

## POLITICAL LEGITIMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TRANSFORMATION

*The article reviews the trends in the development of digital network communications and converged media during the Covid-19 pandemic aiming at determining their impact on the legitimization of political institutions and the formation of a new world order. The conclusions are based on the analysis of the new forms and channels of communication in digital networks, including messengers and Tik Tok. The author assumes that the further digitalization of communication networks is accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in public confidence in the communicative action due to infodemic and intentional exclusion of certain groups of people. The article reviews the "swipe culture" of information consumption and its influence on the formation of discourses. There is a trend of restricting freedom of communication through artificial intelligence and social network algorithms. As a result, users seek more privacy and switch to secure channels of communication, which does not promote search for public consensus and legitimization of political institutions. The concept of "digital anomie" is proposed, which is a prerequisite for the intensification of protest movements around the world. The peculiarities of the use of digital networks during such protests in 2020-2021 and the attempts of national governments to control digital communication are analyzed. The author concludes that no subject, including national governments, digital technology giants, individual actors or audiences are able to control relations of power in digital networks. This reduces the strategic potential of political institutions as major players in the world order, further weakening their influence on key issues of world politics to the point of losing the subjectivity of politics as such. The search for the legitimization ways of political institutions within the above trends is the subject of the further scientific research of the author.*

**Keywords:** political communication, communicative digital networks, discourse, political legitimacy, democracy

During the Covid-19 global pandemic, the organization of measures to combat it, the social and financial insecurity of citizens, the state of national economies and the migration processes have become indicators of the capacity of the countries in the world. The national governments, which citizens rely on during significant hardships, have been challenged in terms of legitimacy. There are various pessimistic assessments about the prospects of representative democracy as a global model of political governance. The American non-governmental organization Freedom House indicates an "antidemocratic turn" in its report of Nations in Transit-2021 [1]. The researchers believe that the unsuccessful pandemic management by major democracies has provided additional arguments for the opponents of democratic governance.

The UN Secretary-General A. Guterres noted in a speech in February 2021 that a voter turnout has declined worldwide by an average of 10% since the early 1990s. According to him, trust in institutions and leaders is declining, and "a growing gap in trust between people, institutions, and leaders threatens us all" [2]. This thesis is confirmed by the results of the "Trust Barometer 2021", which recorded a significant decline in trust in institutions and leaders around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic, quarantine measures, protests against systemic racism, and political instability [3]. This processes occur during the functioning of such a communicative space, where the forms of interactions and subjects of the post-information society become more influential due to a new converged media, digital communication networks, and artificial intelligence.

The task of this article is to identify trends in the development of digital network communications and converged media during 2019-2021 aiming at determining their impact on the operation of political institutions and the formation of a new world order. Such trends may be partially due to the Covid-19 pandemic or its consequences, but may also be considered as a natural process in the development of a post-information society. The author's hypothesis is that the development of digital network communications

creates new forms and channels of interaction, changes the political behavior of citizens, reduces the strategic potential of political institutions as major actors in the world order, further weakening their influence on key issues of world politics to the point of losing the subjectivity of politics as such.

According to the theory of communicative action of J. Habermas, the legitimation of political institutions occurs in the process of constructing a common meaning during public dialogue (or discourse), such as a communicative action aimed at reaching consensus. The institutional stability is based on the ability to clearly articulate different interests and values in the democratic process through communication networks [4]. The Belgian philosopher S. Muff believes that the achievement of consensus is impossible in his model of agonistic pluralism and suggests instead the ability to recognize differences and discuss their possible limits [5, p. 8-21]. According to the theorist of network society M. Castells, the search for common meaning through public dialogue occurs within a hybrid communication system in the development of digital technologies that combines horizontal communication networks and traditional forms of unilateral mass communication (television, radio, and print media). The mass self-communication is a process of interactive communication, potentially accessible to a mass audience, but within which the production of messages is carried out by a user independently, as well as the return of messages [6, p. 9-31].

The author of this article suggests that the further digitalization of communication networks and the expansion of communication space is accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in public confidence in the communicative action itself. As of 2021, 73% of users consume news through their smartphones and other mobile devices. Over the last decade, the number of social network users has tripled, while it increased by 13% during the pandemic. Almost half of the world's population (4.2 billion people) is registered on social networks. In 2020, 42% of users spent more time on social networks than before the pandemic [7].

The growth of information consumption was accompanied by the so-called "infodemic", that is a massive burst of misinformation and rumors, which significantly preceded the outbreak of the infection itself [8]. As a result, confidence in all news sources has declined significantly within six months after the start of the pandemic. The citizens trusted social networks the least (35%), while the traditional media (53%) experienced the largest drop in trust, such as by 8 percentage points [3]. In the fall of 2020, a record number of cases of deleting accounts on social networks was recorded [9]. This happened due to the excessive psychological fatigue from the continuous flow of negative information and feelings of dependence. The researchers from the British Reuters Institute also noted a tendency to "avoid the news". The part of those interested in the news has declined worldwide by an average of 5% since 2016 [10].

In addition to the pandemic, an equally important reason for avoiding news is the exclusion of the interests of certain social and political groups of people not only from traditional media but also from digital platforms. For example, Facebook deleted the account of the sitting US President D. Trump and began blocking his supporters in January 2021, while the administration of this network blocked all national and international news content for users in Australia for several days in February 2021. According to M. Castells, exclusion from the global network is the most terrible sanction of the network society, its structural property [6, p. 35]. According to the Reuters Institute, 75% of those who identify themselves as "right-wing" believe that coverage of the views in the media is unfair, while only a third part of Democrats hold this view [10]. Young people (under the age of 35) around the world also tend to believe that the media is unfair compared to older groups.

The second trend is the deployment of new digital network platforms, which are gradually changing the format of communication and the process of discourse production. Their feature is a significant reduction in the duration of the message and decrease in the concentration of the audience.

Thus, the emergence of the Youtube network in 2005 brought the video format to the leaders, which significantly supplanted the text. As of 2021, Youtube has 2 billion registered users, the second largest network after Facebook (2.7 billion) in the world. Launched in 2018, the Tik Tok vertical video network continued this "text-to-video" revolution. From now on, the message through visual images must be transmitted in 15 seconds, the discourse is formed by emoji and musical memes. By the end of 2018, Tik Tok had 1 billion registered users.

On average, the user spends 2 hours and 25 minutes a day on social networks [11]. However, according to various studies, the concentration of our attention is about 8 seconds, that is less than the average aquarium fish [12]. With the advent of the "Tik Tok era", the attention decreases even more: the algorithm of this network captures the interest in the video and the reaction in the first 4 seconds.

There is a so-called "swipe culture" of information consumption: you only have a few seconds to get the user's interest before swiping your message. Such a culture is characterized by mosaic and short-term image, rapid change to other images, as well as illogical information. The wave of information can live no longer

than stored on Instagram stories, that is a few days or even hours. As a result, it is difficult to create a metanarrative for the Tik Tok audience. It rather should be a system of fragmented emotional markers, expressed through very short cultural and political codes, through which users today differentiate each other on the "own-alien" principle.

In such an environment, political leadership is becoming more of a simulacrum than ever before, and political communication must borrow more tools and technologies from the entertainment industry. It is necessary to create some kind of political series, tell a political story with all the attributes of an effective scenario, such as suspense, conflict, and climax in order to maintain long-term attention and form a discourse. The main factor is not the quality of information, but the scandal, impressions, and emotions.

The next trend is that the restriction of freedom of communication due to the use of artificial intelligence and algorithms of social networks is increasing with the growing role of the audience as a "customer" of information. Since 2016, the world's largest social network Facebook (2.7 billion users) has repeatedly changed the algorithms of its feed, emphasizing that it wants to free the network from manipulation and help "maintain important social contacts" [13]. Artificial intelligence and personalized feed are also used by Youtube, Tik Tok, and the Google search engine. In many Asian countries, mobile aggregators are popular, which also provide the user with information based on artificial intelligence algorithms.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media warns in a special report (July 2020): the use of artificial intelligence, driven by commercial, political or public interests, can seriously jeopardize human rights, including freedom of expression and media pluralism [14].

Because of global infodemic, the dominance of "hate speech" in social networks [15], and the policy of digital technology giants, users are looking for more private communication channels. New technological platforms, such as messengers are gaining popularity. Thus, as of January 2021, Whatsapp had 2 billion users (owned by Facebook), Facebook Messenger – 1.3 billion, Telegram – 500 million.

Messenger users see only those sources of information that they choose themselves. And, as a rule, the number of such sources is limited. Thus, according to the results of a survey of Telegram users in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in May 2021, one third of messenger users read up to 5 channels, another third read up to 10 [16]. The users find themselves as if in a "digital value-semantic capsule" in such closed channels of communication, in the space of which ideas and beliefs do not change, they are not subject to critical thinking, but, on the contrary, are consolidated and even reinforced by repetition, discussion, approval by likeminded people. This, in turn, does not contribute to reaching a consensus (according to J. Habermas) or finding common ground between opponents (according to S. Muff).

There may be processes of "digital anomie", which lead to an intensification of protest movements in a situation of uncertainty and weakness of institutions, exclusion of a number of social groups of people from communication processes and weakness of prospects for finding consensus. According to the concept of E. Durkheim, one of the conditions of social anomie is the discrepancy between the needs and interests of some of its members on the one hand and the possibility of their satisfaction by existing institutions on the other hand [17, p. 114-120]. The processes of digital anomie lead to the intensification of the protest movement, which also originates in the network space and (in some cases) is reflected on the streets of cities. During 2020-2021, many multidirectional protest movements spread not only in Europe but also in the whole world: from anti-racism actions to anti-quarantine protests.

M. Castells emphasizes that these movements arise spontaneously, although they have social and political preconditions [6, p. 27]. The trigger for such a protest to leave the online environment and appear on the street is a sudden outrage (including manipulatively constructed). Such a call must be emotional to be a trigger for protest. Thus, video images transmitted via Youtube, and then via Tik Tok play an invaluable role in this case.

For example, the emotional trigger for the protests known as the Black Lives Matter in the United States in May 2020 was video footage of the ill-treatment of a detained African-American J. Floyd, who later died, by a white police officer. Although the BLM movement itself has existed since 2013, it was only when the video was socially distributed on social media that the United States and a number of Western countries were engulfed in mass protests, which were estimated at between 15 and 26 million people.

If the protest movements of 2010-2013 were coordinated through Facebook (for example, "Arab Spring" or "Euromaidan" in Ukraine), the Telegram messenger was used to coordinate protests in Hong Kong against the adoption of the extradition law in 2019-2020, supporters of D. Trump and right-wing groups in the United States in 2020. The real phenomenon was the Telegram channel HEXTA ("nobody") in the 2020 protests in Belarus. In a month, it received more than 2 million subscribers and became the largest channel in the Russian-language segment. Although there were specific people behind the channel, the very name

of the channel "nobody" indicates the impersonality and anonymity of such communication, which "heats up" the protest movement.

In 2021, Tik Tok becomes the driver of protest movements. For example, the actions in support of O. Navalny in Russia in January 2021 were called "Tik Tok riot" by journalists and political observers [18]. The platform has also become a network for coordinated protests in Southeast Asia and Latin America. According to experts from the Reuters Institute, the government seems to have been stunned by the platform in all these cases, which it does not understand, with its specific sense of humor, the language of musical memes, emoji, and hashtags [9].

Why have such protest movements become so popular in the last decade? M. Castells appeals to the "effect of imitation": browsing online for information on protests in other countries and other social groups inspires mobilization, as it raises hopes for change. Usually, such protest movements make too many demands at once and most often they are diverse demands of citizens who want to determine their own living conditions [6, p. 19-20]. For example, the initial reason for the "yellow vests" protest movement in France, which escalated into street protests in late 2018, was the government's intention to raise the tax on carbon fuel. Subsequently, the demands of the protesters expanded to a wide range of social and economic demands. It is necessary to create alternative discourses in order to challenge the existing relations of power. Since there are so many demands and many motives and triggers for protest, and they are mostly emotional, these movements are usually not institutionalized and do not lead to social change.

At the same time, the activation of protest movements is forcing the ruling elite, which controls national governments, to take measures to control the digital environment through bans and government regulation. However, such measures can only have a temporary and incomplete effect. The only way for the government to fully control digital network communication is to turn off the Internet. For example, this was done during the protests in Belarus in 2020. The less radical actions taken by national governments in recent years include extrajudicial blocking of Internet resources, defamation legislation, foreign agent legislation, etc. Such measures are described in detail by Freedom House and are called "digital authoritarianism" [19].

Another level of the "battle for dominance on the Internet" is the struggle for control between national governments and global technology giants. However, currently there is no winner, even a potential one. A striking example is the situation in Nigeria in June 2021, when Twitter deleted the post of President of this country M. Bukhari, where he threatened to punish those responsible for attacks on polling stations and police. In response, President Bukhari blocked Twitter in the country.

Summarizing the above, despite the growing number of digital communication channels and the size of their audience, the ability of political institutions to legitimize themselves is significantly limited due to the gradual loss of society (or its individual groups) confidence in the communicative action itself. With the advent of new digital platforms and the dominance of "swipe culture", the political communication is actively borrowing approaches and technologies from the entertainment industry, while political leadership is becoming more of a simulacrum than ever before. Subjectivity in the formation of public opinion is blurred between media corporations, digital technology platforms, and the audience itself. No subject in the global communication network is capable of producing dominant discourses and, consequently, controlling relations of power in digital networks, which, in turn, brings into question their subjectivity in politics. The search for legitimization ways of political institutions within the above trends is the subject of the further scientific research of the author.

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### ***Наталіна Н. О. Політична легітимність в умовах трансформації цифрових комунікацій***

*У статті розглянуті тренди розвитку мережевих цифрових комунікацій та конвергентних медіа у період пандемії Covid-19 для визначення їх впливу на легітимність політичних інститутів та формування нового світопорядку. Висновки базуються на проведеному аналізі нових форм та каналів комунікацій у цифрових мережах, в тому числі у месенджерах та Тік Ток. Автор припускає, що подальша цифровізація комунікаційних мереж супроводжується одночасним зниженням довіри громадян до самої комунікативної дії через інфодемію та цілеспрямоване виключення з комунікацій окремих груп. У статті розглянута «свайпова культура» споживання інформації та її вплив на формування дискурсів. Відзначено тренд до обмеження свободи комунікації через штучний інтелект та алгоритми соціальних мереж. Як результат, користувачі прагнуть більшої приватності та переходять до спілкування у закритих каналах, що в меншій мірі сприяє пошуку суспільного консенсусу та легітимації політичних інститутів. Запропоноване поняття «цифрова аномія», що є передумовою інтенсифікації протестних рухів в усьому світі. Проаналізовані особливості використання цифрових мереж під час таких протестів протягом 2020-2021 рр. та спроби національних урядів контролювати цифрову комунікацію. Автор доходить висновку, що жоден суб'єкт, в т.ч. національні уряди, цифрові технологічні гіганти, окремі актори чи аудиторія, не здатен контролювати владні відносини у цифрових мережах. Це знижує стратегічний потенціал політичних інститутів як основних акторів світопорядку, сприяючи подальшому послабленню їх впливу на ключові питання світової політики до втрати суб'єктності політики як такої. Пошук шляхів легітимації політичних інститутів в межах означених вище трендів є предметом подальшого наукового пошуку автора.*

**Ключові слова:** політична комунікація, комунікативні цифрові мережі, дискурс, політична легітимність, демократія