Government Communication in Digital Environment

Liudmila Minaeva
School of World Politics
Lomonosov Moscow State University
Moscow, Russia
lvm@fmp.msu.ru

Abstract— **This article describes the growing adoption of the Internet platforms by Government bodies and civil servants in an attempt to foster better communication with citizens and collaboration with business. The article dwells on the strategy and tactics of communication used by Russian Government Public Relations and civil servants in digital environment. The key communication strategy can be described as that of harmonizing relations between public bodies and citizens. The study identified four communication tactics, characterized by distinctive approaches in terms of interactivity and openness toward concrete target audiences. When communicating via social media, Russian civil servants are advised to adopt conversational forms of communication to expand the range of followers and to involve a broad range of stakeholders in the dialogue.**

Keywords— *government communication, digital technologies, communication strategy, communication tactics, social media.*

I. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the Internet, the development and spread of digital technologies in all spheres of human life have become the most significant technologic trend. People spend more and more time online, they interact with friends, play games, watch video, learn news, sell and buy goods and services, study and research etc. Business has adopted digital technologies to interact with both internal and external publics to educate loyal employees and customers, to promote corporate values, on the one hand, and goods and services on the other [1, 2, 3, 4].

"Digital Revolution" is also affecting political sphere and undoubtedly making a contribution to the development of democracy [5]. Online activity influences create pathways to online and offline forms of political activity [6]. A great number of websites aimed at political life at the local, national, and global levels, discussion groups, chat rooms, alternative journalism, civic organizations, NGOs, grass roots issue–advocacy sites create a complex system of political communication in which various actors compete with government bodies [7].

At the same time the significance of government communication should not be underestimated. Positive citizens' attitude to the political course pursued creates favourable atmosphere in society, facilitates the decision-making process and contributes to participatory politics. This is the reason why government cannot dismiss the central importance of digital communication with citizens and has to expand the communicative space. This study tries to take an in-depth look into the strategy and tactics of government communication adapted to the digital environment.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political communication continues to command the attention of academic and professional discussion and research with good reason. Politics is part and parcel of everyday life of society and affects all its strata. The dynamic character of political communication, however, makes it a cumbersome task to study the interaction of different actors systematically. At the same time, one has to admit that the way communication is organized and managed carries important strategic and political dimensions. Although it has been shown that individuals participate in protests for different reasons [8] most of the time they simply want to communicate with and warn their government.

Political communication has been studied in the field of social science, in linguistics, in political studies. The methodology of the present research is based on the theory of discourse analysis which comprises the methods of linguistic, sociological and political research and gains a deeper insight into specific features of political communication [9]. Discourse analysis can demonstrate the way in which changes occur both in social intercourse and in the conceptual structures upon which it depends [10]. It focuses on the situatedness of language use, as well as its social and interactive nature [11, 12].

Viewed through the prism of communication model political discourse is varied and multiform. Its categorization depends on the presence of four independent variables:

1. Source of information - individual/ group/ mass professional political language speaker or individual/ group/mass non-professional political language speaker.

2. Recipient of information - individual/group/mass professional political language speaker or individual/group/mass non-professional political language speaker.

3. Communication situation - formal or informal.

4. Channel of communication - direct or indirect.

All these four variables affect, at once, the communication strategy and language of political discourse. Because of differences among source of information and recipient of information it is possible to distinguish six types of political discourse: agitational political discourse, professional political

discourse, internal political discourse, media political discourse, household political discourse, administrative political discourse.

Thus, for example, in the case of agitational political discourse the source of information is represented by an individual or group professional political language speaker and the recipient is an individual or mass non-professional political language speaker, communication situation – formal or informal, channel of communication – direct or indirect. The discourse of this kind is implemented in election campaigns.

Professional political discourse presupposes that both source and recipient are individual or group professional political language speakers, in this case formal communication situation is observed, channel of communication is either direct or indirect. Professional political discourse can be illustrated by parliamentary debates, cabinet sessions, international political negotiations.

The focus of the present paper is government communication, that is, administrative political discourse. In this kind of discourse the source of information is represented by an individual or group professional political language speaker, the recipient of information is an individual or mass non-professional political language speaker. The communication situation is formal. As for the channel of communication it is either direct or indirect. In what follows the indirect channel of communication (communication in the Internet) will be considered.

III. STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Government communication is carried out through a multitude of channels at all societal levels. Face-to-face interaction of civil servants and citizens in offices is accompanied by disseminating information through television, radio, regional newspapers, local billboards and Internet. The objective of government communication is to bring about understanding for a nation's ideas and ideals, institutions and policies. Otherwise stated, government communication strives for the harmony in the society and the key communication strategy implemented by Government Public Relations is that of harmonizing relations between public agencies and citizens.

To this end, Government Public Relations departments establish a contact with target publics and promote the policy pursued. The communication strategy of harmonizing relations between public bodies and citizens contributes to justification of courses of action and results in legitimatization of the political policy. Public support of political decisions-making process is achieved by making the latter transparent. Therefore, in open, democratic societies public bodies have to make information accessible and instantaneous. This is no easy task. The solution lies in implementing e-government which is an instrument that provides enhanced access to information and basic services 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

It should be emphasised in this connection that as far as Russia is concerned, although the programme "Electronic Russia" (2001-2010) was not flawless, at present all public agencies, regional and local government have their websites. The analysis of websites of all federal subjects and 18 cities

with the population of 1 billion or over 700 000 people has demonstrated intensive work of PR-managers and IT-professionals aimed at expanding the political realm at the local, regional and national levels.

The strategy of harmonizing relations between public agencies and citizens in digital environment is manifested in a number of communication tactics. The most important one is the tactic of self-presentation. The website of a public agency, regional or local government informs users about its structure and jurisdiction, functions and service delivery, news. E-mail makes feed-back possible.

At present all federal subjects have portals which provide Internet users with a wealth of various useful information and are linked with other relevant websites and the social media. Internet receptions have partly replaced e-mail. So, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Internet has become integrated with the established system of government communication.

It should be added that portals of federal subjects are made user friendly. There are versions of websites for visually impaired people and versions in national languages of the Russian Federation. Russia is a multinational country and the version of the website in the native language of regional residents is a sign of respect to their national identity. The Republic of Tatarstan, for example, has a Tartar version of the website side by side with Russian and English ones. The same holds true in the case of Republic of Buryatia (Russian, English and Buryat versions). The existence of such versions, too, contributes to the implementation of the strategy of harmonizing relations between government and population.

The tactic of self-presentation can be used individually or in combination with others depending on the target public. For example, the tactic of emotional impact is employed in communication with potential tourists. Interactive maps and virtual city tours, photo galleries of museums create the emotional image of the region.

The tactic of positive policy presentation facilitates communication with businessmen and potential investors. Detailed information concerning the region governance, business opportunities, taxes, transport cost and labor cost, etc. which can be found in the Investment passport presented at the website serves to create the image of the territory where business initiatives will be supported by public administration.

The present architecture of the Internet offers available space for many forms of civic initiatives. Public support for unpopular political decisions is very difficult to achieve because frequently there are interest groups which oppose them in the Net. Public agencies can overcome these difficulties if they are proactive in communication with citizens. According to Grunig [13] "when conflict occurs, publics 'make an issue of the problem". If the public agency waits for these issues to occur before it manages its communications with citizens, the agency will confront a crisis and will be forced to invoke short-term communications. However, if the public agency tries to identify and anticipate potential issues well before they reach a threatening stage, it establishes long-term symmetrical communications and crises, in the majority of cases, are avoided.

The two-way symmetrical communication suggests openness to and cooperation with the public. The tactic of stimulating the citizens' involvement is quite effective in this case. The tactic can be illustrated by the Moscow Government portal "Active Citizen". In April, 2014 the Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobianin proposed to users of the Moscow portal of government services and the website "Our City' to take part in the development of Moscow. 250 000 Moscovites expressed their readiness to participate in the city governance. There was created a special website (ag.mos.ru) and a mobile application. Every week Moscow Government proposes an issue concerning the city development for discussion and Moscovites vote for this or that decision. In this way Moscovites can affect the decision-making process.

It should be emphasized that the tactic in question implemented on-line is supported both on-line (to this end Facebook, Vkontakte, Instagram and Twitter are employed) and off-line. Active citizens are rewarded points which can be exchanged for various city services: bice rental, parking time, theatre tickets, souvenirs, etc. They can also attend some events of city holidays free of charge.

When the project was only launched a very effective way of involving citizens into communication was the platform Instagram, where they could publish their images with relatives. The authors whose images got a great number of "likes" could see them on video screens all over the city.

It follows from above that social media are effectively used by Government Public Relations. Individual politicians are also aware of their potential. Indeed, it is common knowledge that nowadays "social media have become ubiquitous communication channels for candidates during election campaigns. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable candidates to directly reach out to voters, mobilize supporters, and influence the public agenda" [14]. However, civil servants too turn to social media platforms to interact with citizen.

As far as Russia is concerned the first blogs of governors appeared in 2009 during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev who encouraged civil servants to interact with citizens with the help of digital technologies. Blogs, in his opinion, could make governors and other civil servants be more open to the general public. By addressing the issues of current importance in their regions governors could contribute to promoting the policy pursued on the regional level. Indeed, research shows that social media increase the responsiveness of politics in the Russian regions [15]. More than that, some researchers argue that political leaders' blogs are playing a great role in generating legitimacy for the Russian political system [16].

At the same time when reading regional leaders' messages citizens could learn more about them and perceive them as ordinary people with their joys and troubles. One should always bear in mind that the blog is a personal digital diary and people address it because they are interested in the personality of its author, his/her opinions and emotions. Hence, the significance of the tactic of self-presentation and that of emotional impact. Citizens expect from civil servants respect and politeness, honest and open dialogue with people. Besides, openness presupposes keeping promises, admitting mistakes, confessing to weaknesses and apologizing if necessary. The analysis of governors' blogs, however, has revealed a very controversial picture.

Indeed, already in 2014, 53 out of 85 governors were represented at least in one social network, in addition to them four governors had blogs on independent platforms. Strange as it may be, but governors' blogging is confined almost entirely to the tactic of positive policy presentation. Most blogs are governors' accounts of what has been done in the region. Phrases "I have participated...", "I have held a meeting…", "I have given the order…", and the like are quite common and describe the governor's everyday routine work.

Very rarely civil servants share their opinions on non-political issues and tell about their personal experience. However, it is well known that the discussions of social and cultural topics which bear on common interests and collective identities are politically relevant, because although politics is not explicit in them there always remains a potential [5]. Such discussions would be the implementation of the tactic of emotional impact which could contribute to a more favourable perception of civil servants by citizens.

The only exception is Twitter where one can find emotional reaction to the current political situation on the part of top officials more frequently. A case in point is Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's Twitter. Her twits are always informative and at the same time emotional and witty. Her messages are tailored to a more conversational style of communication on social media platforms. But such examples are very few.

It should be added to what has been said above that one of the most conspicuous features of Web 2.0 is interactivity which is hardly ever observed in officials' blogs and their other social networking sites. In spite of the fact, that citizens comment on individual messages, express their opinion on the issues under discussion, civil servants generally ignore their posts. More than that, in the majority of cases, governors have delegated blogging to their PR-managers or secretaries. As a result, the formal style, official statements and the bureaucratic approach to the management of blogs kill the public interest in governors' blogs. This approach of officials to communication with the public makes the attempts of Government Public Relations departments to involve citizens in the political decision-making process pointless.

Importantly, it would appear that today's civil servant is required to have a broader range of more highly developed communication skills and the ability to apply them more sensitively. It is obvious that public relations practitioners working in the field of public administration should pay more attention to coaching civil servants and develop their communicative competencies.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, the multidimensional nature of government communication in the Internet suggests that there are no quick fixes for the concerns raised, but rather that issues will need to be addressed with careful attention to context and target publics' needs and interests. The true challenge for PR-managers, of course, is to develop communicative

competencies of civil servants to help them to adjust their communication style to target publics in the Net.

References

[1] P.A. Argenti, C.M. Barnes, "Digital Strategies for Powerful Corporate Communications", New York: McGraw Hill. Information Systems, vol. 7, No. 4, 2009, pp. 273-298.

[2] C. Veldeman, E. Van Praet, P. Mechant,"Social Media Adoption in Business-to-Business: IT and Industrial Companies Compared", International Journal of Business Communication, vol. 54, issue 3, 2017, pp. 283-305.

[3] P.W. Cardon, B. Marshall, "The Hype and Reality of Social Media Use for Work Collaboration and Team Communication", International Journal of Business Communication, vol. 52, issue 3, 2015, pp. 273-293.

[4] M. Vernuccio, "Communicating Corporate Brands Through Social Media. An Exploratory Study", International Business Communication, vol. 51, issue 3, 2014, pp. 211-233.

[5] P. Dahlgren, "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation", Political Communication, vol. 22, issue 2, 2005, pp. 147-162.

[6] J. Kahne, B. Bower, "The Political Significance of Social Media Activity and Social Networks", Political Communication, vol. 35, issue 3, 2018, pp. 473—493.

[7] J. Berman, D.K. Mulligan, "Issue advocacy in the age of the Internet", The civic web: Online politics and democratic values, Edited by: D.M. Anderson and M. Cornfield, 2003, pp. 77–83.

[8] J. Kim, "Why do people take to the streets? Understanding the multidimensional motivations of protesting publics", Public Relations Review, vol. 44, issue 4, 2018, pp. 501-513.

[9] T.A. Van Dijk, "Discourse Analysis: Its Development and Application to the Structure of News", Journal of Communication, vol. 33, issue 2, 1 June 1983, pp. 20-43.

[10] P. Chilton, M. Ilyin, L.J. Mey(eds.), "Political Discourse in Transition in Europe 1989-1991", Pragmatics and beyond, ser. 36, 1997, p. 274.

[11] C. Hart, "Analyzing political discourse: Toward a cognitive approach", Critical Discourse Studies 2(2), 2005, pp. 189-194.

[12] P. Chilton, "Analyzing Political Discourse. Theory and Practice", Routledge, London-New York, 2004, p. 241.

[13] J.E. Grunig, N.J. Hillsdale, "Communication, public relations and effective organizations: An overview of the book, Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1992, pp. 1-28.

[14] S. Stier, A. Bleier, H. Lietz & M. Strohmaier, "Election Campaigning on Social Media: Politicians, Audiences, and the Mediation of Political Communication on Facebook and Twitter", Political Communication, vol. 35, issue 1, 2018, pp. 50-74.

[15] B. Renz, J. Sullivan, "Making a connection in the provinces? Russia's tweeting governors", East European Politics, vol. 29(2), June, 2013, pp. 135-151.

[16] F. Toepfl, "Blogging for the Sake of the President: The Online Diaries of Russian Governors", Europe-Asia Studies, vol. 64, issue 8, 2012, pp. 1435-1459. |