



Influence of Media Type on Political E-Discourse: Analysis of Russian and American Discussions on Social Media

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Abstract. The article presents the results of discourse analysis where authors define how media identity influences character and quality of online discussions on actual socio-political themes. The research is carried out in terms of theory of J. Habermas and methodology of Misnikov who develops the conception of German philosopher. The empirical data comprises Russian and American cases: A. Navalny's court sentence and D. Trump's second impeachment are analyzed. Russian media platforms are divided by political affiliation into independent, pro-state and neutral while American ones are represented by democratic, republican and central media sources. The authors use such parameters of deliberative standard to assess quality and character of online deliberation as distribution of positions, argumentation, culture of communication, interactivity and dialogicity. As a result, investigators come to conclusion that media type has an impact on the way opinions are polarized in online discussions; quality and amount of argumentation; communication culture towards object of discussion and participants of interaction both in Russian and American political e-discourse.

Keywords: Social media · Online discussion · Online deliberation · Political discourse · E-discourse

1 First Introduction

In recent years, social networks have assumed a special role in such interaction which have taken on promising in the political context functions correlating with active development of the processes of political participation and democracy [1, 13, 17, 18, 22]. Moreover, there is a growing quantity of evidence that social media fosters group identity and informal activism [6, 23, 24].

In the research that will be presented below, we decided to focus on social media networks because there can be massive public discussions and active social polarization of opinions. Each media has a role model that partly sets a tone for their political orientation and activities in online space. As scientific research shows, digital platforms force us to rethink these roles based on study of media behavior in a communicative online environment and structural limitations of platforms [2–4]. To understand specifics of media, we examined several models of their online behavior.

The concept of public media identity is understood as a real or perceived image of particular media [8]. In addressing issues of public policy and expression of will, the endless proliferation of media resources allowing to debate publicly requires greater clarity about impact of their political commitment on discourse outcomes. It is assumed that a process of political participation requires acceptance of someone's side and, thus, a formation (joining) of certain solidarities between participants. Membership in a political party or any other organized group with specific social goals usually means solidarity with like-minded people, especially when meeting personally. However, engaging in online discourses (often anonymous) is a different type of social and personal experience that provides more flexibility in choosing a preferred discussion community. This was partially investigated by us earlier [8].

The purpose of research presented in this article is to identify how media type on the Internet platforms of which various discussions take place affects the quality of Internet discourse.

In the empirical part of our research we will analyze social media discussions of various media types in Russia and the United States.

RQ1. Does nature and quality of online discussion depend on the type of media in Russian Internet discourse?

RQ2. Does nature and quality of online discussion depend on the type of media in foreign Internet discourse?

2 Research Approach and Data

The research is in line with the concept of Habermas. When a participant formulates a similar opinion about something that has already been expressed by someone else, he or she joins in virtual "solidarity" with that participant at that point in discourse. This is what J. Habermas defines within the framework of his theory of discourse ethics "intersubjective solidarity" [14], built to share common values expressed in the public sphere. Habermas's approach can rightly be called discursive since public sphere is formed in the free discourse of citizens, free discussion, i.e. deliberation [5]. It is important that the philosopher institutionalizes public sphere and communication as a space for application of communicative action, making it one of the structural parts of political system.

Literature review dedicated to methods of discourse analysis can be divided into several analytically discernable areas.

The first area, the functional linguistic analysis, deals with language as a system and studies mechanisms of its functioning. The Michael Halliday's systemic functional linguistics is an example of this approach, when the language is considered as a separate paradigm that allows its native speakers to choose different linguistic forms to express thoughts. The role and context of discourse, as well as its participants' intentions, exist but matters little. An exception is the transformational generative grammar by Noam Chomsky, who studied syntax as a set of rules, pointing at interrelation of limited deep language structures to the limitless possible grammatically correct variants of their expression, i.e. sentences in the common language [7].

Social discourse analysis prioritizes cultural and political practices as forms of public discourse through the lens of which a meaning of texts and images are defined. The

prominent theory here is the critical discourse analysis by Norman Fairclough, who argues that discourse is the indispensable part of social practice [11, 12]. By analyzing changes in discourses by studying intertextuality it is possible to reveal the transformation of the sociocultural practices themselves. The formal rules of the language and the computer processing of the content is in this case the supplementary procedure to facilitate the analysis.

Research on online civic activism and e-participation are related to a broader domain of cyberspace sociology. In this area web-demographic and behavioral explorations of the Internet are produced. Communications via the Internet are viewed as a means of unification and mobilization of people bearing common culture and public views, sharing common rules of good behavior. Such works actively use visualization methods to describe communication in social networks [10]. Content-analysis and discourse-analysis are also widespread [21].

The research was carried out on the basis of discourse analysis technique developed and described by Yu. Misnikov [9, 15, 16, 19]. The scholar developed “Deliberative Standard to Assess Discourse Quality” [19] and described seven thematically different discourse parameters corresponding to specific research questions for guiding the process of coding messages of Internet discussions: participatory equality, argumentation, communication culture (civility), validity of statements, interactivity, dialogicity, thematic diversity. It should be noted that Misnikov was the first to do this since at the time of his dissertation publication there were no direct analogs in the scientific literature. One of strong sides of this methodological approach is that each parameter contains a set of specific empirical characteristics designed to reflect certain discursive qualities and determine nature of discussion. In addition, a method is not difficult to use and all counting can be done and analyzed in Excel program. For more accurate analysis a few decoders of messages are needed to compare results. This is a limitation of our research as one person decoded comments.

To study online deliberation as a form of public dialogue we took several parameters presented in the deliberative standard. As a result, Russian and American online discussions on political topics were analyzed according to such parameters as distribution of positions, argumentation, culture of communication, interactivity and dialogicity. You can read more about the technique used in our other publications [8, 16]. We analyzed positions, participants, their argumentation, culture of communication, interactivity and dialogicity in discussions since this is the necessary minimum of important parameters to determine nature and quality of discourse. Perfectly, it is better to analyze a full range of parameters with addition of modified parameter (the degree of dialogue) for a more detailed description of deliberation. Positions For/Against were analyzed by determination of participant’s opinions towards problematic. For doing it, every message was read and analyzed without usage of linguistic processing. Argumentation and communication culture forms were analyzed according to developed and described criteria of Misnikov.

To determine interactivity, it is needed to divide number of participants’ requests to each other’s posts, mentions of each other by total number of posts in discussion. To define dialogicity is almost the same as defining interactivity but only mentions by participant’s names are counted and divided by total number of posts.

Table 1. List of online discussions on media pages on VKontakte social network.

Sources	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	TASS
Media type	Independent		Pro-state		Neutral
Article title, material	The suspended sentence was replaced with a real one for Navalny. Taking into account the time spent under house arrest, Navalny will spend two years and eight months in the colony	Will Navalny be replaced with a real one? We follow what is happening in the court - and around it	The Moscow City Court sentenced Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison and a fine of 500 thousand rubles	The court sentenced Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison in a general regime colony	Navalny's lawyer said that her client will spend about 2 years and 8 months in the colony
Post time	02.02.2021 (20:46)	02.02.2021 (18:34)	04.02.2021 (14:03)	02.02.2021 (21:24)	02.02.2021 (21:20)
Num. of comments	602	155	160	148	100

Table 2. Online discussions of the second impeachment of D. Trump on the pages of media on Facebook social network.

Sources	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	The Wall Street Journal
Media type	Democratic		Republican		Neutral
Article title, material	As House votes to impeach him, Trump's focus shifts to brand rehabilitation	Impeached, Again	Impeachment trial won't begin until after Trump leaves office	House meets to debate article of impeachment against President Donald Trump	Opinion This Time, Trump's Impeachment Is Warranted
Post time	14.01.2021 (3:12)	14.01.2021 (16:50)	13.01.2021 (22:15)	13.01.2021	14.01.2021 (4:31)
Num. of comments	504	654	281	904	588

The empirical base was formed by Russian online discussions on the sentence of A. Navalny on VKontakte social network (see Table 1) and American online discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump on Facebook social network (see Table 2).

3 Research Results

We analyzed online discussions on the topic of A. Navalny's sentence on the pages of five media outlets on VKontakte social network according to such parameters as distribution of positions, argumentation, communication culture, interactivity, dialogicity. Media were divided by political affiliation into independent, pro-state and neutral as we tried to identify how public identity of media affects a discussion. It was found that media type affects the level of argumentation and how positions in the discussion are distributed. Comparing discussions on the pages of independent and pro-state media, we came to the following conclusions.

For a more accurate study, we decided to analyze the media with clearly subjective rhetoric and compare them with those media whose rhetoric is more or less objective. State media have a clearly positive rhetoric towards the ruling political class, while private media, so-called opposition or liberal ones, are clearly directed against authorities. Therefore, we decided to analyze such media as Channel One and Komsomolskaya Pravda on the one hand, and Dozhd and Meduza on the other. The news agency (TASS) was chosen as media whose rhetoric should be conditionally objective. The limitation of study is that media sample needs further improvement.

1. In discussions on pro-state sources the most negative attitude towards politician A. Navalny as he is an oppositionist to the current government, therefore, the overwhelming majority of participants in the discussions support the court verdict and support the appointment of a longer term. The total percentage of positions "Against" was 85.2%, "For" - 14.8%. In online discussions of all five media at least 2/3 of users spoke out against Navalny supporting the court's verdict, although some people disagreed with him claiming that the term was insufficient but they still supported the actions of authorities. The highest percentage of negative attitude towards politician was illustrated in online discussions of pro-state media (92.75%), the lowest on platforms of independent media (75.35%); neutral TASS is in the middle: the percentage of "Against" positions was 87.5%. Considering each source separately we note that the largest share of negativity towards A. Navalny was recorded on the VKontakte pages of Komsomolskaya Pravda (93.8%) and Channel One (91.7%). Participants of online deliberation on the Rain page (32.6%) were most positive about politician. Need to add that that data may not be entirely accurate as some user's comments have been removed. In addition, in the discussions of some media there were few opinions about the stated problems which to a certain extent limits the representativeness of results. Moreover, some participants in the course of online discussions indicated on presence of bots and trolls which could leave an imprint on data obtained and discussion in general due to the fact that the bots were difficult to identify.
2. The general level of argumentation in discussions on independent media is higher than in discussions on the pages of pro-state media (see Table 3).

3. The general level of communication culture in discussions on independent media is higher than in discussions on pro-state media (see Table 4).
4. In discussions on independent media the largest number of posts was recorded: a) personal and abstract from the topic character, b) rough culture of communication in relation to the participant while the largest percentage of rough culture of communication in relation to the topic, object of discussion is in discussions on pro-state media (see Table 4).
5. Discussions on independent media are more interactive (66,2%) and dialogical (62,2%) than discussions on pro-state media (58% and 56,7% respectively).

Examples of comments:

«Freedom to Navalny!»

«Also, Navalny has got a fine 500 thousands of rubles which will be paid by the West»

Table 3. Analysis of argumentation in Russian online discussions (results in percent).

Media type	Independent		Pro-state		Neutral
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KPRU	TASS
Facts and numerical indicators of factual nature	8,3	8,2	2	5,3	2,9
Numeric data	1,1	3,3	2	1,1	5,7
Examples, cases, comparisons, events, citations	0,8	0	0	2,1	2,9
References to political figures	31	44,3	35,3	31,9	28,5
Conclusions, generalizations	53,6	42,6	58,7	56,4	60
Recommendation, suggestions, calls to action	2,3	0	2	3,2	0
Links on various online sources	2,9	1,6	0	0	0
General % of argumentation	63,8	39,4	31,9	63,5	35
General	51,6		47,7		

We analyzed online discussions on the topic of D. Trump's second impeachment on the pages of five leading American media outlets on Facebook social network according to the same parameters as Russian discussions. Media were divided by political affiliation

into democratic, republican and neutral as we tried to identify how public identity of media influences the discussion. A similar situation was noted as in the analysis of Russian online discussions: media type affects distribution of positions in the discussion including the level of argumentation. Comparing discussions on the pages of democratic and republican media, the following differences were revealed.

- 1) In the discussions on the pages of the republican media the majority of users does not agree with the second impeachment of D. Trump and support the US President while in the discussions on the pages of democratic media more people agree with impeachment and do not support Trump; discussion on centrist media is represented by two polarized camps of opinions in approximately equal proportions.

According to the aggregate analysis of all media, 53.5% of users are against Trump and for his impeachment while 46.5% are for Trump and against his impeachment (excluding bots' posts). If we take into account the posts of bots, then the data is 55.8% and 44.2%, respectively, which to a small extent but gives an advantage to demos and supporters of the opinion about Trump's removal from the presidency. Bots could be identified manually as a) they were pointed out by some users to whom these bots responded to the comment with their message; moreover, users went to the Facebook pages from which bots responded to the comment and indicated on the lack of information about users; b) the messages of bots were constantly duplicated and without changing the text which immediately prompts the idea of them. Based on the analysis of all positions, we can see that the American society is split into two camps in almost equal proportions.

- 2) The general level of argumentation in discussions on democratic media is higher than in discussions on the pages of republican media (see Table 5).
- 3) The general level of communication culture in discussions on democratic media is higher than in discussions on republican ones (see Table 6).
- 4) The general level of rude culture of communication both in relation to the participant and object of discussion is higher in discussions on the pages of democratic media. It means that participants in "republican" discussions are more polite than participants in "democratic" ones, although in the discussion on neutral source the level of intolerance culture of communication is the lowest (see Table 6).
- 5) Discussions on republican media are more interactive (28,5%) and dialogical (28,5%) than discussions on democratic media (24% and 24% respectively).

Examples of comments:

«Being impeached twice is something i doubt Trump will brag about. If anything will he most possible be angry if that get mentioned near him after he is out of office»

«He should have been removed from office when the Senate had the chance. We wouldn't be in this mess if they had»

Table 4. Analysis of culture of communication in Russian online discussions (in percent).

Media type	Independent		Pro-state		Neutral
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KPRU	TASS
Thematically empty posts with participant name's mention, only interpersonal communication	50	41,9	42,8	22,3	37
Posts with participant name' mention, discussion on topic, but rude towards participant	9,1	4,5	2,5	2	0
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic, but rude towards object of discussion	0,7	0,7	3,1	2	2
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic in a polite, tolerant way	0	0	0	0,7	1
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic, but rude to-wards participant	0,3	1,9	1,3	0,7	0
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic, but rude towards object of discussion	1,8	1,9	1,3	4,7	1
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0	0	0	0
Total % of negative civility towards participant	9,4	6,4	3,8	2,7	0
Total % of negative civility towards object of discussion	2,5	2,6	4,4	6,7	3

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Media type	Independent		Pro-state		Neutral
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KPRU	TASS
Total % of civility	61,9	50,9	51	32,4	41

Table 5. Analysis of argumentation in American online discussions (in percent).

Media type	Democratic		Republican		Neutral
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	The Wall Street Journal
Facts and Numerical Indicators of Factual Nature	6,5	2,8	2,5	2	6,6
Numeric Data	3,2	0,7	2	1	2,8
Examples, Cases, Comparisons, Events, Citations	1,7	1	1	0,8	2,5
References to Political Figures	23,3	31,2	30,6	38,9	31,6
Conclusions, Generalizations	60,6	58,9	55,8	50,1	45,2
Recommendation, Suggestions, Calls to Action	1,5	0,7	2,5	4,8	1,3
Links on Various Online Sources	3,2	4,7	5,6	2,4	10
General % of Argumentation	92	65	70	60	80
General % of Argumentation	78,5		65		

Table 6. Analysis of communication culture in American online discussions (in percent)

Media type	Democratic		Republican		Neutral
	MSNBC	The NYT	The WT	Fox News	The WSJI
Thematically empty posts with participant name's mention, only interpersonal communication	0	0,1	0	0,8	0
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic, but rude towards participant	0	0,8	0,75	0,2	0,5
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic, but rude towards object of discussion	0,2	1,2	0,75	0,8	1,9
Posts with participant name's mention, discussion on topic in a polite, tolerant way	0,6	0,1	0	0	0
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic, but rude towards participant	0	0	0	0,2	0
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic, but rude towards object of discussion	7,1	4,4	2,8	7,2	1,4
Posts without participant name's mention, with discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0,1	0	0	0,1
Negative civility towards participant	0	0,8	0,75	0,4	0,5
Negative civility towards object of discussion	7,3	5,6	3,55	8	2,3
Average negative civility in dependence of parties	6,85		6,35		2,8
Total civility	7,9	6,7	4,3	9,2	3,9

4 Discussion

Our research has demonstrated a clear difference between discussions on platforms of different media types in terms of such indicators as distribution of positions, argumentation, culture of communication, interactivity and dialogicity. Media identity influences the quality and nature of online discussion. No doubt, for the most part it depends on people who come to these platforms to discuss. Nevertheless, media identity makes it possible to gather more supporters, fans of these media where they can meet the same ones and communicate with them on common topic, and these people have similar views. It is about a consolidating role if we consider the example of American discussions. The question of expression and opinion freedom of expression is also important. This was

clearly demonstrated on the platforms of Russian media, especially in the discussions on the platforms of independent media. Moreover, comments of participants in the discussions in groups of independent media were not removed or moderated which cannot be said about state media.

However, we cannot say with certainty why media type so noticeably affects the quality of Internet discourse. Definitely, it requires further research. Key political preferences, biases and motivations do not change quickly. Nevertheless, ideally, the virtual environment of online communication can apparently help citizens compare differences, clarify established positions and completely change them as a result of Internet communication.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, we got positive answers to both the first and the second research question. Does nature and quality of online discussion depend on the type of media in both Russian and foreign Internet discourse?

In Russian online discussions participants in discussions on independent media platforms support A. Navalny more, speak less negatively towards the object of discussion but more negatively towards each other than participants in pro-state ones. Discussions on the platforms of independent media are more reasoned, interactive and dialogical (RQ1).

As for American discussions, on social networks of republican media, the majority of users does not agree with the second impeachment of D. Trump and support the politician while on democratic social networks more people agree with the impeachment and do not support Trump. In democratic media groups participants speak more negatively in relation to the object of discussion, and in general their culture of communication is more intolerant than those of participants in discussions on the platforms of republican media. Discussions on democratic platforms are more argumentative than on republican ones, but less interactive and dialogical (RQ2).

In the future more in-depth studies of the quality of Internet discussions on various media platforms and in different cultural contexts are needed.

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