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**INTERNET MEMES IN ELECTORAL PROCESS AS NEW TREND  
OF MODERN POLITICS**

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*Abstract*

The role of network interactions is significantly increasing with rapid development and deep penetration into all spheres of the modern society of information and communication technologies. The network structures represented by social networks that are increasingly built into modern political processes. Network communities take a form of public policy, where a public opinion is formed and political decisions are made. The network environment gives not only new opportunities for civic participation, opposition, and protest movements, but also under certain conditions for control over public policy.

The tendency towards an electoral activity decline is one of the most acute problems in the sphere of political relations. This trend can be seen in most democracies. The models of economic and political behavior are changing due to development of information society. On the one hand, citizens spend more and more time in social networks, plunging into virtual reality, moving away from the problems of social reality or the first-order reality. On the other hand, social networks create new social bonds which exist on the basis of certain social relationships (such as kinship, friendship, neighborly and professional ones, etc.) characterized by a high level of trust and solidarity.

The article shows the problem of using Internet memes in electoral fight for votes. This trend has recently revealed itself and it represents a new tendency in modern politics. The article briefly outlines the main ideas of the theory of memes and distinguishes the practices of using memes in modern politics.

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## 1. Introduction

The evolution of information technologies transforms all social, economic and political processes, creates innovative impulses for social development and offers non-standard solutions to both old and new problems.

A tendency towards an electoral activity decline is one of the most acute problems in the sphere of political relations. This trend can be seen in most democracies. (Zolo, 1992)

Models of economic and political behavior are changing due to development of information society. Politicians are concerned about the reduction of interest in politics among the population because such processes as political power formation, legitimation, and functioning of political regimes depend on citizens' political participation.

The use of Internet memes in election companies has become one of new elements of the electoral struggle (Somova, 2015). Memes, seen as self-replicating units of culture, due to their properties not only to increase the efficiency of electoral technologies but also to reduce the costs significantly. Thereafter it is possible to predict the fast spread of Internet memes implementation in future electoral companies around the world. Despite the fact that the theory of memes has existed for several decades and its applied aspects have been used successfully in advertising, the active use of memes in politics has just started. And one of the incentives for addressing this topic was insufficient research data of this aspect of the problem

## 2. Problem Statement

The term "meme" and its concept were developed by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene". Dawkins transfers the genetics concept onto the information environment and he names a "unit of cultural information", which is capable of "reproducing itself" as a "meme". Memes can be both words and images. They are any segments of the Internet, including visual ones, sayings, pictures, video or a scale, which mean something and have spread on the Internet.

In the 1990s, the idea of memes continued in the works of some researchers who tried to explain with its help the society development, the processes in the media, in the political system, and various cognitive models (Stoliarov).

Well-known media theorist D.Rushkoff in his book "Media virus. Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture" (1994) defines a meme as a kind of a hidden ideological code that is capable of affecting a person. Analyzing the movement of memes in the "infosphere" ("the expansion of the planetary ecosystem"), the scientist makes the existing concept of memes more complex by introducing the concept of media virus.

A media virus is a media event that causes real social changes. Under certain conditions, a widespread media virus may even overturn such established ideological systems as organized religions or such well-established institutions as a Republican party or even an entire two-party system (Rachkoff, 1994, p.10).

An important step in the research of memes was R. Broudi's work "Virus of the Mind" (1996), where the scientist adapted Rachkoff's concept to the study of thought. Broudi, following Dawkins's ideas, sees memes as internal representations of knowledge which lead to cultural evolution. "Memes are hidden, internal representations of knowledge that *result* again along with environmental influence in external behavior and the production of cultural artifacts" (Brodie, 1996, p. 7).

L. Shifman's book "Memes in Digital Culture" (2014) stands out from other latest works. There the author gives a new interpretation of the concept of memes. As Shifman defines it, meme is (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of the content, the form, and/or the stance (b) that were created with awareness of each other and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.

S.A. Shomova regards memes as visual images, speech clichés, obsessions; they have one important and fundamental feature: functional qualities that allow us to consider this phenomenon in the context of the unconscious (Shomova). In this regard, the concept of memes is closely related to the theory of the collective unconscious by K. Jung (1991), who denied the idea that a personality is completely determined by his/her experience, education or the environment. Jung distinguished several levels of the unconscious. One of them was the collective unconscious which includes archetypes that are universal for all times and cultures.

Political Internet memes are primarily used to attract citizens to politics, to be an instrument for their involvement in political culture, to increase the political activity in information societies. (Dahlgren, 2009) They are developed via comments, imitations or parodies and are usually distributed voluntarily (Davison, 2012; Street, Inthorn, & Scott 2013).

They allow people to express their attitude towards politics in a simple and playful way. In this case, they represent a form of public reasoning about politics usually in a playful or ironic style (Van Zoonen, 2005).

Political Internet memes that ridicule politics are often rejected by the political elite (for example, in Russia) as trivial and meaningless, serving exclusively for some entertainment purposes. It should be noted that the opposition to popular culture and politics exists and it is supported by modern political discourse. The theorists of the Frankfurt School T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer criticized popular culture for its stereotyped, repetitive content and they claimed that it distracts citizens from activities that support social networks and democratic ideals. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1997). In this socio-philosophical tradition, mass culture is interpreted as a phenomenon which has a harmful effect on policies, reduces civic activity and gradually destroys social capital, which is the basis for a strong democracy.

Therefore, one more point of view should be mentioned. It was expressed by another representative of the Frankfurt School, H. Marcuse. Analyzing modern mass culture, he discovered its deep connection with business and politics: "Selling entertainment equipment and recreation in bomb shelters, TV shows with candidates competing for national leadership demonstrate a complete unity between politics, business and entertainment. However, this unity is dishonest and premature in a fatal way; business and entertainment help to implement a policy of domination". (Marcuse, 1964, p.136) In the authors' opinion, this trend has intensified in the information society. Business and politics follow the

electorate actively and develop social networks, using not only their technical resources and capabilities, but also the network culture, its language, signs and symbols.

### **3. Research Questions**

The use of Internet memes in an election campaign is a new trend in politics. Its peak was during the presidential election in the USA in 2016. However, some researchers noted an active use of social networks by politicians at the beginning of the XXI century.

There are different points of view regarding Internet memes in politics. Most researchers believe that Internet memes contribute to attracting citizens to politics, accustoming them to political culture, encouraging political activity in the information society.

But there is another point of view according to which Internet memes in politics are a successful marketing move. They can reduce the costs of an election campaign, increase the interest in elections, mobilize the electorate, turn an active user of social networks (primarily young people) though a passive voter into a participant in the election campaign.

The main issues that the authors are going to discuss are, firstly, to what extent Internet memes as digital cultural phenomena are able to increase electoral activity and, secondly, to assess the prospects for using Internet memes in modern Russian politics.

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

The aim of the article is to describe a new trend in politics which is an active use of Internet memes in election companies and to assess its perspectives in Russia. The development of Internet technologies has caused a lot of discussions about new methods for increasing citizens' political and electoral activity. In the authors' opinion, one of the most acute problems in the sphere of politics is the tendency to an electoral activity decline. The active use of Internet memes as elements of the network communication culture has become one of the new ways to increase interest in the elections in the United States. This process contributes not only to the penetration of mass culture into politics, but also stimulates the search for new technologies in the struggle for votes. The authors share the views of the neo-Marxists that the participation of candidates who compete for the right to become a national leader demonstrates the complete unity between politics, business and entertainment. The phenomenon of Internet memes is a vivid example of the symbiosis of business and entertainment, which is integrating into modern politics.

### **5. Research Methods**

The authors used a social network analysis for the contemporary political processes. In its broadest sense, the network is a collection of social actors and connections between them, which is created on the basis of certain social relationships (such as kinship, friendship, neighborly and professional interactions, etc.) and is usually accompanied by the transfer of tangible and intangible resources. The social network

analysis is developing in modern sociology, and it consists of studying the influence of network structures formed by these links and relationships on the social behavior of actors.

The widespread use of information technology for political purposes is one of the most important features of the modern political process. It happens due to the growing understanding of a society as a network structure. This approach was confirmed by M. Castells who considered a social structure as a network society, which is distinguished by the replacement of pre-existing forms of personal and property dependence by network structures. The main factors of changes in a society are inclusion of actors in network structures and interaction between networks (Castells, 1996).

## **6. Findings**

For the first time in an electoral process, tools and technologies of Internet communication have been actively used in the USA. Moreover, the Americans use the whole range of sociological tools for public opinion research on the Web and actively create information trends and products that are easily sold during elections (Bronnikov, 2013, p.130-131).

One of such trends was the use of Internet memes in the presidential election campaign in 2016. In the United States, Internet memes are used to express the ideas of a candidate, which conflict with the views of a part of the electorate or are politically incorrect.

In his election campaign in 2016, D. Trump actively used the meme of Pepe the Frog,



**Figure 01.** The Meme of Pepe the Flog

who was not afraid to say unpleasant things about American reality, to expose "boring, correct and deceitful" things that were repeated by the liberals whose interests H. Clinton represented.

On September 11, Donald Trump's son published a picture in his Instagram, which, according to him, had been sent to him by his friend. The US presidential candidate and his supporters were portrayed as heroes of the film "The Expendables" in the comic image. But the name "The Expendables" from the original poster was replaced with the consonant "The Deplorables".



**Figure 02.** The Meme of "The Expendables"

The picture was a kind of response to Clinton's statement, that half of Trump's supporters are "a basket of deplorables" (a group of bad people).

In D. Trump's election company, the meme of Pepe the Frog also performs as a trickster, who is ready to confront the dangers and problems of the surrounding world in an unusual way. In Russian folklore, such trickster is Ivanushka the Fool, in the USA it is Brer Rabbit (Brother Rabbit). But the new era creates new heroes who appear in the images of memes and can communicate with the electorate in a language that is easy to understand for them. Assessing the results of the presidential elections in the US in 2016, one can say that social networks rather than traditional media are becoming more important for citizens nowadays.

## 7. Conclusion

Traditional media still play a leading role in the Russian political practice. Social networks and Internet memes are used mainly by opposition forces as a tool for forming opposition opinions, criticizing the current regime and some politicians (Stolyarov, 2014; Vanke, Ksenofontova & Tartakovskaya, 2014). But as more and more people are connecting to social networks and using the Internet as an instrument of struggle in the elections, the implementation of the Web will be on the top positions in the political process. This phenomenon will become evident when the generation of the 1990s will be involved in the political sphere, since during their childhood they will have tried all the advantages of interactive communication and will no longer be able to do without it.

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