us within the framework of the post-classical paradigm, according to which modern communication technologies are not just a way of adapting to the external environment and the interaction of social actors with the external environment. It is, first of all, a way of constructing a social environment, forming public opinion on a variety of scales and the transformation of public capital into “informational” capital in the terminology of Castells (Castells 1996). The foundations of the Castells’ concept are close to the ideas of Arendt (Arendt 1998) (the basis of society is the open public space) and Luhmann (society is generated by communication) (Luhmann 1982). Habermas's works on public sphere and communicative theory are also of great importance for our study (Habermas 1982, 1989).

It should be noted that the term “government communications” seems to us broader than “communications of public authorities”. The subject of government communications is information relations regarding the exercise of state power. At the same time, messages have the necessary attributes of public communication. They affect the needs / interests / values of citizens and have a public status. Accordingly, when in the future we will use the term “government communications”, we will imply their political nature and public status.

Methods of collecting and analyzing empirical data:

- 1) The quantitative method is content analysis. It is carried out separately for each site and account in social media. It includes analysis of the total number of messages, the frequency of publications, general topics of messages, the use of special means of expression.
- 2) The qualitative method consists of adapting the content of a document to a research task based on the understanding, comprehension and interpretation of the content of documents in accordance with the purpose of the study and the rationale for the conclusions made.

In 2020 digital public communications of all 83 federal government bodies of the Russian Federation were analyzed in accordance with the data of the Official Russia. The study was conducted from 10.11.2019 till 01.15.2020. It should be noted that it was completed on the day when the government resigned. The study is divided into two rounds. The first round is the analysis of websites; the second one is the analysis of social media. Tasks of the study: 1) determine the basic state of electronic means of participation provided by government websites by complete analysis of the websites, tools, services and content they provide; 2) identify the most popular social media used by federal authorities for communication between government and society.

3. Research Results

3.1. Websites Analysis

Obviously, by the beginning of the 2020s, almost all sites at the federal level are regularly filled up, updated, have all the necessary sections and, accordingly, there is no need to evaluate their information and interactive components. Moreover, there is no point in evaluating the design of the site, its usability and search new optimization. Therefore, for the analysis of sites, it was decided to apply almost the same list of criteria that was used in our other studies (Bolgov et al 2018, Filatova et

al 2017) related to the measurement of electronic participation opportunities provided by government web-sites (see Table 1). This list of criteria correlates with the methodology for evaluating e-participation, which is used by the United Nations (UN DESA (2017) .

Table 1: List of Criteria for Evaluating Sites in the Context of Electronic Participation

№	Criteria
1	Availability of a website e-Participation activities (calendar of public debate)
2	Reports on work results
3	Feedback (opportunity to write a message)
4	Multilingualism
5	Integration / presence in social media
6	Electronic consultations (opportunity to ask a question)
7	Electronic voting or referendum technologies
8	Use of mobile technologies

In the case of the presence of investigated component, a rating “1” was set; in the case of absence - “0”. Then the average value was calculated for each criterion for each authority. The results of websites analysis are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Results of the Federal Authorities' Websites Analysis in the Context of e-Participation

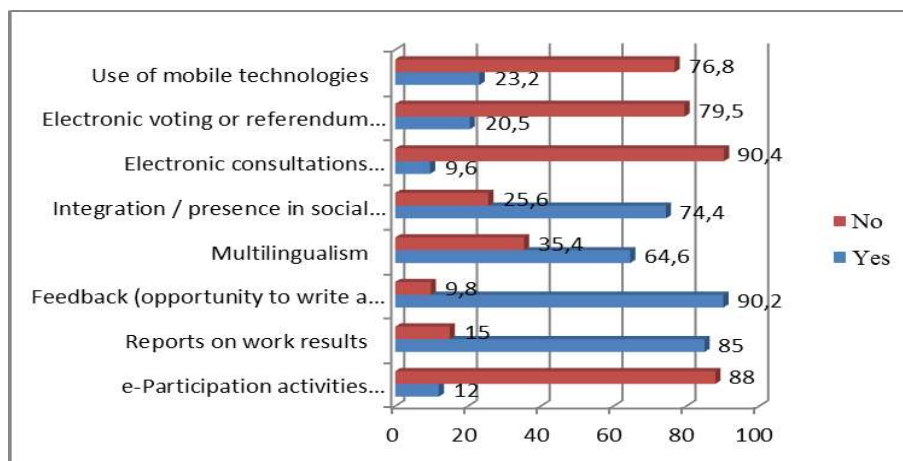


Figure 1 clearly demonstrates that by the beginning of 2020, almost all federal bodies of the Russian Federation provide feedback opportunities (97.3%), faithfully reports on their work (79.7%) and have accounts on social networks (77%) .

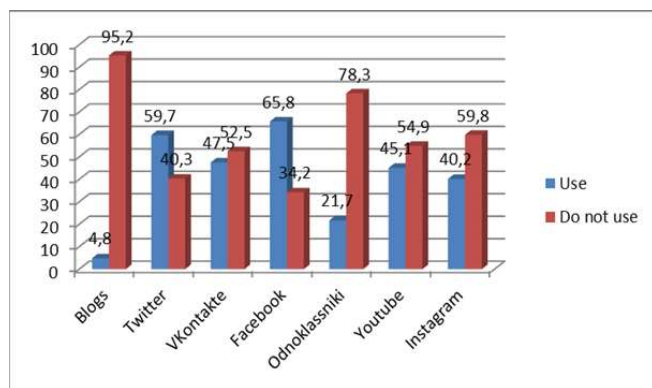
However, only 9.6% of websites provide opportunities for e-consultations, a little more offer to vote on the website (20.5%). And, which is very strange in 2020, almost 77% of websites do not indicate the presence of mobile versions and there are no links to any other mobile applications.

In general, the conclusions regarding the provision of e-participation opportunities on the websites of federal authorities turned out to be disappointing. Most sites are only at the first (information) stage of e-participation (but perform it good). Some websites allow to organize and to hold consultations, but most of the government is still far up to the stage of decision-making.

3.2. Analysis of Communications of Federal Authorities in Social Media

For this analysis, we used those accounts, the link to which is posted on official websites, as well as on the portal of the Government of the Russian Federation. It turned out that the federal authorities are very differently integrated into social media: some of them do not have accounts there at all, some are registered on the same social network, and some try to register on almost all popular networks at once. By the beginning of 2020, Facebook (65.8%) was the most popular social network among the federal government bodies of the Russian Federation. 59.7% used Twitter. Moreover, the government bodies represented on VKontakte (47.5%), Youtube (45.1%) and Instagram (40.2%) (see Fig. 2).

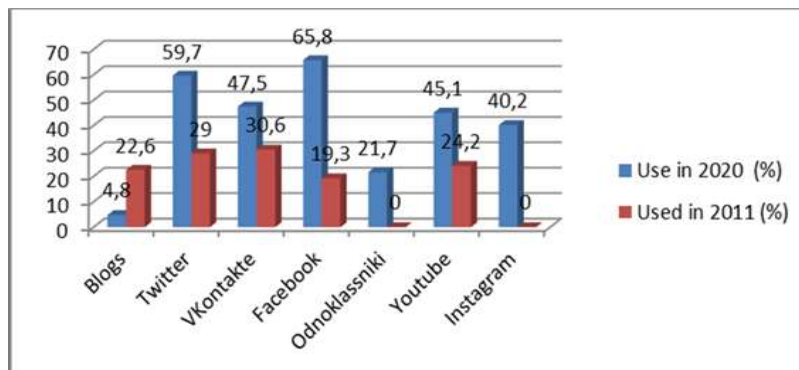
Figure 2: The Number of Accounts of Federal Authorities in Popular Social Media (in percent)



In terms of the number of subscribers to government bodies accounts, Twitter leads with more than 5 million users. The number of famous Russian network Vkontakte subscribers is approaching 3 million. The number of Instagram subscribers is approaching 2 million. Russian network Odnoklassniki with their 18 accounts are ahead of Facebook with 54 accounts in terms of the number of users. About 0.5 million users are subscribed to the channels of government authorities on Youtube.

If we turn to a study conducted in 2011 (see Fig. 3), we can conclude that by 2020, the popularity of text blogs has faded. However, in 2011 it was not large: only 7 authorities had official text blogs, 6 ones had personal blogs of top officials, and one government body had an unofficial blog, that totally accounted for 22.6% of the analyzed authorities. Figure 3 shows that the popularity of social networks is undoubtedly noticeable. Facebook demonstrates the greatest growth. The most popular social network in 2011 (Vkontakte) significantly lost to Facebook. The number of accounts on Youtube and Twitter almost doubled. Accounts on Instagram and Odnoklassniki were not analyzed in 2011.

Figure 3: Russian Authorities in Social Media in 2011 and in 2020



At this stage, keeping social media accounts by federal authorities is rather attributive and image-based instrument than a valid communicative tool. All imagine flats are more like abbreviated press centers. Due to the low activity of the audience, most departments cannot effectively use all the tools of this social network in order to spread their influence on the audience. The lack of feedback from departments in the comments also greatly inhibits this process. Therefore, at the moment, it cannot be said that social media is an effective platform for communication between federal authorities and the public.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that the digital public sphere of modern Russia is undergoing changes, which Habermas largely foresaw. The Internet is actively developing in all areas of life; “ordinary citizens efficiently and creatively interact with each other online” (Coleman 2017). Like most researchers, we cannot but agree with the thesis that modern Internet technologies have fundamentally transformed and changed communications in all areas. Nevertheless, the impact of the Internet on government communications in Russia today can be called insignificant.

Unlike Western European and American practice, in which social networks are most often a full-fledged platform for communication between public persons and citizens, in Russia, social media in the political sphere serve primarily as a modern and technological analogue of a message board used for information or propaganda. Most of both politicians and officials are trying to apply new technologies to implement outdated communication models. They are not yet ready for dialogue and open two-way communication with users. This situation can apparently be explained by national managerial traditions.

The results of trend study presented in this paper demonstrate that the main achievement of the Russian “digital democracy” was only improved access to information. The government supports e-information rather than e-consultation and, moreover, not joint decision making, as it is assumed by the United Nations e-Government Survey. Government authorities prefer to inform about the decisions made, rather than consult with citizens before the making decisions. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to detect the tangible impact of existing digital communication platforms, forums that provoke online discussions, on decision-making by “institutional policy” (Van Dijk 2012) and find evidence of an increase in e-participation today compared with a ten-year-old situation.

This is consistent with the observation by a number of scholars that government actors tend to use online campaigns for information and education purposes, while civil society actors usually conduct campaigns in an attempt to influence current political debate or political decisions, mobilizing for certain actions and increasing social pressure (Baringhorst 2009).

The answer to the first research question is positive. But the answer to the research question about whether the Russian authorities have an adequate and effective means of participation and cooperation with citizens for making democratically sound decisions is negative. Despite the growth of the online channels, tools and services, they are inefficiently used by public authorities to communicate with the citizens. The answer to the third research question is the following. The wide interactive possibilities of social media, which suggest the priority of bilateral and multilateral communication, remain generally unclaimed.

So, it cannot be denied that over ten years, Russian ministries and departments have gradually improved the content of their Internet websites. The number of pages in different social networks was increased significantly. However, these changes are more visible than substantial. With an abundance of websites and social media accounts, only a few of them contribute to improving the image of the government or its bodies. The presence of a website or an account on a social network in the government does not mean that it effectively uses these public communication tools.

Of course, it is necessary to continue research in this direction. The research methodology, of course, needs to be improved. In such a dynamic environment as the Internet, many indicators quickly become obsolete, but new ones appear.

We need projects focused on the study of factors contributing to communication, and, in general, the effective functioning of the system of e-interaction between government bodies, business and citizens in digital environment. Moreover, an important component of this issue is not only theoretical study, but also the implementation of applied research using social science methods and tools of modern Internet research. It seems that the studies described above allow us to identify problems and areas for further work by communication specialists in government.

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