Online Communities in the Public Space of Politics: Subjective Features and Possibility for Control (Exemplified by “VKOHTAKTE” Russian Social Networking Platform)

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Abstract

The article presents the study researching the potential of political subjectivity of online communities functioning in the online space of Russian public policy. The empirical object of the study is action-oriented communities functioning as hybrid networked entities having a complex of identifications and values that allow them to maintain stable interactions and being the basis for real political action. The authors identify operational characteristics of online communities and political subjectivity profiles, and single out social-discursive, civic-discursive, collaborative, socially proactive, and politically proactive types. Interpretation of data allows the authors to assess the potential of these communities to actualize their subjectivity in politics, both online and offline, and technological capabilities of their management.

Keywords

Online Communities, Online Public Politics, Political Subjectivity, Control Over Online Communities.

Introduction

Social transformations, caused by permeation of information and communication technologies into all spheres of social life, had an impact on networkization and
digitalization of the public policy sphere (Castells, 2000). The emergence of a new type of politics – a online public policy – influenced the actualization of new online political actors and the hybridization of traditional political actors. On the basis of network resources and technologies, they generate new meanings that are reflected in the public agenda competing with official political one and demonstrate new forms of civil and political self-organization, acquiring both constructive and destructive character in certain social contexts (Morozova & Miroshnichenko, 2017).

In modern political science, conceptual scientific ideas about political reality integrated with the Internet environment have been formed. They affect both the transformation of the political landscape and the nature of political changes, the format of political technologies and the development of political decisions in modern states. At the same time, diverse studies in political science that reveal institutional, communicative, procedural and managerial-technological aspects of new socio-political phenomena, which fix their network nature, do not develop explanatory models based on sociocultural components. The understanding of these components will allow us to determine constructive and destructive potential of network phenomena in politics and our ability to manage them.

Online communities make up one of the backbone elements of the social morphology of the digital space and, concurrently, the network landscape of modern public policy. The genesis of online communities is associated with the emergence of new models of social behavior in the Internet space in the early 2000s. These models are based on technological platforms of network services that follow the principle of participation and cooperation in arranging information sources and filling them with relevant content. According to T. Naybet and K. Roda (2009), virtual social spaces, creating new communication online structures as the basis of social relations, perform not only an information and communication function, but also the function of managing meanings, knowledge, and thus social relations.

Besides, the dynamics of networkization of public politics has enabled the emergence of network online communities that differ in their genesis (institutionalized political communities, transit political communities and action-oriented communities), and determine the diversity of political practices in the modern public space and possibilities to manage these practices. Being hybrid constructs, which have a real offline representation and use innovative communication opportunities, these online communities enable both social realization and integration within the global digital space created by the
Internet. Their identification features and value benchmarks allow them to retain stable interactions, which provides a resource basis for real political actions.

The study aims at featuring the empirical potential of the analytical and sociological toolset that would allow us to identify subjective characteristics of activity oriented online communities regarded both from institutional and socio-cultural perspective. Furthermore, using the obtained empirical data to prove that the realization potential of subjectivity of these online communities in politics can be assessed both in the online and offline and can be managed.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework for the Study of Online Communities in the Public Space of Politics

The conceptual framework is premised on the works by M. Castells (1999, 2000) and B. Wellman (2001) that state the network nature of transformations occurring in modern communities under the influence of information and communication technologies. Communities operating in the online space are not alternative communities, but are “extensions” of real communities. B. Wellman states that a community is a network of interpersonal connections that provide communication, support, awareness, a sense of belonging and social identity. Regardless of the variety of cultures and ideas on the Internet, people are included in a certain community as this community unites individuals who share common values, interests or have common problems (Wellman, 2001).

Summarizing modern sociological research on communities in the Internet era, D.E. Dobrinskaya (2018) identifies a number of characteristic features of online communities: the sense of space (belonging to constructed spaces that unite many users from different geolocations by a common online place); everyday practices shared by community members (including those formed by speech forms); common resources and support (informational, emotional, material support, recognition of personal, professional and social merits); common identities and the adoption of certain norms and rules of interaction within the community; the ability to build interpersonal relationships between community members, which creates a feeling of common connectedness. The purpose of these communities, according to the author, is the transmission of certain meanings and values through the established norms and rules adopted by community members who have a sense of identity, common interests and specific goals of social interaction (Dobrinskaya, 2018).

Interpretation of empirical data characterizing the established practices of political subjectivity of active-activity communities was based on theoretical works by
I.V. Miroshnichenko, N.A. Ryabchenko, A.A. Gnedash on the political institutionalization of online communities in the public policy space. The authors prove that individuals produce, consume and replicate some content within network communities on three levels, which actualizes the subjectivity of network communities. These are: the latent level or level of everyday socio-political practices; the level of subcultural positioning (where political and cultural patterns are formed, typical for certain network environments that regulate political behavior of individual actors); and the level of political institutionalization (recognition of political problems by network communities and their involvement in real political activity, both in mobilizational and institutionalized format) (Miroshnichenko, Ryabchenko & Gnedash, 2019).

The authors developed and tested a methodology for the empirical research of institutional and socio-cultural characteristics of the political subjectivity of online communities of the Runet. The research was implemented on several stages. At each stage, we determined an array of empirical data representing the object of research, and a set of empirical methods and procedures that allow collecting and analyzing sociological data.


Based on the data retrieved from action-oriented online communities, we formed a digital database divided into a collection of datasets. The database contains an array of messages published by community users in text, iconographic and video formats from the establishment of a given community up to June 1, 2019.
The formed empirical database of digital data of active network communities became the basis for the multivariate content analysis. We used an adapted discourse analysis toolset to analyze the connections between content frequencies, which characterize social issues, representation of value meanings and behavioral practices of network community members in the obtained datasets. According to the discursive methodology (Wodak, 1989; Wong, Altman & Rojas-Mora, 2011; Hammersley, 2003; Van Dijk Teun, 2009), network communications are discursive practices, i.e. fragments of social reality or elements of the internal logic of online activity of actors (users, community members) and network communities (in general). Actors and communities construct social reality through the issues, meanings and values they actualize in the course of their interaction. Hall's theoretical propositions explain how online communities in discursive practices represent socio-political reality. This representation occurs at two levels: the level of relationships between real objects and mental concepts, and the level of organizing, grouping, positioning and classifying concepts and establishing complex relationships between them (Hall, 2001).

To visualize discursive interactions within communities, we built the models of network communities reflecting the dominant social issues, meanings and values contained in the content generated by the participants of network communities. To construct and visualize these models, the obtained datasets – which make up a digital data database of action-oriented communities – were subjected to a frequency analysis. Thus, we identified a list of frequency words and phrases that form the basis of discursive practices in the analyzed online communities. For each word and phrase in the obtained frequency list, we calculated the relative frequency, which served as a metric for constructing and visualizing a social graph of the action-oriented community. To reflect the topology of a social graph, we subjected the resulting social graphs to a layout procedure – a process during which each vertex of a social graph depending on its properties is assigned a certain coordinate. For the purpose of our research, we used “Force Atlas2” force-directed layout algorithm based on a simulation of physical forces. The vertices of a social graph are represented as charged particles that repel each other, and the connections between them are represented as elastic strings that pull together adjacent vertices. We used the visualizations, obtained after the layout procedure, to classify the analyzed communities and highlight their operational characteristics.

We compared the results of the network empirical analysis with the results of online questionnaires with members of online communities and in-depth interviews with their leaders.
The representative sample of the online survey included 1200 respondents, regular members of online communities. The online survey was carried out through direct mailing from March 2019 to December 2019. Direct mailing was a preferred method as VKontakte imposed restrictions on posting online surveys in communities on the platform. The questionnaire contained a list of closed and open-ended questions that allow identification of political and cultural components (cognitive, affective, value and behavioral orientations) of the online community members. In-depth interviews were conducted with 100 formal and informal community leaders in a series of face-to-face online or offline meetings. The structure of the in-depth interview questionnaire included questions that allow identifying and characterizing the identities and political worldview of the interviewees.

The analysis of the empirical data retrieved from the selected online communities allowed us to determine their profiles and operational characteristics. Thus, we identified the potential of their political subjectivity and possibility to manage them in the public policy space.

**Political Subjectivity Profiles and Operational Characteristics of Online Communities**

Based on the results of the empirical study, we have identified indicators that allow us to single out the following operational characteristics of online communities:

- The value stability, which means that the meanings and values shared by all community members are consolidated and fixed within the community. The empirical indicators are the density of the discursive core (according to the visual model of a community), and common political orientations shared by the majority of respondents (according to the results of an online survey);
- The discursive activity determined by the prevalent topic. The empirical indicators are the prevalent topic: social, civic, political, identified through multivariate content analysis and reflected in a visual model of a network community;
- The direction of community actors’ activity: online or offline. The empirical indicators are the practices of community members aimed at discussing and/ or solving problems offline. These practices are identified via online surveys of community members, in-depth interviews with community leaders, and multivariate content analysis of community discursive practices;
- The action strategy of community members which can be individual (everyday practices) or collective (focused on cooperation, group representation of issues and their solutions). The empirical indicators are socio-political practices identified
through online surveys of community members, in-depth interviews with community leaders, and multivariate content analysis of community discursive practices.

The analysis and interpretation of empirical data allowed us to identify the following political subjectivity profiles of online communities: social-discursive; civic-discursive; collaborative, socially proactive, politically proactive.

Social-discursive action-oriented communities are discursive communities of online users based on stable social identifications and interests of citizens in a certain area of public life, excluding identifications and interests associated with politics.

Figure 1 Fishing Community Network Model (https://vk.com/vk_fishing)
The analysis of network models of social-discursive action-oriented communities (an example of this type “Fishing” community featured in Figure 1) allowed us to identify the following operational characteristics and empirical indicators of these communities:

- **The lack of value stability**, which is manifested in the blurring of the thematic core of the community model, comprising common meanings and values shared by all community members;

- **The diversity of topics and the frequency in use**, which is manifested in the thematic diversity and density of the peripheral part of the network model;

- **Social-individual action strategy** that is focused on obtaining, exchanging and disseminating information in the online space, which is associated with specific social interests of community members;

- **Communicative gaps**, manifested in absence of shared topics in the core and periphery of network models, which makes the community vulnerable to external discursive influence – emergence of new discussion topics, new values and meanings, new behavioral strategies, including political ones.

The communities of this type are not involved into politics, but their institutional characteristics mean a high potential for their re-orientation into the activity field of politics, and likewise their exposure to political engineering and control over their civil and political activity offline.

**Civic discursive action-oriented communities** are communities of online users based on sustainable social identities and interests of citizens, which involve civic and political spheres.
The analysis of network models of civic-discursive action-oriented communities (an example of this type “Science| Наука” community featured in Figure 2) allowed us to identify the following operational characteristics and empirical indicators of these communities:

- The presence of value stability, which is manifested in the prevalent thematic core that comprises meanings and values shared by all community member;
- The variety of topics and the frequency of their use, as well as the absence of pronounced boundaries between the core and the periphery of the community model, which shows that all community resources are aimed at organizing effective online
interaction without communicative gaps, which minimizes the probability for external communicative influence and control;

- Civic-collective action strategies, which means that community members are focused on articulating problems of the public sector and their solutions, analysis and assessment in the online space;

These communities are aimed at discussing public issues in a socially transformative context, promoting the values shared by community members. However, in terms of their institutional characteristics, civic discursive communities have limited communicative resources, which does not lead to real political action in the offline space.

Collaborative action-oriented communities are communities of online users based on stable social identifications and interests of citizens, based on a shared vision of socially significant issues and their solutions (anti-crisis or socially transformative), including solutions in real life.

The analysis of network models of collaborative action-oriented communities (an example of this type is “Greenhouse of social technologies” community featured in Figure 3) allowed us to identify the following operational characteristics and empirical indicators of these communities:

- The presence of value stability, which is characterized by the prevalent thematic core, comprising the meanings and values associated with the vision of socially significant problems and their solutions shared by all members of the community;

- The variety of topics and the frequency of their use, as well as the presence of clearly defined boundaries between the core and the periphery show that the community has a clearly defined: discursive core in which the meanings and values are shared; peripheral part, which reflects the communications of citizens aimed at developing solutions to socially significant issues and their real-life implementation;

- Civic-collective action strategy is focused on articulating the issues of the public sector and their solutions, and involving community members in solving problems in real life;

- The absence of communicative gaps and the intensity of communications, both in the core and in the periphery, with an orientation towards socio-transformative or anti-crisis (defensive) civic activity, which characterizes such communities as extremely resistant to external discursive influence.
These communities are aimed at discussing public problems in a socially transformative and anti-crisis (human rights) context; promoting the values shared by community members and involving in problem-solving based on civic action and participation. However, in terms of their subjective characteristics (value benchmarks and behavioral patterns), these communities deliberately limit their activity to the sphere of civil society, without going to the level of politics.

Figure 3 Greenhouse of social technologies Community Network Model (https://vk.com/teplitsast)
Politically proactive action-oriented communities are online communities based on stable social identifications and diverse interests, showing civic and political activity in the real space of public policy, united by a new technological format for solving socially significant problems.

The analysis of network models of collaborative action-oriented communities (an example of this type is “Lisa Alert” Search unit” community featured in Figure 4) allowed us to identify the following operational characteristics and empirical indicators of these communities:

- The presence of a multi-layered value stability, which is manifested in a differential thematic core, reflects the plurality of meanings and values within the community;
- The variety of topics and the frequency of their use, as well as the presence of clearly defined boundaries between the core and the periphery show that the community has
a clearly defined: discursive core in which the meanings and values are shared; peripheral part, which reflects the communications of citizens aimed at developing solutions to socially significant issues and their real-life implementation on the basis of civic (socio-transformative, socio-economic activities) and political participation (political transformative, human rights, mobilization protest activities);

- *Civic and political collective action strategy* that is focused on articulating the issues of the public sector and their solutions, on the basis of real civic and political activity;

- *The presence of communicative gaps* in the core of network models of communities, which makes the community vulnerable to external discursive influence in the form of new topics for discussion, new values and meanings, yet maintaining communication patterns and behavioral strategies.

![Figure 5 “Alexey Navalny” Community Network Model (https://vk.com/ Navalny.group)](https://vk.com/navalny.group)

Such communities are aimed at articulating solutions to public issues and involving its participants to civil (socio-transformative, socio-economic activities) and political practices (politically transformative, human rights, mobilization protest activities) to solve the problems.
Strategies for Managing Online Communities in the Space of Public Policy

The presented research results show that action-oriented communities, despite their various institutional (orientation towards collective action in politics) and socio-cultural characteristics (identities, shared values and meanings, behavioral practices), have a potential to expand their political subjectivity, even if it is formed at a latent level and is positioned through regular social and political practices (as concerns social-discursive communities and civic-discursive communities).

The experience of modern Russia politics shows, if new agenda is introduced by governmental bodies or political parties (i.e. institutionalized political actors) to fill communication gaps and solve vital social problems that refer to their interests, it can contribute to both constructive and protest mobilization of numerous community members in the real-life space of politics. A striking example of a protest action is an action in Moscow, November 2020, which involved 26000 people, parents and teachers who were against distance learning. Parents, members of online communities including (social-discursive and civic-discursive), collected 26 thousand signatures against distance learning, and then with the support of the “New People” oppositional party organized “School is our business” social movement. In this case, a constructive solution is to convert the protest potential of the community into the discussion of solutions. In fact, the current situation is finding faults and responsible for the situation, which is happening in various expert offline and online-sites at the Department of Education and Science of Moscow (Vengerov, 2020).

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<tr>
<th>Types of action-oriented communities</th>
<th>Characteristics of online communities</th>
<th>Control Policy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social-discursive</strong></td>
<td>Social-discursive online activity (outside politics); lack of value stability, in which the meanings and values shared by all community members are fixed; an individual online strategy for the activities of community members; vulnerable to external influence</td>
<td>Introducing a new agenda into communication gaps, mobilizing for collective action related to the interests of community members</td>
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<td>“Real Football” (<a href="https://vk.com/re.foot">https://vk.com/re.foot</a>)</td>
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<td>“AUTO” (<a href="https://vk.com/pubauto">https://vk.com/pubauto</a>)</td>
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<td>“Fishing” (<a href="https://vk.com/vk_fishing">https://vk.com/vk_fishing</a>)</td>
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<td>“MOM real” (<a href="https://vk.com/love_mama">https://vk.com/love_mama</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Civic-discursive</strong></td>
<td>online civic-discursive (society and politics); the presence of value stability; all community resources are aimed at organizing effective interaction in the online space without communication gaps, which minimizes the opportunity for communicative impact on the community and its control; civic-collective action strategies, which is focused on articulating social problems and ways to solve them, as well as their analytical understanding and assessment in the online space</td>
<td>involvement into the discussion about the solutions, rather that fault-finding; assigning the status of “experts”</td>
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<td>“GEEK PICNIC” (<a href="https://vk.com/geekpicnic">https://vk.com/geekpicnic</a>)</td>
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<td>“Science” (<a href="https://vk.com/sci">https://vk.com/sci</a>)</td>
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<td>“Community Forum” (<a href="https://vk.com/forum.oprf">https://vk.com/forum.oprf</a>)</td>
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<td>“Putin Team” (<a href="https://vk.com/putinteam">https://vk.com/putinteam</a>)</td>
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<td><strong>Collaborative</strong></td>
<td>online and offline civic collaborative activity; the presence of value stability; civic-collective action strategies, focused on articulating social problems and solutions, as well as involving participants in real-life problem-solving; resistance to external political influence</td>
<td>institutionalization of the community into formal organizations (NGOs, political parties) and involvement into networked collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Lisa Alert” Search unit ” (<a href="https://vk.com/lizaaa.alert_real">https://vk.com/lizaaa.alert_real</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social-proactive n political-proactive</strong></td>
<td>the presence of a multi-layered value stability, which is manifested in a differential thematic core, reflects the plurality of meanings and values within the community; civic and political collective action strategy that is focused on articulating the issues of the public sector and their solutions, on the basis of real civic and political activity; the presence of communicative gaps in the core of network models of communities, which makes the community vulnerable to external discursive influence in the form of new topics for discussion, new values and meanings, yet maintaining communication patterns and behavioral strategies.</td>
<td>institutionalization of the community into formal organizations (NGOs, political parties) and involvement into networked collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>“ HELP Krasnodar CITY” (<a href="https://vk.com/club9409119">https://vk.com/club9409119</a>)</td>
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The managerial resource for collaborative online communities is to institutionalize network cooperation with authorities or formal entities of the civil sector within the framework of clearly defined interests and problems articulated by the community members. For example, “Greenhouse of social technologies” is open for innovative design solutions in the interests of socially oriented non-profit organizations in the regions of the Russian Federation. The managerial resources such communities are outside the space of political action. Yet they can be adapted to fit in with the framework of important public decisions made by the heads of the constituent entities and municipalities of the Russian Federation associated with strategies for the socio-economic development of the country. This technological approach can also be used to control socially active and politically active communities, whose members are involved in civil and political activity.

Conclusion

The study shows that action-oriented online communities are hybrid network structures with the potential for social interactions and political practices in the real-life space of politics. Institutional and subcultural characteristics of network communities allow us to identify different forms of political subjectivity and resources for managing these communities in the space of public policy.

Social-discursive online communities are latent actors of public politics, as their participants immerse themselves in political reality through the individualization of online communications, consuming political content through the regular social practices (updating social problems according to the community interests, news, memes, humor etc.), thereby mastering a set of situational social roles and behavioral standards in politics, which reduce to rejection of politics. At the same time, the lack of value stability among online community members and their unreasonable consumption of political content, which is produced by other political actors, makes a community vulnerable to new meanings and new public agenda via manipulative strategies focused on forming a certain public opinion and mobilizing citizens for collective action.

Civic-discursive and collaborative online communities are network structures of homogeneous subcultural characteristics united by political and cultural patterns of behavior. Online community members have a collective identity and commonality of normative value schemes. This allows them to exchange different types of resources in the process of their interaction in different environments (offline and online), as well as to solidify in opinions and actions with other citizens in a network format on specific problems. The indicators of the subcultural positioning of online communities and their
resources for real action in the space of public policy are the content and density of discourse connections. Besides, the marker is the presence of triggers in the form of requests from the internal environment to the community or the external environment for the development and implementation of solutions to socially significant problems which allow “launching a call” for certain civil actions. For civic-discursive communities, such messages are associated with the analysis of current public problems and the representation of the most successful or innovative solutions. Collaborative online communities are not so much aimed at articulating developing and replicating successful solutions (mobilization – in response to crisis situations associated with the search for missing people, as in the case of the “Lisa Alert” Search unit” community; or social design of innovations by the “Greenhouse of social technologies” community – innovative civic communities, tools, applications, solutions). Due to political and cultural homogeneity, civic-discursive and collaborative communities are not subject to direct manipulative influence by other political actors, however, their constructive, and in some cases, innovative potential can be successfully used by authorities at various levels to solve the problems of territories within the framework of intersectoral cooperation.

Social-proactive and political-proactive communities, being focused on the construction of active civic and political action and the involvement of their participants, are real political subjects. Their activity, regardless of the commonality of their political and cultural patterns, focuses on the list of issues included in the political agenda of the state or a subject of the Russian Federation, or representing a public agenda competitive to the political one. The members of these communities are united by the goals and resources for possible institutional design of political reality (at the level of a change in the political regime which is the case with “Alexey Navalny” community and incorporation into the system of political representation or active participation of members of “HELP Krasnodar CITY” community in the development and implementation of strategic decisions that contribute to the successful development of the municipality. The prospects for managing these communities are formal institutionalization, which means that community members capable of constructive interaction with other political actors, (including government bodies) in the subject area of public issues, are incorporated into public decision-making process.

Thus, not only does this study show institutional and subcultural diversity of online communities in Russian public policy, but also the potential for managing them. The findings can contribute to a political science explanation of the nature and dynamics of network political practices and can also be used to develop solutions in the field of
political governance for constructive institutional changes and leveling the risks of socio-political tension.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

A study, conducted as a part of the research project RFBR No. 18-011-00975 “Subjective space of politics: opportunities and challenges of network society”, identified three types of online communities. Apart from the action-oriented type that is presented in the article, the authors identified: institutionalized political communities defined as initiated or projected characterized by the homogeneity of their subjective and activity features in real politics (i.e. they are focused on online activity in favor of a particular political subject/party); transit political communities characterized by a number if features such as spontaneous (unprogrammed) digital character of their emergence, short-term public demonstration of unity performed as symbolic communication; absence of real integrating social links and sets of value benchmarks which can create paradoxal configurationa of the participants of network communities, which conflict in traditional sphere (i.e. they function predominantly online though have an offline mobilization potential) (Miroshnichenko, 2020).

References


