Social media deliberation: civil or uncivil, reasoned or unreasoned?

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ABSTRACT

The high deliberative quality of political conversation among citizens is a valuable component when taking political decisions. However, online discussions often do not correspond to deliberative standards which can be found in the theory of deliberative democracy. In this paper, argumentation (reasoning) and communicative culture (civility and incivility) as the most relevant parameters of deliberation are analyzed in order to assess the quality of Russian and American social networks' deliberation. The research is based on a methodology of discourse analysis which allows to identify the deliberative quality of political discourse. The article presents the results of online discussions' analysis on significant issues in the Russian and American socio-political discourses – the court verdict of Alexei Navalny and the second impeachment of Donald Trump. As an empirical basis of study, online discussions on the pages of Vkontakte social network of four Russian media and discussions of four American media on Facebook are used. The authors conclude that social media deliberation as a form of public dialogue in Russia is poorly developed in terms of argumentation and culture of speech while American online deliberation is more developed, reasoned, polite and respectful.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing • Collaborative and social computing • Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Online Deliberation, Civility, Incivility, Argumentation, Social media, Russia, US.

1 Introduction

Information and communication processes in the global politics are contradictory. On the one hand, they contribute to the development of cooperation between different people, on the other hand, they often acquire the character of information and psychological wars. Therefore, it is becoming extremely considerable to address the problem of effective deliberation that means an ability to solve problems through rational, reasoned and polite discussion. Nowadays, the Internet provides great opportunities for this. Online deliberation on issues of common interest to all participants is one of the frequently discussed forms of political Internet communication. The theorists of deliberative democracy argue that in conditions of tension and uncertainty, consensual rational decisions through deliberation could help overcome emerging socio-political problems [1-3].

Online deliberation has both future opportunities and disappointments. According to T. Davis, the flexibility of information and communication technologies is an opportunity as they allow for discussion online and even, probably, surpass the usual, off-network form of discussion in cases where access to information, time requirements, as well as other factors limit the availability of direct discussion in the face-to-face format. However, the disappointment lies in the fact that the activity of advisory kind is definitely not in a hurry to gain momentum on the Internet compared to communication, which is more focused on entertainment, as well as on personal rather than collective needs [4, p.3].

The hypothesis of the study is that, based on the analysis of argumentation and communicative culture in online discussions, it is possible to identify different types of quality in online deliberation on various Internet platforms. To do this, we analyzed relevant marks of online deliberation quality using the cases of Russian and American social networks' discussions. An interpretivist approach included the methodology of discourse analysis developed by UN expert Yuri Misnikov in line with the theory of deliberative democracy of J. Habermas. In this paper, such parameters as argumentation and communicative culture are considered in order to define the quality of deliberation. The other parameters as opinion polarization, interactivity, degrees of dialogue and discussion are analyzed in our other works [5; 6].

The main purpose of this work is to analyze such parameters of online deliberation as reasoning and culture of communication (civility and incivility) in order to identify the quality of Internet public dialogue on current socio–political topics in Russia and US.

1 Theoretical basis of research

The research is based on the deliberative democracy theory of J. Habermas. His deliberative model of democracy comprises diverse forms of communication, continuous and maximally broad political discourse in society. The results of such a discourse are determined by the strength of arguments [7]. The concept implies that authentic problems of society are revealed, the directions of their solution and optimal ways to achieve goals are determined in the course of collective reflection. In Habermasian theory, we may notice the concept of ideal democratic procedure for negotiations and decision-making which is created in order to achieve reasonable and honest results.

In recent years, empirical research in the field of online deliberation has increased dramatically. As a result, a huge amount of theoretical and empirical literature became available [8-10], however, this generated difficulties regarding the definition of what deliberation is or what it should be [11]. The concept has become stretched as many theorists understand almost every type of communication as a deliberation [12]. In our paper, we consider online deliberation as a process of mutual, public, purposeful, reasoned, rational, respectful and equal discussion between citizens with the predominance of a dialogical form of communication and the use of electronic communication technologies aimed at solving common problems and achieving mutual understanding. We use a term of social media deliberation which indicates on the platform where a deliberation takes place (for example, Facebook deliberation, forum deliberation and etc.). In our opinion, argumentation and communicative culture are the most important identifiers of the quality of online deliberation.

According to Wenzel [13], it is conditionally possible to distinguish two directions of research approaches in the study of argumentation – communicative and linguistic-pragmatic. In the communicative projection that is relevant to our research, argumentation can be considered as a social activity involving the participants of the dispute (agents) and the dispute itself, i.e. a discourse in which the separation of the agents' positions is fixed. The linguistic-pragmatic projection studies the intentions of discourse participants who defend their point of view and try to achieve certain cognitive and deliberative goals using the power of arguments [14, p.71].

A significant theoretical block is the approach of D. Walton and E. Crabbe who interpret the features of argumentation as communicative forms of interaction [15]. Scientists determine the argumentation "from the outside", i.e. through their proposed classification of dialogues where the fundamental criteria for their differentiation are an initial position of the dialogue, dialectical goal (the desire of communicators to resolve disagreement through communication) and rhetorical (the desire of at least one of the communicators to convince the other) goal of the participants. Accordingly, argumentation can be considered as a certain tactic used by agents in various groups of dialogues.

Special attention should be paid to the deliberative argumentation focusing on the justification of how to act in a particular situation, as well as on norms and values as elements of a deliberative justification [16]. The difference between deliberative argumentation and theoretical argumentation lies in the conceptual and technical aspects. So, conceptually, the difference is that there is a distinction between argumentation as a competition of justifications (in line with the cognitive direction in computer science) and decision-making as a behavioral strategy (in line with psychology and management). The technical difference correlates with the possibilities of deliberative argumentation which includes not only descriptive sentences, but also intentions, goals, norms, values [15].

As for the culture of communication (civil and uncivil expressions towards participants and discussion), it is of interdisciplinary interest, and researchers express concern about what some call the "coarsening" of political discourse [17]. The scholars have emphasized the importance of civil discourse for an effectively functioning democracy [18-20] but a clear definition of civility has not been given [21, 22]. In the literature, however, there is an agreement that politeness or mutual respect is a necessary and for some definitions sufficient part [23-26]. However, concerns are related to the fact that excessive emphasis on politeness may hinder the free flow of ideas in political conversation [20, p. 266].

Soberay and Berry offer a middle ground recognizing that civility promotes democratic discussion but not at the expense of conflicts or disagreements [26]. In their opinion, civility is "characterized by speakers who present themselves as reasonable and polite, treating even those with whom they disagree as if they and their ideas are worthy of respect" [26, p.20]. Incivility can be defined as a lack of respect for others and their ideas. Coe, Kensky and Raines describe incivility as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone towards the discussion forum, its participants or its topics" [27, p.660].

Using the example of two cases, we will consider how civility, incivility and argumentation during online discussions on current socio-political topics allow us to identify the quality of online deliberation and answer the question: are there differences between the quality of online deliberation in Russian and American social networks?

2 The quality of Russian social media deliberation: the case of A. Navalny

On February 2, 2021, a hearing was held in one of the Moscow courts in the case of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny where the issue of replacing his suspended sentence with a real one – 2 years and 8 months in a general regime colony was considered. This news gave rise to a lot of discussions on social networks about justice and injustice of the decision, critical statements in the direction of both A. Navalny and Russian authorities.

For analysis, we selected online discussions on the topic of the court verdict of A. Navalny on the pages on VKontakte social network of leading Russian media: printed (Komsomolskaya Pravda, Meduza) and TV (Channel One, Dozhd), dividing them by relation to the authorities: independent (1) "Rain" – entered in the register of foreign mass media performing the functions of a

foreign agent. On March 4, 2022, Roskomnadzor blocked the publication 's website; (2) "Meduza" – entered in the register of foreign mass media performing the functions of a foreign agent. On March 1, 2022, Roskomnadzor restricted access to the information resources of the TV channel) and pro-state ("Channel One", "Komsomolskaya Pravda" (KP.RU)). The posts with news about the court decision and user comments under them were left from February 2 to February 6, 2021. A total of 1065 comments were analyzed.

These online discussions were selected based on the following factors: 1) discussions corresponded to the stated topic; 2) each contained at least one hundred comments; 3) discussions were conducted by ordinary citizens on various media platforms. The discussions were moderated, and comments were deleted by administrators of online media groups whose loyalty to government structures varied but the discussions were in no way initiated by the authorities and not led by them. The modified method of discourse analysis developed by Yu. Misnikov, which is described in detail both in the works of its author and in other works of the authors of the article [5; 28-30]. The discussion materials were collected using parsing and uploaded to Excel spreadsheets for analysis.

First, the attitude of participants in online discussions to Alexei Navalny, his sentence and actions of the authorities was analyzed. The total percentage of positions "Against" (against Navalny and support of Russian government) was 84.05%, "For" (support of Navalny and critics of Russian government) – 15.95%.

2.1 Reasoning

The total percentage of argumentation was 49.65%, however, in some comments there were several types of arguments, and in some there was only one (sees Table No 1). The highest rate of argumentation was recorded in discussions on independent media platforms (51,6%); in discussions on pro-state media, the percentage of argumentation was 47,7%, which is not significantly different from the percentage of argumentation in independent media discussions. Nevertheless, the largest indicators of argumentation were established on the page of an independent source ("Rain" – 63,8%) whereas the lowest percentage of arguments' usage was demonstrated in the discussion on Channel One (31.9%).

As for the analysis of specific forms of arguments, we will point out that the most popular types of argumentation were: 1) conclusions, generalizations, conclusions (52.82%), 2) mention of politicians (35.62%); the least popular – 1) recommendations, suggestions, calls to action (1.875%), 2) examples, cases, events, comparisons, quotes (0.725%) and 3) links to online-sources (1,125%). Most of the conclusions and generalizations were shown in discussions on the pages of pro–government sources (Channel One – 58.7% and Komsomolskaya Pravda – 56.4%).

In the discussions on independent media, factual reasoning and links to online sources were used most of all in comparison with other media. References to additional online resources were not used as arguments on any pro-government source.

	Independent		Pro-state		
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	Overall results
Facts and numerical indicators of factual nature	8.3	8.2	2	5.3	5.34
Numeric data	1.1	3.3	2	1.1	2.64
Examples, cases, comparisons, events, citations	0.8	0	0	2.1	1.16
References to political figures	31	44.3	35.3	31.9	34.2
Conclusions, generalizations	53.6	42.6	58.7	56.4	54.26
Recommendations, suggestions, calls to action	2.3	0	2	3.2	1.5
Links on various online sources	2.9	1.6	0	0	0.9
General % of argumentation	63.8	39.4	31.9	63.5	44.8

Table 1: Reasoning in Russian social media deliberation (in percentage)

2.2 Civility and incivility

We analyzed civil and uncivil patterns in online discussions on the issue of A. Navalny's court sentence based on a number of specific empirical indicators presented in Table 2. The total percentage of the communicative culture was 49.05% but some comments could have several positions, although most often – one. The percentage of fixed communicative culture (49.05%) is slightly lower than the percentage of argumentation (49.65%) but not significantly. Consequently, such discussions are still more rational than irrational, although they are not far from it. However, as for general indicators of the speech culture, its main array is about off-topic comments that have an interpersonal nature or distracted from the main issue (39.25%). The general percentages of uncivil communicative culture, i.e. impolite, rude attitude towards the participant, as well as the subject of discussion, strongly prevail over polite ones, especially the percentage of rude attitude towards

other participants in the discussion. As a result, it distracts from the opportunity of constructive dialogue.

	Independent		Pro-state		
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	Overall results
Thematically empty posts with participant name's mention, only interpersonal communication	50	41.9	42.8	22.3	38.8
Total % of negative civility towards participant	9.4	6.4	3.8	2.7	4.46
Total % of negative civility towards object of discussion	2.5	2.6	4.4	6.7	3.84
Total % of civility	61.9	50.9	51	32.4	47.44

Table 2: Communicative culture in Russian social media deliberation (in percentage)

3 The quality of American social media deliberation: the case of D. Trump

We analyzed online discussions on the topic of the second impeachment of American President Donald Trump in connection with his attempt to seize the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The second impeachment of Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States, was discussed on January 13, 2021, a week before the expiration of his term but the impeachment did not take place as the Senate voted against impeachment [39].

The sample of American discussions was conducted similarly to the sample of Russian discussions and also according to the methodology developed by Yu. Misnikov [5; 28-30]. As a result, we took Facebook pages of the leading American TV and print media as data sources because there are active and intense discussions in terms of user interaction, number of their comments, argumentation of positions regarding Trump and his second impeachment. We differentiated media outlets by political affiliation to the two leading parties, choosing two media sources for analysis: conservative Washington Times and Fox News, liberal New York Times and MSNBC. A total of 2,343 comments were analyzed.

First, the attitude of participants in online discussions to Donald Trump and his second impeachment was analyzed. According to the aggregate analysis of all comments, 59,25% of users are against Trump and for his impeachment while 40,75% are for Trump and against his impeachment (excluding bot posts). Based on the analysis of all positions, we can see that American society is split into two camps in almost equal proportions. After analyzing the users' positions, we moved on to the study of argumentation in American online discussions.

3.1 Reasoning

The total percentage of argumentation was 71.75% (see Table No. 3), however, some posts contained several types of argumentation, some contained only one, the rest had no argumentation. The participants of discussions on pages of democratic media used more argumentation (78,5%) rather than participants of discussions on pages of republican media. Conclusions, generalizations were used the most (56.35%),

mentions of politicians and their actions (31%). Examples, events, comparisons, cases from life (1,125%), statistical indicators (1,725%) and recommendations with suggestions (2,375%) were least cited as arguments.

	Liberal		Conservative		
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	Overall results
Facts and numerical indicators	6.5	2.8	2.5	2	3.45
of factual nature	3.2	0.7	2	1	1.725
Numeric data	1.7	1	1	0.8	1.125
Examples, cases, comparisons, events, citations	23.3	31.2	30.6	38.9	31
References to political figures	60.6	58.9	55.8	50.1	56.35
Conclusions, generalizations	1.5	0.7	2.5	4.8	2.375
Recommendations, suggestions, calls to action	3.2	4.7	5.6	2.4	3.975
Links on various online sources	92	65	70	60	71.75
General % of argumentation					

Table 3: Reasoning in American social media deliberation (in percentage)

3.2 Civility and incivility

We analyzed the culture of communication in online discussions on the topic of D. Trump's second impeachment in the same way as in Russian discussions. From the data obtained (see Table No. 4), the total percentage of communicative culture was 7,02% but some comments could have several positions, although most often one. Interestingly, the percentage of communicative culture (7,02%) is many times lower than the percentage of argumentation (71,75%). This suggests that in the analyzed discussions, priority is given to the content of the position, its argumentation, and not to the form of opinion expression. Therefore, such discussions can be called rational. Such online discussions have more chances to be "heard" by the authorities and taken into account when it comes to making political decisions.

As for general indicators of the speech culture in American online discussions, uncivil character of communication prevails over the civil one, although in general it is not enough relative to other analyzed parameters of deliberation. These are mostly comments on the topic but rude in relation to the subject of discussion (6,1125%). Interestingly, in relation to the participant, the rude and unfriendly culture of communication is 0,49% which is almost thirteen times less than the percentage of rude attitude on the topic of discussion.

The outcomes characterize the American culture of communication in the Internet environment as high, mature, tolerant and focused on the topic of discussion but not ideal. As a result, in such discussions, the road for a genuine dialogue of a deliberative nature is open, so rational consensus can be reached, despite some manifestations of negative emotionality, irrational behavior of participants.

	Liberal		Conservative		
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	Overall results
Thematically empty posts with participant name's mention, only interpersonal communication	0	0.1	0	0.8	0.225
Total % of negative civility towards participant	0	0.8	0.75	0.4	0.4875
Total % of negative civility towards object of discussion	7.3	5.6	3.55	8	6.1125
Total % of civility	7.9	6.7	4.3	9.2	7.025

Table 4: Communicative culture in American social media deliberation (in percentage)

In general, American online discussions demonstrated constructive communication goals that the participants set for themselves. They are aimed at solving the problem and seriously discussing issues where there may be a place for moments of entertaining nature. However, they are more associated with irony and sarcasm rather than a simple expression of emotions.

4 Discussion and conclusion

To sum up, our hypothesis was confirmed and allowed us to conclude about the different quality of online deliberation in Russia and US in terms of communicative culture and argumentation. It can be argued that online deliberation as a form of public dialogue in Russia is poorly developed and mainly aimed at entertainment while in American practice the process of online deliberation seems to be more developed.

American online deliberation is more reasoned, polite towards participants in online political discourse than Russian one. Accordingly, American society has more opportunities to build a constructive dialogue. Russian online discussions are less reasoned, polite and tolerant compared to American ones; interpersonal, abstract communication and a rude culture of attitude towards participants in online discussions prevail which hinders the development of online deliberation.

Thus, at present, when the United States are not just opponents, but opponents of Russia in the international arena, the question becomes open for further discussion: could one of the prerequisites for such a situation, in particular, be the different quality of online deliberation in the United States and Russia?

Conducted research has a number of limitations. They include, for example, the largely subjective and situational nature of the selection of cases, as well as a small number of analyzed discussion platforms. In the future, it seems appropriate to investigate the nature and quality of public dialogue in the form of online deliberation on socio-political topics in other foreign countries with different regimes and forms of government. A comparative analysis will help compile a complete picture about how deliberative practices among citizens and dialogue between society and state are developed. It is important to understand the factors why there is a certain culture of communication and certain type of public dialogue between participants in discussions. Therefore, having studied this, it will be possible to offer recommendations on improving the deliberative quality of online discussions and effectively integrating the results of deliberation into the process of developing and making policy decisions in different countries and between countries.

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