

## Network Communities in the Institutional System of the Russian Society: Theoretical and Methodological Aspect

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**Abstract:** In the presented study, theoretical and methodological aspects of network communities positioning in the institutional system of the Russian society are considered. Based on the analysis of concepts “information-oriented society”, “network communications”, “web communities”, “network communication”, introduced in the sociological discourse, authors substantiate the conclusion that it is necessary to study the network community within the framework of the neoinstitutional approach, the interpretation of the network community as an institution, directed on the reproduction of “freedom of communication”, mutual understanding, frame discussion on the basis of non-formal regulators, initiated by the network community core. Network communities included in the institutional system of the society can represent an alternative to formal institutions have a positive impact if they coincide with interests of a real social or professional community and negative in a situation of the virtual space referentiality in relation to a social reality.

**Key words:** Network community, institutional system of Russian society, non-formal regulators, network communication, network community actors, framework

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### INTRODUCTION

Network communities have become a social reality they are studied in various aspects (in sociology, social psychology in social demography) and the very problem of analysing functioning of network communities, their beginning and the growth requires application of the system social and humanitarian analysis. However, conceptualization frames appear to be amorphous and fuzzy they glorking to the publicistic discourse if categorical and criteria cut-off of the consideration of network communities are not worked out.

**Literature review:** A sociological notion, since the late 90's registers an “explosion” of network communities

(Castells and Kiseleva, 2000). In researches of Castells, it is declared that the modern information epoch has led to the beginning of interactive communication systems (Manuel and Cardoso, 2006). Castells notes that the “internetization” was initiated by the state but it was transformed into “technologies of freedom”. Creation of the internet network in 1990's led to the global computer communication to the fact that along with the exchange of finances, services, people, ideas, the global network led to the effect of transparent borders became independent of command and control centres (Castells, 2000). Optimism of Castells lied in the fact that the global communication web created a fundamentally new background and new conditions in the development of the institutional system of the society. Communication capabilities are included in the network communication and the network activity. The

technological openness of the network architecture contributes to the public access and hampers the introduction of government and commercial restrictions (Castells, 2000). As the experience of the “internetization of the society” has shown, the new virtual space, although it promoted the introduction of information technologies and modernized social codes, reproduces and produces social risks. The point at issue is not only about social inequality in the domain of the access to information resources but also about the network “totalitarianism” that the internet environment has lost mainly cognitive and consolidating attitudes having formed as a competition space of actors and senses (Frolova and Volkov, 2015).

Russian researchers have studied up on problems of networked communities, since the mid-2000's. Against the backdrop of the growth of consumers of information services, engaging of a large number of people in the communication environment, a significant phenomenon became the interest change-over of Russians from conventional information-cognitive and socio-orientation schemes to the network participation. Russian researcher I.A. Khaliy notes that the formation of virtual (network) communities is met with a mixed reception: on the one hand, it is possible to establish the self-organization process in a virtual space, the result of which is a social structure which actively operates in the real space (Khaliy, 2007) on the other hand she agrees with Pokrovsky in the fact that the emerging communities can operate in the “simulacra” regime, design another, fantastically perfect reality that replaces everyday life (Pokrovsky, 2007). In the approach of Russian researchers to the network community, a structural and functional approach is traced, determining which requests and of which groups are satisfied by network communities. According to this criterion, the virtuality or the functionality of network communities are considered. Meanwhile, network communities actively position in the social and political life of the country, laying claim if not to the role of new social and political forces then to the collective representation of a new class, a class of network communities. Noting that deregulation is observed in network communities, negotiations of age and gender, social and cultural, territorial markers, researchers consider “networks” with a mixed reception: as both a sphere of the society self-organization and a riskogenous space. Invoking the concept of “constructing a virtual personality” I.A. Khaliy speaks risks, associated with the fact that properties of the virtual communication can require an approach based on a common activity. But the problem lies in the fact what interests are pursued by participants of the

communication, whether they emanate from the desire to give an independent meaning to simulacra and in accordance with the logic of virtualization see in the social reality only background conditions or act on the basis of the network communication acceptance as an extension of communication opportunities (Khaliy, 2007).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Revealed dilemmas move to the consideration of network communities in the institutional system of the Russian society, proceeding from the fact that the issue is not an alternative to “real” social institutions but that to analyse formed institutional mechanisms in the context of the influence of network communities to consider characteristics of the functioning of network communities, wherein the role of anonymous connections is high and along with that the “caste” effect is manifested. The necessary condition for understanding networked communities as having institutional parameters are existing non-formal practices of actors in networked communities.

In other words, the researcher should not be confused by the fact of deregulation, the external absence of internal rules and norms. When it comes to the fact that networked communities need legal regulation, non-formal norms an impression of the anarchy space is created. However, an important research effort can be considered the operationalization of the concept of the network community as a formation, a structure which has structural and organizational and regulatory parameters. The point is that a fixed structure of the organization is inapplicable for the network community as well as the “domination-subordination” relations which are inherent to the administrative legal system. In this sense, the network community is an institution which has a set of non-formal regulations, oriented toward the reproduction or the reformatting in order to satisfy interests of certain social groups. The institutional mechanism of the network community is connected with the voluntary association, with inclusion in the network communication on the basis of mutual interest but in this context it should be emphasized that in networked communities the norms of “boycott”, exceptions, encouragements, determining the status of the participant in the network community as well as the core, the network group active and an adjoining layer of those who can be characterized as applicants for the participation in network forums, a space which includes a discussion on exciting problems and at the same time, obligates a participant to agree with rules, determined by network leaders is formed.

In the network space, although the principle of freedom of movement is proclaimed, effective acting social filters are created which block or limit the possibility for the “alien” invasion in the mastered network space. The point at the issue is that the proclaimed principle of voluntary involvement contemplates a formula of the positive neutrality, focuses on the readiness to support the participant equality but at the same time does not exclude arbitrary behaviour assumptions in the context of the application of the “rule of force”. This point is expressed by the fact that the blog proprietor possesses predetermined advantages and he uses the network space for obtaining symbolic and often, commercial advantages. American researcher F. Webster emphasized that in the context of used tools of the information society theories, it is important to understand the logic of post-modernism, wherein network communities are associated with the post-modernity, the “loss of authenticity” evidence, refusal to determine deep senses and assess the information reliability (Webster, 2004).

In other words, rules of the network community tabulate the aspirations for “absolute” truth and emphasize pluralism, fashion and construction of style differences. Perhaps, the most important is that virtual reality contains possibilities not only of interpretation but of “fancy” too. In the network community, the emphasis is on the relativity of the interpretation on the fact that claims to reality do not mean “joining the sacrificial struggle”. In the same sense acts the rule that network communication does not contain the implication of status as a consequence that the participant in network communication has the right to consider that he is not worse than others but he should be ready to recognize the right to self-expression of others.

Thus, the network community as an institutional structure, having an open access that is based on the non-formal consensus of prestige and reputation, recognizes the legitimacy of the request for self-expression and activity but within the framework of existing institutional matrix of the civil society, the borderland between the genuine public independent activity and a variety of its simulacra is constantly erased. It is important to emphasize that the interest to participation in the network community in the acceptance of the simulative model of the public participation in the Russian society is supported by a low level of the institutional trust and not only to the press and the television as information structures they do not trust, respectively, 47 and 41% but also distrust in the interpersonal sphere: the network community does not include close acquaintance or stable solidarity, it is connected with electoral, irregular actions but at the same

time, the rule of loyalty acts, the important is not the motivation for participation but the fact of participation, that is being among others (Volkov *et al.*, 2016). At that in conditions of social communication deficits in the Russian society, the network participation result can be a game space an on-line action which creates the implication to the real world but along with that does not contemplate the social interaction.

Obviously, the goal is not to recreate institutions of the civil society, since institutions in the social reality are assessed by crisis, complicating the activity by imposing prescriptions and rules, characterized by notions of objectively occupied social positions (Bourdieu, 1993). In other words, between participation in the network community and work out of a civic position, there is a “scheme of perception” of the network as free in comparison with opportunities for participation, provided by real social institutions. A defining characteristic of subjects of the network space as groups which have certain behavioural strategies and are oriented toward strengthening a symbolic capital, unspoken agreements, connected with preservation of own territory, can be considered and that does not cancel competition for attracting new participants and the attractiveness of a particular network community.

The methodological complexity of studying positions of the network community in the institutional system of the Russian society is that such markers as “neoethacracy”, “estates structure”, “social contract” are applicable within narrow limits. It is extremely important that subjects of the network community lean on the non-formal contract, measure the effectiveness of institutions with the probability of independent activity which is not connected with the introduction of institutional establishments. It can be hardly considered, that subjects of the network community focus on a scheme of the institutional evolution which would meet requirements of the Russian modernization for them the activity in the internet community and this is mostly people of 18-30 years old, although it is preferable but does not form the agenda. Accordingly, the key moment in the study of the network community influence on the institutional system can be characterized as a “deferred application”. The point at issue is that expressing dissatisfaction with the state of public organizations, subjects of the network community do not show readiness to introduce the diversity and an initiative to awaken the “spirit of changes”. Such a conclusion can be drawn from the fact that activities of networked communities if not “sectarian” are associated with the position of an “outside observer”. It can not be unconditionally asserted that the tendency of the social

exclusion dominates but subjects of the network community are focused on the virtual activity that is palliative to the real social participation. The mobilization of “networkers” for joint and regular actions, although it has the effect of the social expression has as the real consequence, the introduction of a specific problem in the public discourse but however in this situation, networks can be used for populist “waves” but have no long-term tendency.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As the recent foreign experience shows, the loss of an interest to activities of new parties which are judged to be populist from standpoints of ruling elites is connected with the competition in the network space where “new promising leaders” can be constructed. In other words, the analysis of subject’s positions of the network community is determined, firstly by the reproduction of symbolic resources in a competitive virtual space, secondly by the readiness for real joint actions and thirdly by the awareness of belonging to a particular network community which and this is the methodological complexity can be amorphous, fuzzy, take on the character of a demonstrative identity.

Network communities not acquiring a state of the fixed organizational structure are built into the institutional system of the society by the application for the introduction into the public discourse of problems which are discussed in forums. In this respect, network communities can be outwardly perceived as structures of the public control and contain opportunities for building a dialogue with institutions, operating in the real social space but the attention should be paid to the non-transparency of positions, the anonymity of participants and the lack of democratic procedures for expressing a common position. If demands, proceeding from a specific social request are imposed on social institutions, the network community is in a parallel world, where there are attendance criteria but the process of influence on the institutional system state is not traced.

Based on provisions of neo-institutionalism, it can be said that institutions themselves are understood as mobile networks and institutional changes are determined by the logic of building up useful functions (Igoshin, 2003). Network communities, based on the presented methodological tools can be described as “pre-institutions” as formations which are characterized by the ambivalence of norms but can form institutional practices, behavioural strategies of the network community actors, focused on indemnity of distrust to official institutions. It can also be said that the

participation in the network community can result in the need for instability. The dissatisfaction with the current institutional system in this context is determined by the routinization of anonymous and free communication, by the fact that the actor forms a sense of critical narcissism; its interest to institutions, operating in a real social space is characterized by the fact that while maintaining a sense of identity with the society, a member of the network community distances himself from social realities in other words is fixed in the network space not focusing on the full integration into the society.

To reveal institutional parameters of network communities, it is important to understand the social and structural status positions of actors, resources which they have at their disposal in the network space and the vector nature of practices which are implemented with respect to the social reality. The network community is characterized by the “creation of reality” that is giving it such degree of plasticity and variability which is convenient for its participants. It means that networkers place emphasis on the communication and in this sense it becomes understandable that despite the deficiency of credibility in the interpersonal area, 54% of Russians consider the communication to be the important position. Communication in the network can be interpreted as a surrogate of the real communication, like a simulacrum, behind which lies the problem of the real social disunity. At the same time, network communities have a sufficiently high degree of the social mobilization although it is necessary to take into account the game moment, the sense of the obscuration of responsibility for the social participation.

Thus, network communities in the institutional system of the Russian society can be interpreted by two parameters. The first is connected with a loose organizational normative structure which nevertheless reproduces the core, focused on norms of recognition and demarcation. Another criterion is determined by the socio-structural positions of the network community actors which are emphasized in the orientation toward showing social expectations, striving to be heard but at the same time manifest independence from the influence of societal mechanisms.

Apparently, it can be affirmed that network communities are selected for the virtual consumption. The fact that Russians are gradually moving into the realm of the virtual reality, says that the participation in networks contains a dual effect: on the one hand, these are consequences of a deficiency of the real communication, on the other hand-rather not opportunities, connected with the own development but the delay of the real social self-investments. It should also be noted that network

communities confirm the trend of the micro-world organization through them a social program for forming the circle of contacts is realized (Gorshkov, 2013).

In other words, an alternative to institutional practices which act on the basis of the social integration, shows itself in network communities. In support of this conclusion, it can be said that being a loose conglomerate of organizational norms and rules, the network community contains a charge of attractiveness, offering a market of virtual services. In this context, a group of like-minded persons can be formed, focused on real social actions but more marked are “virtual nomads” those who move freely throughout the network, driven by the demonstrative interest and unwillingness to “dwell” on problems, requiring cognitive activity. Words of Zygmund Bauman are remembered that the situation of “invisible citizens of a viewless society”. Invisible-in the fact that civil positions are expressed anonymously can be a simulacrum, replacing the real motivation. Viewless-in the fact, that network communities in principle are not directed towards exit into a real social space (Bauman, 2002). According to Bauman, a decrease in people’s interest to joint common affairs is observed and the result of this process is the widening chasm between “public and private”.

It is important to note that a discourse which does not completely translate particular problems into the public language is formed in network communities, members of the network community often use “canting” and the ability to translate their positions is not connected with proving utility and reliability. At the same time, a sense of consolidation acquisition appears and it is important to distinguish, whether there is a strive for dialogue with the society and the power or participants of the network communication are not directed to the exit out of the fragmented state.

The impression may appear that there is exists an ambiguity of rules according to which a network community operates but in the context of the above, it is obvious that rules of free communications and demonstrations of an independence are fixed institutionally. But at the same time as noted Z. Bauman, “plots, scenarios and actors change suddenly, sometimes even before heroes have time to to utter their remarks to the end” (Bauman, 2002) . In the established institutional system of the Russian society, network communities can be presented in a simplified, schematic form as a virtual alternative as a substitute. But taking into account the involvement of various social strata and groups in the network communication and first of all of youths and urban layers, it should be said that what is perceived as a virtual reality has consequences in the institutional environment.

It can be assumed that in part, the decrease in trust to real social institutions is due to the virtualization of the social communication with the fact that the network offers a variety of free information but there is no conversion of the acquired information resource into the real social capital. It can be stated that the symbolic influence, reformatted under the influence of network communication of behavioural codes and the system of values and in this sense, network communities can develop the idea of institutional changes. But such a treatment should be regarded with caution.

Network activity contains certain social risks, connected with the introduction and promotion of destructive affirmations. Therein lies the difficulty of unambiguous evaluation of the network activity. For example, the formation of an identity, built on virtual links, unlike traditional (ethnic, religious and community-like) can look attractive but along with that the network community directs on a fashionable, demonstrative identity, detached from basic identification matrices.

The study of positions of subjects of network communities shows that preference in the identification choice is given to integrating attributes but the significance of the “non-binding” integrators is a characteristic factor. In this context, “network nationalism”, “network citizenship” are not connected with ideological political attitudes and do not form an integrity which would be based on senses of the persistent “negativism” or “positivism”. Making this idea more specific, it can be said that subjects of the network community put a priority on the self-expression, self-positioning and as results of opinion polls bespeak, 47% of the youth who are the main subject of the network communication, adhere to the professional identity, 43% place the emphasis on the social status, 49% prefer the ethnic identity. It is possible to trace the effect of the network community in the fact that the Russian youth actualizes a multidimensional identification model which is aimed at expanding the scope of the virtual communication does not pre suppose the attachment to the network locality. However, in this sense it can be stressed that the identification function of real social institutions, perceived as imposing the social profile, attitudes and behaviour, regulated in the language of the official discourse becomes noticeably weaker.

It is impossible to consistently apply the formula to the network community that the social institution is a relatively stable form of social life organization which creates the opportunity to satisfy certain needs, interests, regulates activities of social subjects, implement the integration and the social control. Belov and Lyubchenko Noting the theoretical and methodological difficulties

which have arisen, it can be stated that when describing the network community as an organization of the social life, connected with the need for a social communication, along with that norms of the network community are based not on regulations not on prescriptions but on the self-regulation. However, as the experience of network communities shows, the situation can get out of the social control, since the unspoken consensus is violated by the competition in the network space, the desire to attract new participants in setting a problem which has provocative or antisocial nature. In this sense, subjects of the network community experience the influence to be “in drive” and there is a risk that while criticizing obsolete social norms, non-constructive changes can be introduced.

Are network communities troublemakers of the social order and stability? in this sense, there is an interest in the reproduction of the network space and this circumstance directs toward not bringing to an extreme confrontation with state and social institutions. Agreeing that subjects of the network community can express dissatisfaction and criticism of the functioning of social institutions, it is important to trace to what extent settings in the network communication can be converted in real social activities in joint activities. Analysis of the Russian internet space shows that as a rule, the greatest enthusiasm of actors is caused by fashionable trends: on the one hand in the virtual reality, the hierarchy of problems, coinciding with the position of the majority of Russians (prices, incomes, corruption, justice) is traced; on the other hand, the local satisfaction, characterized by the self-expression is important in the context of the network communication. This means that the network community can acquire the status of a forum of social problems but there is also the risk that the communication virtualization creates conditions for the social self-isolation.

As results of the participation dynamics of Russians in activities of public organizations, associations and communities show, internet communities are leading in terms of the attractiveness (6% in 2014, 7% in 2015). At that subjects of the network community appreciate the internet sphere to be more preferable than non-virtual forms of the participation. Most Russians although they are involved in the internet space do not recognize the status of the network communication participant for them: internet is the sphere of leisure and communication which is attractive due to the fact that social norms are not specified. In this context, it can not be expected that the internet communities can act as a trigger of public initiatives. It is expected to a greater extent that as a result of carrying out public forums and in this we can agree with M.K. Gorshkov, the interest to the problem will increase. This feature is interesting by the fact that there

is a demarcation between regular internet visitors and adherers of volunteer initiatives in the network communication. For the first, it is important to “register”, for the second-find like-minded people, obtain the socially useful information.

Considering in such a way, network communities, one should part advantages of the network communication and the network mobilization and readiness for real civic initiatives. If the network community pretends to be a new public organization it is important to follow, how the composition of participants is formed to what extent subjects of the network community are focused on acting together in the social reality and most importantly, what institutional resources are “mastered” and “appropriated” by participants of the network community. It is important to emphasize the role of the identification criterion, the transfer to the “we” state.

In the current situation, ideological and political integrators are not dominant and do not determine the degree of positioning in the virtual space and the readiness to participate in real social practices. In this context, it is important to emphasize that network communities although characterized by the intensity of communications are not focused on the aggregation of positions but rather on the estimative differentiation that is the rationale for the spectrum of assessment and opinions. The influence of this circumstance on practices of network community subjects lies in the variability reproduction in changing the behaviour regimes from the radical activity to the social apathy, dynamics of the preferences of network communication actors which acts in the form of a response to the most important events is especially obvious.

As results of sociological researches show, the network community passes significant social problems through the prism of established stereotypes. Subjects of the network community are adapted in the network environment on the basis of “safety and comfort” it is noteworthy that access to the information does not take a position of “below average” communication in social networks excites 24% of Russians. It can be assumed that the network environment is not a condition of the life success that for actors the need in the communication is to some extent a symbolic superstructure over the achieved everyday results. At the same time, the communication instrumentality places barriers on the path of a consolidated position. In the network community, the “simulacrum of consent” is important but in real social practices, actors make a choice in favour of other life priorities. Although, it should be emphasized that the riskogenics of the network environment is expressed by the fact that a group of people, living in a virtual world is

formed those who not only spend most of their free time in networks but also for whom the real social life looks signified, non-referential with respect to the network activity.

Understanding practices of the network communication requires focus on the directivity of behavioural strategies. It is obvious that possible positions of network community actors are beyond the scope of societal norms, since the free “territory” is declared in the network. It is impossible in this connection to exaggerate the significance of the network communication as a factor which reduces the protest activity. A clear simplification would be to assume that networks is the sphere of perpetual grumbling, the kitchen dissidence reproduction of the preceding period. The fact is that the network community is included in the global internet system and the circulation of ideas is observed in this space. The main responsibility for the selection is imposed not so much on promoters but on the audience and first of all on its active part. Tang into account the modesty factor it is possible to say that virtual movements which have real social consequences can arise in networks. The point at the issue is that in conditions of increasing social risks, the network communication can represent not only the localization of pleasure and sites of the internal comfort but also stimulate the growth of destructive attitudes, connected with a sense of the extraterritoriality and the isolation from real social practices.

When the Russian researcher S.A. Kravchenko agrees that turbulent times have come when new adaptive structures of life activity are not worked out, the network community can be perceived as transitive as a space of the oblivion of problems (Kravchenko, 2015). But to the same degree, network communities in comparison with real social institutions, compete in presenting to society new patterns of the social behaviour. Institutional practices of the network community actors thus, require the analysis of the status duality when the conformist behaviour in everyday life and the radicalism in positions at forums are combined. It is impossible to reduce this situation to the formula of the social schizophrenia it in a greater degree, reminds that under conditions when social institutions manifest dysfunctionality and the institutional absenteeism of citizens can increase, it is important to analyse the motivation, goals and methods of the realization, interaction of actors in the network community to determine the nature of institutional practices of the network community.

Also, it is needed to take into account that institutional practices, reproduced in the context of the expression freedom, contain an emphasis on the reproduction. In this context, the remark of

neoinstitutionalists is interesting as to weather that the network community can not be qualified as an open access order (North *et al.*, 2009). Outwardly, the network community is connected with the free flow of people but at that it is impossible to ignore traditions of the mood manipulation, the fact that in the network community, the attention of actors is often focused not on “program” and ideologic attitudes but concentrates in the area of rumours and insinuations. It can be said that aggregating information and ideas can create a false awareness of the advantage over carriers of real institutional practices and along with that is the restriction of access for the development and the discussion of truly effective actions.

The recent anti-corruption tendency of the network community participants had the opposite effect: an alternative to the system anti-corruption policy in the state and the society was presented in the form of social actions which had the character of “Fronde” but with a combination of destabilizing circumstances can become a trigger for the onset of the orderly chaos. Ordered in the sense that within the network community, unlike institutions of the order, the construction of a chaos can be actualized in the context of introduction in the public discourse of “attractive alternatives” of resistance and erosion of the existing institutional system.

From this point of view, it is difficult not to agree with the fact that normative provisions in the network space are relevant and the issue is not only creating legal conditions for the real involvement of people in the process of participatory democracy and the form of interaction with government and social institutions. Since, subjects of the network community create the group action effect in the theoretical understanding it is important to determine criteria of the initiative activity, the social self-organization, the potential of the civic activism, it is important to reveal prospects of the social creativity (Volkov, 2013). Since, the social creativity is an alternative to the social anarchy and the violence, the hatred and the prejudice, subjects of the network community can produce social risks and along with that if to take into account that the network activity can acquire an imitative nature, the analysis and the explanation of “conversion” mechanisms of the network activity into various forms of the real participation of Russians are the priority-driven. It is noteworthy that the activity of Russians is quite high “in the place of residence” (26%) but the “virtual activity” prevails at higher levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thus, it is possible to draw the following conclusions. Firstly, network communities, like

established non-formal institutions have their own logic of the reproduction and functioning, acting as a palliative alternative to real social institutions in the context of the virtual space expansion and the satisfaction of the request for the “free” communication. Secondly, proceeding from the established specific nature of the institutional system of the Russian society it can be stated that subjects of the network community in their activities are projected onto the field of new symbolic institutions which are not connected with the everyday life regulation. This is expressed in the fact that denying traditionalist institutions, participants of the network community show their readiness to participate in irregular practices, although they have a certain social resonance but do not have prospects of large-scale involvement and the social influence. Thirdly, it is especially important to determine the interest to positions of network community subjects, conditions for promoting common goals and projects. In general such research efforts would avoid controversial representations about functioning network communities in the Russian society which although they are a “parallel world” to real social institutions form a corridor of opportunities for both deconstruction actions and new methods of the self-regulation within established institutional norms.

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