

Government and youth communications in social media: Theoretical basics and Russian practice¹

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Abstract

Today's media audience, especially young audience, is often described as apolitical, and their activity in social media on various social and cultural issues is not regarded as political activism. However, the content and forms of political participation have by now undergone a substantial transformation. This paper studies the issue of sociocultural determinacy of modern political activism using Russia's youth as an example, its focus on social change in everyday life, and the practices for interaction between the government and young people in modern Russia. The paper contains the findings of a study of official accounts of Russian government institutions and a survey among young Russian journalism students on their social and political media activism and their interest in communicating with the government through social media.

Keywords

Media activism, mediatization, political communication, young people, social media, social networks.

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Introduction

In an era of widespread digital media communication technology, academic interest in the interaction between the political sphere and young people is obvious. Political communication of young people in digital media may have either a constructive or a potentially destructive impact on the society, when it comes to the implementation of normative social and political processes. Young people are clearly an essential part of the electoral system and the talent pool for the society's political institutions. Young people's interest in politics is evaluated and interpreted in different ways.

According to the Levada Center, more than 80% of young Russians are not interested in politics³. On the other hand, sociological studies suggest that young people feel a pressing need to participate in Russia's social and political life, and this need has been particularly strong in recent years⁴. The youth of today – not only in Russia – put a greater focus on social change, which manifests itself in their everyday practices, including media consumption and media activism.

As a matter of fact, conventional ways of drawing young people into mainstream politics, such as voting in elections or affiliation with a political party, are losing their relevance, as they do not offer a possibility for actual political engagement among youth. At the same time, a continuing downward trend in young people's participation in the electoral process (Franklin et al., 2004; Putnam, 2000; Vartanova, 2018; Zakharkin, 2012) does not necessarily mean that they have lost interest in politics, as many researchers suggest, but that the nature of civic and political engagement for young people has changed (Harris et al., 2010).

Political participation of today's youth is described as 'that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that we want to live in' (Vromen, 2003). In fact, it is about the sociocultural determinacy of politics and understanding it very pragmatically, including as a combination of actions and decisions that can change the world around us for the better and improve the quality of life in line with the current concerns and world views of young people and the community that they represent.

Apparently, social media is the ideal environment where young people can perform their socially oriented actions. Many researchers confirm not only the

³ Available from: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/04/29/829352-molodezhi-ravnodushni>

⁴ Available from: <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/molodyozhnyj-aktivizm-obshhestvennaya-polza>

political apathy of youth in the context of traditional political theory, but also the inability of political journalism to offer the young audience the information they need. This explains why journalism is not as interesting to young people as social media. It is the social media that allow the audience to fully participate in the process of development of a citizen's personality (Blumler, 2011) and to link socially determined and politically oriented actions with the processes of self-actualization and socialization as key motives for contemporary media consumption (Dunas & Vartanov, 2020).

Youth, social media, and political participation: Research discourse

Modern research approaches identify that young people are becoming intolerant of information that does not represent a diversity of perspectives and opinions (Drok & Hermans, 2016; Kulchitskaya et al., 2019; Laufer, 2011; Lee, 2015; Vartanova, 2017). They are interested in the information that can be used for personality development or can help address social issues, among other things (Drok, 2017; Gyldensted, 2015; Haagerup, 2014; Nichols et al., 2006). Some studies suggest that young people are more involved in their everyday life and the community they represent, rather than in 'big-time politics'. Such identification is not directly connected with a nation or government but has a more personal focus and therefore an equally integral structure (Blumler, 2011; Drok & Hermans, 2016; Drok et al., 2017).

In the context of interaction between youth and politics, a theoretical issue of the motives that determine the behavior of young people comes to the fore. The definition of motives in the context of a new understanding of the nature of political engagement is closely related to the social nature of politics and thus to such social determinants of personality as identity development and self-actualization (Beck, 2001), which is also confirmed by research on the current motives of media consumption by youth in Russia (Dunas & Vartanov, 2020). A. Giddens refers to such actions as a manifestation of 'life politics' and defines it as 'a politics of self-actualization in a reflexively ordered environment' (Giddens, 1991). To capture this qualitative shift in media engagement in even more detail, researchers prefer to talk about participatory culture / convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006, 2019) or 'digital media culture' (Dunas & Vartanov, 2020), where new forms and motives for youth to produce and disseminate culture and knowledge take center stage.

The research discourse on the impact of social media on young people and their political engagement is diverse. On the one hand, the perception

of new technology as 'disruptive' is still strong (Christensen, 2009; Gavra, 2020; Gureeva et al., 2020; Vartanova, 2017). Researchers warn us about the detrimental effects of digital media on young people; the latter are described as 'technology addicts' who have lost the ability to interact face-to-face (Kahne et al., 2009; Twenge, 2019). Concerns in the public discourse are raised by the risk of online sexual exploitation and other forms of violence, such as physical and emotional abuse, bullying, trolling, etc. (Gladkova & Cherevko, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2016). Other studies suggest there is a link between smartphone use, depression, and suicide (Twenge, 2019). This discourse concludes with a strong recommendation to parents and teachers to limit young people's access to technology (Jenkins et al., 2016; Twenge, 2019).

The reason why this discourse fails is that it associates perceptions of the detrimental effects of digital media with dependence on them or the specific nature of their use. Access restrictions may indeed limit the damage, but they will also limit the positive effects of digital media.

Specifically, one of the most common motives for using digital media by young people is the exercise of civil rights and liberties through reading online news, joining online political groups, and discussing political issues in social media (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). What is more, actions that were once possible only in the space of social physical reality are now performed online at a much lower cost, which results in an increase in participants' activity.

The main focus of studies on the use of digital media by young people is social networks, news web-sites, email, online games, chat rooms, blogs, music, and mobile apps as the most popular media preferred by young people.

The terms *engagement* and *participation* as key terms of youth's political activism do not refer to media discourse only; they are also broadly defined in political science and describe activities such as contacting officials, discussing politics, volunteering, taking part in street marches, boycotting products and services for political reasons, and voting. Whether the use of digital media by young people is related to declining political and civic participation among young people is a key issue that has been a source of debate and concern for researchers for years. Exclusion of young people from the political arena has translated into an extremely poor voter turnout⁵, low levels of party membership, and a sharp decline in other forms of participation associated

⁵ *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(2).

with institutionalized politics (Grasso, 2016; Martin, 2012; Sloam, 2016; Wattenberg, 2008).

But even if young people are repelled by electoral and party politics, this does not mean that they have lost the desire to participate in civic life as such. Digital media do encourage participation in social development for those groups of young people who, for some reason, have no or limited access to formal political institutions (e.g., political parties) and institutionalized methods of participation (e.g., voting) (Jenkins et al., 2016). Research has shown that digital media open new and alternative ways of youth's participation in civic and political life, which are most attractive to young people (Lee et al., 2013; Theocharis, 2011a, b). Early research comparing young and elderly people has proven that the impact of digital media on civic participation differs by age group (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Since then, digital media have evolved enormously; social networking sites and platforms for online political participation have developed, and the very nature of civic and political engagement has changed (Kahne et al., 2013).

With regard to political socialization, young people are at a critical stage of life when their political identities and orientations are still being shaped. Therefore, with digital media being the centerpiece of their everyday life, we can expect that these tools can have a profound influence on them (Jenkins et al., 2016; Kahne et al., 2013; Kruike-meier & Shehata, 2016; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Twenge, 2019). There is a growing interest among researchers in how these tools can be used to shape young people's civic habits so that they are helpful (or harmful) to civic and political engagement. So, a careful analysis of how digital media influence young people's citizen and political activism may 'anticipate' the future impact of technology on other age groups (Jenkins et al., 2016).

One of the most common hypotheses in the study of the impact of media on politics is that digital media allow citizens to interact with all kinds of people, find time for browsing through numerous web-sites, and learn about a variety of problems, including directly from people in their digital community, which ultimately influences them and leads to civic or political action.

Social interactions with different people and different values can have a mobilizing effect, which was described even before social media became widespread and which indicated the involvement of individuals in politics on a small scale (see van Deth, 1998). In addition, digital media can act as online spaces where citizens can acquire skills required for participation in civic life

(Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Researchers see the value of social media in building networks and interactions. The digital environment can help citizens develop certain skills and psychological dispositions that facilitate participation in more resource-intensive offline activities (Kahne et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2016; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Researchers have made an interesting conclusion about online games: certain types of online games accumulate experience that leads to increased civic engagement.

Interaction between government institutions and youth in the social networking space: Findings

As part of the of the RFBR research project *Mediatization of politics in digital communication strategies of the state and the youth in Russia*⁶, we conducted a survey of 373 young people aged 18 to 35 among students who study journalism in Russian universities. During programming of the empirical study, we took into consideration the geography criterion and made a decision to use the ratio of university students from the capital area to students from other Russian regions as the key ratio for sampling at the pilot phase of the study. It was found that according to the Ministry of Science for 2020, the share of students in the country's capital is 43.7% and the share of regional students is 56.3% in the population universe. This ratio was used for the sampling frame.

The survey findings revealed that the absolute majority of the respondents (*Figure 1*) are interested in and willing to receive information about what is going on in the social and political sphere (80.5% of the respondents answered 'Yes' and 'Rather yes'); a little over half of the respondents (*Figure 2*) are already engaged in civic activities (57.7%), and the absolute majority (*Figure 3*) consider it necessary to engage in civic activities (88.3%).

The top three most interesting media consumption topics for young students (*Figure 4*) are: human and civil rights (79.3%); employment and standards of living (69.1%); science and education (59.7%).

⁶ The research project *Mediatization of politics in digital communication strategies of the state and the youth in Russia* is carried out by the research team of the Faculty of Journalism of the Lomonosov Moscow State University with financial support from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) and the Expert Institute for Social Research (EISR) under Research Project No. 20-011-31376.

Figure 1

Do you follow the social and political news?

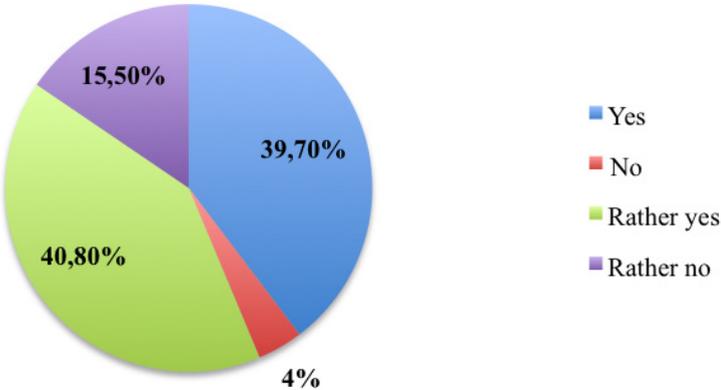


Figure 2

Are you engaged in civic activities?

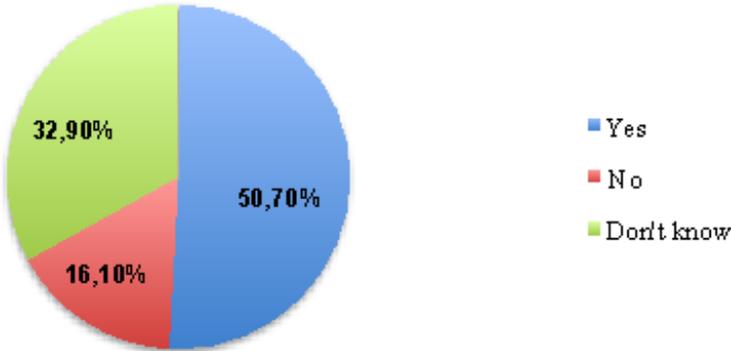


Figure 3

Do you consider it necessary to engage in civic activities?

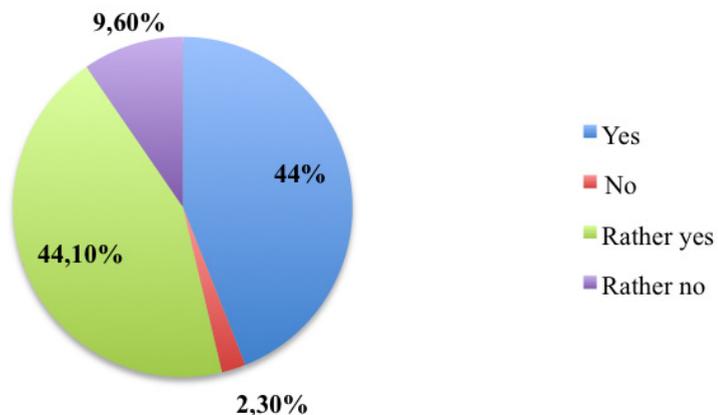
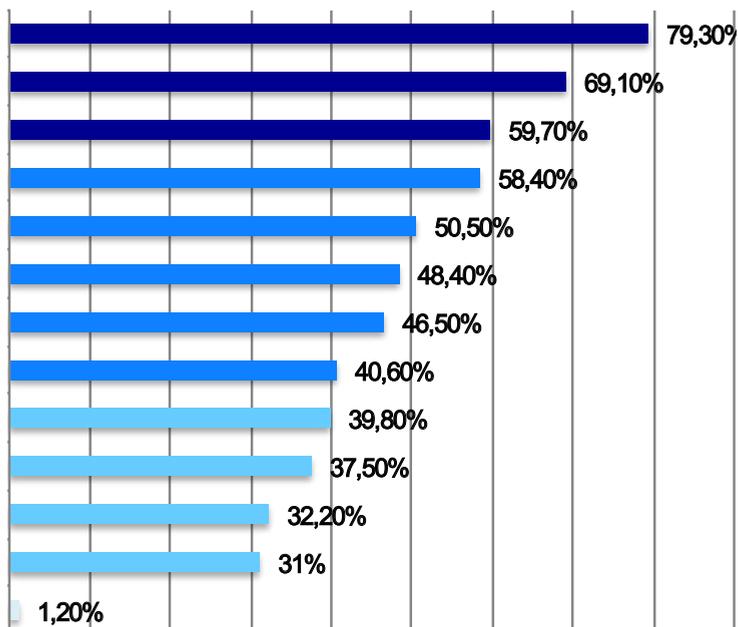


Figure 4

Which of the topics are most interesting to you?



Almost all respondents follow social and political news (88.7%). Their main sources of information are the Internet (99%) and their friends and acquaintances (39.6%); traditional media platforms such as television (22.1%), newspapers and magazines (16.2%), and radio (8.1%) come third only. As to the social media as preferred sources of social and political information, young people opt for Telegram (72.5%), Vkontakte (49.8%), and Instagram (43.4%), which should come as no surprise, given the specifics of certain social media.

Young people are ready to engage in a dialogue and are expecting the government to enhance the outreach and establish bilateral communication on public policy issues. So, for example, the survey respondents were eager to answer the open-ended question on how they see ideal communication between the government and youth; out of 362 responses, the absolute majority of responses had almost the same meaning, i.e. establishing dialogue and two-way communication with the possibility of feedback (e.g. 'through dialogue', 'provision should be made for feedback', 'unbiased information promptly published on platforms used by young people', 'in the form of dialogue with the help of the media', 'direct and open dialogue', 'direct communication, such as Q&A session in social media', etc.).

Considering the share of the younger generation of Russians, which is estimated at one fifth to one sixth of the entire Russian population, who choose social media as their main source of information, we need to rethink the system and form of presenting public policy information.

As part of this study, we analyzed official accounts (open groups) of agencies responsible for youth outreach in the Russian capital and the regions. The object of our study was social media activities of various government committees and departments dealing with youth issues in the following cities: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, Kazan, Volgograd, and Chelyabinsk. These cities were selected to simultaneously survey university students in the capital region and those in relevant regions in order to study their interest in the country's social and political life, their involvement and awareness of important events on the agenda. During the first phase of the study, the working hypothesis was the assumption that all government agencies dealing with youth issues are present in social media and working closely with their audience. However, we had to find out what kind of content is created, what the level of publication activity is, and whether the material offered by the agencies caters to the needs of younger users. The subject field was a sample of 609 posts published in September 2020 in Vkontakte, Russia's most popular social network (Brand Analytics, 2020). All government agencies under study have their own accounts here, except for the

Committee for Public Relations and Youth Policy for the city of Moscow, which has a Facebook account. Although this network is more popular with Muscovites than with those who live in the regions, the reason for such replacement is not quite clear: on average, the Russian youth audience in Vkontakte is 67% whereas in Facebook, it is 32% (Brand Analytics, 2020).

The number of followers of government social media accounts varies and depends on a combination of factors, including the quality of publications, audience involvement, historical interest in the group, and the rate of its growth. Moreover, there is no direct correlation with the population of the cities: for example, the Committee for Children and Youth Affairs in Kazan has more than 42 thousand followers (the city's population is 1.257 million people⁷ and the share is 3.3%), while the St. Petersburg Committee for Youth Policy has about 22 thousand followers (the city's population is almost 5.4 million people and the share is 0.4%).

Table 1

Number of followers of government institutions' accounts

Nº	City	Department	Number of Vkontakte followers	City population, people
1.	Moscow	Committee for Public Relations and Youth Policy	7,451*	12,678,079
2.	St. Petersburg	Committee for Youth Policy	22,008	5,398 064
3.	Chelyabinsk	Department for Youth Policy	840	1,196 680
4.	Vladivostok	Office for Youth Affairs	3,690	606,561
5.	Kazan	Committee for Children and Youth Affairs	42,606	1,257 391
6.	Volgograd	Committee for Youth Policy and Tourism	2,820	1,008,998
7.	Rosmolodezh (Federal Agency for Youth Affairs)	Federal agency	119,495	Not linked to any city

A changing number of followers over time is an interesting parameter to analyze: the annual increase or decrease in the number of followers will make it possible to draw conclusions about the qualitative development of an account in the future.

⁷ <http://www.statdata.ru/home>

Publishing rate. The data analysis shows that the publishing rate varies considerably: some accounts publish one or two posts daily (Vladivostok, Kazan, Chelyabinsk, and Volgograd). Interestingly, the publishing rate for the Volgograd Committee's group during the sample period changed from 4 posts per day on average from 1 till 11 September till zero posts till 24 September. It would be fair to assume that such a long period of inactivity was due to technical or other problems, e.g. their SMM expert falling sick. This fact is an indirect proof that the number of employees responsible for the account is small, so it takes a lot of time to resolve the problems.

The account of the St. Petersburg Committee is more active, with up to 4 posts published daily. However, Rosmolodezh's account has the highest publishing rate (an average of 9.7 posts per day), which means that a new post appears almost every hour.

A wide variation in the findings raises an issue of what the best publishing rate would be. According to practitioners, both content strategies are equally important: the focus may be either on a high publishing rate or on the quality of information content⁸. The choice of strategy depends on the goals of communication. A higher publishing rate brings more traffic to web-sites, which is essential for businesses, as creating a wider audience leads to more sales. But government agencies are not businesses; they are not selling anything to anyone, so in this case, we can safely say that high-quality content adds value, which improves their image. In each case, the final decision on how many posts are published per day should be based on the users' response. Group administrators can independently evaluate the efficiency of content⁹ using internal statistics tools. Another aspect to study is the best time to post on social media. Based on the analysis of media consumption by the audience¹⁰ that reveals peak hours for browsing the Internet, we can select the time period most preferable to quickly read the news or study a lengthy article online. A study by Rusability¹¹ found that Vkontakte posts are most viewed from 3 pm to 6 pm, peaking between 5 pm and 6 pm. Timing also affects the visibility of certain types of content: e.g.

⁸ Available from: <https://vc.ru/marketing/141648-chto-vazhnee-kolichestvo-publikaciy-kontenta-ili-ego-kachestvo>

⁹ Vkontakte statistic data. Available from: <https://www.cossa.ru/sociorama/238333/>

¹⁰ Media consumption in Russia – 2020. Moscow, October 2020. Available from: <https://www2.deloitte.com/ru/ru/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/media-consumption-in-russia.html>

¹¹ Available from: <https://rusability.ru/internet-marketing/luchshee-vremya-dlya-publikatsij-vk-kejs-rusability/>

the best time to post video content is between 1 pm and 2 pm and between 4 pm and 5 pm. However, it should be noted that general data on any social network always has to be double checked for each individual thematic group, since the behavior of the audience can vary for a whole host of reasons.

Content visualization. A trend toward visualizing content in the social media that offer photo publishing tools can be considered omnipresent. The youth audience today prefers visual information to any other type of information¹². There are several reasons for that, including that visual information is more easily remembered¹³ or that it is easy to create photos with readily available modern photo and video cameras in smartphones. Notably, when pictures or illustrations are used, it is photos that are chosen most often, which may be due to the fact that authors are reluctant to go the extra mile to process photo content (Kolesnichenko & Davletshina, 2019). The accounts of the government agencies under study fully confirm this trend: up to 100% of the posts contain photo materials (usually high-quality ones) and, in some cases, video content (on average, 1 to 10% of the total number of posts). Based on this parameter, social media pages of the agencies under study can be considered uniform.

Table 2

Content visualization in the social network Vkontakte

			Type of content, %	
Nº	City	Department	Text+PH	Text+V
1	Moscow	Committee for Public Relations and Youth Policy for the city of Moscow	100	0
2	St. Petersburg	Committee for Youth Policy	99	1
3	Chelyabinsk	Department for Youth Policy, Chelyabinsk	94	6
4	Vladivostok	Office for Youth Affairs	97	3
5	Kazan	Committee for Children and Youth Affairs	94	6
6	Volgograd	Committee for Youth Policy and Tourism	76	24
7	Rosmolodezh (Federal Agency for Youth Affairs)	Federal agency	89	11

¹² Available from: <https://us.nttdata.com/en/-/media/assets/white-paper/apps-dbc-mind-the-gap-white-paper.pdf>

¹³ Available from: <http://www.brainrules.net/vision>

The number of posts with video content in the social media is relatively low, which can be attributed to the fact that such posts require a lot of time, money and human effort: to create high-quality video, you need a competent speaker, operator, and editor, whereas taking photos is much faster and allows publishing several posts per day.

Topics for publications. When we analyzed the qualitative characteristics of the publications, the study of topics discussed by the government agencies in their social media was of most interest. The working hypothesis was the assumption that social media are used by government agencies as corporate media: the information they post is about their own activities and is not integrated into the public policy agenda. The hypothesis was fully confirmed: all content was related only to projects of regional and federal youth committees and partner activities. To classify the content, we identified seven topic categories: *Scientific, Educational and Cultural Events* (grants, scholarships, project competitions, forums, lectures); *Entertainment* (concerts, festivals, celebrations); *Student Teams and Volunteer Projects*; *Youth Policy* (projects in this area); *Health* (donation, first aid, vaccination), *KVN (Club of the Funny and Inventive People)*, and *Other*, where we included one-time posts specific to each city and usually logically related to local events. There was also a need for additional topics relevant only to particular accounts. When we analyzed the content on the Rosmolodezh page, we added another category named *Success Story*, a regular feature telling about personal achievements of young men and women. On the Volgograd Committee page, 10% of the content is about urban improvement, which was also identified as a separate category.

The ratio of topics was different for each city: for example, *Scientific and Educational Events* accounted for 67% of all posts for Vladivostok, 57% for Kazan, 55% for St. Petersburg, 44% for Rosmolodezh, and 47% for Moscow versus 13% for Chelyabinsk and 26% for Volgograd. *Entertainment* accounts for 47% of all posts for Chelyabinsk, 33% for Volgograd, 26% for Rosmolodezh, and 17% for St. Petersburg, with zero percent for Moscow and Kazan. *Youth Policy* accounts for 9% of all posts for Kazan, 6% for Rosmolodezh, and 3% for Volgograd; the other cities did not post on this topic during the sample period. Thus, we can capture an individual agenda for making social media content in each city. But, again, corporate data is the basis for all content, regardless of a variety of topics. On the one hand, this can be expected and explained: the committees tell the audience about what they do, engage new participants to grants and festivals, and give credit to winners. Yet, the young audience wants to see what the government has to say on socially sensitive topics. For example, a questionnaire

survey among young people conducted as part of the current study confirms the need of this audience for two-way communication with official institutions. Headline-making public political events of recent years such as Ivan Golunov's case, Kirill Serebrennikov's case, changes to Russia's Constitution, softening domestic violence law, etc. are getting much coverage but the official position of government institutions is not apparent. When asked: 'How satisfied are you with the information about this event in official government sources?', 80 to 92% of the respondents said 'Dissatisfied' or 'Rather dissatisfied than satisfied'. Obviously, at this stage, government social media are not seeking to function as community media and become a forum for public policy discussions. But given that young people obviously want to interact with government institutions, the latter should use their communication platforms to strengthen dialogic relations with the public.

Conclusion

Today, one can say that the nature of youth's political participation and engagement is transformed. With social media reaching far and wide, political action has largely shifted from the space of physical social reality to the space of mediatized social reality (Gureeva & Vartanova, 2018). Both forms and targets of political participation have changed. Media activism is now the most relevant form of political participation and the main target is struggle for social justice. Moreover, both the form and the intention reshape the political agenda and make it more socially and culturally oriented. Strictly speaking, young people do not care about 'big-time politics' or political decisions that will affect them in the long run, but they do care about the everyday injustice they face, and there is an overwhelming desire to change the world for the better. This is precisely why topics that used to be beyond institutional politics and rather dealt with human rights and liberties find their way onto the political agenda of a young audience (Twenge, 2019).

In this regard, one should say that theoretical studies of politics and media have always emphasized the role of the media in establishing democracy and implementing the basic media principles of social and political life, that is, plurality of views and consensus of the parties. The nature of social media supporting the social network infrastructure in the form of social interactions in human communities makes it possible for these principles to be implemented (Jackson, 2020). This is reason why many actions in social media have a social determinacy related to such basic processes of personality development in society as socialization and self-actualization (Dunas & Vartanov, 2020).

Political media activism is no exception; it also acquires social and cultural characteristics (Gureeva, 2020). It is this factor that describes the hallmark of contemporary political participation and political engagement of young people, namely, their media component and sociocultural determinacy.

More specific, but equally distinguishing features of today's political media activism among young people include the leisure context of activity: the activity takes place in free time and is associated both with the search for satisfaction from consuming a certain type of content and from the very process of media consumption and media activism, as well as with the culture of consumption in general (Dietlind et al., 2005). So, political engagement and political participation become attributes of the 'lifestyle' of modern young people integrated into the 'consumer society' (Baudrillard, 2019). However, this does not make their implementation any 'softer'. On the contrary, when it comes to human personality, human rights and liberties rather than some abstract and fanciful political ideals, the establishment of social justice looks more and more like a form of 'struggle' of the citizen and the consumer.

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