MSC 2020
International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY. COMMUNICATION»

MOBILIZATION SPEECH REPERTOIRES OF PROTEST DISCOURSE ACTORS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Elena Bykova (a)*, Dmitry Gavra (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) Saint Petersburg state University, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation,
E.bykova@spbu.ru
(b) Saint Petersburg state University, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation,
D.gavra@spbu.ru

Abstract

The article analyzes the strategies and speech practices of protest mobilization agents in social networks. As a technology for mobilizing protesters, network mediatization of a local incident is considered. A theoretical model of the network protest mobilization is proposed, and partial dichotomous strategies of mobilization agents are formulated. The empirical material is based on the analysis of a specific local event that received protest potential in social networks and turned into a real confrontation between civic activists and local authorities. The study is interdisciplinary and is carried out at the intersection of the philological theory of speech acts, the theory of political discourse and the theory of mediatization. The institutional approach of the agenda setting theory is used, methods of mathematical processing of big data are applied. The purpose of the study is to identify speech strategies directly or indirectly explicated in the speech practices of protest discourse agents on social networks, using the example of a mediated conflict caused by the plan to build an Orthodox cathedral in Yekaterinburg in 2019. The authors have shown that mediatizing a local incident on social networks can act as a mechanism for mobilizing political protest, thus, the basic hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

Keywords: Local incident, mediatization, protests, mobilization, social networks, speech repertoire

1. Introduction

In a digital society, a significant part of the protest activity moves to the online space, where network protest activists operate. They use a specific arsenal of communication strategies for protest mobilization. One of these strategies is the identification of some real event with protest mobilization potential, and its further online mediatization. Event mediatization is a media effect, as a result of which opinion leaders, using a specific speech strategies, influence the formation of mass consciousness, the functionality of social systems and provoke protest behavior in specific socio-political coordinates (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013; Dekalov et al., 2013; Gureeva 2016; Khrul, 2018), attempts to form deliberation (Grachev, 2013). Mediatization can have a natural socio-communicative dynamic, and can be used by institutional political actors to destabilize the socio-political situation with the help of artificial actors (Nim, 2017; Schulz, 2004). Therefore, it is so important to analyze mobilization means represented in the speech practice of actors of a mediatized protest discourse.

Network mediatization of a local event changes its scale, involving exponentially new groups of network users. Network actors as the main players conducting a protest mobilization by spinning local incident, can translate the event offline - into pickets, rallies, mass disobedience events, etc. In this study, we consider possible online mobilization strategies, suggest their typologies, and test the hypothesis of a limited set of speech strategies of network activists with the help of which online protest mobilization related to a local incident can be carried out (Blassnig et al., 2019; Song et al., 2020). The incident that took place in Yekaterinburg in the first half of 2019 related to the construction of the Orthodox Church of St. Catherine on the site of a popular public square in the city center was chosen as a case.

Speech strategies and the effects of mediatization are considered in the context of a discursive approach that takes into account socio-political factors and the agenda-setting theory of McCombs and Shaw (1972), and are based on the theory of speech acts by Austin (1962). This allows us to analyze speech behavior according to the dichotomous intentions of the protest subjects, which comprehensively represent the individual strategic mobilization repertoires of network activists.

2. Problem Statement

The main problems of the study are as follows:

1. What social mechanisms turn a local incident with protest potential into a real tool for mobilizing mass protest?

2. What is a mobilization speech strategy, with what theoretical models can it be described?

To answer the first question, we turn to the basic thesis of the agenda setting theory of Mac Combs and Shaw that the effect of setting the agenda is defined as an act of faith in the judgments of the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Turning a local incident into a key news item is easily implemented on social networks. Relatively homogeneous communities are formed here, the so-called "bubbles," and the effects of the "spiral of silence" are clearly manifested (Klein & Robinson, 2020; Noel-Neumann, 1996). In the "bubbles" there is a group dynamic where supporters of a dominant position are encouraged, and opposition supporters are discriminated against, banned, and ultimately excluded from the group (Won, 2019). According to the agenda setting theory in a situation of crisis and / or incident, opinion leaders form in the

communities an information flow alternative to the official media agenda. As a result, "communicative scissors" between the opinions of "close" group members and "distant" speakers from the "big" media are formed for community members. There is a situation when the targeted messages inside the bubble give out estimates of the incident with one subjective modality, and television news or official newspapers do not cover this incident at all or cover it differently (Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019). Obviously, the sympathies of ordinary users are addressed to "close sources", which unwind the spiral of protest mediatization and carry out network mobilization. As a result of mediatization, an alternative network agenda can gain a high mobilization potential and transform into an open confrontation. If you do not stop the network wave of mediatization, the incident will acquire official communicative status in the federal and international media fields and will serve to increase the protest offline.

In answering the second question, we rely on the theory of speech acts of Austin (1962). The theory of speech acts in describing the speech behavior of subjects in social networks is relevant, since the distinction between oral and written speech in the digital environment is erased and non-printed texts in the "here and now" format have all the signs of oral communication in the status of performative.

Austin (1962) identifies three types of speech acts: locative - an act of utterance; illocution - the explication of the intent of the subject of speech at the time of utterance; perlocution - the impact that the speech act had on the communicant, the reaction.

The locative in social networks is extrapolated to writing posts (incentive), reposting, leaving a comment on the relevant account (reaction). Illocution in the online environment is considered as a speech action for the realization of the goal of the statement: to inform, give an assessment, call, prove, warn, appeal, etc., when the subject of speech manifests a world outlook in the form of a call, motivation, urge to perform an action. The speech act of the addressee must coincide with the intention of the sender, meet his expectations, then the addressee deserves the approval of the opinion leader and is supported by members of the community. A conglomerate of like-minded people is being formed and this is the first step towards the formation of a network bubble. The axiological, semantic, value aspect of communicative interaction is the first stage of mobilization: there arises a communicative submission to the leader of the community. Perlocution implies the consent of the addressee to like, repost, repost with his own assessment of the situation, post in another community. Perlocution can give rise to a transition from a virtual environment to a real one: picketing, going to a rally, participating in an open confrontation. Mobilization speech strategies of leaders on the network can generate, organize and further coordinate mass protests offline.

3. Research Questions

An empirical study answers the question: what should be the model of the communicative strategy of a network activist if he plans to act as an agent of protest mobilization on a social network?

The basic hypothesis is: for the current Russian political situation there is a single and limited set of strategies for mobilizing protest activity through the online mediatization of local incidents. Network mobilization agents act according to an algorithm that is a sequence of partial choices of a speech strategy from two opposite options. Implementing this algorithm, the network protest mobilization agent, step by step, makes a choice of 7 elementary strategic dichotomies for the development of an individual communicative strategy in social networks.

Let us formulate our understanding of these dichotomies.

Dichotomy 1: a strategy for maintaining tension versus an escalation strategy for tension.

Dichotomy 2: a strategy for focusing on a specific incident versus strategy of transfer and hyperbolization to a wider range of objects.

Dichotomy 3: a strategy of directing negative energy to specific individuals versus a strategy for channeling negative energy to social institutions.

Dichotomy 4: strategy for the reproduction of protest activities online versus a protest transfer strategy from online to offline.

Dichotomy 5: a strategy of direct calls for protest action a strategy of indirect mobilization through the escalation of emotional stress and the corresponding emotional reinforcement.

Dichotomy 6: a strategy of appeal to lower needs versus a strategy for appealing to values and higher needs.

Dichotomy 7: adult-child communication strategy versus "adult - adult" communication strategy.

The basic substantive hypothesis of the study is complemented by the operational hypothesis: each of the differential strategies within the framework of partial dichotomies has verbal and stylistic markers and can be identified by methods of philological analysis.

In relation to the analysis of speech acts with mobilization potential in networks, the theory of J. Austin allows us to qualify each post as performative: an appeal, a motivation, a desire to perform an action corresponding to the intention of the subject of speech (the initiator of communication), taking into account the situational approach.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the empirical study is to test the basic hypothesis about the presence of potential partial dichotomous strategies for mobilizing protest by mediating a local incident on social networks on a specific practical case of confrontation in Yekaterinburg in 2019. An important additional goal of the study is to verify the operational hypothesis about the presence of explicit markers of such partial strategies in the speech practices of network mobilization agents and, accordingly, about the possibility of identifying such strategies by philological methods.

In relation to the empirical case of confrontation in Yekaterinburg in March-April 2019, the aim of the study is also to identify the meanings explicated in the speech practices of protest discourse agents in the digital environment, a description of their communication strategies and tactics for assessing mobilization protest potential.

5. Research Methods

The agenda setting theory was used to identify VKontakte social network media texts dedicated to the trivial informational occasion at the local level - the construction project of the Temple of the Great Martyr Catherine in the city of Yekaterinburg (spring 2019). Construction was planned on the site of a popular city recreation area with green spaces. The project caused a public confrontation between its supporters and opponents and received a wide public response in both online and offline environments.

Protests around the project of the construction of the temple on the site of the recreation area in the city of Yekaterinburg we attribute to the category of local incidents. Using this example, the dichotomous model of communication strategies of the network protest mobilizing agents was operationalized.

The analysis of speech acts was focused on identifying

1) an adequate understanding of the addressee's intent (explicit and implicit meanings of the speech act, full or incomplete awareness by the actor of his true communicative intention expressed in the speech act (invitation, information, presentation, directive, appeal);

2) the degree of impact on the recipient - likes, reposts, comments and other network activities).

The history of methods of detecting local incidents on social networks can be traced back to a project called Topic Detection and Tracking (Chen & Liu, 2016). focused on detecting and tracking topics from the news stream. This task later evolved into retrospective incident detection (Kleinberg, 2016). The ROI systems methodology also consists of detecting keyword spikes from online streams.

Potential agents of mobilization - leaders of public opinion on the described informational issue were selected on the basis of quantitative and then qualitative analysis of posts on the social network VKontakte extracted using Big Data technologies. The analyzed frame includes the top 10 of opinion leaders - authors of the posts from all those recorded in the system of 457 posts dedicated to a specific incident, and the 65 most active commentators who made from 1981 to 150 comments. The analysis of the mobilization speech repertoire of mediatization agents was carried out using the content analysis method with identification of markers for the implementation of partial dichotomous strategies in posted texts.

6. Findings

Detailed analysis of the content of the posts and comments made it possible to identify the main speech mobilization strategies in the posts of the top 10 opinion leaders and confirm the operational hypothesis. Six of the seven differential strategies for protest mobilization have been identified; each of them has markers of partial dichotomies. It allows us to conclude that the basic substantive hypothesis is empirically confirmed.

The results of the study are as following. Below we give only typical examples. Each of the partial types has a statistically significant representation. Due to the limited volume of the article, we present the identified examples of speech strategies for only the first two partial dichotomous elections. It should be noted that in the detailed report on the study the entire range of examples and indicators is contained.

Dichotomy 1:
- the strategy for the reproduction of protest activities online is represented in speech acts with the meaning of an invitation, information, directive, instruction.
- the strategy of transferring the protest offline is represented in speech acts with the meaning of the need for a behavioral response to the situation and invitations to offline action.

Dichotomy 2:
- the strategy of direct calls to protest action is represented in speech acts in the form of instructions, appeals, recommendations, warnings.
- the strategy of escalating emotional stress and corresponding emotional mobilization is represented by speech acts with the meaning of an invitation, appeal, description of the

situation using emotionally colored and obscene vocabulary both in posts and comments on them.

Thus, each of the strategies has recognizable markers. Each agent of the political protest network mobilization has an individual strategic communicative profile, which can be defined as an individual choices matrix for each of the 7 dimensions of the basic dichotomous strategic choices.

7. Conclusion

The study has shown that mediatizing a local incident on social networks can act as a mechanism for mobilizing political protest, the basic hypothesis is confirmed. Theoretically postulated partial dichotomous strategies for mobilizing protest by mediatizing a local incident in social networks are revealed. The instrumental hypothesis about the presence of explicit markers of partial strategies in the speech practices of network mobilization agents was verified. The possibility of identifying strategies for network mobilization by the methods of linguistic analysis of statements in social networks has been proved, which opens the way to the transition to methods of using artificial intelligence to identify mobilization protest strategies and their agents.

An analysis of the content showed that among the publications against the construction of the Church of the Great Martyr Catherine there are posts containing a clear call to action: sign a petition, comment, answer a sociological survey, repost, however, the proportion of posts containing a direct call to enter into a confrontation is 2 %. This scanty percentage comes from the accounts of the protest leaders on social networks (top 10), which mediated the local incident and brought the protest from the local plane to the federal agenda In the speech repertoire of the protest leaders, the authors identified a certain mobilization toolkit and confirmed the hypothesis that if there is an informational occasion with mobilization potential, a minimum number of agents implementing relevant strategies are enough to mediatize the incident. The speech strategies of the protest mobilization agents explicate the principles of influence described in the mainstream of political linguistics (metonymy of transferring a part to the whole (square like the whole of Russia), using performativities (come), generalizations (they and we), reducing complex to simple, using direct nominations and names own, etc.).

From the point of view of the theory of speech acts by J. Austin, explicit and implicit calls for protest behavior realized in illocution are revealed: informing (what will happen, where and when), describing the state of affairs (what is happening here and now), inviting (addressing community members to come somewhere, invite someone, etc.), instructions (what to do and where to go in case of problems with police detentions), directive (who should be supported and not supported), appeal (open call to action) . These posts received the most likes, comments and reposts in the analyzed local incident.

Acknowledgments

References

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do Things with Words*. http://www michaeljohnsonphilosophy.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/austin-how-to-do-things-with-words.pdf

Blassnig, S., Engesser, S. S., Ernst, N., & Esser, F. (2019. Hitting a Nerve: Populist News Articles Lead to More Frequent and More Populist Reader Comments, *Political Communication, 36*(4), 629-651. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1637980

Bodrunova, S. S., & Litvinenko, A. A. (2013). *New media and the political protest: the formation of a public counter-sphere in Russia of 2008–12*. In A. Makarychev, & A. Mommen (Eds.), Russia's Changing Economic and Political Regimes: The Putin Years and Afterwards. Routledge.

Chen, Y., & Liu, L. (2016). Development and research of topic detection and tracking. *7th IEEE International Conference on Software Engineering and Service Science (ICSESS). IEEE*, 170-173.

Dekalov, V., Grigoryeva, K., & Uskova, D. (2013). Cultural Experts and Communicative Capitalism: Transformation of Communicative Practices. *MEDIA WATCH, 3*(8), 438-450.

Grachev, M. (2013). Onlajn-deliberaciya: razrabotki, issledovaniya i praktika [Online deliberation: development, research and practice]. *Politicheskaya nauka* [Political Science]*, 1*, 280-292.

Gureeva, A. N. (2016). Teoreticheskoe ponimanie mediatizacii v usloviyah cifrovoj sredy [Theoretical understanding of mediatization in the digital environment]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 10. Zhurnalistika* [Bulletin of Moscow University. Series 10 Journalism]*, 6*, 192-209.

Khrul, V. M. (2018). Mediatizaciya: metaprocess, paradigma ili prosto modnyj «zontik»? [Mediation: a metaprocess, a paradigm or simply a fashionable "umbrella"]. In M. Akhmetova, & U. Dikson (Eds.), *Materialy mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferencii. Mediatizaciya kul'tury: Konstruirovanie novyh tekstov i praktik* [Materials of the International Scientific Conference. Culture Mediation: the Design of New Texts and Practices.] (pp. 138–143). Neolit.

Klein, E., & Robinson, J. (2020). Like, Post, and Distrust? How Social Media Use Affects Trust in Government, *Political Communication, 37*(1), 46-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1661891

Kleinberg, J. (2016). Temporal Dynamics of On-Line Information Streams. In: M. Garofalakis, J. Gehrke, & R. Rastogi (Eds), *Data Stream Management. Data-Centric Systems and Applications.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-28608-0_11

McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass-media. *Public opinion quarterly, 36*(3), 176–187.

Noel-Neumann, E. (1996). *Obshchestvennoe mnenie: Otkrytie spirali molchaniya* [Public opinion. Opening the spiral of silence]. Progress Academy, The World.

Nim, E. G. (2017). Issleduya mediatizaciyu obshchestva: koncept mediatizirovannyh mirov [Exploring the mediation of society: the concept of mediated worlds]. *Sociologicheskij zhurnal* [Sociological Journal]*, 23*(3), 8-25. https://doi.org/10.19181/socjour.2017.23.3.5361

Pearson, G. D. H., & Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2019). Is the Confirmation Bias Bubble Larger Online? Pre-Election Confirmation Bias in Selective Exposure to Online versus Print Political Information. *Mass Communication and Society, 22*(4), 466-486.

Schulz, W. (2004). Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept. *European Journal of Communication, 19*(1), 87-101. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0267323104040696

Song, Y., de Zúñiga, H. G., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2020). Social Media News Use and Political Cynicism: Differential Pathways Through "News Finds Me" Perception, *Mass Communication and Society*, *23*(1), 47-70. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1651867

Won, Oh. Y. (2019). Who Expresses Opinions in a Hostile Online Forum Environment and When, *Mass Communication and Society, 22*(4), 423-446. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1565785