E-democracy: Slacktivism vs. civic activism

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Abstract

There are many studies in Russia on how the open government and e-democracy should be arranged, what tools they use, what has been done, and what can be done in the future. There is no research, however, on how the public responds to this system and how it can function in the community. This is of major interest because the degree and quality of public involvement is one of the key indices of the efficiency of e-democracy and e-government. Open government and e-democracy expand direct public participation in national life and guarantee effective public control. This is an ideal that all countries' governments are seeking to attend. Meanwhile, the public has begun to use internet on its own as an instrument of democracy and control. Facebook, vk.com, twitter and other online networks were established more than ten years ago. People feel the necessity of information exchanges, highlighting problems, and uniting for their rights. Present-day users are attached to their networks and their media image. We always look better in the internet than in reality. The inability to tell the difference between the real world and the virtual one have created a phenomenon known as slacktivism, manifest in internet petitions, likes, reposts, statuses, userpics changing with the latest news, and suchlike. However, studies show that low level of media and information literacy leads to the development slaktivizm, what can make instruments of e-democracy less effective. Media and information literacy is indispensable for open government's sustainable work.

Keywords: e-democracy, open government, media and information literacy, online activism

There are many studies in Russia on how the open government and e-democracy should be arranged, what tools they use, what has been done, and what can be done in the future. There is no research, however, on how the public responds to this system and how it can function in the community. This is of major interest to us, the Russian Committee of the UNESCO Information for All Programme, because the degree and quality of public involvement is one of the key indices of the efficiency of e-democracy and e-government. Since its establishment late in 2000, the Russian Committee of the UNESCO Information for All Programme has organized more than 20 national and international conferences, and put out more than 50 publications. The Russian IFAP Committee is a link between Russia and the IFAP Intergovernmental Council. It takes part in national policy-making to build the global information society and knowledge societies. It is active in information exchanges and partnership with other countries' international and national organizations. Last but not least, it keeps Russia informed about global trends and UNESCO policy in this field.

The Russian Committee of the UNESCO Information for All Programme, the Interregional Library Cooperation Centre, the UNESCO Secretariat and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) convened an international conference on media and information literacy in the information society in Moscow in 2012.

It was the first-ever major international forum where the term "media and information literacy" was first used. Its final document, the Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy, was the first international document to make a working definition of that term. Experts of the whole world met the declaration with enthusiasm.

The first global event dedicated to this theme, the international conference on media and information literacy and building the culture of open government, was held in Khanty-Mansiisk, June 7-10, 2016, on the IFAP platform and within the 8th international IT forum, and was great success. The international agenda has never before spotlighted the connection of media and information literacy and e-government's efficiency.

The conference represented 45 countries in the Americas, Europe and Africa. Plenary sessions heard 28 addresses. The conference was summarized in the Khanty-Mansiisk Declaration on Media and Information Literacy for Building a Culture of Open Government.

These are its basic premises:

- Open government enhances managerial efficiency and provides the tools and mechanisms for the interaction of interested parties.
- To make such interaction successful for all parties, it must rest on authentic information, mutual respect, security and privacy, with every citizen's and entire society's wellbeing as the main objective.
- Media and information literacy is indispensable for open government's sustainable work.
- Every population group should acquire media and information literacy.
- As a new element of democracy and a new developmental stage of e-government, open government should be regarded not as a mere set of open digital data and government e-services but in a broader context.

The analysis of open government-related issues with respect to media and information literacy is a thoroughly new step in research, as Evgeny Kuzmin, chair of the Russian IFAP Committee and deputy chair of the IFAP Intergovernmental Council, justly said.

Open government and e-democracy expand direct public participation in national life and guarantee effective public control. This is an ideal that all countries' governments are seeking to attend.

Meanwhile, the public has begun to use internet on its own as an instrument of democracy and control. Facebook, vk.com, twitter and other online networks were

established more than ten years ago. SIGs have appeared in plenty on their basis, and more spring up every day. This concerns not only modern art and music fest fans. Everyone can be found on the worldwide web, from campaigners against industrial construction in a park to fundraisers for a baby in need of expensive surgery. Activists launched Change.org, Avaaz.org and some other resources in 2007 as online petitioning platforms. Certainly, their petitions do not settle problems in one fell swoop and governments do not use them as readymade resolutions – but some of them give an impetus to addressing burning problems. At any rate, they come as a cry for help in need.

The first Russian e-democracy resources also appeared long before government officers chose to notice them – suffice to mention Karta pomoshchi (Agony Map), a resource that appeared in the disastrously hot summer of 2010, with thousands of fires raging countrywide. It was an interactive map spotlighting fires and specifying what aid was required. Eyewitnesses and relief volunteers updated information regularly. Another activist group launched the White Aprons anti-corruption project in 2011: a website where members of the public reported on corrupt persons and offices, and project organizers passed their information on to law enforcers. These are only two instances of public activism out of many hundreds all over the world, when online efforts impact reality.

People feel the necessity of information exchanges, highlighting problems, and uniting for their rights. It does not matter whether they are aware that what they do are elements of e-democracy. What matters is that they have found its instruments on their own and realize their practical power.

Not that online petitioning and other internet activism always bring desired fruit now that the border between reality and the virtual world has been obliterated. Present-day users are attached to their networks and their media image. We always look better in the internet than in reality. The inability to tell the difference between the real world and the virtual one have created a phenomenon known as slacktivism, manifest in internet petitions, likes, reposts, statuses, userpics changing with the latest news, and suchlike.

Slacktivism is "feel-good" action in a social campaign to small effect or no effect at all. Slacktivists' satisfaction with illusory involvement in a noble cause is its main achievement.

Many concepts and ideas presently proposed for the emergent e-democracy are active already in social networks and online projects. The opportunity to speak up that is used by thousands of people produces an illusion of civic activism – but does it produce an impetus for practical action?

Have you ever signed an online petition? Do you remember them all? Do you think the signatories monitor the fate of many petitions? Everyone knows Change.org mailouts: sign a petition once and you will receive regular reports on its progress plus an arrangement of the latest petitions. Though it might irritate some users, any Change.org

petition would be a failure without such mailouts. A click is a simple mechanical act that requires no effort at all. That is why we plunge into Wikipedia to learn something about nuclear research and finish with the entry on Albrecht Durer. That is why it is so simple to sign a petition and forget it the next instant. So petitioners have to keep in contact with users and call for interactive moves. This is one of the necessary conditions for a successful petition. There are at least seven other demands from convincing presentation of the problem to fundraising and establishing contacts. The English-language Change.org offers a list.

Danish psychologist Anders Colding-Jorgensen staged a famous experiment in spring 2009: he set up a Facebook team in defence of the Stork Fountain, a historical site in Copenhagen's centre, allegedly to be pulled down. The group snowballed from 126 to 27,500 within two weeks though the fountain's doom was sheer lie – no one intended to demolish it. As long as the experiment lasted, no one cared to check the facts, and passions boiled round a hoax with extensive comments, words of heartfelt encouragement, and indignant exclamations. (Anders Colding-Jorgensen, 2009)

The Danish experiment makes us wonder whether e-democracy and open government might degrade into similar illusory involvement. With all its pros, e-democracy might distract one from real social and political activism, and from real problems of real cities, not to be settled by mere click.

Slacktivism raises another question: Is there a way to see whether users have got to the heart of the matter and are aware of every aspect of the problem, and can we be sure that they know what they do when they are clicking?

Project Active Citizen, launched in Moscow in May 2014, is an interactive online system for public opinion studies concerning municipal life. It has won several highly-sought prizes, including Smart Cities Awards 2015.

The Million Trees annual action on the Active Citizen app is for Muscovites to choose trees and shrubs to be planted in their neighbourhoods. This is not so nice as it might seem due to residents' and municipal officers' botanical ignorance. Galina Morozova, president of the city environment protection society, came down on these ballots in an interview with Gazeta.ru, saying it was up to experts to decide which plants should grow where.

It isn't hard to look up what soil and climate particular trees and shrubs require. But can we be sure that every voter is sufficiently informed and has made a conscientious choice? In other words, open government and e-democracy can easily degrade into another stage of slacktivism. What if their resources only promote make-believe civic activism? This means they produce a docile public enjoying illusory freedom. If society uses open government and e-democracy primitively from the start, can we guarantee that they will ever develop into something worthwhile?

The government should set itself a new objective: not merely to facilitate its dialogue with the public through a network of open governments but, in the same way, promote their civic activity, attract them to practical – not only online – work, and teach them to tell slacktivism from real work for a common cause.

As she regards citizen involvement in public activism, researcher Sherry Arnstein divides it into eight consecutive types on the Ladder of Citizen Participation: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. (Sherry Arnstein, 1969)

The two lower steps – manipulation and therapy – belong to nonparticipation, when the public has no opportunity of planning and implementing changes.

The third step, informing, means that citizens are informed on their rights, duties and opportunities, and so is an initial step to civil society. It, however, lays the emphasis on information flow from the authorities to the public, and people have no chance to influence official decision-making.

Consultation, the fourth step, implies expressing the public opinion on certain matters – a step to full-scale participation. Importantly, if consultation is not combined with any other type of participation, it is fake participation. This is the step on which we can see the presence of e-government and, on the other hand, of slacktivism. If we tolerate slacktivism developing at this stage in the framework of e-democracy and e-government, we will have very vague prospects of citizen participation. E-government will turn into a book of complaints instead of a system for joint regulation of national or municipal life.

Competent promotion of e-government development by the state and the public promises higher stages – placation, with citizens having the consultative vote while their access to decision-making is barred, and partnership, which allows achieve compromises with the authorities at various negotiation platforms. The two highest steps follow – delegated power (7th), allowing collective decision-making, implementation monitoring, and responsibility through delegating power, and citizen control (8th).

We can expect mutually respectful relations between the government and the public to reach a qualitatively new level of understanding and cooperation replacing the typical conflict between the ruling top and the people resisting it. We have seen already the first positive examples – successful campaigns on Change.org, and practical decisions made by Muscovites and implemented in the Russian capital. In this case, e-democracy, just as the entire open government system, may really achieve such perfection that people will no longer have to stand up physically for their rights, ideas and convictions.

To attain this ideal, we have to provide a high degree of public media and information competence. The most competent people are the freest, the most conscientious, and the most critically-minded. The whole world should implement relevant educational programmes at school, university and in the extended education and career broadening

networks for the government and society to speak common language, understand every aspect of the system, evaluate initiatives and decisions, and live a conscious life in the real-cum-virtual world. Government-society relations should base on mutual respect, rational policies, proper use of tools at their disposal, precise wordings, and shared goals.

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