

**SOCIAL NETWORK "VKONTAKTE" AS A GLOCAL "NOTHING"
IN G. RITZER'S THEORY OF MCDONALDIZATION OF SOCIETY**

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Abstract. In this paper we attempt to propose George Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization of society in relation to the study of the social network VKontakte as a new MacDonalidized sub-institute.

The objectives of the study were:

- to characterize social media as a McDonaldized institution;
- to consider VKontakte as a McDonaldized sub-institute;
- to analyze VKontakte in accordance with the concept of "nothing-something" by G. Ritzer in the context of the processes of grobalization and glocalization.

The main methods of research were general scientific methods of observation, analogy, analysis and synthesis, as well as the axiomatic method, which consists in the development of the sociological theory of G. Ritzer.

George Ritzer understands the McDonaldization as an implementing such principles of famous fast-food restaurant as efficiency, calculating, predictability, control and irrationality of rationality into the core of the consumer society. The first four factors add up to a positive effect, the irrationality of the rational means that McDonaldized systems produce unintended and undesirable consequences, among which dehumanization is the main one.

The study revealed that social media has all the signs of McDonaldized social institutions. Efficiency - the use of a variety of multimedia social media tools for optimal achievement of a variety of users' goals. Calculating – tracking the number of views of the created content in the administered communities and profiles in order to increase efficiency in managing social media. Predictability is the ability to use social media anywhere in the world in a user-friendly technological environment with manageable and predictable consequences. Control through the use of inhuman technologies – a neural network or software that offers a user potentially relevant content based on his/her information. Irrationality of the rational is the negative consequences obtained as a result of close affiliation with a McDonald institution (e.g., the risk of becoming a victim of fraud or cyber bulling).

Being a sub-institute of social media, VKontakte has the same signs of McDonaldization. There are many options for convenient using of the virtual platform: from thematic communities, allowing you to be familiar with new information, to different gaming applications, music, self-presentation and online business (efficiency). VKontakte encourages to make a quantitative analysis of the virtual audience that visited the user or company profile (number of views, likes, reposts and comments) etc. (calculating). VKontakte keeps its design unchanged when using a social network anywhere in the world (predictability). Based on user's information, VKontakte predicts and offers him/her similar groups, events, audio-video recordings, products and even possible friends (control). Number of victims of cyber-bullying increases, users become socially and information overloaded, the probability to meet low-grade or illegal content increases (irrationality).

Finally, VKontakte is as an example of the glocal "nothing". In the theory of G. Ritzer, this phenomenon is characterized by the popularization of social forms, which are result of a synthesis of global and local processes, but lacking the unique content. VKontakte appeared after Facebook and in many ways became its copy. VKontakte has acquired a number of locally determined features: 1. Bipolar user registration system; 2. Dependence marital status on gender (only a heteronormative standard is possible); 3. The range of options for expressing political preferences is limited; 4. The choice of types of worldview (represented by various religious movements) is limited.

Considering social media as McDonaldized systems in general and VKontakte as a glocal "nothing" in particular opens up new methodological possibilities in the study of media culture and the role of digital technologies in human socialization and acculturation. A comparative analysis of social media interfaces in the proposed perspective reveals additional cultural codes and meanings of social communication.

Keywords: McDonaldization, globalization, glocalization, social media

Introduction

An important factor for the successful institutionalization of social media is its adaptation to the specifics of the meta-social context, which determine the nature of social interactions at both micro and macro levels. According to the research concept of the leading theoreticians of the XX-XXI centuries (J. Baudrillard, Z. Bauman, R. Barth, G. Ritzer, and others), under this sociocultural context we can consider a consumer society. Despite the active media consumption of the majority of individuals the importance of social media as a phenomenon of the consumer society is not yet given in the

scientific discourse. Accordingly, the research question of this study is: how social media as an institution of consumer society is transformed in the context of a local cultural community and what its methodological implementations.

The most systematic concept of institutionalization of new consumer practices is presented in a book of sociologist George Ritzer "The McDonaldization of society" (Ritzer G., 2011). In our opinion, the pathos of social media fits logically into the ideology of universal consumerism in which the subjects themselves are both creators and consumers of an uncontrollable volume of ideas, symbols, and cultural codes. From this it follows that the theory of G. Ritzer can be used as a theoretical and methodological basis for the study of social media in consumer society.

Objectives and methods of the study

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- to analyze VKontakte in accordance with the concept of "nothing-something" by G. Ritzer in the context of the processes of globalization and glocalization.

The main methods of research were general scientific methods of observation, analogy, analysis and synthesis, as well as the axiomatic method, which consists in the development of the sociological theory of G. Ritzer.

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Results

Below we consider how social media meet main criteria of the McDonaldized system, according to the theory of George Ritzer.

Efficiency – using of a variety of multimedia social media tools for optimal achievement of a variety of users' goals: receiving / creating content, entertainment / leisure, self-presentation, business, etc.

Calculating – tracking the number of views of the created content in the administered communities and profiles in order to increase efficiency in managing social media: quantitative analysis of virtual audience, commercialization of social media, expressed in the using of commercial advertisements with the setting of target audience, depending on its socio-

demographic characteristics, geography of residence, interests and values, level of education and other things. The virtual platform system collects data for each user, makes calculations depending on the advertiser's request and sets the recommended price per viewing of one record.

Predictability is the ability to use social media anywhere in the world in a user-friendly technological environment with manageable and predictable consequences: global access to the network, constant design, template nature of self-presentation, compliance with the national mentality. Social media is becoming more popular than they are technologically closer to the cultural characteristics, mentality of national and ethnic communities that consist their target audience (Zhao et al., 2017).

Control through the use of inhuman technologies – a neural network or software that offers a user potentially relevant content based on his/her information (groups, events, audio-video recordings, products and even possible friends).

Irrationality of rational is negative consequences obtained as a result of close affiliation with a McDonaldized institution (e.g., a risk of becoming a victim of fraud or cyber bullying).

Vkontakte as a glocal "nothing"

Developing his theory, G. Ritzer defines McDonaldization as one of the types of social change, proving that it is not just an aspect of globalization, but its driving force (Ritzer, 2011: 401, 405-406). Before turning to the study of the social network at the macro level, we define the terminology proposed by Ritzer.

Glocalization means integration, interpenetration of the global and local, which leads to the emergence of unique combinations in each individual area (ibid: 407). However an understanding of the essence of globalization processes is not limited by glocalization. In this connection, G. Ritzer formulates the concept of grobalization ("to grow" + "globalization"), which means "the imperialistic ambitions of countries and corporations, their desire and even the need to impose themselves on different regions of our planet ... in order to establish their power, influence and increase profits" (ibid: 409).

With the processes of grobalization and glocalization are closely related two more phenomena described by Ritzer: "nothing" and "something". According to the author, "nothing" is "a social form that is usually conceived and controlled centrally, and at the same time is devoid of any distinctive, substantial content" (ibid: 414).

"Something" is "a social form that is usually conceived and controlled locally and is relatively rich in distinctive, essential content" (ibid: 416). Ritzer also suggests considering "nothing" and "something" not as a

dichotomy, but as a continuum, as two extremes of the same length (ibid: 417).

Having known basic terms, we need to identify in what forms a global phenomenon called “social networks” can take in the context of a local cultural community. Consider this question on the example of two well-known social networks Facebook and VKontakte, which have gained popularity in various social and cultural environments.

Facebook, a social network founded in the USA in 2004, is currently the most popular virtual platform worldwide (Most popular, 2019). Active marketing and promotion of the social network in each country of the world indicates the intention of its leadership to global dominance in this industry that means the trend to globalization. A centralized management system and a uniform interface that sets a set of user capabilities for self-presentation allow Facebook to be classified as “nothing”. Based on this we can find another driving force of globalization, attributed to the globalization of “nothing”, namely Facebook.

VKontakte is a Russian social network, created in 2006, is the most popular in Russia and some post-soviet countries (Seven most popular SNS in Russia, 2015). Like Facebook VKontakte has a centralized management, leaving the user only the opportunity to adapt to the options created by the developers. VKontakte, like its American counterpart, remains faithful to its design regardless of the user's country of residence. Everything in the compartment allows us to refer the domestic social network to the category of “nothing”. However, unlike Facebook, VKontakte does not make active attempts to enter the world market (exception is the transition to the domain vk.com in 2012). Moreover, in the early years, the design of VKontakte was almost identical to the design of Facebook, which allowed specialists to claim that it is a copy, a clone of the American social network (Rogozhnikov R., 2014: 2; Popel, 2012). These circumstances lead to the assumption that “VKontakte” is rather a glocal phenomenon created in a particular location as a response to a global challenge.

Referring to Michel De Certo, Ritzer writes that “actors can create unique phenomena from the global and local interaction” (Ritzer G., 2011: 426). Indeed, if we conduct a study of VKontakte’s interface, we find deep cultural meanings, which often remain non-reflective for the absolute majority of users. Below we consider main differences in VKontakte’s and Facebook’s interfaces (see Shchekoturov A.V., 2018: 46-50):

- In the Russian social network, the gender of the user is not visible; sexual orientation is excluded from the categories for self-identification and self-presentation. Compared to Facebook, VKontakte does not have some marital statuses (“in free relations” and “in home partnership”), the network

replaces them with the categories “in love” and “in active search”. Marital status, as well as the choice of a partner in a social network, is subordinated to a heteronormative standard (the interface allows you to specify a person of only the opposite sex);

- VKontakte offers a user a limited set of options for the public presentation of life attitudes and personal preferences, pushing the religious picture of the world and political segmentation.

Extrapolating differences in social network interfaces to differences in cultural meanings, we can conclude that “categories of gender and sexuality are sensitive themes for the Russian sociocultural context, since they problematize categories of population, such as transgender people or people with bisexual orientation. The absence of these categories of self-identification in VKontakte can be explained by the inconsistency with the generally accepted norms of Russian society. The heterosexual interface standard of the domestic network, the substitution of the category “worldview” with religious views reflects the dominance of patriarchal traditional values in Russian society. And the mutually exclusive choice of one of the variants of political ideologies in VKontakte, in our opinion, represents “the absence of ideological consensus in Russian society, the fragmentation of political norms and values of Russian society”.

Thus, VKontakte representing a social form that is managed centrally and devoid of distinctive content represents the national (local) cultural mentality, which perhaps makes it much more popular in most countries of the post-soviet space. This argument allows us to define "VKontakte" as a glocal "nothing" in terms of Ritzer's concept.

Discussion

Having examined the phenomenon of social media from the position of one of the fundamental theories of sociology of consumption - the MacDonalidization of society - we have convinced that social media have signs of efficiency, predictability, calculating and control by non-human technologies. The constant companion of social media's McDonaldization is the irrationality of rationality, which represents the risks and threats that users face. Being a McDonald institute, social media inspire the illusion of originality by offering template patterns of self-presentation, simplify communication, reducing it to the exchange of iconic symbols (smiles and emoji) (Shchekoturov A.V., 2019: 166).

If G. Ritzer wrote that shopping and entertainment centers are temples of consumption, nowadays social media can be called the temple of media consumption, and Facebook is their main agent and driving force of globalization.

Categorizing VKontakte as a glocal “nothing” allowed fixing additional meanings that are represented by the social network and determine the nature of the consumption of content, symbols and signs. This frame contributes to the rethinking of the social value of self-presentation in the social network VKontakte. The feature of self-presentation in VKontakte is that it occurs in a discursive field, which is enclosed in a heterosexual matrix, politically fragmented, replacing the worldview with religious preferences. Accordingly, the differences between these categories, as well as the differences within them, remain invisible and therefore non-reflective for most users. Applying the theorem of W. Thomas that the situation, defined as real, is real in its consequences, it can be stated that if these categories are invisible in social media, they will remain invisible in real life, especially since the boundaries between online and offline practically non-existent. This can lead to an increase in xenophobic attitudes, not perceiving alternative views, and to a tendency to see in gender, sexual, political, etc. diversity a deviation, but not a variant of the social norm. In terms of methodology the consideration of social media as a McDonaldized institute implies the use of a mixed methods research, combining several research methods at once. On the one hand, any McDonaldized institution is based on quantitative parameters that can be measured and compared, on the other hand, it is important to see the opposite side, what Ritzer calls irrationality of rationality, which is impossible without qualitative research methods.

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