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# TRANSFORMATION VECTORS OF RUSSIAN POLITICAL VIEWS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS (CASE "WINTER CHERRY")

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## *Abstract*

The article presents the results of political and psychological research the influence of the processes emergence and transformation of ideological and semantic constructs in social networks on the Internet users perception the events of reality. The Central problem of the research is the mechanisms of perception and processing of information coming from the Internet into the individual consciousness of active users. The authors investigates the virtual social and political ideas arising in the minds of Internet users, the degree of their coincidence, polarization and confrontation with the ideas formed as a result of objective experience. The authors identifies socially destructive and constructive practices in the online communication in the social networks of the Russian Internet considering their deformational potential for the individual consciousness. According to the results of the study, it can be stated that in the consciousness of online content consumers, semantic constructs are actualized at the moment of emotional intensity, but they remain their significance only for a short period of time. In online environment individuals believe that their actions are real activities, but when they are offline, they return to established patterns of behavior. At the same time, social and political ideas that arise and change at the time of being online can be collide with the ideas formed as a result of real experience.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of large-scale transformations of the Russian information landscape in the 2010s, the Russian Internet segment (RuNet) is one of the most important components in the formation of social and political views of the modern Russia citizens. Nowadays, the RuNet acts as a sociocultural space where new social and political values and ideas crystallize, the existing ones are modified and new discourses of the Russian social and political process are formed (Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, & Batanina, 2019; Evgenyeva & Gubchenko, 2017; Shestopal, 2019). Under these conditions, the study of RuNet as a complex socio-political phenomenon is extremely important for understanding the logic of the development Russian society today and for the medium term (Shestopal & Selezneva, 2018; Volodenkov, 2020).

The scientific innovation of the research is that for the first time an attempt is made to carry out a socio-psychological analysis the specifics of projecting in the Internet communities the mass dissatisfaction caused by specific management mistakes on the social and political spheres. It reveals how the virtual communicative environment of the Internet affects the formation or change individuals' ideas about the events of reality, reformatting of their meaning in the socially and politically significant. The negative assessment of the event is extrapolated to the system of social and political relations. Such projection of the meanings forms the motive of mass protest activity.

On this issue, the author of the virtual reality concept Jaron Lanier expresses the idea that the Internet community deprives people freedom of thought and will. Lanier (2018) refers to the tendency of inciting by the Internet communities of the worst aspects personal and public life of people, accumulation of their discontent, deception, deprivation a sense of autonomy. Nevertheless, Lanier (2018) does not exclude the humanistic nature of Internet communities, and we agree with it in many ways, and we will have the possibility of using their communicative potential for the development of a new type of civil society, the most effective and socially responsible.

## 2. Problem Statement

The object of our study was chosen the case of the events on March 25, 2018 at the shopping center "Zimniaya Vishnia" ("Winter cherry") in Kemerovo, Russia. The choice of this case for analysis is due to the need to find an answer to a number of problematic questions about the possibilities and prospects of the digital transformation of public administration in Russia. The authors are interested in the study of the possibilities of controlling mass consciousness and behavior by means of electronic communication. Particular attention should be paid to comparing the process of political perception in online and offline environments. The case under study is noteworthy in that it launched the process of the chaotic appearance of rumors and distortion of facts precisely through online communication.

## 3. Research Questions

The research model includes: identification a number of the most popular sources of information; qualitative content analysis of specific information provided in a certain period of time by these sources about the episode of interest to us; analysis using formal interviews the dynamics of respondents' ideas

about the causes what was happening; comparison the value-semantic content of respondents' views offline and the actual content of information broadcast on the Internet. This model, in our opinion, allows us to trace how specific information is superimposed on the system stereotypes of mass consciousness, and how it is transformed into emotionally colored assessments that can motivate various options of mass protest behavior.

The study was conducted in four stages within twenty days from the moment of occurrence the event and the presence of information about it in the core of social and political discourse in social networks. Every five days, 25 respondents (100 interviews in total) were interviewed and analyzed, one third of which were collected in the city of Kemerovo. Simultaneously, the qualitative content analysis of messages about the event of interest to us was carried out in the sources trusted by the respondents.

## 4.    Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to compare the vectors of transformation of the political views of Russians in Runet social networks and to identify the possibilities for controlling mass behavior (including in its destructive forms) using online communication tools. The hypothesis of the study is that the ideological and semantic constructs arising and changing in the minds of the Internet communities adepts are perceived as real, can motivate real behavioral reactions in the shortest period of time since the focus of emotional intensity on the problem discussed in the network. Thus, of particular interest is the study of the possibilities and prospects of the digital transformation of public administration and the mechanisms for using the online environment to control mass political behavior (in particular, the prevention of illegal actions).

## 5.    Research Methods

The methodological basis was the methods of formal interviews and qualitative content analysis of news posted in social networks, which are trusted by respondents. The interaction of these methods allowed us to study the transformation semantic interpretation of the event by Internet users online, and to trace its impact on social and political assessments and behavioral responses to offline. While online, respondents consume ready-made paradigms with text, audio and visual design, and the result of the impact of this content on the emerging social and political views and behavioral practices of Internet users can be recorded only in offline research (Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, Pyrma, Sinyakov, & Azarov, 2019; Evgenyeva & Titov, 2014; Shestopal, Smulkina, & Morozikova, 2019; Shestopal, 2018).

## 6.    Findings

### 6.1.    Analysis of the symbolic content of messages about the event in Internet communities and its reflection in the responses of Russian citizens - active Internet users

The main Internet communities and accounts in social networks, which are trusted by the respondents, are located in the messenger "Telegram" and the social network "Vkontakte". Among the reasons for trusting these sources, respondents generally referred to "independence", "impartiality", "neutrality" and "efficiency of information reporting", and «correspondence of information to reality". The

respondents made a conclusion about the correspondence of reality on the basis of "the presence of pictures from the scene". 98% of respondents did not doubt the reliability of images and video materials distributed by these sources.

The degree of trust in a social network depends not on a rational analysis of the objectivity of the information transmitted in it, but on the popularity of the network itself. In turn, the popularity of a social network depends on the segmentation of consumers of content, as the audience of each particular community is formed on the basis of group identity and a sense of sharing in common values. Briefly, the results of the study are shown in Table 01.

**Table. 01.** Comparison of symbolic constructs generated online in the Internet communities and statements that are fixed offline in the minds of the respondents

| Column Heading | Column Heading | Column Heading | Column Heading |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1-5 days** | **6-10 days** | **11-15 days** | **16-20 days** |
| **Sources of information in RuNet, which cause confidence in respondents (in descending order)** | | | |
| **Telegram channels ("NONZYGAR", "Metodichka", "Stalingulag", "MORDOR")** | | | |
| fire, death of children, corruption, make money of life and death, vermins, scums, spit in the eyes of those who are heartbroken, the animal's indifference of power, the authorities lie, unprofessionalism, Russia is Hell | the region is given to local princes, corruption, they spit in tear-stained faces, impunity | corruption, the lack of special equipment, the Soviet-Orthodox caliphate, the spiritual gap between the authorities and the people | on the death of children all spit, disgustingly, rage |
| **Communities in the VK (Lentach, Medusa, TV Channel Rain, The Village, Igor Vostrikov)** | | | |
| children died, suffered, arson or fire wiring, pranker threw fake information about 300 dead, "Kremlin bots" restrain political discourse in social networks, in Kemerovo Hell, the city center in smoke, false eyewitness accounts, spontaneous mass actions, they are fucking | rotten system, the regime is to blame, the problem is not in Putin and not in Tuleev | The dead, injured, the ignition of wiring, negligence, corruption, pranker is declared in the international wanted list, the children of Kemerovo play heavenly volleyball with the children of Beslan. | 7 people arrested, the causes of the fire - the shortcomings of the administrative and management system |
| **The accounts of the federal media in social networks ("RBC", "Vedomosti", "Kommersant")** | | | |
| fire, missing, children were killed, managers of the shopping center were detained, hope to find alive, 5 found alive, the SC found serious violations, Putin flew in, spontaneous rally, "criminal negligence", actions to commemorate victims, Putin declared federal mourning, inability of local authorities to | The shopping center was put into operation without coordination with the Ministry of Emergency Situations, there are no missing persons, 7 are detained, they are late with mourning, Tuleyev resigns, the fight against rumors and the telegram blocking can happen again. | Tuleyev was appointed deputy of the parliament of the Kemerovo region, a fire in the Perseus shopping center in Moscow. | topic is not in the news |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| speak with people, 192 million rubles. for the families of the deceased | | | |
| **Internet users (interview results)** | | | |
| fire, smoke, terrible tragedy, death of people, death of children, 300 victims, did not allow mourning, disregard for the authorities, the cinema doors were closed, children were not allowed to leave, they did not put out the fire for a long time | fire, many children were killed, evacuation shortfalls, guard disconnected fire alarm | fire, death of 64 people, 41 of them children, there was no fire alarm, negligence, corruption of local authorities | death of 64 people, checks are started everywhere, pranker has dissolved rumors |

Source: authors' study conducted by a team of scientists from the Department of Political Science and Mass Communications of the Financial University in 2018.

As can be seen from Table 1, the content implicitly includes a set of symbols and images that are built in a complex system of human representations in accordance with the psychological mechanism of stereotyping. It becomes increasingly difficult to rationalize their judgments for the participants in social networks, whose social and political views are actively transformed when using "virtual" content. The visual series becomes the criteria for the objectivity of information, it is enough for a person to see an image or watch a video to be considered a real reality on a subconscious level.

Despite the respondents' statements that they do not believe in any sources of information, in fact they constantly turn around and follow the content of the same accounts, and accurately reproduce exactly those semantic constructs that are broadcast by the latter. There is a non-critical reading of images and symbols and their reproduction as their own ideas about the events of reality.

### 6.2. Analysis of socially constructive and socially destructive practices of online communication in online communities that actively react to the event under investigation

At the time of the tragedy in Kemerovo, regional authorities were late with the reaction, waiting for concrete facts from the scene, the network sources filled the information vacuum. These sources did not provide facts, but a highly emotional interpretation of events and a subjective moral assessment of what was happening.

Panic practices were realized at the spontaneously held rally in Kemerovo on March 27, 2018. In the eyes of citizens, grief-stricken misfortune took a much larger scale than it really was. The protesters believed that the authorities were lying to them. At the rally, semantic constructs were launched, stimulating the actualization of the stereotypes inherent in Russian society: the corruption of power; concealment of facts from the people; hushing up the real consequences of disasters. About 11 days after the event, emotional tension began to subside, reports of a fire almost ceased to be a political tint, a deepening began in the issues of investigating the causes and punishment of the perpetrators.

High emotional level of discussion in social networks contributes to a significant distortion of objective information, even if its source initially places real facts. The higher the interest in the event and the sense of insufficiency of the facts broadcast about it, the more conjectures and additions arise in the Internet communities. Over time, after filling in the gaps in the knowledge of the event, interest in it

decreases and many of the conjectures are forgotten. But, depending on the moment when one was involved in the consumption of information about the event, only a small fragment, often distorted, remains in his consciousness. For example, we found two cases when respondents were interested in a fire in "Zimniaya Vishnia" at a time when information about a significant number of victims was reported in the online communities. As a result, when they were interviewed on 16-20 days, they called the number of victims several times greater than their actual number.

Analysis of the degree of distortion of information about the fire in "Zimniaya Vishnia", depending on the period of study, allows us to draw the following conclusions. At the first stage, the respondents noted an acute shortage of information, poor coverage of the event in the media, recognized its high relevance for them, and took on faith any messages. There was a distortion of the facts and attribution of political significance to information about the event, the main cliches was formed. In the second and third stages, the relevance gradually decreased, interest in the event disappeared, stamps were consolidated in the minds of Internet users. At the last stage, the respondents noted that the event was very widely covered, demonstrated stable politicized stamps, but no longer relevant at the moment. Many facts related to the fire in the shopping center began to be forgotten.

## 7. Conclusion

As a result of the analysis the obtained qualitative data, the following conclusions can be made, indicating some of the detected patterns.

Firstly, the chaotic appearance and accidental distortion of ideological and semantic structures by their multiple replications significantly affects the opinion of Internet users during their online presence. As soon as the emotional intensity around the information reason subsides, it disappears from the field of perception and it is gradually completely forgotten. When the significant emotionally attractive reasons are absent, the ideological and semantic constructs discussed in social networks are neutral, and they are remembered by adepts as a continuous flow of expected information. In this case, offline Internet users would switch from the virtual to the real world. They do it consciously, realizing that they use different cognitive constructs in reference to these two worlds.

Secondly, subscribers of Internet communities subconsciously recognize other participants as members of the "in-group", they simulate the estimated judgments and behavioral reactions, in their opinion, peculiar to their group. Identifying himself with the Internet community, adept reproduces the reactions of other members of the group and he considers everything that happens at the moment of online activity as a reflection of situation in the real life. The more emotional discussions are in groups, the more they attract attention, and through the mechanisms of emotional contamination and imitation they reinforce the radical nature of the statements, categorical judgments and semantic confrontation. While online, individuals consider their actions to be real activity, they imitate the activity of the rest participants in the group, but offline, they return to the established patterns of behavior.

Thirdly, emerging and changing online social and political views can come into conflict with the ideas formed by real experience. This contradiction leads to misalignment of meanings and frustration on the unconscious level, as a result, the subject of perception expels these ideas from consciousness. Distorted ideas can be short-term relevant and serve as an incentive only momentary emotional outbursts

and they can even lead to real behavior in offline space. But after a short period of time and with disappearing of the influence of the information stimulus online subject can return to more sustainable ideas, formed as a result of objective experience. This is confirmed by statements of respondents that they do not believe information on the Internet, while they can fulfill the calls of Internet communities, for example, to participate in a real rally.

Fourth, we have identified socially destructive and constructive practices of online communication in social networks of the Russian Internet. The first ones include all practices that stimulate the negation of social and political ideas, radicalization, and the extremism of ideas spread by the Internet community, which can result in real destructive actions of its adherents. Second, the possibility of channeling social and political discontent of people into the practice of creating communities in the network, that allows to solve many social problems in a mobile and efficient manner according to the model of activity of the developed civil society.

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