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INTERNET-OCHLOCRACY OR INFORMATION DICTATE: ON COMMUNICATIVE SPACE REGULATION IN DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

The article deals with the problem of regulation of the processes of social interaction occurring in the digital information and communication environment. It is noted that recently an ambiguous situation has developed in this area. The general availability of modern interactive means of communication contributes to the growth of the feeling of individual freedom in the virtual space and the associated opportunities for personal and collective self-realization, which in turn, having its undoubtedly positive aspects, can lead to the formation of phenomena of the digital crowd (digital crowd) and the Internet ochlocracy, the significance of which for society is assessed negatively by the author. At the same time, the increasingly active influence of the values and attitudes adopted in the online environment on various spheres of human existence offline makes political and media elites look for ways to stop the consequences of the unpredictable behavior of virtual crowds and the activity of online populists. From the side of state institutions and the largest IT corporations, actions are being taken to establish control over the space of Internet communications, the spread of fake news and destructive messages that violate generally accepted social and cultural norms are limited. Thus, however, a new danger to society is being actualized, associated with the possibility of introducing innovative forms of diktat into the field of information exchange on the Internet by an elite minority with the appropriate technological, corporate and power resources.

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Keywords: Digital crowd, information and communication space, information dictate, internet ochlocracy, smart mob



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1. Introduction

It is known that the progress of digital technologies significantly transforms many aspects of human existence, including the nature of social interactions and communications. First, the space within which contacts are established between people is permanently expanding, reaching a global scale at its highest limit; secondly, new communication methods acquire the property of interactivity, which allows the user to create and send messages and images that can be immediately accepted by any recipient within the global digital society and receive feedback from the recipient. An increasing influence on the daily and professional activities of people is exerted by their involvement in Internet communities, which, in fact, are becoming a kind of new form of sociality. In this regard, questions naturally arise about how the sphere of mass interactive communications will be regulated, who will set the rules of the game there and dictate the conditions. The need to find answers to them is also explained by the fact that new norms and rules, established initially in the online sphere, actively penetrate into human existence offline, as a result of which new scenarios of mutual communication arise, the structure and functionality of social and political institutions are being transformed.

2. Problem Statement

As a result of the increasing immersion of mankind in the world of virtual reality and in connection with the disappearance of traditional methods of controlling the infospace, new formats of network self-organization are emerging, which allow more fully realize the intellectual and creative potential of actors of social interactions in various spheres: “in communication, political activity, implementation of joint projects for the benefit of others” (Kashchey et al., 2021, p. 692); at the same time, the existence and perception of a person in conditions of digital freedom and information oversaturation are losing their former stable reference points, which can lead to the formation of the phenomenon of digital ochlocracy, which contributes to the development of improved methods of manipulative influence on the consciousness of individuals.

The desire to stop the negative consequences of digital ochlocracy and populism, which threaten the stable functioning of proven social and political institutions, lead to attempts to regulate communicative interaction within the Internet space on the part of modern holders of political and information capital. At the same time, the establishment of strict norms and rules in the field of network communication and control over their observance essentially means the introduction of censorship methods in this area and generates the risk that the digital society will appear as a society of information diktat.

3. Research Questions

3.1 What new models of self-organization and collective action are being formed in the modern information and communication environment?

3.2 What new opportunities and dangers for the everyday life of people, as well as the approved practices of the functioning of political institutions, do the phenomena of smart mob, digital crowd, Internet ochlocracy bring?

3.3. Is it possible to regulate the space of digital interactive communications and what consequences for society can it lead to?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the possibilities, methods and consequences of regulation and control over the space of communication and interaction of people in the online environment in the context of the emergence of innovative formats of virtual self-organization.

5. Research Methods

Discussing the formation and functioning of new formats of interaction in the modern digital environment, the author uses the method of theoretical interpretation of the concept – specifically, the concept of “crowd”. The meanings and connotations of the terms “smart mob” (Artamonov, 2019; Bylieva et al., 2017; Rheingold, 2006), “smart crowd” (Tikhonova, 2020), as well as “virtual or digital crowd” (Köchler, 2013) are compared with the interpretations of the term “crowd” in social science of previous decades.

The method of identifying contradictions and the predictive method are used by the author in order to identify and analyze the ambiguous consequences – both positive and negative, that arise in society as a result of the emergence of non-traditional ways of political discourse and action, which receive their institutionalization in the form of the phenomena of digital democracy and digital ochlocracy.

6. Findings

There is a partially justified point of view that the demassification of information sources and the decentralization of social institutions, which take place in the digital age, contribute to the expansion of the space of personal freedom, provide individuals with the opportunity to more independently determine their value and political priorities. Forms and methods of collective interactions also appear to be significantly different from those that were characteristic of the industrial mass society. In modern sociological discourse, the term “smart mob” is used, which means an innovative type of community that is formed and purposefully self-reproducing through the use of digital technologies. It arises as a result of the desire to exist “in the same rhythm with your closest friends, to constantly feel a belonging to the jointly lived life” (Rheingold, 2006, p. 21) and does not quite resemble the crowd described earlier in social psychology: reducing the intellectual level of its constituent individuals, liberating the hidden instincts of violence and cruelty, producing susceptibility to suggestion. Belonging to a smart mob means for a person not narrowing but expanding the space of personal and collective initiative and opportunities for self-realization.

Socially significant activity of smart mobs can, for example, be manifested in the organization of flash mobs (Bylieva et al., 2017), which is a new dynamic form of solidarity, spontaneously, but at the

same time consciously uniting disparate individuals due to a sudden reason, the use of network crowdsourcing technology is becoming more and more popular, which involves the use of the resources of citizens united in the Internet space for the joint implementation of projects in one area or another. The practice of self-organization and cooperation of consumers (peer-to-peer, sharing) is actively developing – and this is facilitated by the progress of digital technologies (Böcker & Meelen 2017; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Shabanova, 2020), which allow for combining personal gain with the support of others and building mutual trust.

The promotion by individuals and smart communities of their views, preferences and interests in social networks also contributes to the emergence of innovative models of political activism and scenarios of communication between power and society (Boulianne, 2018; Dneprovskaya et al., 2018; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). M. Castells at the beginning of the last decade assumed that the prototype of new forms of political participation can be considered mass movements that do not have a centralized organization, like “Occupy Wall Street”: the notion of democracy is coming to an end, which is that every four years you vote in elections, the outcome of which is determined by the media, the control of the authorities and large business corporations (as cited in Baydakova, 2012, para. 14). In conditions when the opinion of each individual on any socially significant issue can be taken into account online, it is natural to think about expanding the scope of direct democracy mechanisms – on a digital basis, about transforming the functioning of many familiar political institutions.

At the same time, many arguments are expressed in favor of the fact that:

- 1) modern information reality by no means means absolute freedom of thought, self-expression and action for an individual;
- 2) the development of new formats and practices of political participation contributes not to the development of digital democracy, but to the formation of digital ochlocracy.

Freed from the informational influence of the centralized media structures of the last century, a person and their thinking, however, are faced with new problems and dependencies. Arising in view of the constant growth of the sources of production and broadcasting of messages and the information surplus sometimes leads to the impossibility of adequately navigating the endless stream of news, competently distinguishing truth from falsehood, contributes to cognitive chaos. This chaos only intensifies due to the sometimes radical destruction of ethical and aesthetic norms and values observed in modern society and culture. The situation of unprecedented freedom of choice in reality often turns into the fact that it is not possible to make a *conscious* choice, a lot of messages do not constitute knowledge. A person is sometimes forced to look for a point of cognitive and value support in the company of his own kind, who are also lost in the boundless information ocean. And the communities of which he becomes a part (including on the Internet) also do not always reason and act purposefully and reasonably.

Koehler (2013), using the concept of “virtual or digital crowd”, points to such, in particular, peculiarities of the functioning of collective communities in the online environment, such as the possibility of maintaining personal web anonymity and, as a consequence, the lack of personal responsibility of their members; volatility of trends, volatility and unpredictability of behavior; at the same time – the ability, through interactive communications, acting synchronously and everywhere, to turn any information trend into a megatrend, including preparing explosions of public discontent,

spreading a sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment in the minds of people (pp. 80-82). In this case, we have to argue that Internet technologies only enhance the negative properties inherent in the crowd, the mass in the traditional sense. One can also note such destructive forms of virtual crowds activity as the distribution of pirated, illegal content on the network, collective Internet trolling and bullying against users whose opinion is contrary to the point of view of this community, the susceptibility of the consciousness of the Internet-crowd to the manipulative influence of the parties of the newly-minted "opinion leaders" who use the promotion of likes, followers and other similar actions in order to give themselves weight.

The sphere of public administration is also being influenced by virtual crowds, which will probably make it possible to characterize the model of political structure that will develop in the future as a digital ochlocracy. In such a model, as already noted, the possibility of interactive participation of citizens in the discussion of issues relevant to society, as well as of direct influence on the government using Internet technologies, will increase. However, there is doubt that the impact of individuals or groups of people who do not have the appropriate qualifications and are not personally responsible for the proposed solutions to social, political, economic and other problems can be unambiguously considered as a factor of social progress. Nevertheless, it will have to be taken into account, since the border between expert opinion and the reasoning of amateurs in the conditions of information and cognitive disorder is increasingly eliminated, and the possibility of producing emotions and passions that can channel public discontent towards state bodies is growing as never before.

The last dozen years provided many examples of how exactly the impact on mass consciousness through interactive forms of communication contributed to the intensification of political protests in different parts of the world (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018; Larson et al., 2019; Metzger & Tucker, 2017). And even in the considered exemplary democratic polities, it becomes possible to promote new political actors by promoting populist slogans on the Internet; these actors take advantage of, firstly, a decrease in the level of critical perception of information in the minds of members of virtual crowds, and secondly, the unwillingness of political institutions that developed in the pre-network era to properly resist them.

Indicative in this case is the political career of D. Trump (his participation in two presidential campaigns, as well as his activities as President of the United States in 2017-21). As one knows, he maintained attention to himself, communicating with the audience on a daily basis via Twitter and other social networks. At the same time, acting contrary to American political, cultural and media norms, Trump often touched upon topics that were considered not entirely correct for public discussion, appealing to mass social instincts, prejudices and stereotypes: "Trump's supporters voted for him mainly because they share his prejudices, not because they're financially stressed" (Smith & Hanley 2018, p. 195). The attempt to storm the Capitol, undertaken by its supporters in January 2021, can be seen as a vivid example of the agitated reaction of the crowd, previously formed mainly as a virtual one, but under the influence of populist rhetoric, it was transformed into a traditional physical crowd.

7. Conclusion

In principle, can responsible political and media elites do something to counter digital ochlocracy and populism? As recent practice shows, they still have the means for this – and they also relate to the

field of modern digital technologies. Paradoxically, along with the development of the accessibility and interactivity of the new generation of communication resources, the opposite trend towards the oligopolization of the infospace by several major IT campaigns is clearly observed, and the tightening of control over the freedom of speech on the Internet. This control makes it possible to limit the spread of fake news and destructive appeals in social networks, to respond to violations of legal and generally accepted moral norms. Thus, after the events at the Capitol, described above, the leaders of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram decided to block activity on these platforms of the same Trump, which, coupled with a critical attitude towards him from a number of traditional media (CNN, etc.), led to the actual ousting of his person from the information field.

Another problem, however, is the difficulty of establishing a boundary between the logical desire to protect citizens from the effects of network populism and to reduce the risk of unpredictable reactions from virtual ochlocracy and the desire to restrict freedom of expression online, pursuing the corporate and political interests of those who are becoming the new digital power these days. A well-founded fear arises: will the actions to exercise control over the information environment lead to the implementation of the diktat in this area? It is worth noting that attempts to regulate the space of social communications fit into the general logic of the crisis of the mechanism of free competition in the digital technology market. It is no coincidence that not so long ago the US Congress presented a report on the violation of antitrust laws (buying competitors, etc.) by four Silicon Valley companies – Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Google (US House of Representatives. Subcommittee on antitrust, commercial and administrative law of the committee of the judiciary, 2020).

Thus, the functioning of the modern information and communication space is characterized by contradictory trends in terms of assessing the prospects for its regulation. The euphoria of absolute Internet freedom for everyone and the lack of responsibility for their behavior within the network coexists with the realization that regulation and control by a few are gradually beginning to be implemented in this area. This circumstance leaves its imprint on the relationship between citizens and political institutions, consumers and large corporations. History provides many examples of how the liberalization of management and control practices in the spheres of the economy, civic engagement, cultural self-expression was replaced by their tightening and vice versa. Any revolution that shook social foundations forced to re-search for a balance between the aspirations of humanity for freedom and order, a balance that would allow avoiding the extremes of ochlocratic chaos – on the one hand, and despotism, suppressing individual freedom – on the other. The current stage of the digital revolution is no exception: we, living in the third decade of the 21st century, again have to solve this problem in the context of a changed technological format of social interactions.

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