

**ISCKMC 2020****International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»****VIRTUALIZATION OF POLITICAL REALITY**

Mairbeck Ruslanovich Makhaev (a), Alexandra Alexandrovna Argamakova (b)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Kh. Ibragimov Complex Institute Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences , 21a, Staropromyslovskoe shosse, 364051, North Caucasus Federal District, Russia, makhaev-87toms@mail.ru

(b) Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences, 12/1, Goncharnaya str., Moscow, Russia, argamakova@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Virtualization of political reality appears as a result of technological progress and widespread access to the internet. So far internet technologies function in the paradigm Web 2.0 which implies interactive communications and cooperation between users. The next shift from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 has been determining the essential features of internet evolution. Political activities realized on the basis of Web 2.0 incorporate online deliberation, political crowd-sourcing, application of petitions, electronic elections, PR and party branding, political slacktivism, and other “participatory” technologies and anti-technologies (the latter is understood as an activity which destroys or imitates construction of political processes; the former is understood as a purely constructive activity in line of chosen social goals). Virtualization of political reality reinforces democratic principles in governance and engages citizen in real politics, though producing risks together with benefits for social development. At present, virtual networks are widely invaded by cyber-simulacrams. Astroturfing and fake news have become intrusive attributes of illusionary reality. Growing uncertainties and fabrication of reality call for better navigation in virtual worlds as a basic skill of information age. Emerging difficulties can be partly overcome at the next stage, according to Web 3.0 conception by Jason Calacanis. The idea is associated with production of quality content, significance of expertise and smart automated algorithms of data processing. However, Web 3.0 and its subsequent modifications are not free from new challenges for humanity and social well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

New information technologies and public policy virtualization turn our attention to histories of cyber-reality and transformations of social communications. Over the past few decades, there appear a number of publications in political internet studies. In this article, we reference to the following names and works (Calacanis, 2007; Castells, 2001; Dvorsky, 2014; Fishkin, 2009; Greenfield, 2017; Kalathil & Boas, 2002; Margetts, 2001; McLuhan, 2007, 2014; Morozov, 2009a; Nasbitt & Eburdin, 1992; O'Reilly, 2007; Popov & Piskunov, 2020; Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2019; Townsend, 2019; Volodenkov, 2011; Zuboff, 2019 and some others). Advancements as well as studies of internet seem to be raising as never before.

Since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term "communication" became fundamental for social theories. To the end, it was indispensable for studying the internet and processes within networks.

Social theorist Luhmann (2014) stated that communication as a social system includes three elements: utterance, information and understanding. He considered communication as a closed system, since it is autonomous and reproduces its own components. Communication is entirely autopoietic in the sense that all its elementary parts are produced and reproduced by the system itself (Luhmann, 2014). It has no purpose and duplicates the reality. Though communicative acts have causal connections with the reality, they are autonomous from it in the sense of operational constructivism. Communication takes place or does not take place – what else can be said in this respect (Luhmann, 2014). In the same time, it creates a living fabric of social interactions.

Classic intellectual figure such as McLuhan (2007) described mass media communications as extensions of human feelings. In his book "Understanding media...", he classifies them into "hot" and "cold". "Hot" media (cinema, radio) does not require active human participation and imagination. Audience engagement here is extremely low. On the contrary, human participation and role of active imagination in "cold" media are very high (speech, telephone). Virtual reality shows both "hot" and "cold" features, though the latter ones predominate. No wonder as the internet is exactly a ramified type of net with intense communications between users and other data exchange nodes.

To compare, communicative resources of the global network are much higher than resources of traditional media. Internet is better suited to retranslate images and meanings in numerous formats. It allows a more effective re-design of social reality, together with application of 3D and XR technologies.

## 2. Problem Statement

Attributes and modifications of virtual reality, problems and histories of its evolution are situated at the centre of interdisciplinary research and philosophical reflection.

Virtual communications contradict certain statements of classical communication theories. At least, it is true for Luhmann's theses on closeness of communication systems, absence of goal and duplicability of reality. In contrary, internet communications demonstrate that they are open, have multiple goals and do not duplicate reality but simulate it.

Virtual reality augments all aspects of social life including politics. Everyday relationships and social practices are essentially mediated by the internet (Greenfield, 2017; Townsend, 2019), starting

from calling a taxi or searching for route on the city map to automated management of business processes and control of urban facilities. Initially met with hope for democratic change, at the actual stage of evolution, the internet shows itself as a source for dangerous consequences. Hopefully these consequences can be foreseen and described within a framework of scientific research.

### **3. Research Questions**

Virtualization brings new risks for a society together with opportunities for social change. The subject of undertaken research is the transition from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 stage. It describes its impact on consciousness, transformations of social relations and (de)constructions of political sphere.

The "information explosion" in global networks, spread of fictitious information, on the one hand, and limitations of human consciousness and, moreover, expert skills for data processing, on the other hand, give the range of subsequent results which can be marked as negative.

There emerge innovative technologies for shaping public opinion and consciousness, from collaborative platforms and immersion techniques to data surveillance and neuro-hacking. Taking into account instruments for manipulation with data and systems of smart city, perspectives of electronic overregulation and digital dictatorship are more realistic now than could be supposed before. (The notorious but the popular case appeals to the Chinese systems of electronic governance).

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of undertaken research is to analyze and anticipate key problems concerning virtualization of politics on the actual stage of internet evolution.

Research tasks include analysis, classification and explanation of digital phenomena (manipulations with data, virtual provocations, astroturfing, slacktivism, cyber-simulacrums, fake news and some others) which imitate or deconstruct the real political processes.

The idea of Web 3.0 is introduced as a solution to difficulties produced by fabrication of reality. It references to smart automated algorithms, wisdom of crowd and wisdom of expert groups to generate more quality media content and check the relevance of knowledge created online.

### **5. Research Methods**

We used general theoretical and logical research methods, content analysis of web sources and network sources, plus, conceptual analysis of scientific and publicistic texts on the selected issues.

### **6. Findings**

Until now, internet technologies have been based on the conception Web 2.0a generation of network communication resources, where one of the basic specifications is collective intelligence and user cooperation. The concept was introduced by O'Reilly (2007).

Web 2.0 is mainly built on active interaction between users and "writable web", that is, collective blogging, podcasting, writing wiki, etc. (Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2019) The proliferation of communities – those "bricks" of virtual political reality – is a character of Web 2.0. Network platforms serve as an unlimited space for political discussions and gatherings which are intended to movement from online to offline.

By this way, there appear "network parties" (Pisarchuk, 2014) or "cyberparties" (Margetts, 2001). As Margetts (2001) believed, cyber-parties were phenomenon of the late 1990s, described in terms of informal membership, dominance of web communicative channels, absence of hierarchies and presence of horizontal organizational structures. Cyber-parties include the Italian *"Five star Movement"*, International *Pirate parties* and, for one more example, the direct democracy party *World of Tanks* in Russia.

Nasbitt and Eburdin (1992) believed that network technologies create democratic institutions and give citizens the real power. Computers increase capabilities so much that citizens monitor the government more effectively than the government monitor activities of citizens. Internet is still the best instrument for increasing awareness in politics. It provides access to state documents and services via electronic forms; it gives knowledge about political events via web resources and news feeds; despite the distance, virtuality is able to consolidate for common actions.

However, with the development of data collection and surveillance technologies (Zuboff, 2019), the situation is changing in a quite opposite direction. Electronic control over an individual, technological systems of surveillance, overregulation of the internet, censorship and the loss of the primordial paradise of anonymity in networks turn into a negative side of virtualization.

Call to "cognitive hygiene" in the light of unprecedented manipulation of consciousness is more pressing these days than ever. Among the last innovations discussed by scholars – the spread of network astroturfing, or technology for artificial support of political forces (Chistyakov, 2011; Romanyuk, 2013). Astroturfing is considered as an unfair social practice that undermines trust in public initiatives and the media (Cho et al., 2011; Volodenkov, 2011). Astroturfing uses special teams or bots to broadcast media content, shape public opinion or fulfill technical "cheating" with popularity markers such as views, likes and votes (Lyon & Maxwell, 2004; Ludlow, 2013; Zverev, 2014). It "leads to the fact that participants in political communities become adepts of their own created reality, which they try to navigate in real life" (Zverev, 2014). Just as a number of mobile devices exceeded a number of users, so an amount of virtual personalities tends to surpass the Earth population (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). It shows how ambiguously the internet shapes personal views and identities.

The Danish scientist Anders Colding-Jorgensen conducted an experiment in Facebook. He created a group to prevent the demolition of a historical fountain in Copenhagen. More than 27,000 people joined the group, although it was created just for experimental purposes. Users did not find out whether the information was true before they joined the initiative (Morozov, 2009b).

Virtualization of political communications – more precisely its "dark side" – is well represented by slacktivism. This term was introduced by Morozov (2009a). It refers to political activity on the web (online petitions or flashmobs) without significant results offline, but producing a sense of satisfaction

among participants. Slacktivism is comparable to the technologies of "letting off steam" or "sofa analytics" without real social results (last terms are more popular in Runet).

Virtualization of political life is a natural process, so the main task is to manage its consequences and create improved online communication models. One source of difficulties is concerned with deep processing of information flows. The user does not have time to process information efficiently. Because, firstly, he is not an expert in a specific field. Secondly, there are natural time limits. And, thirdly, the human mind itself is limited for processing large amounts of data.

Professional skills for dealing with information are not any exception. Therefore, specialists and distinct researchers must be replaced by cognitive teams or "wisdom of the crowd". In collectives, heterogeneous intellectual resources are combined to solve complex, joint cognitive tasks. Scientists and teams of scientists are equipped with data analysis tools and computer technologies. By this way, they improve cognitive abilities and capacities, commit an intellectual enhancement.

Another source of difficulties is associated with tools for reality fabrication which multiply the illusory nature of online relationships. Logic of reality fabrication corresponds with the circulation of fake news, widely discussed in recent times. The illusion of being online has increased dramatically due to instruments for falsifying digital reality, creating fake videos and images. To describe the illusory reality generated by the internet, the term "cyber-simulacrum" is applied (Volodenkov, 2011).

No wonder that certain expectations are associated with the transition from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0. The new paradigm modifies the previous stage of internet interactions and promises to take one out from the chaos of virtual "Platonic cave".

Web 3.0 was suggested by Jason Calacanis as an extension of Tim O'Reilly's conception Web 2.0 (Calacanis, 2007). It achieves high-quality content based on Web 2.0 technologies as well as cloud-based internet or decentralized networks. Sometimes the latter is put at the forefront in order to explain the revolutionary nature of Web 3.0 for networks architecture (Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2019).

For Web 3.0, media content is created on the basis of expert institutions with high reputation. Calacanis points out on Wikipedia which is written by professionals rather than by ordinary users as it was before. Let us indicate fact-checking mechanism in Twitter, Yandex Zen or Instagram which verify the authenticity of facts and images by means of professional expertise (Instagram references to *International Fact-Checking Network*).

Smart algorithms are necessary attributes of Web 3.0. They are successfully used for automatic and personalized generation of news feeds or contacts lists in Facebook. They rank news reports on media resources, podcasts and videos on hosting services. They produce the famous "filter bubbles" when "any sites begin to display only the information that is consistent with the past history of surfing..." (Dvorsky, 2014). "Online deliberation" serves as an additional illustration for transition to Web 3.0, which appeals to collective decision-making (Fishkin, 2009). The difference between deliberation and debate is that in debates opponents defend own position no matter what it is. While deliberation presumes enriching personal vision, readiness to correct it after getting alternative facts. The goal is not to win in verbal ping pong, but to find the truth. Internet forums are largely used as platforms for deliberative democracy.

## 7. Conclusion

Digital technologies have inverted traditional models of political communication. Despite the optimistic and enthusiastic hoorays on the rise of democracy and the use of IT in political life, virtualization brings negative consequences articulated in this article.

Internet technologies really contribute to flourishing of civil society due to consolidation mechanisms in social networks (search for like-minded people, application of petitions, protest actions) and services for government control (citizen apps and other online platforms). On the other hand, network technologies construct virtual political reality, which is illusory in relation to the real space of political relations, including reshaping the social space according to set of (artificial) patterns, in some cases blowing up the consciousness of users ("unaccounted losses" in information wars).

The manipulative usage of information technologies is associated both with power structures ("digital control", "internet surveillance", "violation of privacy", "information wars", "troll factories") and with activist movements ("color revolutions", "virtual provocations", "astroturfing", "slacktivism"). So, instead of democratic achievements, a set of new problems arise. In perspectives of neural networks, the internet of things and the internet of vehicles, mentioned problems attract tremendous attention.

Web 3.0 may be used to resolve the difficulties of reality construction. It relies on consolidated expert intelligence and delegates more power to expert groups and automated systems as a special form of power. Some researchers associate it with the decentralization, but this trend has just revealed itself, without becoming mainstream and bringing radical changes within the internet architecture.

Web 3.0 is not free from risks for electronic governance. As the "filter bubble" effect, it restricts the angle of view, cutting off alternative opinions for a user. The result is what Dvorsky (2014) called "information determinism" when the future and world picture are shaped by your browser history.

Significant and yet underestimated dangers come from improving surveillance systems. George Dvorsky was right when included them in ten key algorithms of our times. Dvorsky (2014) also noted the cases when surveillance systems were operated by joint intelligence services of Canada, the New Zealand, the United States, the Great Britain and Australia. Electronic systems automatically track phone calls, emails, webcam images, and GPS data based on special algorithms. We just hope that next stages of internet evolution will remove emerging contradictions. Once there may appear technologies for privacy protection and cognitive well-being, caring more about human rights and freedoms.

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