

The lexical apparatus of users' discussions about conflict in the Internet space: The experience of empirical research¹

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Abstract

The paper presents the experience of empirical study of lexical characteristics of mass communication texts (users' comments) in various Telegram channels related to the discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 2023. The article describes the approaches that exist to the formation of texts accessible for the analysis, taking into account the lexical elements used by the authors of the comments. It demonstrates the possibilities to elaborate and to implement software solutions to conduct content analytical research. The study shows that the real event in its media embodiment is significantly transformed under the influence of non-institutionalized communication participants due to the introduction into the discussion social reality elements closer to users. It is remarkable that users' comments demonstrate the word-making practice inspired by the social and political context, realize the creative potential of users and their ability to propose and to use word forms indirectly marking users' attitude to various objects of discussion. Data obtained stress the process of power personification under the influence of the global process of mediatization that it realized in users' perception and the conflict. The dataset lets to speak about the empathy as the trait of the participants in the discussion and about logical inconsistency of mass consciousness manifested in simultaneous usage of neutral and negative lexical units withing the frames of discussion studies.

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Keywords

Social conflict, media representation, Telegram channels, users' comments, lexis.

Introduction

In the modern mediatized social space, the practices of communicative interaction undergo significant transformations that transform messages from a logical point of view and change their textual – grammatical, phraseological and lexical – characteristics. The study of lexical apparatus used in Internet discussions presented in this article belongs simultaneously to several segments of the academic space. In a certain sense, it continues the tradition of mass consciousness study established at the Faculty of Journalism of Lomonosov Moscow State University in the late 1980s, since it provides an opportunity to consider scientifically the reflective practices of modern Russian society representatives and to evaluate the communicative, cognitive and other abilities of modern media audience. The application of the previously developed sociological approach makes it possible to reflect on key characteristics of the audience of modern media based on the results of empirical research, allows to evaluate it analytically “in two ways: firstly, in the ability of people to reflect on the facts and events of reality (on the basis of their knowledge and within the limits of their competence) and, secondly, in their ability to articulate (to formulate the results of their own reflection)” (Grushin, 2001: 35).

At the same time, the debatable nature of the object under the investigation and the conflict potential of studied materials localize this research in the space of modern academic projects aimed to analyze the life cycle and the nature of social conflicts' coverage in current information environment (Smirnova, & Shkondin, 2021; Smirnova, Shkondin, Denisova, Antipova, & Ilchenko, 2021; Islam, Das, & Tabassum, 2023), associate it with foreign studies of conflicts' representation in traditional media and social media, with the analysis of the mediatization of military conflicts and the nature of the media coverage of conflicts in modern society (Gilboa, Gabrielsen, Jumbert, Miklian, & Robinson, 2016; Vartanova, Gladkova, & Dunas, 2023). In addition, it becomes possible to comprehend the activity of communication participants of different types involved in representation and discussion of conflicts (Krashennikova, & Nikolskaya, 2022), to study the representation of conflicts of different types in the communication space, which often becomes not only an environment for discussion and understanding of conflicts, but also an environment for their generation (appearance) (Vartanova, Dunas, & Gladkova, 2021).

It is obvious that in the modern media space conflict events' coverage is not limited to the dissemination of information about them through official traditional media, although it is obvious that the existence of media as institutional entities is important in order to implement an institutional approach to coverage global and regional conflicts of various types (Loucif, 2022; Anikina, Krashennikova, & Vyrkovsky, 2023). To a certain extent it affects the detached nature of texts that manifest themselves both in the choice of actors done by the authors, and in the formulation of attitudes to the described conflict situations. However, today we have the opportunity to trace the reaction of non-institutionalized media, opinion leaders and their audience to certain conflicts in social networks. It gives the ground to complement the existing picture of the situation, development and representation of conflict in media environment.

Methodology

The Arab-Israeli conflict of autumn 2023, during which the armed forces of the Palestinian Hamas movement invaded Israel, became a kind of event-based center for the current research procedure. The choice of this event as the starting point of empirical study could be explained by the relative distance of conflict events from a significant part of Russians, by the geographical distance of the event from the Russian media audience as a whole. During the development of the research program it was decided to analyze the one-month time interval from the moment of the invasion (October 7, 2023 – November 6, 2023). This segment begins with the launch of the Hamas operation "Al-Aqsa Flood" and the response operation "Iron Swords", includes events of various scope, actions and decisions of the Israeli and the Palestinian sides of the conflict (including air raids and airstrikes on the territory of the Gaza Strip, evacuation of the population, blockade of the Gaza Strip, explosions, organization of humanitarian corridors, the beginning of a ground operation etc.), the reactions of representatives of the international community and foreign states (including visits of the US President and the British Prime Minister to Israel).

The materials for the study were collected on the Telegram messenger platform. This decision was made due to the growing popularity of this platform among Russians in recent years, as well as the implementation of a whole range of functions on this platform, primarily information and communication functions providing the opportunity to obtain relevant information and to discuss various aspects of the conflict situation open for the authors of publications and their audience.

In the process of a sample construction the TGStat³ resource was used (data for February 2023 were used to make methodic solutions). This made possible to take into account simultaneously several parameters of various communication participants and to consider the channels of non-institutionalized media and bloggers, which are leading in terms of the total number of subscribers, audience growth per month, audience coverage and citation indicators of these resources by other channels on Telegram platform. The strive to study the audience of a popular media platform in Russia and to draw conclusions about the key characteristics of users' discussion lets to include into the sample only those channels that open up the opportunity to comment on publications (posts) to their audience.

As a result, five Telegram channels were included in the sample in the study:

1. Readovka (@readovkanews),
2. RT in Russian (@rt_russian),
3. SHOT (@shot_shot),
4. VPSH (@pravdadirty),
5. Turned on the Z war (@voenacher).

Since the problems of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the fall 2023 were not actively reflected by most bloggers on the Telegram platform, two channels of bloggers, NE MORGENSTERN (@nemorgenshtern) and Nevzorov (@nevzorovtv)⁴, were included into the study to make it possible to compare different types of communicators participating conflict representation.

The selection of specific texts for analysis was carried out using the media monitoring system Medialogia⁵. All the posts and comments about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the new phase of which began on the morning of October 7, 2023, published on channels until November 6, 2023, were included into the sample. The texts were selected according to the keywords "Israel" and "Hamas". The total number of comments reviewed within this research procedure exceeded 300 thousand (see *Table 1*).

³ TGStat. Rating of Telegram channels. URL: <https://tgstat.ru/ratings/channels>

⁴ An extremist association banned in Russia.

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⁵ Medialogia. Monitoring of media and social networks. URL: <https://www.mlg.ru/>

Table 1

Quantitative characteristics of the sample

Channel title	Number of publications	Number of comments
Non-institutionalized media		
Readovka	236	79102
RT in Russian	461	43758
SHOT	62	38404
VPSH	58	21232
Turned on the Z war	99	18115
Bloggers		
NE MORGENSTERN	64	13745
Nevzorov ⁶	155	124204

The massive of publications and comments collected during the sampling process contains more than 300 thousand messages of various length. Taking into account this circumstance, in order to follow the tradition of media studies focused on the study of texts and to preserve the general logic of content analytical research as a way to conduct a formalized qualitative and quantitative analysis of documents aimed to implement objective research of texts to understand social, political, economic processes (Toschenko, 2013), it was necessary to propose a fundamentally new methodological solution, connected with the use of special mathematical programs to analyze text on Telegram platform. Today there is a large number of services that provide high-quality content analysis of texts (Gudkova, & Dayneko, 2020). But it turned out to be difficult to use them to solve the tasks of current study. Firstly, these programs may also have limitations in the amount of texts for the study. Secondly, in order to evaluate a number of indicators, some services use their own formulas that differ from the generally accepted ones, while others do not provide information about calculation methods, which does not allow them to be fully trusted. In addition, it should be kept in mind that in any case, formatting of the database to meet the requirements of existing services is required.

Taking the above described into consideration it was decided to create our own program to conduct content analysis of users' comments. At the initial stage, the program would solve a limited set of tasks. But as the scope of research expands, this number would grow. The most convenient environment for writing such a program turned out to be the Python programming environment. It is

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characterized by efficiency, simplicity and versatility of use and is widely used for big data analysis. At the first stage, after reading the data file, the program performs word-by-word tokenization of input messages. From programming languages' point of view, each text consists of words, spaces and punctuation marks. After tokenization, this text turns into a list of words without spaces and punctuation marks. Next, the lemmatization of words is carried out, i.e. their representation in dictionary form, including the replacement of uppercase letters with lowercase ones. For example, the text "Israel was subjected to a massive missile attack" after tokenization and lemmatization will look like this: "Israel", "to be subjected", "massive", "missile", "strike". At the next stage of processing input messages, words that do not carry any semantic load are removed from the list: conjunctions, prepositions etc. This reduces the calculation time. Since the main task of the program is to search for words from a pre-compiled thematic word groups ("trees") in the message, tokenization and lemmatization procedures should also be applied to the "tree". Then, by simple iteration, each word from the "tree" is sequentially compared with the words in the uploaded messages. In case of a match, the counter takes this fact into account. The result of the program implementation is an Excel file with information about how many times each word from the "tree" appears in the downloaded collection of messages. A collection of messages can be collected by grouping texts by time of creation, by various Telegram channels or by authors.

At the stage of general research program development, "trees" of words of different types were formed. That allowed to conduct further analysis of messages. The list of word groups included "Toponyms / geographical names" (for example, *Ashdod, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Kibbutz Urim, Erez checkpoint, Rafah, Gaza Strip, Khan Yunis, Rishon Lezion*, etc.), "Persons – participants of the conflict" (for example, *Benjamin Netanyahu, Bibi, Yitzhak Herzog, Yoav Galant, Abu Ubaida, Saleh al-Aruri, Ismail Hani*, etc.), "Persons not involved in the conflict" (for example, *Vasily Nebenzia, Joe Biden, Lloyd Austin, Pope Francis, Nikol Pashinyan, Vladimir Putin* etc.), "Organizations" (for example, *Islamic Jihad, Mossad, NATO, UN, Taliban, Hamas, Hezbollah*, etc.), "Religious terms" (for example, *Allahu Akbar, David, Jew, mosque, namaz, rabbi, synagogue*, etc.), "Groups of people/ individuals" (e.g. *Arabs, refugees, military, children, women, hostages, Israelis, Palestinians, old men, military women*, etc.), "Names of military operations" (for example, *the Yom Kippur War, Iron Dome, Iron Swords, Al-Aqsa Flood*, etc.), "Media" (for example, *Times of Israel, Al Jazeera, Rudaw, RT*, etc.). The formation of "trees" was carried out by expert reading of the collected materials (the massive of posts and comments) and highlighting the relevant lexical units in the texts.

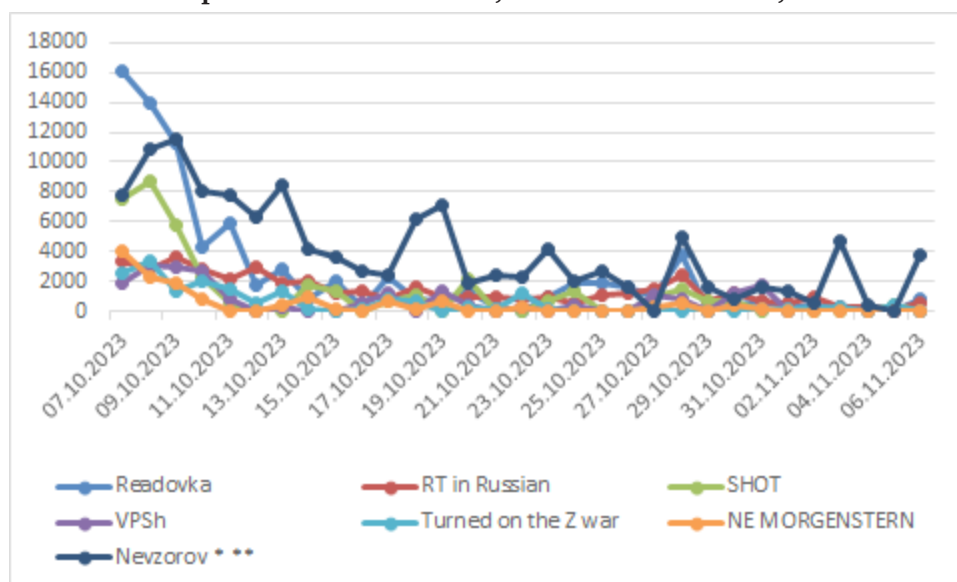
In this way, from 5 to 70 units were recorded in each “tree”, which were further used in the study of the collected array of posts and comments.

Results and discussion

One of evident observations made based on the results of conducted research concerns the nature of the development of a real conflict and its representation in the space of social media. The analysis of the saturation of the discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the selected channels indicates the absence of an obvious interdependence between the real events of the conflict and their discussion / representation by the audience of the channels as a universal feature of the discussion. *Figure 1* shows different profiles of discussions in diverse channels with a general decrease in activity over time.

Figure 1

The total number of user comments in the studied Telegram channels in the period from October 7, 2023 to November 6, 2023



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The existence of multidirectional processes and a certain delay in the communicative activity of users compared to the general chronology of the actual events of the conflict in Telegram channels could be noted. For example, the total number of comments from the audience of the SHOT channel and the

Nevzorov channel⁷ increases on October 8 and 9, respectively, compared with the number of comments directly on the day of the beginning of a new phase of the conflict in real (physical) space October 7. The following observation has methodological significance and is related to the possibilities of using software solutions in the implementation of content analytical research. The above-mentioned “trees” of words, formed with the help of expert reading of Internet discussion materials at the stage of research program development, have been fundamentally reduced with the automated analysis of a large volume of texts. During computer processing of texts’ massives, it became obvious that the use of a fairly large part of words (lexical units of different types) by the authors of comments does not have a massive systemic character. The analysis of the texts shows that there is a rather limited set of words (names, concepts) that are actively used during discussion by users of posts related to various real events of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their use in discursive practices will be discussed further.

The study of conflict direct participants mentioned in the comments could be a kind of illustration of power personification process that takes place under the influence of the global mediatization process. According to representatives of the scientific community, “media not only reflect a multifaceted picture of the world, providing it to the modern consumer, but also participate the formation of cultural, political, and social values <...> have become the main way of producing modern experience” (Gureeva, 2017). In the political sphere, which was influenced by the media before, this invasion becomes evident in the creation and crystallization of leader’s image in communication and information spaces. According to the researchers, “modern theories of leadership are increasingly closely linked to the phenomenon of the politics’ mediatization, where the personification of power, coupled with levels of perception and public opinion, affects the political behavior of social groups in accordance with their limits” (Kazakov, & Bepalov, 2017: 56). In discussions about the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu occupies the most prominent place in terms of the number of mentions in comments – in discussions under the posts of Readovka channel, his name is mentioned 130 times during the month, he is more actively mentioned than other direct participants of the conflict (and other politicians – in particular) in the discussions of the SHOT channel.

Frequency analysis also indicates another characteristic trait of the participants in the discussion – their empathy. In the word “tree” “Persons

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involved in the conflict”, the second noticeable element, according to the results of computer mediated analysis, becomes the “dan” element associated with two representatives of the same family – a 12-year-old Israeli citizen named Noah Dan and her 80-year-old grandmother Carmela Dan, who were abducted and later killed by representatives of the Hamas organization. This lexical element is most noticeable in users' discussions of the Readovka channel (121 mentions in the studied time period totally), users of the SHOT channel (37 mentions) and VPSH channel (30 mentions).

In general, it could be said that the lexical units included in the word “tree” of “Persons involved in the conflict” do not often appear in the massive of studied material, in user discussion of the conflict events. At the same time, the analysis of texts for the use of elements from the word group “Persons not involved in the conflict” demonstrates a higher user activity, the representation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in this aspect looks more saturated. The discussions feature both historical figures (for example, “Hitler” – from 26 to 251 mentions in discussions in the various channels reviewed) and contemporaries of users (“Putin” – from 109 to 826 mentions in different channels, “Zelensky” – from 40 to 499 mentions). It is important to note two key characteristics of the considered field. The first is the transfer of the discussion about geographically distant events to better known, more understandable and physically and mentally closer objects. The appearance in the comments the names of the so-called *relocants* who were not directly involved in the events of the Arab-Israeli conflict (for example, the mention in the discussion of A. Makarevich⁸ – 40 mentions in the comments of the SHOT channel , 136 – in Readovka channels), in a certain sense leads to a change in the direction of the discussion, and not just to expand the subject and the range of actors discussed.

Related to this, the second feature of the media representation of the conflict in the space of user comments becomes the word-making actualized by the social and political context of the development of the discussion. In discussing the events of the conflict, the creative potential of users and their ability to propose and to use word forms indirectly testifying to their attitude to various objects of discussion manifests itself. The use of automated methods for studying the texts allows to see an active mentioning of the lexical unit “alkin”, attributed at the stage of development of the toolkit to the described word “tree” (the maximum number of mentions – 561 – in the Readovka channel). Analytically interpreting the appearance of this lexical element in the discussion, it is possible to isolate its use as a noun and to fix the presence

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of substantive dysphemism in the comments, as well as a proper name – and to evaluate it as a substantive dysphemism of pronomination, that is, to talk about the formation of a semantic derivative of a real proper name for solving communicative problems in a separate thematic segment of the social media space. The analysis of data in terms of the use of lexical units forming a “tree” of “Groups of people/persons” in the discussion partially confirms the previously formulated statement about the transfer to fragments of social reality that are closer and/or more understandable to users when discussing the Arab-Israeli conflict in the virtual media space (including using the lexical unit “relocant”, understandable to the Russian-speaking audience, taking into account the events of the last two-three years in the international arena).

It can be noted that there is a greater variety and greater inclusion in the texts the mentions of various groups in the comments of audience of the Readovka channel compared to the rest of the Telegram channels included in the sample (“Jew”, “Israeli”, “Arab”, “Palestinian”, “hostage” appear in the discussion, there is quite an active discussion using the lexical unit “a terrorist”). In the rest of the channels considered in the study, there is a focus on the key groups involved in the conflict, the groups designated in the “tree” by the units “Jew”, “Palestinian”, “Arab”, “terrorist” are noticeable in the discussion. Working with this group of lexical units it could be noted that there is a certain connection between the media representation of conflict events and real events. This may be evidenced, in particular, by the discussion of attacks on the elderly and women (and, accordingly, the presence of the lexical units “old man”, “woman” and “young woman” in the discussion, noticeable, for example, in the comments of the audience in the SHOT and VPSH channels). In addition, the reflection of real events in the media representation is noticeable in the intensification of the use of negatively marked lexical units, swear words and colloquial words (“Nazi”, “fascist” and “*khokhol*”, which is not directly related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, on the dates of notable events of the conflict – the explosion in the parking lot near the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza on October 17 or the massive bombing of the Gaza Strip on October 28).

Conclusion

The real event in its media embodiment is significantly transformed under the influence of the characteristics of non-professional non-institutionalized communication participants due to the introduction of elements of social reality closer to users into the discussion. The transformation of an event in the space of user comments also occurs through the use by the authors of

statements of emotionally colored, evaluative lexical units that can change the vector of discussion, contribute to the transformation of the meanings of online discussion and, as a result, the perception of the problem by passive users who get acquainted with the content of the discussion in reading mode. The analysis of the lexical apparatus of users' comments on the events of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the autumn 2023 once again confirms the logical inconsistency of mass consciousness noted in the second half of the twentieth century (Grushin, 1987). In this case, it manifests itself as a feature of the consciousness of the modern media audience, discussing the conflict situation in studied Telegram channels and simultaneously using neutral and negative lexical units (for example, "Jews", "Israelis" and "Yid"). Reflecting on the results obtained, it can be assumed that there is a connection between the quantitative characteristics of the audience of channels and their content parameters. The Readovka channel has the largest declared number of subscribers. The array of comments created by its audience contains more diverse lexical units in conflict situation discussion. However, such a judgment can become a hypothesis of further empirical research in a related field, as well as the assumption about mutual penetration of the audience's value orientations and user attitudes in discussions on specific problematic (conflict) situations.

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