

Digital Transformation of Government Communications in Russia: from 2011 to 2020

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Abstract. The paper presents the results of two studies conducted with an interval of 9 years, which allow us to identify trends of government communications in digital public sphere of Russia. The authors draw conclusions about the active, but generally ineffective development of such communications that do not allow citizens to actively participate in political decision-making.

Keywords: political communications, public communications, digital public sphere, e-participation, social media, Russia.

Introduction

Last few decades, the concept of "public sphere" has become so widely and frequently used that there are few intellectuals who did not know who is Jürgen Habermas and how his works are related to this concept. However, starting from the period of active development of social media, the subject of intense theoretical debate and numerous empirical studies is the emergence and existence of the digital public sphere as the online equivalent of the traditional, seemingly imperfect, "old" public sphere. The advent of the digital public sphere has attracted a lot of attention in recent years because it has been conceptualized as an addition or even replacement of a previously existing, "classical", "old" concept of the public sphere as an essential element of modern democracy [1]. The digital public sphere is mainly defined as the sphere of online communication, participation in which is openly and freely available to everyone who is interested in discussing issues of common interest. The contemporary studies show that a distinctive feature of the digital public sphere is the visibility of the discussion or the results of the joint work of all actors in the network and that at least sometimes they affect the decision-making by other people. Among these studies are the ones presented in this paper.

In 2011, we carried out a structural analysis of public communications of the authorities in the Web 2.0 space at the federal and regional levels of government as part of a grant project of the Faculty of Applied Communications of St. Petersburg State University [2].

In January 2020, we conducted a second study, which allowed us to identify trends in the development of government communications in the digital public sphere

of Russia. The 2020 study can be called a trend study, since it was carried out on the same sample and relied on the same methodology that was used in 2011, with some adjustments. To compile a sample of the study, a list of servers of state authorities was used, available on the Official Russia website at www.gov.ru.

The main research questions were resolved during the study:

1. Can we see the growth of channels, tools and services used by public authorities to communicate with the citizens?
2. Do social media really open up wide opportunities for communication between public authorities and the audience, or is this just a political myth?
3. Do the authorities have an adequate and effective set of means of participation and cooperation with citizens for making democratic decisions?

Below we will try to answer these questions.

1 Research methodology

First of all, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that representatives of all theories note the extreme importance of political communication in public administration. It should also be noted that the goal of political communication in public administration is not just the manipulation of the audience, but the achievement of agreement between the citizens and the government.

The study of government communications was developed by us within the framework of the post-classical paradigm, according to which modern communication technologies are not just a way of adapting to the external environment and the interaction of social actors with the external environment. It is, first of all, a way of constructing a social environment, forming public opinion on a variety of scales and the transformation of public capital into “informational” capital in the terminology of Castells [3-5]. The foundations of the Castells’ concept are close to the ideas of Arendt [6] (the basis of society is the open public space) and Luhmann (society is generated by communication) [7]. Habermas’s works on public sphere are also of great importance for our study [8-9].

It should be noted that the term “government communications” seems to us broader than “communications of public authorities”. This is due to the fact that in the latter case, only public authorities designated as such in the constitution act as communicative actors who create, direct, and receive messages. Due to the nature of government actors whose functioning is connected with the implementation of state power, the communications they carry out are a priori political and public. The subject of government communications is information relations regarding the exercise of state power. At the same time, messages have the necessary attributes of public communication. They affect the needs / interests / values of citizens and have a public status. Accordingly, when in the future we will use the term “government communications”, we will imply their political nature and public status. As a method of the study we used the network approach. Using network analysis accompanied by other methods such as case study, descriptive statistics, etc.

To search for knowledge about the really existing types of the studied phenomenon, typological and structural analysis was used. Methods of collecting and analyzing empirical data:

1. The formalized method is content analysis. It is carried out separately for each site and account in social media. It includes analysis of the total number of messages, the frequency of publications, general topics of messages, the use of special means of expression (links, photos, videos).

2. An unformalized method, which consists in adapting the content of a document to a research task based on an intuitive understanding, generalization of the content, and the rationale for the conclusions made.

3. Statistical methods.

The advantages of the selected methods are profitability, efficiency and versatility of the study. So the unformalized method is based on the understanding, comprehension and interpretation of the content of documents in accordance with the purpose of the study. A formalized analysis (content analysis) is designed to extract information from large arrays of documentary sources inaccessible to intuitive analysis.

Next, we will present in retrospect, first, the results of the analysis of Russian government digital communications in 2011, and then move on to the results of the 2020 study. In this text, the analysis is limited to government communications at the federal level.

2 Research results

2.1 Study 2011

An empirical study was conducted from September 1 to November 1, 2011. We analyzed the official websites of authorities, as well as blogs, microblogging (Twitter), social networks, video hosting (Youtube). First of all, we revealed that in 2011 all official bodies had the official website. We analyzed 62 sites of all branches of the federal government: legislative, judicial, and executive (52 of 78 sites) using the basic array method. Only 7 federal authorities had official blogs. 6 authorities did not have official blogs, however there were personal blogs, blogs of the public persons, or simply officials of the department. As for microblogging, it turned out that they were much more popular than regular blogs: 15 ministries had official Twitter accounts.

12 official YouTube channels were identified during a 2011 study. Social networks were not as popular as expected. The most popular was the social network VKontakte, on which 17 official pages and two personal pages were registered. The local authorities had 12 pages on Facebook in 2011.

In general, the analysis showed that Twitter is the most convenient communication tool for the authorities on the Internet. VKontakte was a popular network. Although it is difficult to talk about any mass activity of federal government bodies on the Internet, because, as it turned out, only a little more than 10% of government departments at the federal level went beyond the boundaries of their own site (see Fig. 1)

Thus, the use of Web 2.0 technologies in public communications of the federal authorities of the Russian Federation in 2011 could not be considered effective.

The wide interactive possibilities of social media, which imply the priority of bilateral and multilateral communication, were generally unclaimed.

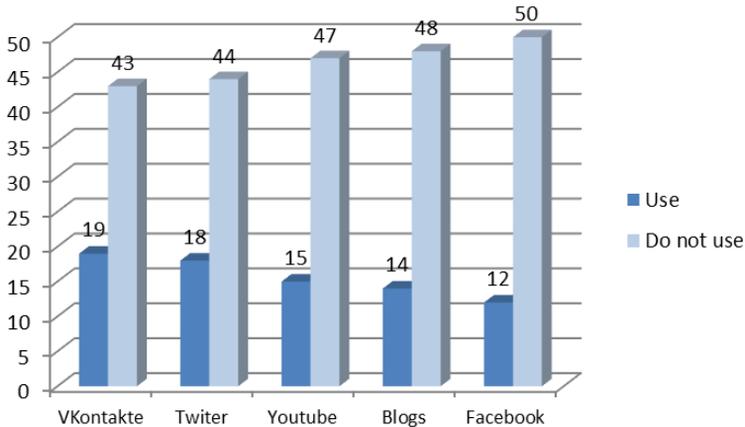


Fig. 1. The use of Web 2.0 tools in the activities of public authorities at the federal level in 2011

2.2 Study 2020

In 2020, a continuous sample was used, according to which digital public communications of all 83 federal government bodies of the Russian Federation were analyzed in accordance with the data of the Official Russia.

The study was conducted from 10.11.2019 till 01.15.2020. It should be noted that it was completed on the day when the government resigned. For convenience, the study is divided into two rounds. The first round is the analysis of websites; the second one is the analysis of social media. The main goal of the study is to compile a rating of authorities in the context of e-participation.

Tasks of the study:

1. determine the basic state of electronic means of participation provided by government websites by complete analysis of the websites, tools, services and content they provide;
2. identify the most effective social media used by federal authorities for communication between government and society;
3. assess the scale and degree of effectiveness of the use of e-communication by federal authorities for making democratically sound and technically rational decisions in the interests of all citizens on the one hand, and creating the image of a modern and effective government on the other hand.

A desk-top study was conducted — an inventory of available means of participation and cooperation on official websites and accounts of federal authorities.

Websites Analysis. Obviously, by the beginning of the 2020s, almost all sites at the federal level are regularly filled up, updated, have all the necessary sections and, accordingly, there is no need to evaluate their information and interactive components. Moreover, there is no point in evaluating the design of the site, its usability and search new optimization.

Therefore, for the analysis of sites, it was decided to apply almost the same list of criteria that was used in our other studies [10-11] related to the measurement of electronic participation opportunities provided by government websites (see Table 1). This list of criteria correlates with the methodology for evaluating e-participation, which is used by the United Nations [12-14].

In the case of the presence of investigated component, a rating "1" was set; in the case of absence - "0". Then the average value was calculated for each criterion for each authority. The results are presented in Figure 2.

Table 1. List of criteria for evaluating sites in the context of electronic participation

№	Criteria
1	Availability of a website e-Participation activities (calendar of public debate)
2	Reports on work results
3	Feedback (opportunity to write a message)
4	Multilingualism
5	Integration / presence in social media
6	Electronic consultations (opportunity to ask a question)
7	Electronic voting or referendum technologies
8	Use of mobile technologies

Figure 2 clearly demonstrates that by the beginning of 2020, almost all federal bodies of the Russian Federation provide feedback opportunities (97.3%), faithfully reports on their work (79.7%) and have accounts on social networks (77%).

However, only 9.6% of websites provide opportunities for e-consultations, a little more offer to vote on the website (20.5%). And, which is very strange in 2020, almost 77% of websites do not indicate the presence of mobile versions and there are no links to any other mobile applications.

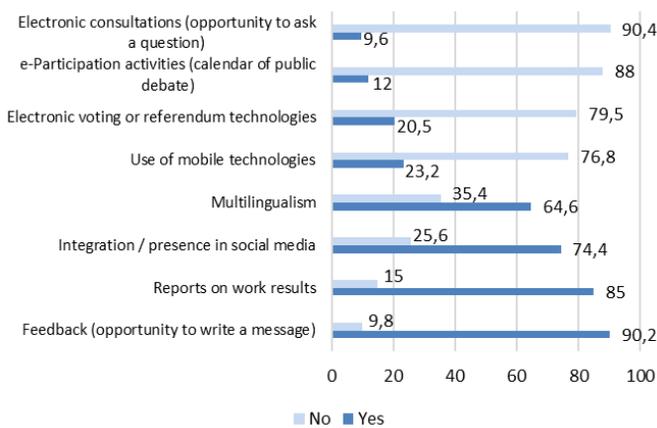


Fig. 2. The results of the federal authorities' websites analysis in the context of e-participation

In general, the conclusions regarding the provision of e-participation opportunities on the websites of federal authorities turned out to be disappointing. Most sites are only at the first (information) stage of e-participation (but perform it good). Some websites allow to organize and to hold consultations, but most of the government is still far up to the stage of decision-making.

Analysis of communications of federal authorities in social media. For analysis, we used those accounts, the link to which is posted on official websites, as well as on the portal of the Government of the Russian Federation.

It turned out that the federal authorities are very differently integrated into social media: some of them do not have accounts there at all, some are registered on the same social network, and some try to register on almost all popular networks at once. By the beginning of 2020, Facebook (65.8%) was the most popular social network among the federal government bodies of the Russian Federation. 59.7% used Twitter. Moreover, the government bodies represented on VKontakte (47.5%), Youtube (45.1%) and Instagram (40.2%) (see Fig. 3).

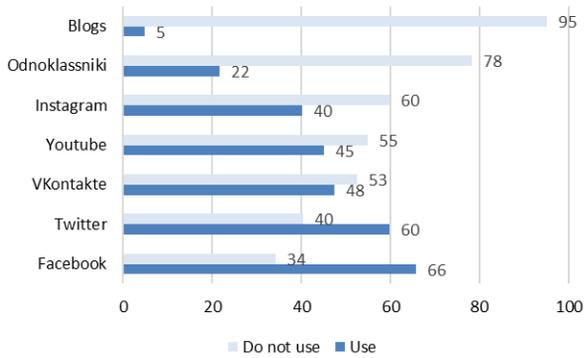


Fig. 3. The number of accounts of federal authorities in popular social media (in percent)

In terms of the number of subscribers to government bodies accounts, Twitter leads with more than 5 million users. The number of Vkontakte subscribers is approaching 3 million. Odnoklassniki with their 18 accounts are ahead of Facebook with 54 accounts in terms of the number of users. About 0.5 million users are subscribed to the channels of government authorities on Youtube (Fig. 4).

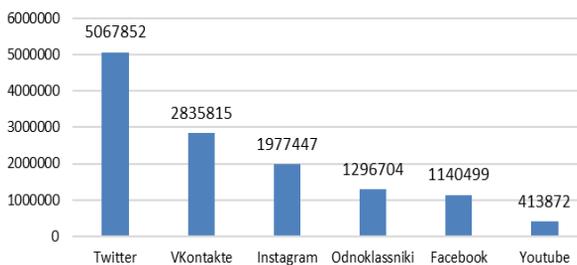


Fig. 4. The number of subscribers in social media

If we turn to a study conducted in 2011 (see Fig. 5), we can conclude that by 2020, the popularity of text blogs has faded. However, in 2011 it was not large: only 7 authorities had official text blogs, 6 ones had personal blogs of top officials, and one government body had an unofficial blog, that totally accounted for 22.6% of the analyzed authorities.

Figure 5 shows that the popularity of social networks is undoubtedly noticeable. Facebook demonstrates the greatest growth. The most popular social network in 2011 (Vkontakte) significantly lost to Facebook. The number of accounts on Youtube and Twitter almost doubled. Accounts on Instagram and Odnoklassniki were not analyzed in 2011.

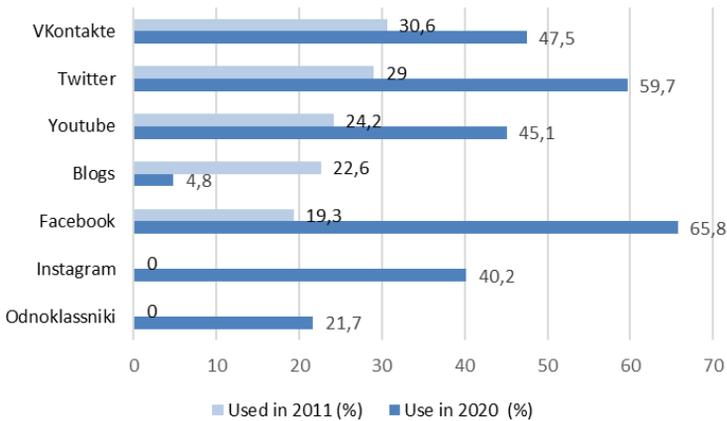


Fig. 5. Russian authorities in social media in 2011 and in 2020

In a detailed way, we have analyzed and identified some trends and tendencies in the activity of federal authorities on Instagram, since Instagram is now becoming increasingly popular among a wide audience and opinion leaders.

We found Instagram accounts with 33 federal authorities (40.2%) (Fig. 6). The total number of subscribers at the time of the study was 1977447 people (Fig. 7.)

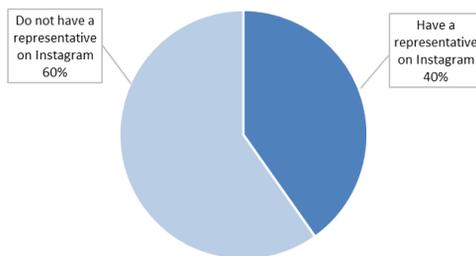


Fig. 6. Representation of federal authorities on Instagram

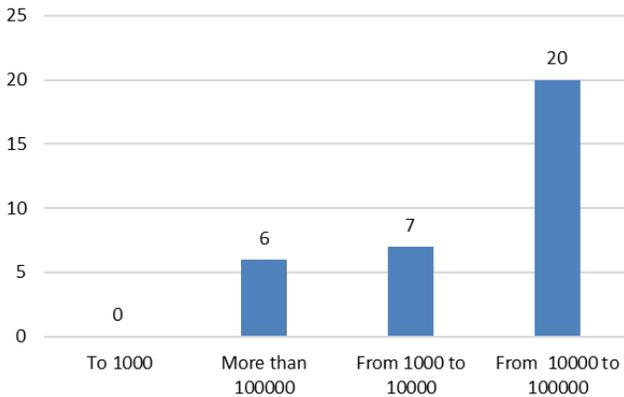


Fig. 7. Distribution of the number of subscribers on Instagram

It can be stated that the absolute majority of accounts of federal authorities on Instagram have an only information function. Among the topics discussed, all accounts unanimously lead news content, and almost all accounts contain congratulations on holidays. Some departments dilute their content with reference material for citizens, contests, etc. In two accounts of departments there is even a humorous content.

In almost all representative offices, there is a very low activity. Even in accounts with more than 20 thousand subscribers, the number of likes and comments is disproportionately small. In almost all departments, there is no official representative who could communicate with users in the comments and respond online to questions arising on topics.

The most active are the State Duma, the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense. The most active account by a wide margin must be recognized as the profile of Dmitry Medvedev, chairman (at the moment, former) of the Government of the Russian Federation. At the time of the study he had more than 2.6 million subscribers and 581 posts.

Among the least active body are the Accounts Chamber, the Federal Agency for State Property Administration, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and the Federal Service for Alcohol Market Regulation. The account with the lowest activity indicator was recognized as the profile of Valentina Matvienko as the head of the Council of Federation (higher chamber of Russian parliament) with 13 publications and the last update a year ago.

Based on the analysis, we built a ranking of information activity on Instagram and an index of involvement of federal authorities.

The following formula was used to calculate the information activity index:

$$\text{Information activity index} = \text{number of posts} / \text{number of subscribers} \quad (1)$$

To compile the ranking, the indicators were ranked in descending order.

Engagement rate is the level of audience engagement in the activity of an account (an indicator of user interaction with published content).

To provide engagement formula, we used the program Xprofile. Engagement formula (a week metrics) is following:

$$ER = (\text{likes} + \text{comments}) / \text{followers} * 100\% \quad (2)$$

In our activity ranking (if we divide the number of posts by the number of subscribers), the leader was the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as the Central Election Commission. The last three places are occupied by the State Duma, the President of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Culture. Accounts of D. Medvedev and V. Matvienko were not included in the ranking, because only the accounts of departments were analyzed.

But the activity ranking does not coincide with the engagement index, which shows how many people interact with publications (like or comment). Only one agency, Federal Agency for State Property Management, provides the content that is interesting to the user, that is, subscribers really react to it. Four more departments can be considered more or less active on Instagram. They have average indicators for the audience engagement index. These are the Federal Biomedical Agency, the Federal Customs Service, the Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Defense. The vast majority of accounts do not fall into any standards on the level of involvement.

It should be noted that the engagement index was calculated from indicators for the week and was fully relevant only on January 13, 2020. That is, in different weeks, different agencies are leaders or outsiders. But, nevertheless, our experience in conducting such studies shows that, on average, this index reflects the trends correctly.

Thus, at this stage, keeping Instagram accounts by federal authorities is rather attributive and image-based instrument than a valid communicative tool. All imagine flats are more like abbreviated press centers. Due to the low activity of the audience, most departments cannot effectively use all the tools of this social network in order to spread their influence on the audience. The lack of feedback from departments in the comments also greatly inhibits this process. Therefore, at the moment, it cannot be said that Instagram is an effective platform for communication between federal authorities and the public. Unfortunately, the similar conclusion can be made virtually with respect to all the analyzed social media.

So, it cannot be denied that over ten years, Russian ministries and departments have gradually improved the content of their Internet websites. The number of pages in different social networks was increased significantly. However, these changes are more visible than substantial. With an abundance of websites and social media accounts, only a few of them contribute to improving the image of the government or its bodies. The presence of a website or an account on a social network in the government does not mean that it effectively uses these public communication tools.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we note that the digital public sphere of modern Russia is undergoing changes, which Habermas largely foresaw. The Internet is actively developing in all

areas of life; “ordinary citizens efficiently and creatively interact with each other online“ [15]. Like most researchers, we cannot but agree with the thesis that modern Internet technologies have fundamentally transformed and changed communications in all areas.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Internet on government communications in Russia today can be called insignificant, and the wide interactive possibilities of social media, which suggest the priority of bilateral and multilateral communication, remain generally unclaimed.

Unlike Western European and American practice, in which blogs and social networks are most often a full-fledged platform for communication between public persons and citizens, in Russia, social media in the political sphere serve primarily as a modern and technological analogue of a message board used for information or propaganda. Most of both politicians and officials are trying to apply new technologies to implement outdated communication models. They are not yet ready for dialogue and open two-way communication with users, or simply not interested in them. This situation can apparently be explained both by national managerial traditions and by the features of the political system that has developed in Russia today.

The comparative results of two studies presented in this paper demonstrate that the main achievement of the Russian “digital democracy” was only improved access to information. The government supports e-information rather than e-consultation and, moreover, not joint decision making, as is assumed in the concept of e-participation. Government authorities prefer to inform about the decisions made, rather than consult with citizens before the making decisions. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to detect the tangible impact of existing digital communication platforms, forums that provoke online discussions, on decision-making by “institutional policy” [16] and find evidence of an increase in e-participation today compared with a ten-year-old situation. This is consistent with the observation by a number of scholars that government actors tend to use online campaigns for information and education purposes, while civil society actors usually conduct campaigns in an attempt to influence current political debate or political decisions, mobilizing for certain actions and increasing social pressure [17].

The answer to the research question (whether the Russian authorities have a sufficient and effective means of participation and cooperation with citizens for making democratically sound decisions) is negative. Despite the growth of the online channels, tools and services, they are inefficiently used by public authorities to communicate with the citizens.

And yet, despite the ambiguity of the digital public sphere of Russia, there are communication platforms in the Russian segment of the Internet that, at least from time to time, influence other discussion platforms and contribute to finding collective solutions. However, this conclusion needs further substantiation and identification of the conditions under which such digital public communications can develop.

Of course, it is necessary to continue research in this direction. The research methodology, of course, needs to be improved. In such a dynamic environment as the Internet, many indicators quickly become obsolete, but new ones appear.

We need projects focused on the study of factors contributing to communication, and, in general, the effective functioning of the system of e-interaction between government bodies, business and citizens in digital environment. Moreover, an important component of this issue is not only theoretical study, but also the implementation of applied research using social science methods and tools of modern Internet research. It seems that the studies described above allow us to identify problems and areas for further work by communication specialists in government.

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