



# Narrative Communities on Social Networks and the Roles of Legacy Media in Them: The Case of User Complaints in Russian Regions

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**Abstract.** On social networks, user complaints and comments they drive form a special type of hybrid discourse of user posts/comments, media publications, and various (re)actions by authorities, from monitoring procedures to response posts on official portals and social media to real action [1]. As our previous research suggests [2], user complaints form stable cross-regional thematic domains based on continuous ‘complaint – response’ narratives and, thus, may gather discussion communities of yet unknown permanence. Even if such communities are ‘discontinued’ [3] in terms of stable participation of both ordinary users and institutions, they still accumulate substantial amounts of popular discontent and foster cumulative formation [4] of moods towards authorities, social issues, and quality of life on the regional level. We interpret such detectable complaints-based groups as narrative communities and qualitatively assess the roles played by legacy media in these communities of opinion. We also show that decentering of local journalism takes place in the socially-mediated ecosystems affected by both preferential treatment by the state and the rise of informal newsgroups that attract massive audiences. However, in times of rising uncertainty re-centering of journalism may happen.

**Keywords:** social media · cumulative deliberation · narrative communities · user engagement · news media · newsgroups · complaints · russia

## 1 Introduction

Social media of today host mass-scale public discussions. Users tend to discuss issues of public importance that continue in time. Social media have become an important milieu within public sphere where social dissent and discontent accumulates [2, 4]. We argue that discussions on issues form narrative communities and/or communities of opinion in which issues gain public recognition and get continuously discussed.

Such narrative communities form around gatekeeper accounts of varying provenance. We detect three major types of gatekeepers, namely the accounts of local authorities, local legacy media, and local informal newsgroups. The context for formation of narrative issue-based communities in Russian regions comprises subordination of most local

media to regional administrations, growing presence of local governing bodies on social media, restrictive legal environment that has led to elimination of most oppositional news outlets, and destruction of public discussion on ‘undesired’ Western social media platforms. Such an environment fosters media decentering from opinion formation processes and allows for non-mediated decision-making.

In this paper, we ask whether legacy media may preserve their democratic functions within such environments. For that, we collect data from the Russia-based platform *Vkontakte* (VK) for 22 regions and map dominant gatekeepers; then we qualitatively assess the roles of media in formation of narrative communities, using statistics of user engagement, interpretive reading, and discussion tracing.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the theoretical and empirical context of opinion formation on Russian social media and poses the research questions and hypotheses. Section 3 describes sampling and data analysis. Section 4 reveals the research results, and Sect. 5 generalizes on our conclusions.

## 2 Complaints-Based Narrative Communities in Russian Regions

### 2.1 Narrative Communities and Community Narratives: The Forces that Shape Online Community Building

Narrative community as a concept has been developing since the 1990s. Narrative communities are defined as ‘consist[ing] of closely interacting participants who frequently discuss their views of the world’ [5]. The concept has been utilized for detection and conceptualization of offline communities of practice (like Israeli backpackers [6] or tourists who use recreational vehicles [5]). However, today, most research is focused upon online communities, as they may be tracked by various methods, including narrative analysis and community detection.

Interestingly, research on narrative communities overlaps with that on community narratives [7] and that on community as narrative. In most of the literature of pre-Internet era, narratives serve as community markers/detectors and are seen as either a way of communal expression of will/attitude, a method to reveal the community borders [8], or a way to debunk the relationship between a certain social process and individual experience [9]. Research from the 1990s suggests that social cognition may also take narrative forms [10], thus helping in reshaping the shared understandings of social problems. Moreover, narratives were shown to play a role – or, rather, multiple roles – in community building, both offline and online. In the 1990s, narrative-based networking was described by clinical psychologists as having capacities of affecting both personal narratives/self-concepts [11] and social behavior, including socialization [7, 12]. Narratives are also believed to shape communal life [13]. Some communication philosophers even insist that communities, at all, exist only when a ‘we-narrative’ of and about a given community exists [14: 22], seeing communities as being constituted by and dependent upon particular forms of narration [15].

In online realms, networked narratives arise [16]. Narratives identify ‘online community space [that] provides emotional support and a space for social interaction in an interpersonal relational context between geographically dispersed individuals’, especially for social groups of activist or politically vulnerable nature. Narratives add to

community growth, as ‘shared narratives provide context for each additional narrative, allowing for the development of interpersonal relationships,’ and the community itself [17]. Albrechtslund [18] underlines two other major functions of narratives in online communities (of gamers, in this case), namely sensemaking for an online co-practice and building of a shared identity.

Some research has focused on political roles of narrative communities. MacIntyre has critically influenced community psychology studies by stating that communities were groups of people who argued together in a constructive way, which was later developed into communities seen ‘as overlapping groupings capable of engaging in meaningful dialogue’ – that is, as communities of political practice [19: 56] relevant for public spheres and decision-making. Works by Rappaport, including [20], link community narratives to community empowerment. Moreover, narratives may complement or challenge the status quo in national and local public spheres. E.g., in antivaxxer discussions, shared common narrative strategies build a competing consensus based on personal expertise [21]. It was stated, i.a., that narrative communities utilize technology for resistance and resilience [17].

Our previous research [2] suggests that certain types of persistent discussion communities may form via practice of policy criticism and/or critique of local authorities. They may form despite the pressure of platform affordances which may not support negative emotions, while platforms still become places where collective grievances on agendas are expressed [22]. However, we see virtually no research on narrative communities formed via policy criticism. There is a conceptualization of critical publics by Toepfl [23], among which he distinguishes leadership-critical, policy-critical, and uncritical publics. However, such publics are non-defined in his theory in terms of their structure and discursive belonging. We suggest that such publics may take shape of discursive or narrative communities that gradually grow in time and space, having a chance for relatively long and stable existence. As our concept of cumulative deliberation implies [4], policy-critical publics may have cumulative character and, thus, grow or diminish in time, as well as continue in time via forming detectable stable structures. So far, publics were assessed in their final state relevant to policymaking; however, their dynamics is also important, as we can detect the moment in time when they become relevant, as well as whether they dissipate and how exactly. Moreover, via assessing the policy-critical communities in their growth, we could also assess the roles of various actors in their formation and public pressure upon decision-makers, as well as the public reaction of the authorities within these narrative communities. In particular, the roles of journalists are assessed in literature within either publics or discussions online, but very rarely in terms of their impact upon formation of critical online communities.

Such communities have, in the recent years, received a push in formation due to growth of alternative socially-mediated forms of city media – namely, local/regional newsgroups, accounts of ‘overheard’ city talk, and online media represented on social networks. Such media have been called ‘new gatekeepers in town’ [24]. In them, as our previous works demonstrate, the bulk of user complaints concentrates, and around these complaints commenting unfolds. We would like to inquire whether narrative communities form within the user talk that discusses complaints.

## 2.2 Communities of Opinion and Gatekeepers of Discontent on Social Media

In media and democracy studies, the roles of legacy media accounts in public dialogue are under scrutiny [25], as we need to know whether, in online communities of opinion [26], they preserve their normative roles of information disseminators, discussion organizers, and bridges between authorities and publics that would convey public dissent and demands to the powerful. However, mediatization of politics has also led to the growing possibilities for authorities to be present online and react directly to user dissent, including complaints. Moreover, new players that change the landscapes of online public spheres, especially in (semi-)autocracies like Russia, are amateur news accounts and local newsgroups [24]. Absence of political accounts in major online discussions [27] allows new local media to accumulate and lead the regional narratives of dissent. Thus, we see the three potential types of social media accounts that would allow for formation of the narrative communities in the Russian regions. These are:

- traditional gatekeepers of social dissent, that is, accounts of local media;
- new gatekeepers of social dissent, that is, local amateur newsgroups;
- mediatized addressees of social dissent, that is, accounts of local authorities.

Posts and comments on user complaints in them take part in maintaining the narrative communities on certain themes of popular discontent, but the three of them are expected to differ in origin and nature of active deliberators, discussion length, and the role of legacy media in the discussion.

The three types of gatekeepers differ in their normative roles in the online deliberation on local issues. Thus, local legacy media operate today in hybrid environments, reaching their audiences physically, on web 1.0, and via social media, forming their own ecosystem [28] and taking part in accumulation of opinions [4]. They are expected to perform democratic functions, including informing and political newsmaking [29], community integration [30], and linking local governments to local publics. However, with the growing mediatization of local governance and rise of alternative news sources like newsgroups, under pressures of excessive information flows and emotionalization of media content, the process of decentering journalism has been taking place, both in democracies [31] and in countries with no long democratic traditions [2]. Decentering refers to the diminishing role of local media in deliberation of local issues. Interestingly, mediatization of local governance appears to be both similar in various countries and highly contextual. On one hand, direct communication with voters via social media has been growing worldwide. On the other hand, presence of government representatives in online discussions varies highly across contexts; in Russia, e.g., we had detected an institutional vacuum in both conflictual and complaints-based discussions [2; 28].

All this poses questions on the roles of the three gatekeepers in creation of narrative communities of opinion. Legacy media and authorities that might be expected to create such communities do not always take part in this process, while amateur local newsgroups are rarely equipped with professionalism, including media ethics, for creation of rational and balanced public dialogue.

### 2.3 Mapping Complaints-Based Narrative Communities in Russian Regions

Given what is stated in 2.2, at this stage of research, we aim at two goals. First, mapping of Russian regions is necessary, in order to see what types of gatekeepers dominate. Second, we will assess what roles the three gatekeepers play in the formation of narrative communities around user complaints.

Complaints were selected for the assessment of narrative community formation, as they accumulate both emotional peaks and conglomerates of rational suggestions. However, on social media, comments rarely reach the form of well-shaped and well-organized discussions, which makes their patterns hard to detect. Moreover, on Russian social networking platforms such as *Vkontakte* (VK.com, or VK), the ecosystems are adjusted to fostering emotional reactions more than to growing chains of topical messages. However, despite this and other limiting factors such as, e.g., botization, VK has been recognized as key for official state communication, along with Telegram as a nearly-official messenger. Over 150,000 organizations have been obliged to establish at least one account on a social network (most of them preferred VK). On the contrary, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have been called undesired and claimed to spread extremist and anti-Russian views, which prevents them being used for official communication today. This is why we will focus on VK and will configure our research questions the way that helps detect the varying features of discussions in the narrative communities within the three types of local gatekeepers of social dissent.

The active struggle in the Russian media space was also shaped by a range of laws on foreign agency that treated both individuals and organizations, including oppositional media. By September 2022, most of them ceased to exist, moved to foreign jurisdictions, or continued on Telegram (not on VK). Thus, local legacy media on VK were mostly regional newspapers or TV channels that received some sort of support or (at least) tolerance from local authorities. Audience consolidation in terms of opinion building was also taking place, as circa 3.8 mln people who opposed the official Russian position, by various estimates, left Russia during the first months of the military conflict. The conflict has influenced the state information policy, accelerating the process of digitalization of bureaucracy and local decision-making institutions. After 2017, the state has sharply intensified Internet regulation, which has led, i.a., to withdrawal or banning of many titles from the media space. With these trends taken together, relative etatization and depoliticization of the socially-mediated public discussion on VK may be noted. Discussions on this social network have even previously been recognized by scholars as de-politicized and trivial [32]; as for now, oppositional media have been next-to-absent in Russian regions. However, ‘new gatekeepers’ could to some extent be viewed as an alternative, as they provided space for satirical treatment of current events, social critique, and user-generated content that contained complaints and described shortcomings of local life, while legacy media remained linked to either authorities or big regional businesses.

### 2.4 The Research Questions

In our research, we focus on how types of narrative communities affect discussion efficiency and media roles, including those most studied within the research on media

decentering [31]. In accordance with the research goals stated above, we have formulated the following research questions and hypotheses:

**RQ1.** What is the shape of complaints-based narrative communities in Russia? How do narrative communities distribute in Russian regions? Are there regions where media-based narrative communities dominate?

**RQ2.** What is the role of media accounts as discussion organizers within the narrative communities, in comparison with those of local authorities and local newsgroups?

*H2a.* Discussion length on media accounts will be significantly shorter than on those of local authorities (longer) and newsgroups (the longest), as the two latter allow for either direct communication with authorities or freer expression of discontent.

*H2b.* The number of user comments on media accounts is much smaller than on those of authorities and newsgroups.

**RQ3.** What is the role of media accounts as discussion participants within the narrative communities, in comparison with that of local authorities and local newsgroups?

*H3.* Media accounts themselves are rarely involved in commenting, which is also true for local newsgroups who see themselves more as news providers, unlike the authorities' accounts who comment on user complaints more often.

### 3 Data Collection and Analysis

*Selection of Time Span.* We have selected September and October 2022 as the period of an outburst of societal anxiety and complaining due to the first wave of military mobilization that took place in all Russian regions. It has led to both a significant news outbreak and to growth of online discussions. On September 21, 2022, President of Russia Vladimir Putin announced partial mobilization of citizens in reserve liable for military service. Putin's decree has become the main newsbreak of the end of 2022 for the entire Russian society, and many media outlets have begun to cover events in accordance with the interests of their owners or the elites influencing them. E.g., oppositional media focused on the emigration of Russians following the mobilization decree, as well as on events related to the blocking of some online media and the implementation of the law on foreign agents in relation to individuals and legal entities. Heated discussions on social media and messengers like Telegram have, to some extent, spurred authorities' communication activities in response to public anxiety and the incoming news from the army. In addition, local recruitment points have seen a lot of incidents related to mess within the recruitment system and conscripts' lists, many of which were reported via new gatekeepers on VK and Telegram, rather than on legacy media. Thus, we have selected September and October 2022 as the time span when all three types of gatekeepers were critically affected by the incoming agendas and audience behavior.

*Data Collection.* Was performed via manual selection of 66 most popular accounts of the three types (one per type, that is, three accounts per region) in 22 Russian regions and automated parsing of posts and comments on VK. All posts for September and October 2022 were collected and the top 3 most comprehensive ones (by views, comments, and reposts) were selected along with comments to them. The list of regions included Astrakhan, Bashkortostan, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Karelia,

Khabarovsk, Krasnodar, Krasnoyarsk, Leningrad Region, Lipetsk, Murmansk, Nizhniy Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Perm, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Tatarstan, Tyumen, Voronezh, YUGRA (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region).

In each region, the top 3 media outlets were detected via the ‘Medialogia’ web portal ranking list, as for the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2022. The media that had VK accounts with the largest number of subscribers were selected for the sample. The official pages of the heads of regions (verified by a special VK check mark) were chosen as the accounts of the authorities; if there was no account of the governor or the number of subscribers was relatively small, we opted for the pages of the regional governments. In addition, the heads of the regions were checked for popularity measured by mentions by the same ‘Medialogia’ for the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2022, to make sure they were among the popular accounts. For the third type of gatekeepers, the most popular news groups were selected, which names contained the names of the respective regions. Most often, these were the groups with the names ‘Typical [city]’ or ‘[city] online.’ Some of these groups allegedly belonged to local authorities, but it was impossible to find public confirmation of this.

Within the collected data, we have chosen the posts where comments contained complaints and/or discussions around them – in fact, over 90% of posts in each case.

Two legacy media accounts (*Kuban’ News* and *74.ru*) were eliminated due to absence of comments switched off by moderators. Under some posts, comments were also missing: E.g., in *Ircity*, they disappeared in October. In Tyumen, a post on mobilization had 155,000 views in the media account, 1,221 reposts, 1,800 likes/dislikes, and not a single comment; presumably, they were deleted manually. For posts with less than 5 comments registered, the duration of the discussion was assigned 0.

Thus, a total of 64 accounts were closely examined in VK, with a total of 8,946,230 subscribers, 1,738,857 of them saw posts in two months (see Table 1).

*Data Analysis* All accounts were assessed by the following parameters: average VRpost (audience coverage by post, %), number of subscribers, entries, views, comments, likes, reposts, average views, average comments, average likes, average reposts, most viewed

**Table 1.** Sample description

Parameter	Authorities	Legacy media	New gatekeepers
VR (audience coverage / subscriber reach), on average per post (% of subscribers seeing a post)	<b>74.3%*</b> (10.3% to 179.5%)	8.4% (1.5% to 31.3%)	11.7% (1.9% to 27.8%)
Average size of the public, thousand subscribers	61.2 (7.9 to 211.5)	98.9 (5.9 to 349.8)	<b>246.6</b> (24.2 to 582.7)
Average size of audience seeing the post, thousand subscribers	<b>45.4</b> (4.3 to 190.1)	6.5 (0.1 to 20.6)	25.9 (1.1 to 57.7)

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

Parameter	Authorities	Legacy media	New gatekeepers
Average number of published posts per month (September / October)	56 (5 to 359)	<b>838</b> (302 to 1586)	391 (38 to 989)
Dynamics of N posts (September to October)	<b>+ 7.9%</b> (-42.9% to + 54.3%)	+ 1.8% (-22.1% to + 31.6%)	-0.6% (-22.1% to + 34.1%)
Dynamics of N views (September to October)	+ 15.7% (-56.3% to + 77.9%)	<b>+ 19%</b> (-27.6% to + 191.1%)	+ 4% (-20.6% to + 28.9%)
Dynamics of N comments (September to October)	+ 11% (-83.7% to + 143.7%)	<b>+ 13.5%</b> (-100% (closed) to + 137%)	-11.7% (-60% to + 55%)
Dynamics of N reposts (September to October)	<b>+ 20.6%</b> (-75.9% to + 132.1%)	-7.3% (-49.2% to + 34.8%)	-16.3% (-53.6% to + 36.7%)
Dynamics of the average N comments per post (September to October)	+ 5%	<b>+ 12.1%</b>	-8.9%
Average N comments in the top 3 posts	397	206	<b>605</b>
The average length of the discussion in top 3 posts	16.3 <b>days</b>	6.4 days	9.5 days
Dynamics of the average N comments in top 3 posts (September to October)	+ 1.3%	<b>+ 64.6%</b>	-9.2%
Dynamics of the average discussion duration in the top 3 posts (September to October)	+ 61.4%	<b>+ 86.1%</b>	+ 82.8%

Note. \* - the highest meaning is highlighted for each row



posts, number of views on the top 3 posts, the most commented posts, the number of comments on the top 3 posts, and duration of the discussion.

We have employed frequency analysis for assessment of the number of comments and user activity, manual account assessment for detection of user types, and interpretive reading for detection of cumulative patterns in user discussions.

## 4 Results

**RQ1.** Mapping of the narrative communities via simple account statistics has revealed quite unexpected misbalances is how complaints-based discussion structures today in Russian regions (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Dominance of gatekeepers in 22 Russian regions by three parameters

Type	N comments in top 3 posts	N comments on average	VR post
Governor / authorities	<b>27%</b> Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Leningrad region, Perm, Tatarstan, YUGRA	<b>77%</b> Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Rostov-on-Don, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk, Perm, Samara, Kaliningrad, Irkutsk, Tatarstan, YUGRA, Karelia, Voronezh, Murmansk, Leningrad region, Khabarovsk	<b>100%</b> All regions
Mass media	<b>18%</b> Chelyabinsk, Khabarovsk, Krasnoyarsk, Lipetsk	<b>9%</b> Bashkortostan, Lipetsk	-
Media-like accounts	<b>55%</b> Astrakhan, Bashkortostan, Karelia, Krasnodar, Murmansk, Nizhniy Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Tyumen, Voronezh	<b>14%</b> Astrakhan, Krasnodar, Tyumen	-

First of all, we need to underline that our previous results [2] which told of the zero presence of governmental and media accounts within VK-based discussions on complaints that unfold on legacy and new media accounts needs to be complemented by the current results. While authorities are not present as discussion participants on media accounts, they seem to be quite successful in building their own narrative communities on their accounts. The accounts of the authorities are leading in terms of the coverage of views per post, the average size of the audience per post, the dynamics of the number of posts and reposts, and the average length of the discussion in the comments in the top 3

posts over a period of two months. Despite the much smaller number of posts during the two months, public attention to these posts grew, and the major deliberative parameters such as audience coverage and duration of discussion were better than those for both types of media. Stratified, they, again, show that, in over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of regions, government accounts attracted more comments on average than media, and were outperforming media for VR in 100%(!) of regions.

Professional media have also experienced a relative return of user attention. In general, they show low efficiency, posting over two times more frequently than media-like accounts and nearly 15 times more often than authorities, but having much lower audience reach. The length of discussions under their posts in top posts varies from 3 to 6 days, 1,5 times and 2,5 times shorter than for new media and authorities, respectively, though normatively it is the legacy media that are expected to organize discussions and support the narrative communities while they are elaborating decisions. However, during the mobilization which was perceived by many as a crisis, audiences partly returned to viewing and commenting, especially the most popular posts (+64.6%), and the length of discussions grew nearly twice, forming more stable communities of opinion. Discussions became longer on all three types of gatekeepers, but legacy media experienced the biggest growth followed by new media-like accounts, while the discussions at the authorities' accounts grew less intensely. This shows that there is still room left for the audiences to form communities of opinion around media accounts in crisis times, despite regular low attention to their content.

Newsgroups and media-like non-editorial accounts entered the time of mobilization as the most popular sources, but have demonstrated drops in user attention, as the audiences turned to more politicized and urgent information that only the authorities and legacy media could provide. However, in over 50% of regions, their most popular posts still kept them as important gatekeepers. Newsgroups, in general, tended to create longer discussions than legacy media, but during the.

Despite our results for RQ1 draw a picture of partial re-centering of local media and growth of audiences' direct communication with authorities throughout the 22 regions, this may be a bit misleading, as regional differences are high, and the results need to be contextualized in further studies. Given the results in Table 2, we, in future, will cluster the regions in terms of dominance of certain types of gatekeepers.

Second, we show in both this and previous works that the shift of media roles implies both deprivation of the role of discussion organizers and non-development of the role of discussion participants. The remaining role is discussion watchers, which implies echoing user discontent and subordination to local authorities in disseminating information on their replies to people's complaints. This may be explained by the fact that most local media are owned by either local authorities or state-affiliated businesses, which deprives media of their watchdog roles.

An important observation can be made about user reactions and the discourse of complaint within the communities of opinion. Thus, topics that evoke complaining comprise many posts; the topics less popular if judged by the number of posts dedicated to them and the views in these posts turn out to be the most commented upon. Moreover, the focus of comments does not always relate to the news topic. There were often cases when users, having seen the reaction of the local authorities to complaints, continued to

ask questions beyond the topic of the post, in the hope of getting an answer – and they received it. Thus, the topic of the news might not be the most interesting (as, e.g., in the case of the news on the governor's visit somewhere), but the discussion in the comments turned into a 'hotline' for a governor or a government, with certain 'complaint themes' being more persistent than news topics. This supports our view of user commenting under posts in the three gatekeeper account types as narrative communities / communities of opinion. This also clearly corresponds to the idea of cumulative deliberation [4], which needs to be further explored.

We should also report atypical patterns in comment samples of several regions. The first non-standard pattern of discussion development is that, after a certain time, messages (or stickers) non-related to the post topic appear on the already exhausted comment thread, thus artificially prolonging the comment period, with an unclear goal. The second pattern describes the activity of individual complainants who simultaneously publish the same question in all the gatekeepers' accounts using the same text. Third, there is also content that is repeated in different regions (mainly videos with nationwide news), also published at about the same time. One can associate this with the pro-government content produced by the information management centers of regional governments. Thus, we see attempts of strategic interference to the discussions and influencing the narratives featuring complaints, which demands attention.

**RQ2.** It is on social networks where Russian local media turn out to be secondary to government accounts, in both the speed of reaction to user complaints and user attention. Often posts and comments from the accounts of heads of regions or governments become the basis for journalistic publications, and not vice versa. Journalists remain voiceless within user discussions, as well as lose their chances for creating a deeper discussion on local issues if the authorities answer individual user complaints quicker than journalists can pick them and introduce to the news cycle. Thus, the logic of news production today plays against journalism professionals and against the public sphere itself, depriving regions of user complaints becoming a source for generalization in journalistic enquiry and a spur for deeper discussion. Neither narrative nor cumulative character of opinion formation help local journalists engage into efficient issue-based reporting and discussion organization, which leaves them the roles of discussion watchers only, deprived of the watchdog and agora roles.

*H2a.* The hypothesis was partly confirmed. In general, media accounts turned out to be the least engaging the audiences in lengthy discussions. However, authorities, not newsgroups, were the most engaging. Unlike the authorities' accounts which follow an unspoken recommendation to respond to all complaints and requests of citizens on social networks quite quickly and correctly, and unlike the accounts of newsgroups which do not respond to comments but use provocative style and do not limit comments, media accounts are not engaged in any activity dedicated to community or narrative formation, and also limit commenting. The latter is primarily due to legally binding responsibility for potential dissemination of fakes and/or extremist statements (account holders being also responsible for commenters!). Observing an increase in aggression, user discontent, and botization, in October, the media preferred either to limit commenting or to reduce interaction with subscribers. However, the users still addressed them more in October

than previously, which hints to the potential of local legacy media for community building and support of the narratives based on complaints, if not for the restrictive regulation.

*H2b.* The hypothesis was fully confirmed (see Table 2). In terms of the number of comments in general, the government accounts are leading, and in terms of the number of comments on top 3 engaging posts, newsgroups are ahead. At the same time, legacy media are leading in the dynamics of the increase in comments in October (see Table 1). However, this conclusion has several limitations. Firstly, hiding and ‘cleaning up’ comments on such a sensitive topic as partial mobilization affects the overall dynamics. Secondly, the most popular posts often include sweepstakes, contests, or reportage videos non-related to the post topic. Finally, the fact that the agendas of all three gatekeeper types differs also distorts the results. Government accounts publish only information important for regional management; the media focus on socially relevant agendas; and newsgroups are a mix of local social agendas, national and even world news, and entertainment content in substantial quantities. Thus, being cautious about direct comparisons, we can only state that we see signs of re-centering of media in user attention during the period of anxiety, and that, even given the re-centering, legacy media were losing to other gatekeepers in terms of user engagement.

**RQ3.** If the role of the discussion organizer is, at least partly, fulfilled by legacy media, their role as discussion participant is minimized. As it can be seen from Table 1, legacy media increased the volume of publications within the crisis period, but lost momentum in the number of reposts. A lot of information is produced, but it does not make people react. For emotional satisfaction of information needs, subscribers turn to informal communities, and for solving local problems they directly address the accounts of the authorities. Crisis times engage audiences more and make re-address legacy media, but this is definitely not enough to bring media back to the center of narrative communities.

*H3a.* The hypothesis is confirmed – i.a., by observations on the course of discussions under specific posts in the sample. As stated above, the topic of user complaints to the authorities does not always correspond to the post topic. Prompt response by government representatives to citizens provokes an increase in comments, but at the same time they cannot be considered a full-fledged deliberative discussion. Solving an individual problem often does not imply public dialogue on the issue. Moreover, sometimes fellow commenters may not support the complainer and react negatively to his/her complaint; this, though, does not create an opinion crossroads but, rather, helps silencing complaints and allows for letting them down by both authorities and media. This practice clearly needs additional research in terms of deliberative quality of user disagreement and institutional reactions to such disagreements.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

Narrative communities that form on social networks generally reflect the moods and problematic issues of citizens in real life. Along with that, discussion flows in semi-autocracies are shaped both political and commercial factors, such as by fairly intensive information policies of the state authorities, market competition, informal news communities acting as an aggregator of local agendas, and the production of content by local

media that still see social networks as an additional channel for news dissemination of information, not an autonomous space where local communities reside.

A fairly large amount of social discontent accumulates on social networks, monitored by local authorities and media, as well as provoking engaging comments in informal newsgroups, which provide a platform for open expression of discontent via publication of user complaints. As our previous studies have shown, in which we interviewed newsgroups moderators, the professional community of journalists is divided in opinion whether working with complaints is the direct responsibility of journalists, while the authorities clearly see their role in reducing social discontent in the space of social networks and increasing the volume of published 'constructive' content in order to demonstrate efficient problem solving and prompt response to citizens' requests. However, such reshaping of institutional response to social discontent decenters journalists via competition pressures of two sorts, of which one is the competition with authorities for quicker pickup of user complaints, and the second is the one from informal newsgroups that attract much bigger audiences and allow for freer discussion of local agendas.

An important role in the restructuring of information flows in social networks is assigned to state public pages and, in particular, the personal pages of governors and heads of regions. Posts on the pages of local politicians become a source of information for both citizens and journalists, mostly in a top-down way. However, the bottom-up chain of articulation of social discontent via media is broken. Even the top-down communication between politics and media, in which important governmental input was provided via press secretaries to influential media, is substituted by direct broadcasting through the accounts of government officials on social networks. Users have a chance to react, but further engagement of authorities into socially-mediated dialogue does not happen, leaving public discussion the function of vapoing out dissent. Depending on the charisma and political position of politicians, popularity of their accounts may be several times higher than that of local public affairs media.

The processes of decentering journalism are vivid on VK if we examine such classic media roles as informing, providing feedback, information verification, social orientation, gatekeeping, and watchdog. At the same time, we cannot state that media accounts do not affect opinion formation. Moreover, in times of crisis, such as pandemic or military mobilization, media accounts become more visible as foci of public attention. In journalists' reportages, the public is looking for confirmation or refutation of facts and rumors, important additions to known information and, of course, interpretation of events. In the accounts of the authorities, people are interested in solving momentary problems and operational comments on important events in the region. Newsgroups shift to more marginal positioning in times of crisis, as they do not directly deal with public needs, but primarily respond to demand for higher quality of life, lifestyle orientation, and leisure.

User complaints are the most indicative on narrative communities formed around public affairs issues, as they accumulate various facets of complaints-based discourse, namely substantial, emotional, and behavioral ones. User complaints create peaks of formation of narrative communities, attracting the entire range of opinions, emotions, and in all the three major socially-mediated gatekeepers.

State policies towards certain platforms critically influence the formation of narrative communities, as the latter are shaped by platform affordances, state presence, and moderation practices bound by the legal and political environment. In Russia, with the de-facto destruction of a large segment of socially-mediated discussion in the ‘undesired’ Western platforms and obligation of local authorities to be present on VK has directed user discontent more towards direct VK-based communication with authorities. VK not only forms certain patterns of interaction between community members, but also receives support and preferential treatment on the part of the authorities. The bulk of the public affairs discourse has moved to VK, and the struggle between different types of narrative communities is unfolding there.

All in all, on social networks, professional media have partly lost their positions in formation of narrative communities to the accounts of the authorities and informal news groups. Decentering of journalism on social networks shows up via its diminished roles in collecting discontent and failing to find those responsible for problem solving. Nevertheless, in times of crises, media remain anchors and providers of guidance and orientation, which leaves room for a return to basic democratic functions.

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