

## Political Communication in the Context of Social Media<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The article examines the features of the formation and implementation of political discourse in social media, which in the current conditions of widespread informatization of all spheres of public life is turning into one of the main communication platforms for political subjects. Within the framework of social media, a network political discourse is formed, the essence and method of implementation of which are mediated by the logic of social media and directly by the features of network culture. The article comprehends some attributes of network political communication, which forms a virtual “inclusive” political reality; characterizes the features of mediatization of politics under the influence of social media and identifies the consequences of this process for socio-political reality.*

**Keywords:** social media, network culture, political communication, political discourse, network political discourse, mediatization of politics.

### Introduction

A long-known and indisputable fact is the close connection between the media and political discourse. The media are the main communication platform for the political sphere, allowing to convey political intentions to a wide audience. At the same time, the political agenda is one of the main ones for the media, attracting a mass addressee. In linguistic literature, when considering political communication, the concept of *media-political discourse is often used*, denoting a hybrid construct within which both media and political discourse are transformed (Степанова, Курганская 2024). In essence, we are talking about the mediatization of politics and the politicization of media. Today, due to the widespread use of social media, the onto-

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logical foundations of media-political communication are changing significantly, erasing the already unclear boundary between the media and political spheres, and at the same time between professional and non-professional journalism, professional and non-professional politics. The issue of modifying political discourse in the context of social media is the subject of research in this article. It seems appropriate to begin consideration of this issue by outlining the specifics of network culture, which to a large extent determines political communication.

### **Social Media and network culture**

With the spread of the Internet, *new media* as a means of mass information and communication based on digital technologies has firmly entered into common and scientific use. At the present stage, social media are singled out as a separate group within the framework of new media, the fundamental characteristic of which is the ability to generate and distribute user content (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010, Murthy 2013). Social media suggest dialogic strategy transmissions information by principle “from many to many” (Pavlik, McIntosh 2014) and are based on network communication. Social media primarily includes social networks, blogs, photo and video hosting sites.

The widespread dissemination and penetration of social media into all spheres of life has led to the formation of new forms of social integration (network communities) and new social practices. The basis and at the same time the meaning of the existence of network communities are not common interests, opinions, activities of their participants/members, but communication, which has changed from a means of establishing and maintaining social relations to their goal. The gradual crystallization of a special system of priorities, values and ways of social behavior within social networks testifies to the formation of a new culture, created by information and communication means and based on network principles, i.e. network culture.

There is no universal definition of network culture as a phenomenon of modern socio-virtual reality in scientific literature. The well-known Spanish sociologist M. Castells interprets network culture as the culture of a network society representing “a new social order of the digital age <...>, which forms the culture of virtuality” (Castells 2010: 386-387). It is therefore a culture of network communities that are formed and function in virtual space and are an integral part of the new social reality (van Dijk 1996). Italian linguist T. Terranova explains network culture as a modern global culture formed by communication networks and functioning on the basis of

network principles (Terranova 2004). In accordance with the theory of the German philosopher O. Spengler, who explains culture as a “unique stylistics” within other stylistics shaping the world (Spengler 2017), network culture can be perceived as an autonomous normative system of values that arises on digital platforms of network channels and is characterized by linguo-communicative specificities (stylistic originality): symbolic communication tools, unified communication formats, norms of speech behavior, speech strategies and tactics, principles of self-organization and self-reproduction, etc.

Culture is traditionally based on territorial, national, religious unity, but the new network culture is primarily determined by the technical and communication possibilities of social networks. The basic characteristics of network culture as a culture of virtual society are therefore directly conditioned by the specifics of the Internet space, within which a new social reality is being formed. It is appropriate to talk about the following key characteristics of network culture: digital mediation, communicative focus, openness, self-organization, polycentricity, semantic and axiological pluralism, interactivity, priority of mediality, publicity, anonymity and creativity (Dolník, Orgoňová, Bohunická, Kazharnovich 2023: 242-245).

These attributes of network culture determine it as a culture of inclusion (penetration) and participation. In the context of this article, inclusiveness can be understood as the absence of boundaries in the network space: physical (e.g. temporal and spatial), social (openness and dynamism of network communities, neutralization of the importance of social role and social status), communication (openness of communication channels, the possibility of initiating communication or joining an ongoing discussion, absence of knowledge barriers and boundaries between expertise and laymanship), individual as the norm of network communication), linguistic (ignoring language norms and rules). The inclusiveness of network culture has an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, it can be perceived as a manifestation of the democracy of the network space, which is characterized by openness, accessibility and unlimited communication as the basis of social interaction in virtual space. Every user of a social network has the same communication possibilities, i.e. is a full-fledged actor of virtual social reality, which conditions its pluralistic nature.

On the other hand, the interpretation of inclusiveness as the immediate and unlimited participation of everyone and everything in the process of forming a virtual social communication reality has negative socially significant consequences, which are manifested primarily in the spread of destructive social practices, the deformation of social norms and value systems, and the negation of ethical rules and linguistic culture.

## **Features of political communication in social media**

Today, social media have acquired the status of one of the main communication platforms for the implementation of political discourse, opening up broad and virtually unlimited opportunities for political communication and eliminating the issue of availability/inaccessibility of mass media, temporary and physical availability/inaccessibility of the addressee, censorship/freedom of speech, thematic limitations/unlimitedness of communication, mass/non-mass audience reach, etc. Political subjects have received the opportunity to interact with a mass addressee (with their supporters and opponents, politically active and passive audience) directly, in real time, bypassing all sorts of spatial, temporal, intellectual, etiquette, and often ethical barriers. Such “inclusiveness” of the communication space, of course, affects the quantitative-qualitative content of political communication. If traditional media covered the political process (sometimes objectively, sometimes objectively, sometimes deliberately distorting it), social media largely shape political reality. The logic of the functioning of social media determines the method and nature of communication within them, including political communication.

Social networks imply user identification, i.e. defining their virtual “I”. And if an ordinary user of a social network can function anonymously, hiding, including under the guise of a fictitious personality, then a politician, pursuing the goal of popularizing himself as a political subject, strives to identify himself. However, as a rule, we are talking about creating a virtual image, which is an improved, corrected “I”, when the politician’s positive personal qualities, successes, achievements and socially significant goals come to the fore. In social networks, politicians use the opportunity to present themselves as an ordinary person, posting information about their family, their daily concerns and affairs, hobbies, ways of spending leisure time, etc. Social networks, erasing the boundaries between the personal and the public, are the communication platform within which the “humanization” of the politician’s image is expected and appropriate.

The basis of network culture, as noted above, is communication. Each user is in a continuous communicative flow through the production, reproduction and perception of information, posting text, graphic comments and assessments. As for political communication, within the framework of social media it undergoes significant changes, both in terms of content and methods of implementation. Social networks imply communicative openness and freedom, when each user of a social network has the opportunity to speak out on any topic. Such freedom is often understood as the ability to speak without having to take responsibility for one's words. This feature of

social networks is widely used by political actors, resulting in the formation of a network political discourse, which is determined by a high level of manipulativeness, populism and propaganda. At the same time, political communication becomes more interactive and creative. The content of political content and the way it is presented in social networks directly affect the political preferences of the addressee, forms his attitude towards political subjects, provokes political mobilization.

In social networks, the way a politician interacts with his audience is also changing. “Network inclusivity” comes to the forefront, when a politician strives to create the image of an ordinary person, accessible and open to communication. You can rate and comment on his posts, you can write to him, you can debate with him, you can criticize him, etc. Politicians do not always manage their social networks independently, but this does not cancel the idea of their inclusion in the online community.

Online political discourse is maximally personalized, i.e., directly linked to a specific political figure. The logic of social media functioning as a whole promotes the personalization of politics, when a political personality comes to the forefront, completely replacing political parties, movements, and organizations.

Online political discourse is thematically heterogeneous. Political subjects as users of social networks have the opportunity to speak out on any topic, to engage in various discussions. Online political discourse is non-institutional and is not limited by thematic frameworks. The very nature of network information excludes possibility of existence of a united political agenda as it is formed and managed by every subject of network content independently.

Online political communication is dialogical in nature, both from the point of view of the creator of political content and its consumer. Often, political meanings are formed in direct online dialogue within the framework of interaction at the level of politician – politician, politician – non-politician, or non-politician – non-politician.

In online communication, not only the information content that a political subject generates, but also that which he comments on, evaluates, forwards or ignores - acquires special significance.

Political discourse within the framework of online communication undergoes significant changes in terms of its content, linguistic design and methods of implementation.

### **Specifics of mediatization of political discourse under the influence of social media**

In the context of the widespread distribution of new media and the global digitalization of the communicative space, the concept of *mediatization* has become firmly established in scientific literature as a concept capable of explaining the transformation processes that can be traced in all spheres of social life, and accordingly in all types of discourse. The term *mediatization* itself has gradually received its scientific understanding, but still has not acquired an unambiguous definition. There are various concepts and approaches to the presentation of the essence of the mediatization process: sociological, cultural, linguistic, etc. (Orgoňová, Bohunická, Kazharnovich 2023: 111-116). The most general and universal definition was proposed by V. Schultz, denoting mediatization as the process of qualitative and quantitative changes in social communication under the influence of the media, i.e. the structural transformation of public discourse: by taking the place of central communication institutions, the media gained the power to shape all essential communication processes taking place in the public sphere and, as a result, the entire social consciousness. V. Schultz emphasized attention on following aspects of mediatization: media technologies are expanding natural limits of possible styles of human communication; media partially or fully provide replacement social activities and social institutions; the media connect with various non-media processes in society life; subjects and organizations from all layers societies adapt media logic (Schulz 2004).

Political reality as such is largely mediated by the media, therefore the mediatization of politics and directly political discourse is in many ways a natural and logical process. Scientific literature speaks of a gradual global mediatization of politics: from the mediation of political discourse by the media to its “media colonization” (Blumler, Gurevitch 1981, Meyer 2002, Street 2005). The mediatization of political communication is explained as a process and a result of changes in political reality under the influence of media logic.

The mediatization of politics in the context of social media is directly related to the formation of a *network political discourse* aimed at creating images and meanings that are often only a virtual picture, far from reality, but have an effective persuasive effect. French sociologist J. Baudrillard drew attention to the fact that mass communication is “decoration ideas”, designed render influence on people. The transition of politics to the area of symbolic space, according to him, is evidence of the disappearance of genuine reality and the emergence of media reality. Images of reality in it are created as a result of the application of discursive practices that combine in-

formation and power. Simulation is the fundamental way of implementing government institutions. The real picture is being replaced by practices of total simulation, generated by means of mass communication (Baudrillard 1982). It is precisely the means of mass communication that increase or decrease the importance of what happened in the country or the world, limiting this space to a set of image positions, constructing a mediatized policy. In other words, there is a process of moving political meanings and aspects from reality to virtuality. Imaginary constructions increasingly affect real political processes, not only changing reality, but also actively shaping it (Воинова 2006, Казимирчик 2014: 99-100).

In the conditions of the dominant role of mass media (communication) in political discourse, the attention of politicians is concentrated not on their own activities, but on creating their images. It's not what you do that matters, but how you present it in the media. Politicians are forced to form their own media images to win over the audience, turning from real people with a set of beliefs into «media figures». Only what is shown and what is told in the media becomes politically effective. Social media become not only an important source of news distribution and a platform for the publication of political opinions, they create a political picture of the world and shape public opinion. Network political discourse is transformed on the content and communicative level, increasingly adapting to commercial logic, when the “viewability” of political communication and the political discourse itself comes to the fore.

## **Conclusion**

During the widespread informatization and digitalization of all spheres of public life, social media are turning into not just one of the main communication platforms, but also acquiring the status of an influential information resource, within which a system of dominant ideas and methods of social behavior is formed. Social media are distinguished by a special network culture based on continuous communication and interaction of social network users. Political discourse is not simply implemented in the sphere of social media, today it is largely formed in the virtual network reality, obeying the principles of its functioning. We are talking about network political discourse as a discourse of virtual political reality.

On the one hand, social media in political communication perform a number of important tasks: they are a platform for dialogue, providing the opportunity to exchange opinions, leave comments, enter into discussions, i.e. they are a tool for political participation; social media perform a moni-

toring and control function for political subjects; they are a source of political information (official, alternative, opposition). On the other hand, the unlimited and uncontrollable nature of political communication in social media turns them into a successful resource for political manipulation, propaganda, and populism, leading to the deformation of political communication and the spread of inadequate political practices.

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