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**DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND CIVIC ACTIVISM:  
CURRENT SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE PROBLEM**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of the present study is to describe current research prospects in the field of sociological analysis of civic activism in the context of digitalization and the spread of digital technologies. It is concluded that the discourse of sociological research on digitalization is changing. Currently, digital technologies serve not only as a factor in the growth of citizens' freedom, but also become a means to increase social control by the state, as well as lead to the dispersion of social activity, and reduce its transformative power.

**Keywords**

Digital activism – Digitalization – Slacktivism – Civil society – Digital Humanities

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## Introduction

The last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by the formation of a fundamentally new socio-cultural environment driven by information technologies, called the information society. The specificity of the information society is that digitalization provides individuals with broad access to a variety of information sources. These processes have resulted in the formation of a global communication space, which is characterized by immeasurably large flows of information, opportunities for its use, and huge impact on all life processes, consciousness, and behavior of people. Internet technologies are not only rapidly being implemented in politics, business, and public administration, but also transforming the nature of interpersonal relationships in society.

The spread of the new communication environment has led to the emergence of various forms of virtual interaction, such as forums, chats, blogs, and social networks, which are becoming a field of digital civic participation of people all over the world. Citizens have fundamentally new opportunities to show their social and political activism about the public problems that concern them, as well as to influence their solution in a certain way. At the same time, the issue of how the virtual activity of individuals and their real readiness to participate in protest actions, rallies, and pickets intersect, remains insufficiently studied. Some researchers see digital technologies as a path to democracy and greater civic engagement, while others focus on the decline in the effectiveness of civil movements due to the transition to online forms.

## Methods

The conducted analysis is based on a relatively new dynamically developing area of the humanities called *Digital Humanities*, which is an interdisciplinary field of research that combines the methods and practices of the humanities, social, and computational sciences to study the possibilities of applying and interpreting new digital, information and communication technologies, and the systematic use of digital resources in humanitarian and socio-cultural research and education.

Technology shifts expressed in the digitalization, automation, and robotization processes lead to serious structural changes in politics, economy, and social sphere, as well as actualize the issues of the impact of digitalization of socio-economic and socio-political processes on the transformation of individual's behavior. As defined by J. Naisbitt, digitalization is a megatrend of economic development based on cybernetic methods and management tools, big data analysis tools, and artificial intelligence<sup>1</sup>. Reaching a critical point in the digitalization of any society leads it to its qualitatively new state, which is characterized by higher efficiency.

Digitalization is a long, complex, and multidimensional process of transferring production and management technologies and information resources into a state suitable for the effective use of digital devices and technologies. It involves achieving the following goals: reducing the cost and improving the reliability of data collection, systematization, transmission, and analysis; reducing the cost and simplifying communications in the economy and society (digitalization of content and communication channels); and creating

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<sup>1</sup> J. Naisbitt, *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* (New York: William & Morrow Company, 1990).

a system for multi-interaction of people and business processes vertically and horizontally (inter-organizational digital systems)<sup>2</sup>.

As noted by B. Panshin, it is appropriate to consider the digitalization process in a narrow and broad sense. Thus, in a broad sense, the digitalization process is understood as organizational and technological processes of mass application of new digital technologies in production and management to reduce costs and increase the speed of business processes. In a narrow sense, digitalization means the transition from an analog form of data (information) transmission, processing, and presentation to a digital one, implemented through the use of appropriate technologies and platforms<sup>3</sup>.

## Results

According to Bukht and Heeks, digitalization demonstrates the following economic benefits: accelerates the use of new market opportunities by enterprises due to direct digital signals from the external environment; improves the quality of customer service by simplifying and reducing the cost of data collection to personalize their requests and maintain constant communication with them; expands the ability to optimize business processes (by eliminating delays as much as possible), as well as simplifies and accelerates them through digital devices; increases the target audience and geographical reach of the enterprise by using all forms of digital channels and their contact points<sup>4</sup>.

To create effective strategies in the field of digitalization and the digital economy, it is important to note that the relevance of digitalization is due to the growth of social communications implemented using networks and digital platforms that increase the speed and variety of exchanges and fundamentally open more opportunities for the development of economy and society. At that, the cultural characteristics of the region may add additional specificity<sup>5</sup>.

In the context of the high transparency of the contemporary digital space, the experience of an extreme social situation is associated with an increase in the negative influence of various media actors, that is, there is a threat of various forms of the destructive behavior of the individual. In foreign studies, the concept of digital media as an influence environment was considered by R. Stults and S. Harrison, who understood digital media as certain electronic environments where people worked together, even if they were not geographically located in the same place<sup>6</sup>.

The main theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of digital civic engagement are the concepts of digital anthropology<sup>7</sup>, within which, for example, the role of

<sup>2</sup> B. Panshin, "Structure of and development trends in management systems for information technology", *Cybernetics and Systems Analysis* Vol: 29 num 4 (1993): 602-605.

<sup>3</sup> B. Panshin, "Structure of and development trends..."

<sup>4</sup> R. Bukht y R. Heeks, "Defining, conceptualising and measuring the digital economy", *International Organisations Research Journal* Vol: 13 num 2 (2018): 143-172.

<sup>5</sup> A. Gladkova y M. Ragnedda, "Exploring digital inequalities in Russia: an interregional comparative analysis", *Online Information Review* Vol: 44 4 (2020): 767-786.

<sup>6</sup> R. Stults, *Media Spaces* (Palo Alto: Xerox PARC, 1986) y S. Harrison, *Media Space: 20+ Years of Mediated Life* (Springer, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> D. Miller, *Digital Anthropology*. In the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (eds) F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez & R. Stasch. 2018. <http://doi.org/10.29164/18digital>

digital media in interpersonal communication is considered<sup>8</sup>. Besides, this concerns also theories of coproduction<sup>9</sup>, deliberative democracy<sup>10</sup>, and digital or virtual civic participation<sup>11</sup>. Digital civic participation is considered in the context of youth practices<sup>12</sup>, gender issues<sup>13</sup>, and religious culture<sup>14</sup>.

A separate research area concerns the concept of slacktivism<sup>15</sup> which can be defined as an action carried out over the Internet in support of solving a certain problem, but not requiring much time, for example, signing online petitions or joining an outreach team through social media sites. One of the types of digital activism is crowdsourcing. The concept of crowdsourcing was first used in an article by J. Howe<sup>16</sup>. In his opinion, crowdsourcing is the transfer of certain functions to a large set of people, or the resolution of socially significant problems by volunteers, which are coordinated through the use of modern information and communication technologies. Crowdsourcing is based on the basic principles of egalitarianism: a society whose members have equal opportunities to manage and access material goods. Each person has knowledge and talents that other people may need. The notion of crowdsourcing is based on the concept of collective intelligence<sup>17</sup>. Bloom has noted that individuals who sometimes seem to be completely independent can cooperate so closely with each other that they become a single organism. To date, political crowdsourcing is the most developed topic. It is considered, in particular, in the frameworks of the reasons for participation in online political crowdfunding<sup>18</sup>, new approaches to social information analysis methods<sup>19</sup>, and various research approaches in general<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> M. Madianou y D. Miller, "Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication", *Monitoring Obshchestvennogo Mneniya: Ekonomicheskie i Sotsial'nye Peremeny* Vol: 1 num 143 (2018): 334-356.

<sup>9</sup> T. Iversen y J. D. Stephens, "Partisan politics, the welfare state, and three worlds of human capital formation", *Comparative Political Studies* Vol: 41 num 4-5 (2008): 600-637.

<sup>10</sup> N. Curato, "From authoritarian enclave to deliberative space: governance logics in post-disaster reconstruction", *Disasters* Vol: 42 num 4 (2018): 635-654.

<sup>11</sup> A. Y. F. Zhu; A. L. S. Chan y K. L. Chou, "Creative social media use and political participation in young people: The moderation and mediation role of online political expression", *Journal of Adolescence* num 77 (2019): 108-117.

<sup>12</sup> T. V. Maher y J. Earl, "Barrier or Booster? Digital Media, Social Networks, and Youth Micromobilization", *Sociological Perspectives* Vol: 62 num 6 (2019): 865-883.

<sup>13</sup> J. R. Linabary; D. J. Corple y C. Cooky, "Feminist activism in digital space: Postfeminist contradictions in #WhyIStayed", *New Media and Society* Vol: 22 num 10 (2020): 1827-1848.

<sup>14</sup> E. O. Shebalina y D. D. Shebalin, "Digitalization in activities of non-state actors: Example of the church", *Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems* num 139 (2021): 399-407.

<sup>15</sup> D. J. Wilkins; A. G. Livingstone y M. Levine, "All click, no action? Online action, efficacy perceptions, and prior experience combine to affect future collective action", *Computers in Human Behavior* num 91 (2019): 97-105.

<sup>16</sup> J. Howe, *The Rise of Crowdsourcing*. Wired Magazine. June 14, 2016. Retrieved from: [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds_pr.html)

<sup>17</sup> H. Bloom, *Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind from the Big Bang to the 21st Century* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000)

<sup>18</sup> R. Kusumarani y H. Zo, "Why people participate in online political crowdfunding: A civic voluntarism perspective", *Telematics and Informatics* num 41 (2019): 168-181.

<sup>19</sup> N. J. G. Winter; A. G. Hughes y L. M. Sanders, "Online coders, open codebooks: New opportunities for content analysis of political communication", *Political Science Research and Methods* Vol: 8 num 4 (2020): 731-746.

<sup>20</sup> L. Malfent y B. Missbach, "How crowdsourcing delivers new research approaches. "tell us!" – an innovation project of the ludwig boltzmann gesellschaft", *VOEB-Mitteilungen* Vol: 72 num 2 (2019): 310-316.

Examples of political crowdsourcing in the world in general and in Russia, in particular, include portals for online voting (for example, the Active Citizen project, the Russian Public Initiative which is an online resource for promoting civil initiatives and voting on them), web resources for discussing laws being developed (such as the European Public Administration Network – EUPAN portal), portals for submitting electronic petitions, and portals for discussing draft laws, for example, the Russian Federal portal of draft regulations (regulation.gov.ru), or the European portal "Your Voice in Europe".

In general, many authors, in one way or another, turn to the study of various aspects of the use of Internet communications and information technologies in public administration and the functioning of the e-government system. However, among researchers considering these issues, there is no uniform understanding of the results concerning the influence of the Internet on the political system of society. Researchers associate the implementation of Internet communications into the activities of government agencies with both democratic transformation and the expansion of control over the behavior of citizens.

## Conclusion

Based on the research results presented in the article, one can conclude that at the first development stages of digital technologies and global Internet communications, digitalization was clearly recognized by most authors as a significant factor in the growth of democracy and the strengthening of civil society. However, digitalization also bears destructive consequences from the standpoint of the population's civil activity. For example, in 2020, the quarantine and self-isolation imposed in most countries of the world due to the pandemic caused the need (mostly forced) to immerse almost the entire global population in the digital environment. Educational institutions, enterprises, companies, and structures that provide public services have switched to remote work. Under such conditions, it can be assumed that some individuals perceive the digital environment as an opportunity for social inclusion in various areas of socio-political activity, while others, due to various factors (including the digital barrier) may find themselves in a situation of social exclusion. Exclusion, in turn, contributes to the formation of new forms of destructive activity, deviant behavior, and social isolationism. Such effects of digitalization within the framework of social exclusion are a promising trend for further research.

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