

## Digital Civic Participation in the Context of Modern Research



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**Abstract.** The emergence and development of digital civic participation is an inevitable consequence of Internet penetration into various spheres of life. Despite the novelty of the phenomenon itself, the practices of online activism have become engrained in public life; and they have a significant impact on certain events, and sometimes even act as the main trigger of subsequent changes, which is especially typical of the political system. At the same time, there are many concerns related to the spread of digital civics, so that it is very difficult to talk about the long-term implications of such transformations. In this regard, the purpose of our research is to summarize the experience of studying digital civic participation and highlight the features of its manifestation in a modern world. The research methodology is based on the principles of making a systematic scientific review. During the analysis, we identify essential foundations and distinctive features of online activism compared to the traditional offline format, which are reflected in the forms of manifestation, methods of attracting and composition of the participants themselves, as well as the conditions necessary for collective action. The scope of digital civic participation is largely

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ensured by the ease of entry into public affairs, and the variability of activities and types of networking. Despite the prevalence of the thesis about the purely external visibility of online activism and its destructive consequences, specific empirical studies do not confirm this conclusion. Nevertheless, the threats of the spread of ICT are quite real and go far beyond the virtual space. In conclusion, we formulate several polemic provisions on possible ways to overcome the contradictions in this area. Our research contributes to the development of scientific ideas about the specifics of digital civic participation and the disclosure of the potential of its application from the standpoint of modern challenges and threats.

**Key words:** digital civic participation, online activism, digital activism, social media, slacktivism, civic participation, digitalization.

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### Introduction

Trends of modern development allow speaking with confidence about the full-fledged entry of the world community into the digital era. Over the previous 20 years, the share of Internet users has increased from just a few percent to more than half of the inhabitants of the world<sup>1</sup>. In the context of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, when the demand for digital services showed record growth, the indicator values reached 66%, and in some regions of the world – 90% and higher<sup>2</sup>. It is obvious that in the near future the use of the global network will become ubiquitous. It has already penetrated into almost all spheres of human activity transforming traditional practices of public participation in society. In this regard, the Internet acts not only as a means of carrying out actions that are familiar to us, but also as a space that fixes fundamentally new patterns of behavior. This is especially evident in the field of civic activism, where online activity comes to the place of pickets, strikes and demonstrations: from

writing and reposting messages on social media to developing special applications aimed at identifying and solving social problems. At the same time, the openness and, for the most part, anonymity of the Internet space not only contributes to expanding opportunities for participation in public initiatives, but also becomes a platform for conducting destructive activities (spreading disinformation, Internet harassment, hacker attacks, etc.).

As a result, the perception of digital civic participation, despite the regularity of its occurrence, is difficult to call unambiguous. The academic environment often talks about the positive aspects of this phenomenon, which is often only emerging in the digital space, but is already being implemented offline (Basheva, 2020, p. 45). At the same time, the researchers emphasize that digital civic participation does not replace traditional practices, but rather contributes to unlocking their potential and increasing the diversity of forms of social activity, especially for younger generations<sup>3</sup> (Pettingill, 2008). However, there are also opposing views on this matter. For instance, the use of digital

<sup>1</sup> Individuals using the Internet (% of population). *World Bank Open Data*. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS> (accessed: October 15, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Internet usage statistics. *Internet World Stats*. Available at: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed: October 15, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Smith A. Civic Engagement in the Digital Age. *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/> (accessed: October 15, 2021).

media often turns into slacktivism (clicktivism), that is, imitation of an activity when actions on the network satisfy only their own needs due to the illusory ideas of participation in solving a particular problem (signing online petitions, joining online communities, etc.) (Lane et al., 2018). However, specific empirical studies, as a rule, do not confirm this hypothesis (Lee, Hsieh, 2013; Howard et al., 2016; Boulianne, Theocharis, 2020), although in some works attention is focused on the fact that in the case of anonymous support of initiatives, the probability of real participation in them is noticeably reduced (Yessenbekova, 2020).

Digital civic participation is a very sensitive topic for the authorities. On the one hand, in developed countries there are objective prerequisites for ensuring the principles of deliberative democracy, implying the involvement of civil society institutions in the implementation of public policy (Ermolaeva et al., 2020, p. 388), since the youth participation level in traditional practices (in particular, voting and joining political parties) is steadily decreasing (Xenos et al. al., 2014). Hence there is the government's interest in creating favorable conditions for digital activism. Along with this, there are many reasons for concern about its spread. One of them is the lack of transparency on the Internet (Mandarano et al., 2010, p. 132), which allows, for example, hiding the authorship of extremist publications available to a wide audience and not being responsible for it. The situation is similar in the case of virtual aggression which is quite difficult to deal with (Makarova et al., 2016, pp. 298–299). Another important problem is the spread of fake news which has received a second wind in the digital age as a tool for manipulating mass consciousness. Uncontrolled dissemination of information on the global network can have serious consequences for the state and society. Examples include the US presidential election in 2016, during which every fourth news item on the

Twitter social network was false or extremely biased (Bovet, Makse, 2019), as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, which generated a huge amount of misinformation (Barua et al., 2020). In this regard, serious measures are being taken in many countries aimed at regulating and controlling civil activity on the Internet.

Despite all the opportunities and threats, the phenomenon of digital civic participation manifests itself at various levels of networking. As a rule, the formation of horizontal ties occurs when initiative people declare their position and unite with each other to achieve certain goals. In this case, a wide variety of Internet platforms can be used, created both for simple communication and information exchange, and directly encouraging citizens to creative activities (for example, crowdfunding platforms). At the vertical level of interaction, there is mainly a dialogue between society and authorities, where the basis is the electronic government, which has been developed in almost all countries of the world<sup>4</sup>. This concept represents the organization of public administration based on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), which, in particular, expand the possibilities of feedback and the provision of electronic services.

Taking into account the inconsistency and widespread use of online activism, it is important to emphasize that there are many gaps in this area that prevent the disclosure of its potential. The information, presented in the scientific literature, is largely fragmented as a result of which it is very difficult to talk about the formation of a holistic understanding of the essence and prospects for the development of this phenomenon from the point

<sup>4</sup> UN E-government survey 2020. Digital government in the decade of action to achieve sustainable development. *UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs*. Available at: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2020-Survey/2020%20UN%20E-Government%20Survey%20-%20Russian.pdf> (accessed: October 10, 2021).

of view of the possibilities of interaction between the state and society. In this regard, the article aims to summarize the experience of studying digital civic participation and highlight the features of its manifestation in the modern world. We also pay special attention to the comparison of practices implemented in the virtual and real world as this discourse is of fundamental importance for determining the contours of the future civil society.

### Materials and methods

In order to more clearly define the design of the study, we will reveal the essence of the concept of “digital civic participation” and related categories. However, we will make a reservation right away that in the framework of this study we use the terms “digital civic participation”, “online activism”, “online participation”, “digital activism”, as well as a number of broader formulations (for example, the online format of civic participation) as synonyms. Despite some differences in interpretations, it allowed reducing the number of unnecessarily cumbersome speech constructions and repetitions that make it difficult to perceive the material being presented.

In numerous works, when defining digital civic participation, the starting point is the statement that *this is a form of civic participation, during the implementation of which ICT tools are involved* (Vegh, 2003; Yang, Kang, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2017). If we follow this logic, then first of all it is necessary to correlate the concepts of “civic participation” and “digital civic participation” as general and private. To do this, let us turn to the definition of the first term, limiting its subject field and highlighting the essential features (Milbrath, 1965, p. 5).

The analysis of the scientific literature helps to set the following conceptual framework for civic participation:

- participation includes voluntary collective actions (Demakova et al., 2014, p. 148);

- the purpose of the actions is to influence/pressure the authorities (Ermolaeva et al., 2020; Teocharis, 2015), cooperation with other citizens and civil society structures (Nikovskaya, 2017) or awareness raising (Lonkila et al., 2021);

- actions are implemented in the course of communicative interaction with other citizens and social institutions (Lonkila et al., 2021);

- as a result of actions, it is assumed to solve a social problem (Ermolaeva et al., 2020), satisfaction of public interests (Skalaban, 2011a).

Based on the above provisions, by *civic participation we will understand various types of voluntary interaction of citizens or their associations in order to influence the authorities, cooperation or awareness-raising aimed at solving social problems and satisfying public interests*. Since the conceptual apparatus in this area has not yet been formed, it is hardly possible to draw a clear boundary between adjacent categories. For instance, the scientific literature says that social participation is more based on horizontal connections that are established within the framework of everyday life, while civic participation focuses on the interaction of people with various structures and democratic institutions and may include political participation (Skalaban, 2011b, pp. 136–137). We share this point of view, but it is not the only one and each author ultimately means something of their own by the designated terms. All this imposes certain limitations on our research, since during the analysis of scientific literature, the conceptual apparatus often remains outside the narrative, as a result of which it can be very difficult to form a holistic view of the approach used.

Further, a logical question arises: is the transition to digital civic participation really limited to the use of ICT? From the point of view of identifying essential features, this is indeed the case, which is confirmed by the above-mentioned literature, while the virtual space makes serious adjustments to people’s behavior.

One of these features is connective actions, which imply the lack of clear top-down coordination by movement leaders (Bennett, Segerberg, 2015). The relative ease of entry into online activism makes it optional to have a formal organization and leadership, as well as the formation of a civic identity and collective ideology (Bennett, 2012). It is not by chance that the concept of “personalized collective action” is even introduced into scientific discourse (Micheletti, 2003). At the same time, we should note that among network users there is a division into opinion leaders (communicators in the linear communication model of H. Lasswell) and recipients of information. For example, only 6% of Twitter users were classified as “active political tweeters” while the rest of the participants of protest groups were limited to reading, “likes”, sometimes commenting and reposts (Akhremenko et al., 2020).

In itself, digital civic participation is inextricably linked with traditional collective actions and often acts as a booster, strengthening or expanding them primarily through the establishment of communication chains and the dissemination of information in social media and messengers. In this case, the main effects are achieved in the real world which *requires additional efforts outside the virtual space* (voting in elections, participation in rallies, etc.). However, online activism can be very self-sufficient and carried out only on the Internet. The individual’s target attitudes come to the fore here, which may be limited, for example, to informing the population about socially significant problems. At the same time, there are many opportunities to fully realize the potential of digital civic participation. We are mainly talking about Internet platforms (digital participatory platforms) which can be used to raise funds for charity, support various civic initiatives, and create digital solutions and even electronic voting on issues relevant to the state and society. The range of possible destinations is growing every day, although it depends on the characteristics of a particular country.

In the most generalized form, such actions are divided into awareness/advocacy, organization/mobilization and action/reaction (Vegh, 2003, p. 72).

An important feature of our research is the construction of the logic of presentation *from the point of view of the activists’ actions*, i.e. the consideration of purely one-sided connections, since even in this case the topic remains quite broad, although our goal is only to outline the general contours of the development of digital civic participation. According to the accepted approach, when solving socially significant problems, an individual can apply both to the authorities and to other social institutions. Based on this, we assume that digital civic participation is characterized by the following main types of interaction: *citizen-to-government (C2G)*, *citizen-to-society (C2S)*, *citizen-to-business (C2B)* (Smoleva, 2021).

In the course of the analysis, we have used methodological principles for constructing a systematic scientific review including setting goals and developing research design, selecting literature, summarizing and presenting results (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 214). The information base of the work is the articles published in Russian and foreign databases, monographs, reports of international organizations and other sources posted on the Internet. We have carried out literature search in the databases Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, RSCI by the keywords “digital civic participation”, “online activism”, “digital activism”, “slacktivism” in Russian and English. Despite the lack of emphasis on specific areas of life, many works were *devoted to activity in the political field which affected the nature of the presentation of the material and the examples we have given*. However, this does not contradict the essential foundations of digital civic participation which we outlined earlier.

### **Research results**

The results of the analysis of scientific literature in the field of digital civic participation indicate a tendency to narrow the subject of research. Online

activism is often understood as activities related to social media: posting original content and links to user materials, discussing socially significant issues and encouraging other people to take active action (Theocharis et al., 2021). The actual list of digital civic participation practices is noticeably broader and includes *filing and signing petitions, charity, creating online communities, electronic voting*, etc.

A broader approach to digital civic participation can be characterized as “a new concept of citizenship based on alternative ways of participation” (Akhremenko et al., 2020). At the same time, acts of participation in the virtual space can often be more than just online versions of autonomous civil actions (Teocharis, 2015). At the same time, there are statements that only the translation of online activity into the real world contributes to the realization of social movements of their purposes (Menteş, 2019). It is the transition from one format to another that is of particular interest. In particular, the potential of protest movements can accumulate on the Internet and subsequently spill out “outside” (the “Occupy Wall Street”, “Arab Spring”, etc.) (Akhremenko et al., 2020). Therefore, both formats of citizen participation are closely linked. Scientists cite data according to which the probability of accessing an online format of any type of civic activity increases if a person is already involved in it in the traditional way (Theocharis et al., 2021). Conversely, online participation in political discussions has a positive effect on off-network activity, such as electoral behavior (Boulianne, 2009).

As we have mentioned earlier, digital civic participation has its own characteristics depending on the interaction type. In the research environment, much attention is paid to online activism which has a direct impact on the activities of authorities (C2G): participation in elections and referendums, the work of application services,

etc. The key mechanism here is e-government, which contains various tools for dialogue with the population: from state information resources to portals of state and municipal services. As a concrete example, we can name the Internet resource “Russian Public Initiative”<sup>5</sup>, where Russian citizens can vote for existing initiatives or put forward their ones. An important role is also given to informal communication channels, where the “palm of victory” belongs to social media, mainly used for interaction within society, both between individuals and when they address various associations (C2S). At the same time, in the second case, citizens have the opportunity to resort to more formalized types of interaction: participation in the preparation of informational materials, distance learning, online volunteering, management of digital projects and network communities, etc. In the work, we consider online volunteering as an element of crowdsourcing, when several people work together to solve a socially significant task on a voluntary basis. Within the framework of joint activities, the following subtypes are also distinguished: crowdfunding (fundraising or resources), crowdfunding (expertise), crowdrekruting (search for volunteers), crowdriaction (collective development of an idea).

Since civic participation is most often interpreted from the perspective of politics and assistance to the state in overcoming social problems, some skepticism may cause the identification of the type of interaction “citizens-to-business” (C2B). However, we believe that collective actions of people in relation to any organization, be it complaints or reviews of its activities, have a significant impact not only on the development of the principles of corporate social responsibility, but also on the functioning of entire sectors of the economy. As an example, we can cite the MeToo movement

<sup>5</sup> On the project. *ROI*. Available at: <https://www.roi.ru/page/about/> (accessed: March 10, 2022).

which turned into serious consequences for the film industry<sup>6</sup>, computer game developers<sup>7</sup>, etc. As a result, many companies were forced to revise their policies on female employment and the formation of favorable working conditions in general.

In the process of organizing and forming social movements, the digital environment contributes to the implementation of the most important tasks of informing, coordinating and mobilizing people (Boyd, 2008). However, it is hardly possible to talk about the existence of a consolidated position regarding the impact of the Internet on civic participation. On the one hand, many focus on the entertainment nature of the activities of users of the global network, which distracts them from civic actions (Wu, Weaver, 1997) and reduces social capital (Etzioni, Etzioni, 1999; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, virtual space provides people who are already involved in online activism with additional opportunities for self-realization (Norris, 2001), and also helps to attract new participants by expanding the information horizon and providing an easy entry point into public affairs (for example, the transition from signing a petition to participating in a rally) (Weber et al. al., 2003; Edgerly et al., 2018).

Just as in the case of the Internet in general, the scientific literature has formed polar approaches to assessing the role of social media in civic activism: *positive* (allow people to be more informed, find like-minded people and participate in society) and *negative* (focus on interpersonal communication in the online space, distracting from real affairs

and contributing to activism) (Kristofferson et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2019). It seems that it may be premature to occupy one of the designated parties due not only to the lack of a sufficient number of specific empirical studies in this area, but also to the specifics of the process of digitalization of civic participation and its regulation in different countries. Nevertheless, there are already works according to which the overwhelming majority of respondents believe that social media are effective in terms of raising public awareness of political or social problems (80%), creating sustainable social movements (77%), and influencing management decisions (63%)<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are perceived as popular tools for organizing protests (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) and platforms for political discussions (Howard et al., 2011), as well as alternative sources of information under the control of the authorities of traditional media (Khondker, 2011).

Popularity of social media in this context is largely due to their mass character, which allows more clearly monitoring certain processes. For instance, according to reports by the Pew Research Center, in 2018, 53% of Americans participated in political activities associated with actions on social media (an increase of 14% compared to 2013). About a quarter of adult users of social media in the United States in 2020 changed their views on the problem because of the information posted there (for example, about the MeToo and BlackLivesMatter movements). This implies the crucial role of social media in the formation of people's political self-awareness and their political self-presentation (Lane et al., 2019).

<sup>6</sup> #MeToo and Hollywood: What's changed in the industry a year on? *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/08/metoo-one-year-on-hollywood-reaction> (accessed: October 10, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> #MeToo topples activism blizzard exec after huge staff revolt—\$10 billion in market value lost. *Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2021/08/03/metoo-topples-activision-blizzard-exec-after-huge-staff-revolt-10-billion-in-market-value-lost/?sh=28e3d02fb480> (accessed: October 10, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Auxier B., McClain C. Americans think social media can help build movements, but can also be a distraction. *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/09/americans-think-social-media-can-help-build-movements-but-can-also-be-a-distraction/> (accessed: October 10, 2021).

Speaking about the Internet space, it is important to understand that digital inequality leaves a serious imprint on certain segments of society involved in online activism. With equal access to information about participation opportunities, the representativeness of various groups is significantly shifted toward people with knowledge and resources (Rottinghaus, Escher, 2020). Young people with a low level of trust in the political system and a high level of political interest often come to the fore (Theocharis et al., 2021). The participation of older people is usually complicated by a lack of digital competencies and problems when interacting with web resources (Seddighi, Salmani, 2018). In this regard, the socio-demographic portraits of followers of offline and online formats of civic participation differ. The situation is similar with the motivation that encourages people to be active on the Internet. For example, online volunteers, along with altruism, social recognition, and self-development, have a great need for flexibility and freedom (primarily in terms of time and place of work) (Silva et al., 2018).

As in the case of traditional practices, country and regional differences in digital civic participation largely depend on economic, institutional and socio-cultural characteristics. Using the case of Facebook, it was shown that protest mobilization primarily occurs in the following countries: technologically advanced, with an increase in public discontent or lack of other opportunities for coordinating actions against the authorities (Fergusson, Molina, 2021). At the same time, studies show that relatively disparate networks with a predominance of long-distance connections among activists will rather contribute to the dissemination of information about the protest, and networks with denser clusters and strong connections will contribute to protest behavior (with an increase in the risks of forming a closed community, beyond

which the protest does not go (Jost et al., 2018)). In this regard, great importance is given to the type of settlement. So, in rural areas, the activity of citizens depends mainly not on the presence of opinion leaders on the Internet or the network nature of the dissemination of information, but on the behavior of the immediate environment. Although there are exceptions here, when, for example, it comes to political elections at the state level (Eubank, 2021). In turn, in urban districts characterized by higher social capital and people's participation in online communities, efforts to coordinate collective actions are noticeably reduced (Enikolopov et al., 2020).

A feature of digital civic participation is the low threshold for entry. This is confirmed by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, three weeks after the announcement of the introduction of restrictive measures and blocking the activities of official social institutions, 247 Facebook support groups with hundreds of thousands of participants were formed in Denmark, and in Germany every fourth volunteer providing assistance during the pandemic had not previously participated in civic initiatives (Hjalmar et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the involvement of people in digital civic participation is influenced by the characteristics of *Internet connectivity* (as a rule, users with broadband access are more active) and *websites* (their popularity and engagement, biased presentation of information), as well as *user experience*. The results of studying the electoral behavior of the adult population in the United States showed that the popularity and obvious bias of network resources affect not only the attitude to the information received, but also the subsequent activity (Al-Hasan, Khalil, 2021). At the same time, it is very difficult to assess the real effect of using the global network to involve people in civic participation which is largely due to the need to take into account such a factor as



the presence of interest that determines the general mood toward online activism (Boulianne, 2009). Based on this, personalized invitations are an effective mobilization tool that increases the level of participation four to seven times (Rottinghaus, Escher, 2020).

The disadvantages and negative manifestations of ICT in the context of digital civic participation include an overabundance of information, the possibility of controlling the information field by the authorities, and the substitution of the real environment/virtual actions. The year of the US presidential election was accompanied by political attacks on social media, which forced more than half of adult users (55%) to report information “fatigue”<sup>9</sup>. In addition, the majority of Americans (72%) do not find common ground during online discussions about politics. Researchers also pay attention to the use of social media by autocratic governments to control democratic movements (Gunitsky, 2015). In connection with the above, it is alarming that about 70% of social media users in the United States never publish information (or very rarely) and do not talk about political and social problems as of their unwillingness to be attacked because of their views<sup>10</sup>.

As a result, can digital civic participation be considered an effective way to overcome social challenges? In our opinion, the very formulation

<sup>9</sup> Anderson M., Auxier B. 55% of U.S. social media users say they are ‘worn out’ by political posts and discussions. *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/19/55-of-u-s-social-media-users-say-they-are-worn-out-by-political-posts-and-discussions/> (accessed: October 10, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Auxier B., McClain C. Americans think social media can help build movements, but can also be a distraction. *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/09/americans-think-social-media-can-help-build-movements-but-can-also-be-a-distraction/> (accessed: October 10, 2021).

of the question contains an answer that can be either positive or negative depending on the position of the state and society on this matter. On the one hand, online activism has firmly entered public life, transforming the reality around us, which is facilitated by the development of technologies (for example, the use of blockchain for electronic voting). As a result, the range of possible activities is constantly expanding. Given the low entry threshold, more and more people can unleash their civic potential at least at a basic level (message reposts, petition signing, online volunteering, etc.), since individual actions on the network require certain competencies. On the other hand, there are many examples when the authorities are trying to strictly regulate digital civic participation, delineating very narrow boundaries of what is allowed (mainly within the framework of formal mechanisms of interaction). Even in countries committed to the principles of deliberative democracy, ideas about combating excessive Internet freedom are often heard, a special place is given to deanonymization of users, blocking unwanted content and countering hacker attacks.

In the conditions of rapid digitalization of all spheres of life, it seems obvious that further increasing the importance of virtual space will lead to the merging of online and offline worlds. This will overcome a number of difficulties associated with distrust of digital civic participation, although it will generate new challenges that have been mentioned more than once in fiction. In this regard, the situation in many respects seems to be a stalemate, and the only rational way to resolve contradictions is close monitoring of the development of online activism by the state and society, the search for mutual compromises.

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