Russian Large Cities Authorities' Pages in Social Media: A Platform for Expert Communication?

Mikhail Karyagin[✉]

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg, Russia
karyaginm@gmail.com

Abstract. The paper presents the results of empirical research aimed at analyzing the effectiveness of the social media usage by administrations of Russian cities. We use both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the content of municipalities' SNS accounts, as well as ways of communication between public employees and citizens in the digital public policy sphere. It is argued that in the overwhelming majority of cases municipal authorities do not use the potential of SNS to contact with citizens, mainly because of lack of material adaptation, necessary recourses, as well as inability to adapt to the new information environment.

Keywords: Social networks · Social media · Internet · Municipal authorities · Russian cities

1 Introduction

In recent years the social networking sites (SNS), which are still called the new media, have stopped to be actually new. They have intervened in our life so deeply that are now an ordinary means of communication not only in private everyday life, but also in business communication.

The share of active Internet – users in Russia (those using the Net at least once a day) is now 53%, or 61,5 million people[1], and practically each user has an account in at least one SNS[2]. Moreover, each year the length of SNS usage sessions is increasing, according to the Romir Holding data, a Russian user spends about 143 min a day in social networks[3].

SNS today is an effective channel of communication, with the majority of citizens having access to them (to add, the Internet-penetration rate in large cities with the population over 100,000 is notably higher than the average of 53%). Hence, it can be said for

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[1] Internet in Russia: Dynamics of Penetration. Spring 2015 [in Russian]. FOM, 12.08.2015, http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12275.

[2] TNS Web Index [in Russian]. TNS, 01.03.2016, http://www.tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/internet/information/.

[3] How Much Time Do the Russians Spend in the Social Networks [in Russian]. The Village, 21.05.2015, http://www.the-village.ru/village/city/city/214995-sotsialnye-seti.

sure that the official accounts of public authorities may become a platform of interaction between public policy actors for decision-making on the municipal level.

Besides, it is necessary to take into account the global agenda: the Arab – spring and the so-called Twitter – revolutions phenomenon have raised the question of states' strategy towards the behavior in SNS. It has become obvious that it is impossible to ignore the new media, since the virtual processes going on there may have quite real consequences in political, economic and social areas.

The technique, developed and tested within the present research is unique and can be applied by researches from different countries, and the conceptual findings characterize the situation not only in the Russian segment of SNS, but encompass more general tendencies plausible for the whole area.

2   Research Design

The key question we were interested in during the research is whether cities administration accounts in popular SNS can be considered platforms for expert communication between the government and citizens. To answer this question we examined all municipalities in the Russian Federation and chose the cities with the constant population of 100, 000 and more (excluding Moscow, St. Petersburg and Sevastopol)[4]. First, it helped to indicate the research field. Secondly, the indicators of the Internet – penetration are higher in these cities, and therefore there are more opportunities for communication between public policy actors. As a result, we have chosen 166 municipalities under consideration, with the overall population of municipalities as many as 56,7 million people.

To verify a large number of municipal accounts in SNS, we analyzed official websites of big cities administrations on whether they have a link to their SNS – pages. It allowed us to include the official accounts only and eliminate those civic pages that deliberately or by chance had been arranged as official city administrations' accounts.

To specify the list of SNS under consideration, we used the Brand Analytics data to reveal the most popular SNS. According to the date, the most popular SNS in Russia are: Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Moi Mir, LiveJournal, Instagram, Twitter.

After the formation of official accounts' list we gathered qualitative and quantitative indicators: number of subscribers, number of posts by the authorities in SNS, topic and content of published information, as well as design of a post in SNS.

3   Research Methods

In research we used the methods of qualitative and quantitative content-analysis of official websites of large cities administrations, as well as their SNS accounts, as well as the qualitative content – analysis of published information and users' activities on

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[4] Population Count of Municipalities of the Russian Federation [in Russian]. Federal Service of Statistics, 06.08.2015, http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/publications/catalog/afc8ea004d56a39ab251f2bafc3a6fce.

SNS pages of the municipalities. Within the quantitative content - analysis the units of analysis were the links to the official accounts in SNS at the official web-sites of the municipalities. During the research we focused not only on quantitative characteristics, but also on the qualitative indicators:

– Adaptation of published materials to the peculiarities of a SNS;
– Tag usage;
– Topics and content of published information (news, entertainment, information materials);
– Links to official web-sites of municipal administrations;
– Interaction with the users in the commenting section and by personal messages;
– Informal style usage (humor and Internet – memes in posts).

We also used automated tools for gathering data (fanpage karma, Fake Followers by SocialBakers and Twitteraudit), which allowed to analyze the effectiveness of cities administration accounts' in Facebook and Twitter. We also ran several semi-structured interviews with public servants of those municipalities, which SNS accounts had appeared to be the most effective and popular, as well as conducted the overall survey of administrations' employees.

4   Why Do Public Authorities Need SNS?

Policy – making is becoming a more complex phenomenon nowadays. Even in hybrid political regimes with the shift to authoritarianism official organizations must follow the rules of game to legitimize political decisions. Considering the decision-making algorithm by Anderson and Dunn, one of the five steps is "confirmation of public decisions", which seems to be done more effective via modern communications technologies [5, 6].

Public policy space has a much more complex configuration of actors, than a public administration system. "Instead of one traditional actor – a state – we have the civil society represented by NGO leaders, as well as expert community related to science and systematic knowledge" [10].

To set the effective dialogue between the participants of discussion, a platform with equal access for all is needed. For this purpose web-recourses on the basis of official websites can be made, but technical development of such facilities requires a large amount of resources, which makes it irrational, especially in cities with no sufficient budget. The usage of ready and free platforms that provide opportunities for public discussion of important city problems, seems an easy and effective decision: "Information and communication infrastructure allows to regard public administration system not as a centralized hierarchy, but as a network organization of authority units, connected by horizontal unities, accountable and transparent to citizens" [8].

Despite the system motivators of SNS familiarization by public authorities, it is important to note individual motives [3] of executives. As one of our respondents notes, SNS reduce burden placed on divisions in charge of the official communication in a

public authority. It is easy for administrations' employees to respond to citizens' questions and problems in SNS, rather than to deal with the document circulation under official inquires received by public authorities.

In the course of interviewing we found another interesting task solved by cities administrations' representatives by means of SNS: "Citizens in SNS are the same people we can meet on the streets. It is better to solve questions and problems in SNS, rather than see their consequences in reality aftermath. Sore points and problematic issues are seen well on the Internet". Other advantages the state gets by actively using SNS are described in detail in literature that can be easily found [7].

5 Why Do Citizens Need SNS?

State and municipalities' accounts in SNS do not only solve problems of government, but allows citizens getting a range of benefits, the key of which are the following:

(1) SNS are the instrument of controlling the government by citizens. In case of qualitative and effective administration of SNS account, civil activists, NGO and other public policy actors can expose control over the government's activities. This leads to the increase of public authorities' transparency [1].
(2) By means of SNS citizens can raise questions for discussion, i.e. to set agenda, which was confirmed empirically [4].
(3) SNS have e-democracy options [2], like online voting on important issues. It is clear that such instruments lack institutional power, and results of such voting do not have any official status, and hence, the obligatory character for the executive power, but the government can use the results of such polls and voting to consider public opinion in decision-making.
(4) Citizens and experts can participate in discussing strategic city issues, which allows the government making necessary corrections to the government policy. Generally, the representation of public bodies in SNS is a mutually beneficial process, in case of the correct maintenance of communication.

6 Research Results

According to our primary analysis of municipal administrations' websites, only 77 out of 166 cities with the population over 100,000 have their accounts in SNS, which forms 43,3%. The general amount of accounts in different SNS is 204, and the overall audience of these pages on date of the data gathering was 364,749 users. The distribution of accounts and audience in percentage is the following:

VK	OD	FB	TW	INST	YT	LJ
General Audience						
209403	10377	53415	56211	29625	5543	175
57,41%	2,84%	14,64%	15,41%	8,12%	1,52%	0,05%
Number of Accounts						
54	11	39	52	15	28	4
31,76%	6,47%	22,94%	30,59%	8,82%	16,47%	2,35%

To avoid the quantitative indicators being abstract figures, we connected them to cities' population count, as well as to indicators of SNS penetration in a region from Brand Analytics[5]. That was made to level cities with different population (from 100 thousand to 2 million).

The indicators of SNS penetration allow forming an assumption on a potential audience of official accounts according to the formula: (city population * SNS penetration in a region)/100. Accordingly, having defined potential audiences, it became possible to draw conclusions on effectiveness of public authorities in this area.

In the overwhelming majority of cases it was revealed, that the audience of SNS municipal authorities' accounts does not correspond to the level of SNS development in the regions. It means that public authorities pay inadequate attention to the problem, and the realization of potential is in average 17,48%. Twitter and Facebook are exceptions here, but it can be explained rather by low levels of these SNS' penetration rather than governments' activeness. For instance, penetration of Twitter in the North-Caucasian regions is about 1–2%.

Municipal SNS pages' administrators in the majority of cases do not adapt the content to the format of a SNS, meaning that press relaeases do not fit the audience of a SNS. For instance, the audience in Vkontakte is younger than the one of Facebook or Odnoklassniki[6], hence different language and communication style should be applied. Adaptation of materials is carried out only in 44,44% of account, in the rest of cases news from websites are simply copied and pasted to the SNS.

Twitter format assumes just 140 symbols to place the content in, but there we more often saw a simple placement of a link to the original source without any adaptation. The latter is done in 19,61% of cases only.

A widespread practice is the so-called cross-posting, when materials from one SNS are automatically transmitted to other ones, therefore, such automatization do not speak for the effectiveness of such accounts.

5 Social Networking Sites Statistics [in Russian]. Brand Analytics, April 2016, http://br-analytics.ru/statistics/author.

6 TNS Web Index [in Russian]. TNS 01.03.2016, http://www.tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/internet/information/.

The results of our research reveal the low engagement of users into the discussion of materials posted in municipal SNS pages. For instance, only 9 out of 54 pages in Vkontakte have discussions between users and group administrators (communication in other SNS is totally absent). The reasons for this low activity are the following:

– Poor adaptation of materials, which leads to lack of its comprehension and acceptance by the audience.
– Publication of information having no social significance. It is often the case when public authorities publish news on internal procedural activities (internal councils, meetings with neighboring municipalities' administration etc.)
– SNS accounts' administrators do not react to users' questions. Usually subscribers ask clarifying questions or give critical comments that draw no attention, and sometimes are deleted. We have carried out an experiment by commenting one publication about the mayor's statement on the official page of Lipetsk City Administration (https://vk.com/public60460495). As a result our comment has been deleted and our page has been banned.
– Unwillingness of state and municipal structures to adapt to the open format of social networks. This is the most popular answer by city administration representatives', according to our survey (25% of respondents).

Our research shows that municipal authorities usually choose Twitter as SNS, apparently assuming it to be the easiest to run. The problem however is that not all authorities adapt materials to the format of Twitter (usually it is just cross-posting), as well as they disregard the low popularity of micro-blogging in Russia. Hence the major part of the audience remains uncovered. Despite the fact that the number of SNS accounts in Vkontakte is comparable, they have much larger audiences and are more vivid in terms of communication quality.

In the context of resource constraints (9 out of 32 our respondents pointed out the problem of combining SNS administering with other responsibilities), the strategic choice of SNS for municipality will be defining.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary analysis has shown that the representation of the Russian authorities remains at the primitive stage. On the municipal level the development is carried out much slower, that on the federal one[7], due to the following reasons:

– The larger resource base of federal authorities. Federal executive bodies have human and financial resources that provide SNS development. Some pages of federal authorities are administered by outsourcing.

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[7] Results of the Analysis of Representativeness of Federal Executive Authorities in Social Networking Sites, carried out by the author within the Infometer Project [in Russian]. Project center "Infometer" spring 2015, http://www.infometer.org/analitika/foiv_smm_2014, http://www.infometer.org/analitika/foiv_twitter_2015, http://www.infometer.org/analitika/foiv-v-instagram.

- The index of SNS penetration and the quality of the Internet connection is much better that in the regions of the Russian Federation.
- Attention of the Open Government[8] to federal authorities' SNS accounts is an additional stimulus for development, while there are no such indices for regions or municipalities.
- Human resources potential is much higher in federal authorities than in municipalities. Many municipal employees, according to our survey, have no skills to effectively manage SNS pages.

Unfortunately, municipal administrations' accounts in SNS cannot be considered platforms for public policy actors' effective communication in majority of cases. There are several positive examples in the cities of Irkutsk (http://vk.com/public95424720) and Achinsk (https://vk.com/nashach), but in general the accounts play the role of sounding out the newsfeed from official websites. The potential of SNS is not used fully, as information is important, but not the main advantage of Web 2.0. The latter is the opportunity to arrange feedback, but now this channel is used only in direction from the authority to the society.

In the course of research we considered factors that could have changed the situation. The process of municipal SNS accounts seems to be carried out in two directions: citizens should use cities' pages actively, while authorities should be more active in entering this new information space.

The demand makes the supply. It is crucial to subscribe to municipal administration pages, and follow the news more actively, as well as comment on publications and inquire additional information. Should a municipality do not have accounts in SNS, citizens must demand their creation. Civic activism promotes openness and transparency of authorities, which in turn stimulates their activity in these or those policy actions. The government must be more active in new technologies' usage. There is plenty of literature on social media at the moment, as well as free online-courses, that may help public servants. It is important to understand advantages the government can gain by using SNS.

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