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**THE PRACTICE OF TRANSIT ONLINE COOPERATION OF THE  
AUDIENCE**

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*Abstract*

The article explores transit solidarity as a special type of online cooperation within the audience, which we characterize by the spontaneous nature of occurrence, short duration, and lack of strong social connections, symbolism and processuality. According to the authors, Internet audience collaboration in its various forms, while based on a certain informational message, allow us to record current areas of public interest. Based on a quantitative analysis of popular online petitions posted on specialized resources on the Internet (Such as platforms: Democrat, Russian Public Initiative, Change.org), online cooperation serves as a tool to represent timely issues, which arouse interest and attract attention of the Internet audience. The authors of this article research the subject matter of popular online petitions (in total, the analysis included 300 petitions with the largest quantitative indicator of audience participation), in order to code them subsequently and classify by integrating them into 15 key topics. The evaluation of the key topics of online petitions allowed us to highlight relevant areas of public attention. Among the latter, the authors mark: 1) critical concern of the audience in relation to social and economic stratification of society; 2) increased attention to social regulation and protection of fundamental rights and freedoms; 3) lack of trust towards ongoing legal actions performed by the responsible state institutions and authorities. It follows that socially significant problems (expressed through the analysis of online petitions) provoke and establish a public dialogue, which reflects current issues of contemporary Russian reality.

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**Keywords:** Online cooperation, online petition, activism, slactivism.



## 1. Introduction

Reflecting on the transformation of the communicative sphere, Jürgen Habermas introduces the concept of “representative publicness” - a popular media discourse addressed to a mass audience (Yarskaya-Smirnova & Romanov, 2013). It is typical for the contemporary Internet communication, where the audience is no longer a consumer (searching for the type of representative publicness, where he or she belongs), but a provider of information, who is able to create an independent discourse. Modern sociological researches reveal the tendency of narrowing the mass media audience (Nazarov, 2018), as well as its fragmentation in the Internet space, when, according to Bauman (2002), the audience: “lives in fragmentation and generates fragmentation, being both its product and its main cause” (p. 251). Alongside with the processes of fragmentation occurring in the Internet space, one can note that the distinct type of audience community is forming now, which we define as transit solidarity (which is different from the traditional types of solidarity interpreted by researchers in relation to sustainable social groups (Blee, 2018; Karmadonov & Kovrigina, 2018). Transit solidarity employs a number of characteristic features:

- A spontaneous (not programmed) nature of occurrence and accidental (viral) mechanism of distribution in the mass media;
- A short-term (sporadic) public demonstration of unity;
- A flexible basis of identification with the group (lack of strong social connections);
- It retains its focus on the symbolic communicative interaction practices;
- The process of forming solidarity has the priority (the very practice of involvement) over the result (namely formed and stable bases of unity).

In our opinion, integration of Internet audience by means of the media messages helps to point out critical areas of public interest, so called “points of attraction” for Internet users. We have already investigated such public areas of interest through the statistics of popular search queries (common informational incentives) and online flashmobs (demonstrated audience solidarity) (Zubanova & Zykhevskaya, 2018).

In this article, we identify the interest of the audience to the Russia-specific social problems by analysing online petitions, supported by users in the sphere of online cooperation.

## 2. Problem Statement

Online cooperation is defined as task-oriented voluntary actions of the audience in the Internet space (voting, signing petitions, fundraising), based on the inner motivation to engage in solving relevant problems, as well as on the collaborative support of socially significant initiatives.

The proliferation of such forms leaves questions of the implementation of solidarity practices in offline mode unanswered. Our intention is to compare real (activism) and simulated (slacktivism) positions of the audience. On the one hand, one can consider online cooperation as a way of self-organization of users aimed at solving specific problems, that is, activism, with its characteristic features:

- A conscious desire to cast one’s vote to support proposed initiatives;
- An efficient nature of participation (registration, choice of petition, in some cases - financial support);

- Readiness to reveal one's identity while participation (logging on to some Internet resources is carried out through the Public Services Portal of the Russian Federation, with the required indication of the user's personal data);
- Demonstration of the values-based attitude to the current social situation; in some cases - a real contribution to the problem solution (positive reaction to the petition from the state institutions).

Researchers share the view upon online cooperation as a manifestation of social activism. Perezolova (2015) on the example of the "Active Citizen" project interprets the experience of conducting electronic referenda and assesses such experience of civic engagement as an "open incubator, which shapes self-conscious citizens".

Arshtein (1969) establishes a "ladder of civic participation" that goes back to the highest levels of public control over the activities of governmental institutions. Similarly, Kalashnikova (2018) assesses the portal "Russian Public Initiatives", designed for voting and supporting petitions, as a platform for a results-oriented dialogue between the authorities and society.

Yudina and Zakharova (2016) explore successful practices of forming solidarity groups in the Internet space, from the standpoint of their common information interests and emerging trust at the micro level (Yudina, 2016).

On the other hand, a number of authors dwell upon the phenomenon of "simulated involvement", "click activity" carried out without "getting up from the chair" – in other words, they describe practices of slacktivism or "new sensuality", which turns a person into an alien observer, imitating activity (Safina, 2017). According to Dogaev (2017), slacktivism corresponds post-truth ideology, shifting the focus from content to form; from objective facts - to the demonstration of emotions; from real activity - to its designation.

Let us highlight the characteristic features of slacktivism in terms of understanding online cooperation practices:

- Using platforms that do not have a real impact on solving problems (for example, the platform Change.org);
- The lack of direct mechanisms to influence the situation, even in cases of collecting a sufficient number of signatures through official government platforms and compliance with all the requirements;
- Low level of user verification, ability to multiple (automatic) participation;
- Poorly resolved individual control over the result (when setting for long-term tracking of the supported initiative is not formed);
- Nomination of frankly illusory, impracticable initiatives (for instance, the demand to pay 15,000 roubles a month to all non-working citizens from 14 to 30 years supported by the signatures of Internet users);
- Participation in the trolling format - promotion and support of provocative initiatives (in particular: "to reduce the gestation period from 9 months to 7 months", "to cancel the prohibition of the sine to be more than one", "to add pokemonology to the lists of scientific specialties", "to prohibit the State Duma to prohibit anything", etc.);

- Diminished awareness of real social problems, untapped resources of personal activity in offline mode. Thus, Lagutina (2016) refers to an example of an experiment conducted by Anders Kolding-Jørgensen, a Danish psychologist, who created a thematic group on Facebook against the demolition of a historic fountain in the centre of Copenhagen. None of the 27,000 signatories of the petition found out that this information is false, as well as no one took any real action to protect the fountain. In our opinion, the distinction between activism and slactivism in this matter come loose namely by recognizing the transit nature of online cooperation in the Internet space, which is arising spontaneously for a short-term and symbolically represent the process of forming unity, but not the result of the latter.

This form of online cooperation, regardless of its real (activism) or simulated (slacktivism) character can be a challenging tool for the representation of social issues, by means of indicating interest and attracting the attention of the audience. In this case, online petitions can be viewed as an element of a representative culture where, according to Tenbrook (2013) "... beliefs, ideas, pictures of the world, ideas and ideologies influence social action, since they are actively shared or passively accepted by the majority" (p. 101).

### **3. Research Questions**

Considering online cooperation as a tool for the representation of timely issues, provoking interest and attracting attention of the Internet audience, raises the following research questions:

- 1) Which online petitions are the most popular (that is attracting maximum audience support) on various platforms in the Internet space?
- 2) What are the principles of petitions distribution within prevalent topics (what are the specific motives for generating community initiatives)?
- 3) What is the leading dominant subject of online petitions?

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

The purpose of the study appears to be:

- In the systematization of social issues and public interest areas based on popular online petitions, supported by the audience in online cooperation practices.
- In recording and evaluating the key positions of the current representative culture.

### **5. Research Methods**

As a research method, we used content analysis of online petitions posted on specialized platforms on the Internet.

The research selection included the following resources:

1. Democator (democator.ru) – with the ideological manifesto: "Global public platform for solving your problems, implementing your initiatives, raising funds for good deeds";
2. Russian Public Initiative (www.roi.ru) - positioned as the official platform created for the implementation of the decree of the President of the Russian Federation "On consideration of

public initiatives sent by citizens of the Russian Federation using the “Russian Public Initiative” Internet resource;

3. Change.org ([www.change.org](http://www.change.org)) - positioned as a global platform for campaigning: “With Change.org, people from all over the world start their civilian campaigns, find supporters and, together with decision makers, realize crucial changes.

The choice of these sites was due to the following reasons:

- Quantitative coverage of Internet users (266,955,424 participants were designated on the Change.org platform as of January 2019, and 2,167,144 participants were designated on the Democrat platform);
- Platform recognition (priority positions in the search query "online petition");
- Functional advantages of Internet platforms (maintained archive of petitions, provided opportunities for their ranking by type, updates, popularity, available information about the quantitative support of specific initiatives).

We selected 100 online petitions at each website, stored in the “popular” section, which scored the largest number of participated audience (considering the positions “sign the petition”, “support”, “give voice”). Thus, the study base of three websites amounted to 300 online petitions.

Further, we performed coding and cataloguing procedures. We assigned each petition in the research selection to the enlarged class in accordance with the key subject of the appeal. In total, we allocated 15 aggregate issue-related positions (Table 1).

The final section of the article presents the distribution and analysis of the results.

## 6. Findings

Socially significant issues (rating of the most popular petitions and projects) establish a public dialogue, which reflects current issues of contemporary Russian reality. The addressee of this dialogue is the state authorities; the applicants are citizens, voting and collecting signatures to solve a significant (from their point of view) problem and putting forward this or that initiative. Table 1 shows the results of the quantitative distribution of online petitions on key topics of appeal.

**Table 01.** Quantitative distribution of online petitions on key topics

Key topic of appeal	Distribution by Internet sites			Total number of petitions
	Democrat	Russian Public Initiative	Change.org	
Challenging court and law enforcement decisions	12	4	7	23
Preventing harsh treatment of animals	24	4	42	70
Reducing privileges to certain categories of citizens	7	29	4	40
Support for low-income citizens	9	20	12	41
Reduction (cancellation) of tariffs and utility payments, alongside with prices for goods and services	8	13	3	24

Preventing domestic abuse	9	2	2	13
Indication of improper performance of professional duties	8	3	5	16
Environmental issues	4	8	10	22
Respect for the rights of minorities (national, sexual)	3	0	1	4
Preservation of cultural and historical heritage	4	0	1	5
Crime prevention, safety	2	4	3	9
Ban on certain products	3	2	2	7
Improvement of infrastructure and service	6	7	4	17
Leisure activities initiatives	0	2	3	5
Violation of moral and ethical standards	1	2	1	4

Summarizing the obtained results, we can distinguish three groups of petitions, within the general distribution: the leading ones, which are the most common topics on selected Internet platforms; popular group of petitions – with the subject matter that has a quantitative advantage against the background of the general distribution and outsider subjects - that is, subjects presented just once. All other topics we assigned to the middle block.

Leading topics per totality (the sum of the three sites):

- Preventing harsh treatment of animals - 70 petitions;
- Support for low-income citizens - 41 petitions;
- Reducing privileges to certain categories of citizens - 40 petitions.

Popular topics per totality:

- Reduction (cancellation) of tariffs and utility payments, alongside with prices for goods and services;
- Challenging court and law enforcement decisions - 23 petitions;
- Environmental issues - 22 petitions.

Outsider topics per totality:

- Leisure activities initiatives - 5 petitions;
- Preservation of cultural and historical heritage - 5 petitions;
- Violation of moral and ethical standards - 4 petitions.

The topic “Preventing harsh treatment of animal” dominates due to the expected reasons: public organizations and caring citizens, who initiate this subject, enliven it by the heightening of emotions of the Internet audience (with the descriptions of real examples of cruel treatment, accompanied by photos of animals).

The following two positions, gaining, in fact, equal indicators (41 and 40), demonstrate the principle of contrast: reducing privileges to certain categories of citizens — support for low-income citizens. “Support for low-income categories of citizens” position implies the introduction of benefits and material assistance to the elderly, the disabled, and orphans. The position “reduction of privileges to certain categories of citizens” presents a remonstrative perception of state power, a sensitive experience of economic and legal stratification in society:

- “Cancellation of any privileges to officials”;
- “Prohibition of public procurement by officials”;
- “To lower the salaries of deputies of the State Duma to the subsistence minimum”;
- “Equate the salary of officials to the average salary in the region”;
- “Introduce criminal liability for non-fulfilment of election promises”;
- “To deprive deputies of the opportunity to raise their salaries” and others.

Also, among the popular topics are petitions, united by the overview of the injustice of punishment for alleged or falsified (from the point of view of the Internet audience) offense or, on the contrary, connivance concerning guilty persons. This topic continues the leading subject matter of the conflict between “strong and weak”:

- “The teenager was convicted of a crime he did not commit”;
- “The guys were imprisoned illegitimately”;
- “The unpunished rapist is free!”
- “The senator sent a sick person to jail following a false denunciation”;
- “The guy was given 6 years of imprisonment for the crime he did not commit” and so on.

The positions designated by us as “outsiders” are connected firstly with the propaganda in the media of an immoral (according to the initiators of the petitions) way of life, promoted in particular by the talk show hosts and reality show audience; Likewise the outsider petitions include those ones aimed at urban redevelopment, prohibition on the demolition of unique cultural monuments.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of the distribution of the key topics of online petitions allows us to highlight relevant areas of public attention, which include:

- 1) Critical concern of the audience in relation to social and economic stratification of society;
- 2) Increased attention to social regulation and protection of fundamental rights and freedoms;
- 3) Lack of trust towards ongoing legal actions performed by the responsible state institutions and authorities.

In this case, one can agree with the opinion of Toshchenko (2014) that trauma and antinomy, which reflect disaccord, contradictions and conflict in the perception of reality, are characteristic features of public consciousness in modern Russia.

Thus, when we summarize the obtained results, one can see that socially significant issues (expressed through the analysis of online petitions) can establish a public dialogue on critical issues specific for present-day Russia. Such areas of public interest and audience attention constitute a representative culture that functions based on the following characteristics:

- Inconsistency: dynamic rotation of topical informational stimuli;
- Relevance: the requests from the audience are focused on the current situation;
- Subjective-emotional expression of positions;
- Collective nature of the representation of opinions and ideas;
- Problematic and polemic character: petitions appeal to the pressure points of the existing reality;
- Public referentiality: expression of interests and inquiries of social groups.

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