From digital divides to epistemic divides: The rise of new inequalities in the conflict media space[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, we approach Russian media policy through two main areas – digital inequality, which is a complex multilayer phenomenon embracing access, skills and benefits areas (three levels of the digital divide), and influencing all social processes in the country; and digital capital approached by scholars as a new intangible meta-capital that is becoming increasingly important under current digitalization processes in Russia and worldwide, as well as remaining conflict challenges and risks to information security. We discuss how Russian media policy has been changing in recent years to address new demands posed by digitalization and the growth of information society, which calls for new competencies, skills, and knowledge of citizens/users. Within broader epistemic rights context, we draw links between digital inequality and epistemic inequality, which concerns the widening gap in information, knowledge, and understanding between the elites and the majority of the population. We stress the need to overcome both intertwined types of inequality – digital and epistemic one – and suggest that closer attention of policymakers, scholars, educators, and public authorities should be shifted to the formation of digital capital, which is becoming fundamental for successful professional and personal practices in both offline and online realms today, also when it comes to overcoming digital and epistemic inequality.

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Introduction
Russian media system has been constantly adjusting to current trends of social and media change since early 1990s. Academic research has focused on radical transformations in media regulations, media structures and practices (Nordenstreng, Vartanova, & Zassoursky (eds.), 2002; Rantanen, 2002; Rihter, 2007; Nordenstreng, & Thussu, 2015), as well as various changes in professional journalistic cultures we have observed through 2000s (Pasti, 2007; Anikina, 2015). So far scholars have described media trends primarily from political-economic perspective (McNair, 2000) as driven by political forces, and explained recent developments through the lenses of Western democracy concepts and Western approaches to media systems and their dominant models (Curran, & Park, 2000; Hallin, & Mancini, 2004, 2012).

In 2000s however, scholarly attention has noticeably shifted to previously under covered non-Western regions of the world, going in line with increasing research on 'Emerging States' (Hallin, & Mancini, 2012; Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2020), BRICS (Shi-xu, 2009) and CIS (Nurumov et al, 2021; Vikhrova et al, 2021), as well as overall closer academic attention to 'the rise of the rest' phenomenon, originally approached in early 2000s by Amsden (2001) and others. Landmark studies on the BRICS countries (Thussu, 2013; Nordenstreng, & Thussu, 2015; Wasserman, Zhang, & Mano, 2016; Pasti, & Ramaprasad, 2018) together with current research (Vartanova, 2018; Thussu, & Nordenstreng, 2020; Shi-xu, 2022) analyze trends in media and communication fields following non-Westcentrism approach and focusing on national specifics and cultural context of each country.

Yet, in the context of Russian media transformation, the role of digital technologies, diversity of regional developments as well as specifics of ethnic and linguistic multiculturalism remain underexplored. Russia's peculiar character as unevenly developed and regionally diverse country, as a multicultural and multi-ethnic society where over 190 ethnic groups coexist, has substantially influenced country's digitalization shifting from digital gaps of 1990s, through prioritization of information society in 2000s to the formation of rather advanced digital media environment in 2010s. This happens to be a result of pressures coming from audience demands, as well as needs of growing media industry and state media regulation. Today, Russian Federation is indisputably an interesting case of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of digital media transformations

in the non-Western national context, in which digital developments coincided with ongoing social changes (Ragnedda, & Gladkova, 2020).

In this paper, we approach Russian media policy through two main areas – digital inequality, which is a complex multilayer phenomenon embracing access, skills and benefits areas (three levels of the digital divide), and influencing all social processes in the country; and digital capital approached by scholars as a new intangible meta-capital that is becoming increasingly important under current digitalization processes in Russia and worldwide (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2020; Gladkova, Vartanova, & Ragnedda, 2020), as well as remaining conflict challenges and risks to information security. We discuss how Russian media policy has been changing in recent years to address new demands posed by digitalization and the growth of information society, which calls for new competencies, skills, and knowledge of citizens/users. Within broader epistemic rights context, we draw links between digital inequality and epistemic inequality, which concerns the widening gap in information, knowledge, and understanding between the elites and the majority of the population. We stress the need to overcome both intertwined types of inequality – digital and epistemic one – and suggest that closer attention of policymakers, scholars, educators, and public authorities should be shifted to the formation of digital capital, which is becoming fundamental for successful professional and personal practices in both offline and online realms today, also when it comes to overcoming digital and epistemic inequality.

Internet in Russia: opportunities and inequalities

Due to its complex and immense territory, its socio-economic and historical development, professional journalistic practices, and other factors (Vartanova, 2019; Vyrkovsky et al, 2019), Russia represents an interesting case study for the analysis of different kinds of inequalities, divides, discrepancies, and gaps. This topic has, indeed, attracted the attention of numerous scholars that, over the years, have focused on inequalities in socioeconomic development of the Russian regions (Kolomak, 2010); inequalities in access to the higher education (Mikheeva, 2004); and inequalities in the quality of life in Russia (Bobkov, Gulyugina, & Odintsova, 2009). Fewer research, however, has been conducted to investigate the development of digital inequalities and digital gaps in Russia (Deviatko, 2013; Nagirnaya, 2015; Volchenko, 2016; Gladkova, & Ragnedda, 2020), despite the country itself being 'an illustrative example of social, cultural and technological complexity within Europe' (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2019: 202).

Uneasy transformations of the Russian society since early 1990s characterized by rapid unjust privatization of the former state ownership, rising inequalities in socioeconomic developments of regions, significant social stratification, disappointment and loss of values (Kolomak, 2010) resulted in a number of social problems, including digital inequalities on different levels. Since 1990s, Russia has faced various forms of digital divides, including low level of access to computers and telecommunication networks, limited volume of digital content, inability to use digital technologies and low level of media literacy (Deviatko, 2013).

Internet in Russia has been developing rapidly since early 1990s, and the number of users doubled almost every year in large industrial cities in the European part of country's territory. In 2000s, Internet penetration expanded among the majority of urban population, still reflecting discrepancies between industrial cities and small urban settlements, male and female users, different generations, ethnic minorities, and other groups of the society (Deviatko, 2013). In 2010s, digital media use continued to grow, and the number of Russians regularly using Internet went beyond half of the country's population, while the number of mobile connections became equal to population size. By the end of 2010s, the popularity of social networks began to challenge the use of traditional print and broadcasting media (Mediasistema Rossii, 2021: 247–249), which have traditionally been the backbone of the Russian media system.

At the end of 2021, more than 80% of Russians were digitally connected and were using Internet on regular basis, at least once per month. An increased use of social media by Russians is paralleled by the growth of digital media ecosystems, built around Russia-based digital services – search engine *Yandex*, social networks *VKontakte*, *Odnoklassniki*, *Mail.ru*, and messenger *Telegram*, which increased its popularity in the last decade. Audiences also demonstrated a great demand for user-generated content accessed through *LifeJournal* and *Zen. Yandex*, as well as global digital platforms, and some popular bloggers including journalists and non-professional authors have become strong competitors to traditional legacy media. As a result, since 2020s, Internet and social media have become popular sources of news and entertainment, as well as means of interpersonal/group communication in Russia (Dunas et al., 2021).

Rapid digitalization of public communication in 2000s, together with the rise of social media brought up new challenges and inequalities, including audiences' unequal access to information, in many ways related to peculiarities of Russia's geopolitical and territorial nature. Russian Federation is a huge territory with tremendous cultural, lingual, ethnic, and socio-economic differences.

In a country consisting of eight federal districts, divided into 85 federal subjects (i.e. constituent units), 22 out of which are national republics, having a territory of over 17 100 000 square km and population of 146 million people, including over 190 ethnic groups, the problem of different types of inequalities between – as well as within – different parts of the country remains exceedingly important. Earlier studies showed that while urban Russians got access to the most advanced digital technologies, services and content, regional audiences still experienced numerous divides and absence of users' digital capital which includes poor technological access, undeveloped skills and inability to get benefits from the usage of digital media (Deviatko, 2013).

Recent research into Russian cross-regional digital divides (Gladkova, & Ragnedda, 2020) proves that digital inequality remains a serious problem in the country. Russian regions still differ from each other significantly when it comes to the spread and availability of ICTs and access to the Internet (first level of the digital divide), ICT skills/use (second level of the digital divide), and advantages online engagement can bring to users (third level of the digital divide). Digging deeper into these differences, Gladkova and Ragnedda (2020) argue that a set of 'objective factors' related to the specific character of Russia (distances, climatic and geographical conditions, urbanization level, etc.) may influence digital divides in the country and also within regions, which are not 'monolithic' either (ibid). This can be illustrated by comparing Northwestern or Central federal districts to North Caucasus or Far Eastern for example: urbanization level, socioeconomic conditions, location of the regions, the cost of building infrastructure in remote parts of the country, especially located and other factors may indeed create a situation when some regions are more technologically advanced than others. Further comparative research into digital capital (Gladkova, Vartanova, & Ragnedda, 2020) and digital inclusion (Gladkova, Argylov, & Shkurnikov, 2022) in Russia prove that digital inequality stretches beyond mere access problem in the country, revealing differences between ICT use in Russian regions and digital engagement of users based in difference parts of the country and belonging to different ethnic and cultural groups.

This is in line with broader international research on digital divide, showing that digital inequality is no longer a dichotomy between 'information haves' and 'information have-nots' or between 'access' or 'no access' (van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2015), but reflects larger geopolitical (North/South or East/West) and social, regional, cultural and even individual contradictions (Ragnedda, & Gladkova, 2020; Tsatsou, 2021). By mapping three levels of digital divide –

inequalities in ICT access, ICT use and benefits from use of ICTs and Internet, scholars underlined that regardless of reasons leading to digital gaps users have fewer social opportunities and advantages, different capacities to fully exploit digital media and transform the use to noticeable social outcomes (Ragnedda, & Gladkova, 2020).

In this vein, bridging digital gaps seem not just an issue for academic exercise but also a policymakers' concern since inequalities in Internet access and use reflect and reinforce social injustice (Ragnedda, 2020). Given that digital and social inequalities are closely intertwined and reinforce each other, digital exclusion has become an important challenge to social mobility, social justice and equal representation of various population groups around the world (Helsper, 2008; Reisdorf, & Rhinesmith, 2020), where lack of access or skills to use ICTs can lead to further social exclusion of people.

Moreover, digital inequalities are today closely related to epistemic inequalities, resulting in fewer opportunities 'to achieve epistemic goods, such as knowledge, understanding, and intellectual virtues' (Croce, 2020: iii). Access to knowledge and information, as well as ability to interpret and use them for one's professional and personal development, informed will formation, informed choices making about matters of societal importance, have become essential in modern information society. Digital inequality can hinder these processes or make them impossible in countries where digital divide on the level of access or skills has not been bridged yet. Due to lack of infrastructure availability, high cost of connection, lack of educational and training programs for ICT users, and other factors, people can face epistemic inequality, when those having access and skills to use ICTs receive more benefits, are better informed and have access to wider scope of knowledge than those excluded from online realm.

To overcome digital divide in Russia, the government has determined several priorities in state federal and regional policies (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2019). Measures to bridge the digital gap were determined by the federal and regional authorities on the basis of the priorities and characteristics of federal and regional policies, as well as subject to the economic situation of the subjects. The main effort in the legislative policies to solve the problem of digital divide in Russia was made in 2008, when the 'Information Society Development Strategy' was adopted at the state level. This marked the beginning of 'intensive use of information and communication technologies by the state authorities, business and citizens'. Later, in 2010 Russian Government's Order No. 1815-r 'On the State Program of the Russian Federation 'Information Society (2010-2020)' was signed. The task to decrease the digital divide between urban and rural citizens

was also set in the Federal Law 'On Communications' (in force as of 2014) where establishing access points in communities of between 250 and 500 people and providing people with access to the Internet at a speed of at least 10 Mbps has been proclaimed.

The 'Information Technology Industry Development Strategy in the Russian Federation for 2014-2020 and for the future until 2025' defined a new aim to improve the literacy of the population in the field of information technology. In 2017, the Presidential decree approved the second 'Strategy for the Development of the Information Society in Russia for 2017-2030', which also included the creation of a level playing field for the use of digital information technologies by the Russian citizens. The government was instructed to ensure the rights of the Russians to access digital infrastructures.

Nowadays, almost all federal subjects of the Russian Federation have elaborated their own programs to foster and regulate digitalization process on regional level with the focus on specific socioeconomic and cultural priorities of the region. Recent study by Vartanova, Gladkova, Lapin et al (2021) looked into various programs focused on digital transformation/development or building information society/infrastructure in Russian regions. The analysis of documents showed that regional authorities have defined numerous, though in some ways similar, goals to build information society and foster digitalization process through improving quality of life, developing digital infrastructures and equal access of people to digital media services, effective public communication, etc. (ibid: 10–18). At the same time, the problem of digital divide was considered in all documents in various ways. In most regions, authorities focused on bridging the first level of the digital divide (access problem), focusing at the same time on improving digital services in citizens-state communication. On the other hand, citizens' skills/competencies to use digital infrastructure and ICT services were still far from prioritization (ibid: 21), which stresses the need to approach digital divide as a complex multi-layer phenomenon in further legislative documents and policymaking initiatives. In the following section, we will discuss how Russian media policy have been developing since dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and what new challenges and concerns media policy in Russia has been experiencing in recent years.

Russian media policy for digital era

Historically, Russian journalism and the media have been under a significant influence of relations with the state. The first Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* was established by the Russian Emperor Peter I the Great, who wrote and edited texts

for its issues in the beginning. Russian Empress Ekaterina II the Great was also active in publishing essays in magazines. The legal status of censorship, introduced in 1804 by Alexander I, was preserved in imperial Russia until 1917. In the USSR ideological censorship existed until 1991. This tradition had a strong influence on the relationship between the state and the media, including the model of state economic regulation. Thus, the structure of the domestic newspaper market was established in 1850-1860, when official regional newspapers subordinate to the governor were created in many regional centres. Many of them were subsidized and often directly controlled by local state bodies, and restrictions on advertising in newspapers (abolished in 1863) turned out to be a tool forcing young publishers to seek state support (Esin, 1989: 116). At the beginning of the XX century, the tradition of state economic control was strengthened by the introduction of a system of economic subsidies. Economically, the Soviet media, characterized by the vertical subordination of content production to ideological control, were part of a state-planned economy with a complete ban on private property and a large amount of state investment in telecommunications infrastructure (postal service, television networks, satellites and telephone lines) (Minaeva, 2018).

After 1991, media policy in the country was driven by the struggle for the liberation of journalism and media from the censorship and dependency from Communist ideology and the legislation was viewed as the only foundation for the free speech (Nordenstreng, & Paasilinna, 2001). The collapse of the Soviet state initialised a complete rebuilding of regulatory system – from the Constitution to particular laws and regulations acts. On the other hand, media experienced a need to change the logic of the Communist top-down ideologically biased media regulation to establishing corporate – journalistic and managerial – regulatory frameworks, norms, and set of accountabilities with the focus on the social responsibilities of journalism.

The new philosophy of the market driven economy defined the logic of the media policy in 1990s with the emphasis on the de-politization of the media, meaning withdrawal from the former Communist ideology. For professional regulation, reconceptualization of journalism with the articulation on the freedom of press principle, to a large extent borrowed from Western journalism theories and focusing on the complete abolition of the censorship, became a dominant trend. This also correlated with mainstream neoliberal approaches at Russian media market, as well as changing economic structures of the media business through processes of privatisation and building of new commercial business models emphasized the importance of the same logic of the state withdrawal from the media.

The deregulation of the Russian media began with the adoption of the Russian law 'On the Mass Media' (1991), which postulated the abolition of censorship and guaranteed – among many other freedoms – the freedom of speech and private ownership of the media. 1990s were characterized by withdrawal of the state from the media industry, and the privatization of the media, combined with a low level of legislative activity (the adoption of just one law 'On Advertising', 1995; the absence of antimonopoly regulation; and almost no regulation of foreign property) were the most striking signs of the deregulation process. In parallel with the rapid penetration of information and communication technologies in the mid-1990s this has led to entirely new private print and audio-visual media companies. The following factors significantly expanded the boundaries of the domestic media industry: the almost instant transition of the Russian economy to the market in the early 1990s, the growth of consumer industries and the subsequent rise of the advertising industry, the introduction of new lifestyle models and the rapid start of the digital revolution, characterized by the increasing use of consumer electronics, computers and ICT networks (Rantanen, 2002). However, the state has always been and still is an important player in the Russian media, setting the legal and regulatory framework, financially supporting media companies both formally and informally, protecting socially and culturally significant, albeit often unprofitable media.

In 2000s, the new logic of digitalization and the rise of the mobile emerged. Digital telecom environment became the central area for the rise of the neoliberal philosophy in the Russian economy regardless the crucial role of the state in controlling core technological infrastructure (especially fixed telephone lines, analogue transmission of TV signal, and satellites). It remained high as in previous periods, but surprisingly the area of content production and distribution was left outside the state interest. This new emerging digital and convergent system showed the trend towards technical deregulation with no attention to new possibilities of content distribution. The first outcome became an unlimited piracy in film distribution through widely privatised cable networks, which lately resulted in the rise of the pirate content market and still existing disregard to copyright, especially in online space. In 1990-2000s, the gap between traditional media industry and telecommunications in Russia remained still big, and media policy making continued to be sectors' split and undeveloped.

Information security has also become an important issue of the state media policy, especially for segments of the media audience that are less digitally

literate. This is especially true for young people, who, being advanced in their technological skills, are unable to be critical of digital media, understand the challenges of national security and the cultural identity of Russians. In response to these concerns, in 2010 new laws were passed. Among them are the law 'On the protection of children from information harmful to their health and development' (2010/2012) and amendments to it (2013, 2018), a set of amendments to the Administrative Code, the law 'On information, information technologies and information protection' (anti-piracy law, 2006), the law 'On Communications' (2004), 'On Amendments to the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection" and certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation on streamlining the exchange of information using information and telecommunication networks (law on bloggers, 2014), amendments to the law 'On Mass Media' and the law 'On Advertising' (2016/2017), new laws on combating terrorism (Yarovaya law).

Despite actively developing media policy in Russia on a general scale, there are several challenges policymaking initiatives experience today. Controversies of the modern Russian media policy are being reflected in numerous collisions in digital rights characterized by clashes of equality and inequality in access to digital communication, violations of public and individual rights in terms of privacy and manipulation, among other things. The urgent need to develop holistic approaches to digital literacy and critical thinking among digital generations of young Russians poses another challenge in the field of digital rights. Today, there is a clear need for Russian media policy on both federal and regional levels to address new demands, as well as new risks, challenges and opportunities digital environment poses to citizens. Given the remaining digital inequality in the country, which we have discussed in the previous section, we believe there is a growing need for media policy to approach a new, albeit exceedingly important concept today, that is digital capital. In the following, concluding section we will discuss digital capital within broader digital divide/digital inequality context and suggest that closer attention in Russian policymaking processes should be paid to this important intangible capital, as well as significant benefits it can bring to citizens.

Digital capital in the context of digital and epistemic rights

Today, digital capital is becoming a key component, together with other intangible capitals, for interpreting digital social stratification and its related inequalities, as well as policies to overcome these inequalities in the information and network society. More than that, digital capital is perceived as a new and much-needed

capital in the modern digitalized world, which is gaining particular importance when it comes to epistemic inequality and epistemic rights of citizens, as we will elaborate further in this section.

In recent works of Park (2017), Ragnedda (2018), Vartanova and Gladkova (2021) and others, digital capital as a new type of intangible capitals is being closely linked to the digital divide/digital inequalities theoretical framework, considering digital capital as a key component of overcoming the third level of digital inequality, based on the difference in benefits from use of the Internet and ICTs. However, the original idea of digital capital is rooted in P. Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) classification of capitals, understood as any resource that gives an advantage to those who own it, and who can also be accumulated and perpetuated over time.

Digital capital is currently understood as closely linked to other types of capitals such as information capital or techno-cultural capital but should nevertheless be considered as a specific capital. Digging deeper into this difference, Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) note that while information capital (Hamelink, 2000), information habitus (Robinson, 2009) and informational capital (Prieur & Savage, 2013) are often used to describe the technological component of the already existing social or cultural capital, 'digital capital should be conceived as a specific capital and not a mere subset of other capitals and, therefore, can be isolated' (Ragnedda, & Ruiu, 2020: 30).

In recent years, scholars theorized digital capital as a new intangible capital with a hybrid nature (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2020, 2021), understood as 'an integral set of users' access to information technologies, digital communication environment (primarily the Internet) and the ability to use them for professional and personal purposes' (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2020). Developing Ragnedda and Ruiu's (2020) idea about digital capital being a specific capital that can be isolated, scholars argue that digital capital should be considered also as a meta-capital, influencing the possession and use of other intangible capitals: communication, information, political, social, cultural and others in current digitalized world (ibid). Digging deeper into the idea of digital competences as a broad notion, scholars argued that digital capital embraces both technological skills/digital skills required for efficiently operating ICTs, and informational-analytical skills, which include social skills, competences in content-creating, ability to protect personal information by unsolicited use by others, and other types of skills, therefore having a complex multi-consistent nature.

In Russian context, several studies have been so far conducted to theorize, measure and construct digital capital of users (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2020, 2021;

Gladkova, Vartanova, & Ragnedda, 2020), given remaining digital inequalities in Russia, across, and also within regions. The study by Gladkova, Vartanova and Ragnedda (2020) was focused on comparing Digital Capital Index between two big ethnic groups: Russian and non-Russian users. Research showed that minor ethnic groups in Russia can be disadvantaged when it comes to digital inclusion, due to lower level of digital capital they possess. However, scholars note that ethnicity should not be treated as an independent variable: there are plenty of other factors including education, social status, age, economic state of the region, etc. that may influence the result. Similar results were suggested in recent study by Gladkova, Argylov and Shkurnikov (2022), which showed that the first and the second levels of the digital divide interrelate and influence each other in multi-ethnic and multicultural Russia setting, leading to a situation when people with lower access to Internet and ICTs have lower skills and competences to use them, therefore risking becoming digitally excluded.

In 2021, Vartanova, Gladkova, Lapin et al proposed a model of 'digital passport' for deeper analysis of the current state and challenges associated with remaining digital inequalities in Russia. Although this model does not specifically measure digital capital of individual users or Russian regions, it nevertheless considered digital capital as an essential capital closely linked to three levels of the digital divide. Having tested 'digital passport' in several federal subjects of the Russian Federation (Moscow, Kaliningrad Region, Republic of Tatarstan, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Republic of Dagestan, and others), scholars showed differences in access, skills and benefits from using Internet and ICTs in different parts of Russia. They argued that this model can be used both by scholars and policy- makers engaged in developing strategies for further 'overcoming digital divide, fostering digital inclusion and increasing digital capital of Internet users' (Vartanova et al, 2021). By better understanding digital inequalities at all three levels, and the current state of the digital capital among users, policymakers, scholars and educators can work out legislative initiatives and educational programs aimed at building and further increasing digital capital of different population groups. In addition to bridging the access gap, which is still an important problem is many regions of the world, specifically in the Global South (Gladkova, & Ragnedda, 2020), scholars stress the importance of bridging the skills gap among Internet users. An important role in this context belongs to media education and digital literacy programs, enabling people to construct and further increase their digital capital level and fully use the benefits of online realm: civic engagement, social activism, communication in online space, self-representation and self-actualization, the use of digital services and much more.

Conclusion and ideas for future research

Looking at Russian media policy from historical angle as well as its current state, we can reiterate an important argument, that is Russian media policy being constantly developing, addressing new challenges and transformations associated with digitalization, commercialization, changing patterns of regulation/deregulation, the growth of new media sector, development of active audiences, transformation of journalistic cultures and journalistic professionalism, and much more. At the same time, there is a need for media policy to fully embrace new demands information and network society has posed to citizens, such as a clear need for digital access, digital skills, and – increasingly important today – digital capital, which goes beyond mere access or knowledge how to use ICTs. Talking about network society, van Dijk (2020) stressed a number of crucial new issues and challenges in today's digital media ecology, which should potentially be taken on board by policymakers too: the increasing importance of Internet, AI, big data; the growth of Internet platforms; constant appearance disinformation and fake news in online space, etc. We argue that for citizens to be able to successfully and efficiently work and live in this challenging environment, a certain level of digital capital is needed. Media policies aimed at acknowledging, protecting, and constructing digital capital are becoming essentially important therefore too, on both country and international/global level.

Elaborating this concept further, we believe that digital capital can play a pivotal role in bridging not only digital but, probably even more importantly, epistemic inequality in the society – be it Russian society, or any other society, where digital divide is still present on one or several levels. If we approach epistemic inequality as a gap in information, knowledge, and understanding between different groups of the population, we cannot but mention the importance of digital capital in knowing *first* how to access information (this requires digital access and digital skills of users); *second* how to interpret it, being cautious of the presence of intentionally false informing (disinformation), distorted information, which is closely linked to interpretations rather than facts, online falsehoods and fake news (Tandoc et al, 2018; Tumber, & Waisbord, 2021; Simons, & Manoilo, 2021), as well as various social conflicts and risks; and *third* how to use information and knowledge in one's professional and personal life contexts. Digital capital in this vein is closely linked to all three levels of the digital divide, and can possibly contribute to bridging all of them, given a set of outer (availability of ICT infrastructure and Internet connection to population, straightforward policies aimed at bridging gaps in users' ICT access and skills)

and inner (personal motivation of users and their willingness/readiness to be digitally included) factors.

Finally, although this paper does not look into epistemic inequality within specific national, cultural or professional groups, but rather discusses it from a broad theoretical perspective, we think closer attention in the future should be given to particular contexts and population groups, and the way epistemic rights and epistemic equality/inequality are manifested there. Earlier works into epistemology of news production for example, showed that 'The epistemology of journalism differs from other institutionalized forms of knowledge production with respect to the organized procedures and practices applied for the acquisition of information' (Ekstr m, Rams lv, & Westlund, 2021). There are also specific challenges, gaps and possible inequalities associated with particular professional contexts, such as 'a particular epistemic challenge in the live reporting is to acquire information under time pressure to be able to add something meaningful' (ibid). Our final argument therefore is related to a need for more research approaching close links between digital divides, digital inequality, epistemic inequality, digital capital, digital and epistemic rights, digital inclusion, and social inclusion. These notions/concepts/processes cannot and should not be longer studied separately, but rather should be approached within a broader paradigm of equality, human rights, citizen rights, and individual well-being in the modern society, as well as state and public policies aimed at securing and constructing them.

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