

**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE INTERNET
AS A FACTOR OF SOCIO-POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

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Abstract. In the 21st century the Internet and information technologies open up new prospects for political participation. The Internet wide coverage has created unprecedented opportunities for dissemination of information on socio-political processes, for enlargement of the aware sector and for their active involvement in those processes. The authors proceed from the definition of political participation through the Internet as involvement of various groups of people via information technologies in political processes, as well as in presentation by the authorities of positions and proposals concerning issues of public importance, ways to resolve them, or in taking decisions through formation of public attitudes and opinions, in influencing the processes aiming to enforce these decisions.

The use of the Internet in politics promotes the evolution of the conventional, i.e. consultative, model of political participation into the interactive model, thus securing the impact of broad masses on the political decision-making processes. Political discourse that has acquired features of horizontal communication is turning into a multi-component, multi-lateral model of interactive communication. Political Internet participation makes it possible to overcome such obstacles as time and distance.

The article presents the role and influence of the Internet and means of electronic communication on political ongoings and participatory processes. It is exemplified by the results of the electronic voting during the 2005-2019 elections to local and state bodies held in Estonia, a European pioneer in providing elections through the Internet.

A more detailed analysis is given on the role of the Internet and information technologies in the revolutionary events and power turnover processes of 2018 in Armenia. The possibilities arising due to the use of the electronic mass media and Internet information websites are demonstrated and analyzed in the context of radical political changes and revolutionary events. Evidence is provided that permanent coverage of the developments and interaction with Internet users enhanced and regulated the then-opposition activities, and involved the public at large in the ‘Velvet Revolution’. The

new Armenian authorities are rather sensitive about communication on the Internet platform. They not only present reports on the work fulfilled, but also follow the society feedback.

The survey is conducted with the methods of content analysis of documents (mass media publications), Facebook monitoring, elements of statistic analysis and secondary analysis of research works on political activities and political participation.

Having noted the advantages and disadvantages of the use of IT in politics, the authors come to the conclusion that neutralization of abuses and risks of the opportunities given by continually developing technologies, supposes not only philosophical consideration but also moral and legal studies, as well as practical mechanisms.

Keywords: Information technologies, Internet, social network, political participation, electronic voting

Introduction

Information society presents a specific stage of social development where the Internet and information technologies form a new platform and opportunities for political participation. Expanding coverage of the Internet day by day, mobilification of social life have made it possible for broad social layers to be more informed and more or less involved in political processes. Currently the Internet is employing a specific function: a user is transforming from the position of a passive addressee of information into an information developer and is becoming a subject (agent) of internet communication. The Internet forms an environment, a unique social space for the active part of society to present their initiatives and implement projects, such as fund-raising for solving various issues, for collecting signatures, launching social actions, etc.

Objectives / Purpose of the study

Swift enlargement of the Internet coverage has opened up unprecedented opportunities for disseminating information about socio-political processes, for making the wider public aware and more actively involved in those processes.

Extensive use of the virtual space to activate political participation in Armenia (RA) became a serious factor of politics during the last decade. This phenomenon achieved its pinnacle during spring and summer months of 2018.

The objective of the present survey is to reveal the role and significance of the Internet and electronic communication in the revolutionary events and power turnover in Armenia in 2018.

Methodology

Back in 1995 Lawrence K. Grossman (the former president of NBC News and PBS) predicted that the Internet would give wide opportunities to involve the public in the decision-making process (Grossman L.K., 1995: 290).

Modern political processes, including political participation, are difficult to imagine without the use of Internet resources. *Political participation through the Internet* means involvement of various groups via information technologies in political processes, as well as in presentation by the authorities of positions and proposals concerning issues of public importance, ways to resolve them, or in taking decisions through formation of public attitudes and opinions, in influencing the processes aiming to enforce these decisions.

Scholars propose different classifications of political participation forms[^]

- conventional and non-conventional (Voinov D.A., 2016: 50),
- orthodox and unorthodox (Vasilik M.A., 2000: 213-214),
- elemental and organized (ibid.),
- latent (non-explicit, unspecified) and explicit (Ekman J., Amna E., 2012: 289),
- individual and collective (ibid.),
- legitimate and unlawful (ibid.),
- managerial, consultative and participatory (Chadwick A., May C., 2003: 276).

Whatever the bases and forms for the classification of political participation, they are all exposed to the impact of IT, gaining new qualities and modernity.

In general, the following options of political activity and participation via the Internet are distinguished:

- voting at Internet elections, polls, referenda;
- creation and dissemination of political information through blogs, websites, Internet-papers, etc.;
- fund-raising to support a party or political movement;
- participation in discussions of political issues in blogs, websites of different political organizations;
- hackers' attacks on political actors' and parties' websites, portals of state bodies;
- such political provocations as technologies of "black PR" (creation of clone-sites, dissemination of false information) (Voinov D.A., 2016: 50).

The analysis of political activity and participation phenomena provided in this study is based on the above-mentioned disclosure of political participation and its methods and ways listed above.

To achieve the target set in the article, the content analysis of documents (publications in the mass media), monitoring of Facebook publications and the consequential analysis of research in this field have been applied.

Results and Discussion

Since the 2000s, the Internet has begun to assume its essential role in the public life of post-Soviet countries. For instance, in 2005 Estonia was the first European country to hold elections to local bodies through the Internet. More than 9 thousand citizens or about 1% of those eligible to vote took advantage of voting through the Internet. That number has been incessantly increasing during the following years. Since 2005 6 similar elections have been held in Estonia. And in the 2019 election to the State Assembly of Estonia (The Riigikogu) a record number of voters using the Internet was registered: 43.8 % of voters preferred to transfer their votes electronically (Valimised, 2019).

Almost all forms of online political participation were employed during the 2018 ‘Velvet Revolution’ in Armenia. The opposition leader N. Pashinyan used his FB personal page to inform the public and to enhance their political activeness.

Most of local TV and radio companies were to some extent under the control of the former authorities or their associates. The Internet remained the only means of information about non-violent demonstrations which was stimulating active participation of broad masses. Perhaps, if it had not been for the Internet, the large number of FB-users (1.2 million) and a wide coverage of the Internet throughout Armenia, the ‘Velvet Revolution’ would have hardly come true.

The protest leader N. Pashinyan notes regarding this issue: “Currently my Facebook page has a huge audience comparable to that of a TV audience. ...Facebook played a big role in the process of our revolution and was a very effective channel for information flows to invite people to demonstrations” (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

This is a new phenomenon and a new culture of political participation in Armenia. The ex-authorities never applied the Internet to transmit urgent information to the public. Before the ‘Velvet Revolution’ FB was more of a forum for analyses and personal information. Many government members, especially the young ones, had their personal FB pages; however, Internet activity was not considered as something very positive by most of the public. A skeptical approach towards the FB forum completely changed after the 2018 revolution.

The leader of the 'Velvet Revolution' N. Pashinyan gave live reports every hour about the march that commenced on March 31 and resulted in revolutionary events just three and a half weeks later. His FB page monitoring proves that his page became 7.2 times more active within two weeks. During the first five days of the march his live messages were viewed 31 345 times on average, while during the last five days the figure reached 225 651. The most powerful tool in the hands of the opposition at the time was Internet communication. With the help of Internet monitoring the opposition activists were able to point out the issues mostly worrying the crowds that had taken to the streets. Thus, they were able to change slogans instantly, like "I am making my step", "Anti-Sashik", "Make a step, deny Serj", "Help Serj to retire", "Policeman, join in", "Policeman is one of us", etc.

At that moment the TV as a source of information was upstaged because before it was able to process the available information, the situation in the country would change, the events would develop in some unpredictable way and rather quickly. Live broadcasts from the Internet media and FB users remained the main source of updated, latest and first-hand information.

After the opposition leader had assumed the post of the Prime Minister, TV programs presented live broadcasts from his FB page, which had no precedent under the former authorities.

The results of the syndicated sociological survey conducted by Gallup International organization a month before the parliamentary elections of April 2017 and December 2018, also prove the decline of the role of TV.

The data of the surveys held within 1.5 years show that the TV has lost its position as a primary source of information by 14.7%. The number of people acquiring information from the TV has reduced, while the number of those gaining information from Facebook and e-media has increased by 13% and 10.4%, respectively (Gallup International in Armenia 2017; Gallup International in Armenia, 2018). See Fig. 1.

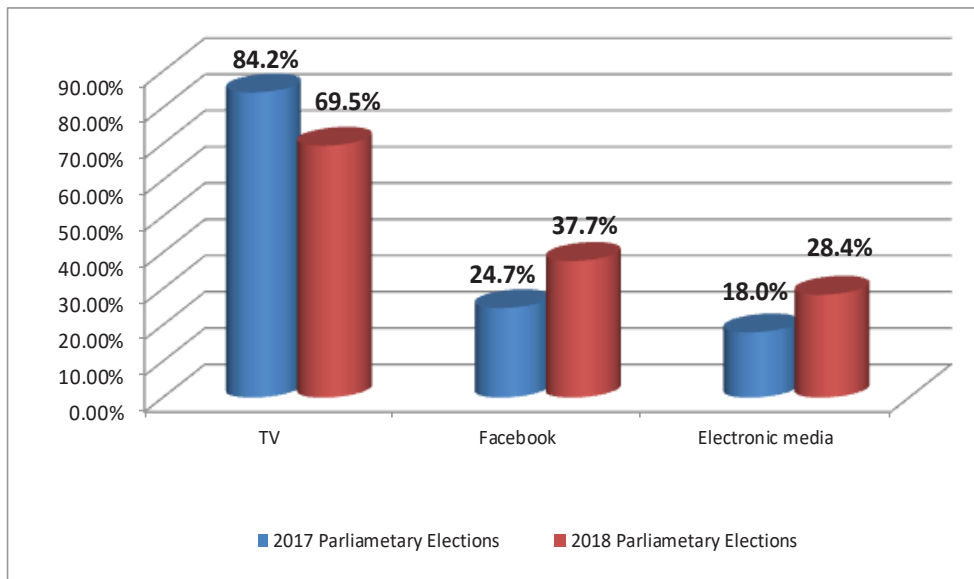


Figure 1 - Main sources of information prior to elections to parliament of 6th and 7th convocations

Implementation of the Internet in politics promotes the evolution of the conventional participatory model. The traditional consultative model of political participation is being replaced by the interactive model providing impact of broad masses on decision making in politics.

Internet political participation contributes to the weakening of vertical contacts in communication processes and to the formation of horizontal political institutions – public relations. The genesis of the democratic participatory model can be traced in the RA since the turnover of spring 2018. The newly elected authorities are rather sensitive about communication on the Internet platform. They not only present reports on the work fulfilled, but also follow the society feedback.

Conclusion

Thus, political participation via the Internet has its advantages and characteristic features. Firstly, Internet participation gives an opportunity to overcome time, distance and geographic obstacles. During the spring-summer months of 2018 irrespective of their place of residence a sweeping number of RA citizens were watching the political movement online and promptly reacted to the leader's instructions.

Another major function of the Internet gives a citizens an opportunity to impact the process of making decisions on issues of public importance. The political phenomenon which has acquired features of horizontal

communication is transforming into a multi-component, multi-faceted interactive form of political communication.

However, it should be noted that (like with the energy generated when an atom is split) it may have positive implementation, promote resolution of problems and civilization advance, it may just as well be employed erroneously and produce negative effects.

In the 18th century Jan Jack Russo noticed that development of science and technology contains inherent consequences menacing to progress of society and the person (Rousseau J.J., 2014). The issue has been relevant at all times, including today.

In this context, those who created these technologies face a strong challenge of moral outlook and values; meanwhile voicing and regulation of the latter, as history of civilization shows, “lag behind” scientific and technical revolutions. Neutralization of abuses and risks of the opportunities arising out of continually developing technologies, supposes not only philosophical consideration but also moral and legal studies and practical mechanisms.

And yet, development of science and technologies is indivertible; it has no alternative and is to serve the wellbeing of man, enhancement of democracy. The study of the above mentioned influence of information technology on the social, political, economic, educational and cultural spheres of public life bears not only theoretical and emotional but also practical importance.

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