

Structures of Civil Society in Social Networks: Mechanisms, Prospects, Risks

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of main functioning features of civil society structures and institutions in social networks. The author describes the main characteristics of social media in terms of their compliance with the ontology of modern civil society. Opportunities and prospects of social networks application in the field of civil-political practices implementation are analyzed. Associated risks and restrictions are also analyzed. The author's typology of social-network communities is given in terms of their civil-political orientation. Topical directions of further research on the problem of civil-political practices in social media are described in conclusion.

Keywords: civil society, Internet, social networks, civil-political practices, network communities, social media

Introduction

The question of maintaining the balance of socio-political groups as well as their interests in the overall structure of political space is becoming more and more urgent (Fukuyama (1992); Crouch (2005)). It is comprehensive development of various social and political forces and associations, which contributes to consolidation of the society, practices' development of effective civil control over the implementation of public policy, prevention of monopolization of political power and media discourse. In this regard this is an important task of modern democratic state (for various contexts of the Internet communication development and civil society structures) (Grimov and Goncharova (2016); Donaj (2015); Zamotaev (2015); Mihajlova and Skogorev (2017); Aslanyan (2018); Druzhinin (2017)). The achievement of such goals is possible together with harmonious development of civil society structures and their constructive interaction with the state institutions. Thus, it is precisely mechanisms, prospects, resources and risks of civil society development that in modern conditions become one of the objects of attention from various sciences, especially sociology and political science. In this regard, let us further analyze the impact of modern network communication technologies on the development of the civil society.

Results and Discussion

Configurations of political actors in general political field are changing. Then, we will consider and analyze main substantive aspects of civil-political practices in the context of new information and communication realities.

The main characteristics of social networks and broadly WEB 2.0 services are as follows:

- multimedia - due to this characteristic multi-format (audio, video, computer graphics) content is ensured;

- interactivity - the participation of online users both as a consumer and as a content producer;
- operativity - high speed of information dissemination and formation of information agenda; as a result, communication becomes "momentary";
- volunteerism - free participation in communicative practices, absence of coercion or any centers of force and power;
- overcoming space-time constraints;
- blurring of social hierarchies, various status, and identification characteristics, which can be transformed in social media and can be replaced by more significant ones which are already in social network.

Thus, many properties and characteristics of network communication are embedded in the ontology of civil society structures. As you know, structures and institutions of civil society differ in a number of features, including: voluntary nature of contacts between actors, a certain level of autonomy and oppositionism in relation to official power structures and official political discourse, self-organization and self-development, multiple opinions, views, horizontal communications between participants, a certain level of creativity. It is these properties that shape the subjectivity of actors in civil society structures; wherein social media provides substantial resources for the development of such subjectivity.

The development of new technologies (about digital technologies as the backbone of modern technology, see (Grimov and Kamensky (2019); Mayakova (2019); Law (2004); Aseeva and Budanov (2019))) is an important condition for the formation of new structures and institutions of civil society. At the same time, as a rule, it is assumed that network will be secondary to "real" structures and institutions of the civil society. One of the leading features is confrontation with official political discourse, a certain opposition and independence.

The Internet, as well as related services and applications, expanded communication opportunities, made social world more open, provided rich prospects for self-expression in completely free space. It is the definition of the Internet as a space of creativity and freedom that is increasingly balanced by an understanding of risks associated with it. Gradual development of the Internet communication has shown that the idea of virtual nature of social practices on the Internet, the idea of their anonymity is no longer true. In modern social networks, the tendency to express identity is predominant. There are possibilities of anonymity and virtual identity, but they are no longer relevant. This is confirmed by numerous examples of individual data theft, deanonymization, revelations, etc. Thus, the other side of freedom on the Internet is the question of safety and control. The freedom of the Internet is compensated by its excessive transparency, which can be used to commit various kinds of illegal actions. It is the formation of a system of effective social control measures by the state institutions and the civil society as a whole to comply with existing legislation in network space that is one of the important tasks. As a result, freedom on the Internet, as well as in the implementation of civil-political practices, must be balanced by appropriate responsibility, which can ultimately serve as the basis of the state program for regulating activities in network, as well as the program for the development of the civil society. At the same time, civil control mechanisms will maintain a balance between chaotic, uncontrolled circulation of information on the Internet and the gravitation to new forms of digital totalitarianism.

In terms of understanding the role of Internet resources in the implementation of civil-political practices (both at personal and group level) it is necessary to underline dialectical unity of technological freedom of network resources (certain patterns or corridors of opportunity which are called "affordances" by B. Latour (2005)) and a steady trend to digital control of civil life of the state, special services, large media corporations, etc. So, network freedom for civil society "actors" cannot be absolute or final but is determined by the configuration of interests and resources of all participants in political interaction.

Social media can serve as consolidation of public opinion. The fact that social media and network technologies serve not only as means and a tool, but also as a place for expressing and implementing civil-political practices, is most clearly revealed. In this regard, the Internet as a whole can be considered as a place of clash between various political actors, as a result of which various spectra of political views and forms of political activity are widely represented. Therefore, the opposition of official power discourse to the Internet space is untenable: broadest political views, including official ones, are presented on the Internet.

The problem of "real" and "virtual" civil-political practices ratio is of particular importance. The status of these practices is determined by their localization respectively (offline or online). A central question is the status of civil-political network communities acting as subjects of such practices. Different configurations of real and virtual activity are possible:

- civil-political communities in real life precede their representation in online environment. In such case, organizational connections and structures are primary and strong in real life, while the community in online environment will duplicate original (community) to a certain extent and will be an additional way to coordinate its activities using new technological capabilities. In such case network community can also perform an information function or serve for the implementation of a specific social project. An example of such communities can be official communities of political parties, associations on social networks. Obviously, in this case, formal organizational structures precede virtual ones;

- online civil-political communities precede real-life activism. Basically, this happens when planning certain actions and events (protests, meetings, charity work) on social networks with their realization offline. Such activity forms short-term sociality (potentially effective and massive), but does not, as a rule, form long-term ties and therefore has limited time. Interaction can be situational; there may be no long-term mutual obligations. Further institutionalization of social connections of online communities can lead to the formation of full-fledged community in real life, although such examples are an exception.

Thus, it can be noted that both activities are closely intertwined and interconnected. Many civil-political communities are represented both offline and online; at the same time, the question of primacy of offline or online for them cannot be resolved unambiguously due to complex branched structure and many separate suborganization or project structures that can fall out of general organizational logic. For example, the main part of the community may be initially familiar with each other in real life, and then meet online; at the same time, new members of this community can first recruit in an online environment, and then become full members of offline community.

As we see, the question of primacy of offline and online communities can be solved in any single case in its own way. Combinations of direct civil-political practices and online practices can also be unique. In general, the efficiency of offline civic engagement practices offline is higher than online ones, due to their direct and systematic implementation, better coordination, etc. At the same time, online civic activity is characterized by a higher rate of mobilization, potentially larger audience; in some cases, we can talk about a developed network infrastructure for implementing certain practices that can be implemented more conveniently or successfully online (for example, crowdfunding, crowdsourcing (Howe (2008)), organization of search teams, etc.). We also note that the Internet and social networks can be as an interaction platform for many social groups, whose activities offline are limited for various reasons. These groups can thus overcome their marginality online without offline. Such groups can be illegal (extremist and terrorist communities, drug traffickers, distributors of child pornography, etc.) or legal, experiencing public pressure, stigma (for example, sex minorities, individual religious and counter-cultural groups, political opposition) etc. Thus, online civic engagement may be more effective in some cases.

At the same time, online civil-political practices have several limitations. Civic online activity is often simulated, in which the user is limited to formal participation in civil political activity, reduced to virtual gestures: comments, likes (expressions of approval), reposts etc. As a result, mass involvement of the Internet audience in the activities of civil-political communities turns into imitation and primitivization of participation itself. Obviously, such actions can have only limited social effect and therefore are called "slacktivism" (Ushkin (2015)).

When analyzing civic engagement practices in social networking communities, particular attention should be paid to considering different types of such communities. We believe it is appropriate to describe the following types of communities:

- "apolitical" (not having an emphasized political color, not related to explicit political allegiance, engaged in patriotic, volunteer activities, etc.);
- communities supporting official power discourse ("official");
- communities opposed to official power discourse ("protest"). These types of communities, being clearly expressed in social networks, represent various patterns of political activity, the level of political mainstreaming in their activities. Therefore, comparative analysis of trends in functioning of civil society institution in these communities is an urgent task and will allow to study the problem " with a breakdown into."

Conclusions

The demand for harmonious co-development of a citizen, the society and the state is obvious in modern conditions. This is possible with successfully functioning responsible institutions and structures of the civil society, capable of constructive criticism of public institutions of the state power. This together reflects interests of the whole society. In this regard, an adequate response to technological opportunities offered by modern information and communication technologies, in particular the Internet and social networks, is important. As we have stated in this study, Internet communication provides extensive opportunities for civil policy practices and for the development of civil society structures and institutions, however, at the same time has several restrictions and is associated with certain threats and risks. A relevant topic of future research may be the study of the prospects for the development of civil society structures in the context of further information and technological revolution, escalation of artificial intelligence technologies development, the Internet of things, etc. The development of new forms of subjectivity (Ignat'ev (2020)) can become the basis for further transformation of civil-political sphere, which is already manifested in discourses about digital government, about the replacement of legislative, executive, and (especially) judicial bodies with artificial intelligence. The development and segmentation of digital media market can result in both the formation of relatively competitive information environment and concentration of most social media and network resources in one hand, which can distort the infrastructure of the civil

society. Solving such problems at both theoretical and applied levels will contribute to the formation and development of civil society in the context of information and communication technologies use.

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