MYTHS OF ONLINE CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The relevance of the topic is due to the fact that the digital space presupposes new forms of interaction between citizens and the construction of new communities different from those that existed before. The modern networked civil society is not only one of the forms of self-organization of individuals, but also provides opportunities for the construction of new subcultures with their own mythologies. From this point of view, the case of digital vigilantism is interesting – an unformalized institution that regulates the behavior of citizens with the help of sanctions (and not always virtual ones) against those whose behavior does not correspond to their value system. The purpose of this report is an attempt to study the mythology of these communities in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet. The object of the research is the materials of such communities in the social network "VKontakte" as "Project Lev Protiv", "StopHam", "Hriushi Protiv", "Trezvie dvori". The subject of study is the myths on which their activities are based. As a specificity of the myths of a networked civil society, one can single out the fact that they are based not only on the myths inherent in the virtual community (we are talking not only about Russian users, but also foreign ones), but also on the political culture of Russia.

Keywords: Mythology, networked civil society, political culture, social network, vigilantism

1. Introduction

Modern reality presupposes the emergence of new ways of expressing the interaction of citizens with each other and uniting them into various communities. Not only the institutions for providing public services, but also the structures of traditional civil society are undergoing transformation: the problems of citizens are solved through social networks and specialized sites. More and more government services are being digitized, super services are being introduced (https://www.gosuslugi.ru/superservices), and feedback channels are being established (https://vashkontrol.ru/). Platform interaction is not time-consuming and eliminates the need for multiple visits to institutions. The pandemic situation has only accelerated this process, translating many life situations and areas of activity into the online format. It is interesting that along with the measures for the implementation of the state policy of digitalization, alternative digital reality is also intensively developing. The process of coordination and self-organization of citizens with the help of modern mass media has been very effectively carried out for quite a long time: thus, the first Twitter revolutions date back to 2009. It can be noted that if initially online activism was more affective in nature, now, due to the increasing penetration of social networks into the life of citizens, it is acquiring a systemic character. This suggests that a new informal institutional structure is being built.

In this aspect, the phenomenon of digital vigilantism acquires special significance, which is a powerful civil movement that has become actualized in the Internet space of most developed countries, the essence of which is the exercise by a group of citizens or vigilant activists of the function of overseeing the observance of laws, generally recognized norms or customs. This is especially evident in national contexts in dealing with issues related to problems of local, regional or district scales. However, vigilantism is also becoming a way to declare oneself, about one's own position at the state level (the Lev Protiv movement). To achieve a mobilization effect and promote their ideas by vigilants ("vigilant citizens"), a variety of mechanisms and techniques are used: both technological innovations (personal gadgets) and traditional ones, such as myth-making. This was especially evident in the situation of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent campaigns to vaccinate the population. As a result, these communities are overgrown with their own myths and practices.

Online civil society is expanding the scale of such movements, involving a large number of individuals in their daily practices, albeit not physically, but through virtual interaction. Accordingly, we can assume the interpenetration of the mythological component of the vigilants with the myths that exist in the Internet space.

2. Problem Statement

The topic of vigilantism is just beginning to be comprehended in modern Russian and foreign political science. Initially, this issue was considered from the point of view of forensic science, where the emphasis was on citizens' achievement of their rights and assistance to law enforcement agencies (Johnston, 1996). It is noteworthy that vigilantism develops within the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition and, mainly, in the United States, where the practice of "headhunting" existed for a long time and non-institutionalized proactive assistance of citizens to law enforcement agencies and in the administration of

justice (search for suspects and criminals) was encouraged. Digitization and networkization of society gave this movement a new impetus and contributed to the expansion of its boundaries.

Some modern researchers equate vigilantism with the refusal of certain groups of citizens, parties, from the adoption of certain state norms. Their main goal is to achieve political resources that were not available to them. At the same time, the borderline theme is the phenomenon of political violence from these groups of the population. This, in particular, is devoted to works related to the modern political process of Ghana (Gyampo et al., 2017; Kyei & Berckmoes, 2021).

Probably, vigilantism can be spoken of as a movement that includes various participants, whose actions are determined by a whole complex of different factors. In the modern vigilante movement, firstly, single activists who initiate any campaign should be singled out. Secondly, one can see groups that, first of all, resemble a conglomerate of individuals (spontaneously emerging groups of lynchers and those who want to commit lynching) and, finally, structured communities with organizational features, albeit often not of a formal nature (Phillips, 2017).

The connection between digital vigilanthism and political protest and illegal practices (Trottier, 2017) is also traced in the materials of Dutch researchers conducting a comparative analysis of countries such as the Netherlands, Great Britain, China and the Russian Federation (Trottier, 2019).

It is very curious to consider digital vigilantism in the context of the scandal associated with the publication of materials on the Wikileaks website, when such an act of digital frankness essentially served as one example of civil vigilance, even if it served as a violation of state secrets, but the interests of the majority were placed above the interests of the elite (Heemsbergen, 2017).

An attempt to consider this phenomenon from the point of view of rituals, in the context of the theory of E. Durkheim, was undertaken by the Dutch researchers Asif and Weenink (2019), however, here, too, scientists found themselves more in the framework of the relationship between legal norms and illegal initiatives, and not the cultural component. Note that in foreign science, the criminogenic component of this term and the emphasis on how vigilants are within the framework of the law and the accepted forms of manifestation of political activity persist to this day, regardless of the research strategy used (Dunsby & Howes, 2015). The works that are related specifically to the specifics of the digital environment and the value foundations of vigilant groups, especially given their existence within the framework of social networks, are still in the minority (Ward, 2020).

Meanwhile, this is precisely what gives rise to the main research collision: the modern civil network society itself presupposes the existence of a large number of interest groups that do not fit into the traditional ideas about the framework of their actions. One way or another, but the ideology of these movements and their personal legitimacy lies in the general basis of their activities. We also note that often vigilants turn out to be not nameless avengers, but rather individuals striving to declare themselves and achieve not only their own goals, but also a certain popularity.

The Internet space, as such, is in the area directly related to myths, and, accordingly, this goes to all its "subcategories", including the networked civil society.

3. Research Questions

In this vein, it is very important to define the category of "myths" taking into account the fact that they do not imply a universal structure (Stavitsky, 2018). In the context of the vigilante movement, it can be assumed that, most likely, they belong to the political sphere, since, as one could already understand, their main goal is not so much the protection of someone's rights and actions, as gaining access to power in its most classical Weberian understanding, and dominance over the rest of the population.

Political myths themselves contribute to the fact that the practice of political domination, from the point of view of the layman, becomes not only a symbol meaning their legitimacy, but also a way of carrying out the process of communication between those who share a particular political space. Specificity in this case depends not only on the existing cultural and historical contexts, but also on the interpretations of symbols adopted in society, as well as the "temporal regime of political memory" in which this system of myths exists (Zavershinsky, 2020).

Perhaps, he will agree with the point of view according to which the political myth is interpreted primarily as a kind of social myth. The political myth also shows a two-level characteristic of the modern myth: on the one hand, they are separated by centuries. Collective perceptions, on the other hand, are components correlative to the current political environment. The presence of the above two levels is characteristic of any modern myth, including the political one. The combination of the "archaic" and "opportunistic" ("instrumental") levels makes the myth a unique phenomenon; distinguishes it, on the one hand, from the ancient, or classical, myth and, on the other hand, from ideological constructions (Ivanov, 2019).

Based on this, it can be assumed that one of the important points related to this study is touched upon: what is the "ideological" background of the actions of digital vigilants, or do their actions simply fit into the behavioral stimulus-response scheme? Since the discussion in this article is about those who can be ranked among the participants of the network civil society, then one of the possibilities to study this issue is the analysis of the materials of their social network pages. It also seems productive as a challenge to hypothesize why such ideas resonate.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to attempt to study the mythology of vigilant communities in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet. The object of the research is the materials of such communities in the social network "VKontakte" as "Lev Protiv", "StopHam", "Hriushi Protiv", "Trezvie dvori". The subject of study is the myths on which their activities are based.

These pages were chosen taking into account the fact that they not only have a large number of subscribers in relation to their target audiences, but are also known for scandalous actions that have had a long public response.

5. Research Methods

The research methodology is structuralism. From the point of view of Levi-Strauss (2001), the main component of any myth is not the language and not the form of its embodiment, but the narrated story, the plot of which is not limited to any framework. Consequently, in this case, it seems promising as a research method to use critical discourse analysis in the interpretation of Jorgensen and Phillips (2008).

6. Findings

In the process of analyzing the materials of these communities of digital vigilants, it seemed appropriate to combine them into two groups. The first group unites "Project Lev Protiv" (Rus. "Lev Against") and "Trezvie dvori" ("Sober Outdoors"), the associations, the main purpose of which is to control public order. The second group – "StopHam" ("Stop Bounder") and "Hriushi Protiv" ("Piggies Against") – is aimed at solving problems of an everyday nature: correct behavior of motorists and protection of consumer rights.

6.1. "Project Lev Protiv" and "Trezvie dvori"

"Project Lev Protiv" (https://vk.com/lionvs), founded by Mikhail Lazutin, traces its history back to 2014. This movement is directed against smoking, drinking alcohol and the use of profanity. We must note that, despite the large number of subscribers – over 308,400 people, this public page does not differ in detailed stories about its activities in the profile header. The main emphasis is on the publication of videos with emotional titles and comments, for example: "Lev protiv– narushitel′ umer v parke vo vremya reida Chast′ 2" ("Lev against – Disturber died in the park during raid. Part 2"). "Rasprostranyayte repostami v sots. seti i laykami, obshchestvennyy rezonans pomozhet v oglaske etogo uzhasa i bespredela v parke" ("Share and repost on social media and like this post, public outcry will help in publicizing this horror and lawlessness in the park") (thumb raised emoji) (Lazutin, July 2, 2021) or "Novyy shokiruyushchiy fil′m "Alkogol′. Sekrety manipulyatsii"… Vse pro skrytuyu reklamu spirtnogo. Novyye neozhidannyye fakty pro alkogol′. Kak Timati, Morgenshtern i prochiye artisty vtyagivayut molodezh′ v pagubnuyu zavisimost′, zabiraya zdorov′ye i schast′ye v obmen na den′gi" ("New shocking film "Alcohol. Secrets of manipulation"... All about hidden advertising of alcohol. New unexpected facts about alcohol. How Timati, Morgenstern and other artists drag young people into addiction, taking health and happiness in exchange for money") (Lazutin, June 27, 2021). Such expressiveness, combined with obscene expressions (not used constantly, but in the context of especially acute cases) and a rather ascetic design, on the one hand, allows users to focus on the content, and on the other hand, they create the effect that the information presented does not need verification, and its distributors do not need additional confirmation of its reliability.

"Trezvie dvori. My Chelyabinsk"(https://vk.com/https://vk.com/trezvii.dvor) has a large number of "regional branches"and largely creates the effect of a patriotic movement with traditional and at the same time militaristic values. The description of their activities is detailed in nature and the design of the community itself is designed in a single style (including video posters). There is no emphasis on a certain

elitism; rather, the philistine character is emphasized. At the same time, one cannot fail to note the politicization: playing on the theme of a small homeland – elaboration "My Chelyabinsk" (or the name of other cities in their branches) – and also the bear as a symbol of the movement refers to the understanding that the participants base their activities on purely popular interests (the use of state symbols and the words "Rus") and represent themselves as some kind of masters of the city, by analogy with the fact that the bear is the master of the forest. Security is interpreted by them in a broad sense, and not only sobriety as a physical condition (topics related, for example, with street fraudsters, are also widely discussed). Thus, the name "Trezvie dvori" can be interpreted as streets living by rules that meet the requirements declared by the organizers of the movement.

6.2. "StopHam" and "Hriushi Protiv"

The StopHam movement (https://vk.com/stopxam), with more than 407.200 subscribers, was founded in 2010 in Moscow and has spread far beyond its borders, including neighboring countries. The main goal was to require drivers to comply with traffic rules. At the same time, the actions of activists, despite the initially legal nature, subsequently began to be illegal in nature, which, among other things, led to the fact that the organization was excluded from the register of NPOs (note that this is not about causing physical harm, as in the case of the above structures, and damage to property). Until now, their activities, despite the broad description in the profile header, are focused on monitoring compliance with traffic rules. At the same time, one can observe their desire not only to convey the truth to the people, but also to achieve their goals by contacting the police and attracting the authorities.

"Hruishi Protiv" (the slogan is "We fight the swinish attitude towards people") is probably the only such movement that has the status of an NPO and positions itself as a volunteer movement to protect consumer rights (https://vk.com/hrushigroup). Unlike the others, they are more focused on theatrical actions, the message of which is to involve the authorities in violations of the law (created in 2010, they became famous for the action in June 2012, directed against the St. Petersburg supermarket "Narodny"). Dressed in the costumes of cartoon pigs, they refer not only to the very diverse ancient images of the Calydonian boar, Sehrimnir, Vajravarahi and so on, but also to the Russian proverb "Svin′ya vezde gryaz′ naydet" ("A pig will find dirt everywhere"). For all its seemingly frivolousness, there is a dissonance not only of the name with the avatar, but also of the content: posts about violations of consumer rights are interspersed with birthday greetings, speeches of activists in well-known media (for example, on Russian Radio), rallies of branded products and an offer to join the ranks of activists. We can say that it is precisely the atmosphere of common trust that is created here, practically good neighborly assistance.

Despite all the differences, it can be assumed that the main myths on which the mythology and the complex of beliefs of these vigilant communities are built may be:

Golden Age - all the aspirations of the activists of these communities are aimed at building an ideal version of society (of course, from their point of view). It will become such as soon as the main goal of their activities is achieved. At the same time, the possibilities of the Internet space and social networks allow creating the effect of general involvement in this process, even if group members or sympathizers simply read or comment. This largely echoes the myth about the freedom of the Internet, about its limitless possibilities of communication between people and the dissemination of information.

The heroic myth, in this context, echoes the ideas of messianism. Activists of the movement are equated with heroes who, like Prometheus, carry good ideas and act for the good of society, even risking their own well-being. Let us note that their activities are so shocking that their names have become memes.

7.   Conclusion

Summing up, it is important to emphasize that the myths of a networked civil society, despite the fact that they seem to be based on specific myths and themes of the Internet space, as they are based ultimately on the mythology that exists within the framework of the general structure of archetypes and develops in the framework of political culture. As for the vigilant communities present on the VKontakte social network, they largely assume the functions of a "guide to a brighter future", declaring their readiness to sacrifice themselves, which may, among other things, be a violation of the law.

Acknowledgments

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