

Dialogue Between Authorities and Citizens in New Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Observation of everyday life and numerous studies show that over the last two decades, communication between people has increasingly moved to the sphere of social media (World Economic Forum, 2015). This also applies to the practice of using these platforms by the authorities, which implement their strategies of influencing citizens (European Commission, n.d.). However, current technological solutions create different conditions for communication than before (OECD, 2021). In this article, the authors present an analysis of the communication process between the authorities and society in Uzbekistan - a country that is undergoing a process of political transformation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The subject of the study was social media, which is the main channel of communication in the modern world. The analysis covers the years 2023-2024, and the primary data was collected in the form of an online survey and interviews with a questionnaire based on two groups: users of a popular news portal and representatives of central and regional authorities.

The study results indicate:

- a fundamental discrepancy between the expectations of citizens (public opinion) in contemporary Uzbekistan and the media activities currently implemented by the authorities of this country;
- limited or low effectiveness of the content and the way it is presented, in particular the deficiency of such aspects as the attractiveness of the content (its usefulness, importance for the recipient) and the transparency of the message (providing sources, credibility);
- confirm the principle known in the literature that in order for the authorities to influence society in order to engage it, it is necessary to build trust.

Keywords: Trust, transparency, responsiveness, engagement, communication, social media, institutions, Uzbekistan.

Introduction: Social media has influenced the way of social communication in almost all countries in the world (OECD, 2021). It has changed the way in which public discourse takes place and the development goals of a given country are formulated. The authorities of Uzbekistan, like the authorities of many other countries in the world, actively participate in the process of communicating with the citizens of their country. The aim of the authorities in this process is to engage society in the postulated actions, which is part of a nationwide project called "New Uzbekistan". The government focused on the country's next stage of socioeconomic enhancement with the implementation and execution of its ambitious New Uzbekistan

Development Strategy 2022-2026 (Uzbekistan Special Report, 2022).

However, in Uzbekistan, as in many other countries, there are differences in positions and views between the typical citizen and the authorities, which results from, among other things, historical and cultural conditions. Uzbekistan is a country with a long and rich history. However, the country only gained its statehood in 1991, which has a significant impact on limited institutional development, both in terms of formal and informal institutions and their synergies (Freedom House, 2022).

Particular attention in the study was paid to the issue

of building citizens' trust and their involvement in public activities proposed by the government. For the purposes of the study, an own theoretical model was defined.

In the case of assuming that the path to such engagement is to build trust among members (World Bank Group Management, 2019). However, it should be taken into account that in the country it is only building civil society, this level of trust is low. It can be assumed that Uzbekistan is such a case. Due to the fact that access to them is limited, and access to the security of views that operate between them and the authorities, they will be particularly difficult to obtain and will require basic equipment. Attention should be paid to the element of the communication process. This is also in relation to such detailed requirements as the currency of content produced by the authorities and distributed in social media, the use of this content for public opinion, the way the authorities respond to inquiries and demands from the side.

Literature review

There is a large body of literature on the role of social media in government-public communication in different countries and under different political and economic conditions (OECD, 2014). All over the world, in all countries, both developed and developing, governments use social media to inform, persuade, engage, and gain insight into views.

A number of studies (e.g., Bonsón et al., 2012) have shown a correlation between government use of social media and increased citizen engagement in the affairs of the same government. Furthermore, government use of social media has been found to have a positive impact on citizens' interaction with the government via social media. This is important because encouraging citizens to express their opinions in government is a key goal of participatory democracy (Seigler, 2017; Song & Lee, 2013).

It is crucial that the government provides citizens with the opportunity to express their opinions and that there are easily accessible and effective channels for citizens to provide feedback (Wu, Ma, & Yu, 2017). The effectiveness of this two-way communication process is influenced by such process features as transparency (e.g. citing sources) and real involvement of citizens in the decision-making process (even at the city and local level).

Still other studies emphasize that the so-called participatory democracy is an essential element for effective development (Bennett & Manoharan, 2017; Buell, Porter & Norton, 2021; Omar et al., 2013). It is crucial for the government to regularly maintain open communication with society, and ensure transparency,

readiness for dialogue, and provide a forum where citizens can express their opinions without fear of restrictions (Kim & Lee, 2012; Liao et al., 2020).

Studies also indicate that governments are currently trying to use social media to "warm up their image", i.e. to create bonds with society by humanizing the image of the authorities (Eom, Hwang, and Kim, 2018; Guillamón et al., 2018).

The literature indicates that Uzbekistan - like other states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR - is going through a process of searching for and formulating its own identity. In the case of Uzbekistan, we are dealing with the creation of structures, traditions, and functions of an independent state from scratch. The authorities must therefore build the myth of statehood and their legitimacy to rule at an accelerated pace.

On the other hand, there is a multinational society, speaking different languages (apart from Uzbek - Tajik, Russian, Kazakh and others), religiously diverse, with a strong territorial identity (places of residence of clans).

The process of moving away from the imposed Soviet system creates a kind of void that favors the influence of other systems - including Islamism and pan-Turkism. All these elements indicate possible discrepancies between such a diverse society and the authorities implementing the process of central management of media content.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed approach, which consisted of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The qualitative study, in addition to literature analysis, was based on collecting interviews with a group of government representatives involved in creating content for the media and analyzing their statements. A total of 30 statements were obtained, and the "Word Cloud" method was used for analysis. The aim was to identify the components of the communication process in social media that are important in Uzbekistan for building trust and engaging society.

On the basis of these interviews, three such components were selected: "Communication content" with two subcomponents "Significance" (i.e. how important a given content is to the recipient) and "Credibility" of a given content, "Transparency of communication" with two subcomponents "Source transparency" and "Source diversity" and "Responsiveness" with two subcomponents "Responding regardless of how and when" and "Speed of response".

The above-mentioned elements were included in the theoretical model (Figure 1) as independent variables.

The dependent variables were "Trust in the authorities" and "Citizen engagement".

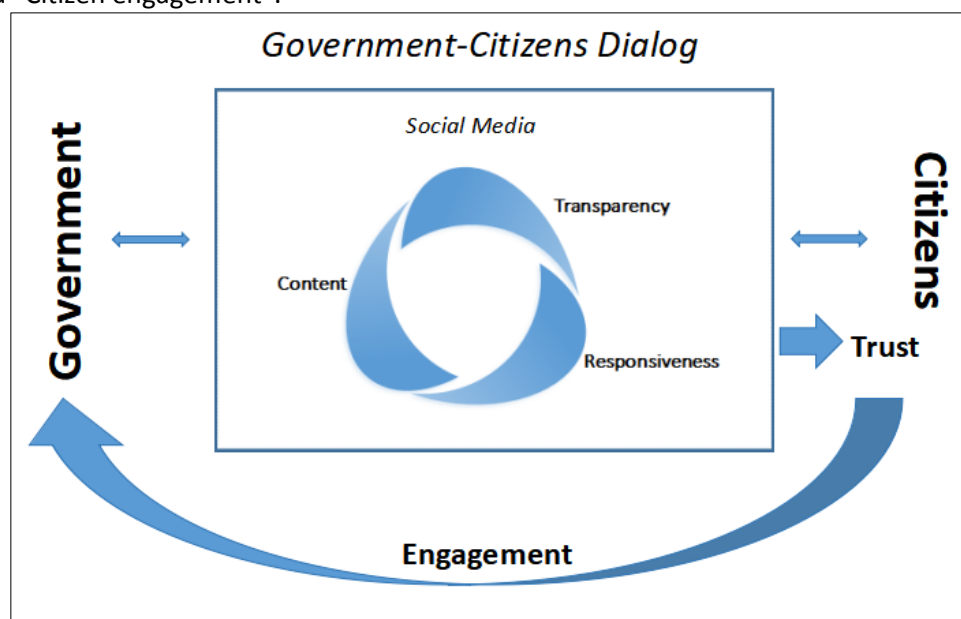


Fig. 1. Government-Citizen Dialog Theoretical Framework (Own elaboration)

After identifying key concepts and indicating the most important fields of analysis, the quantitative study was started. The quantitative study consisted of collecting responses in an online survey and covered two groups: 280 people in the "General public" group and 49 people in the "Government representatives" group. The obtained data were subjected to statistical analysis (SPSS).

Research hypotheses

In the study that is the basis of this article, several research hypotheses were adopted. The first three hypotheses concerned the impact of the selected three components on gaining public trust in the content distributed by the authorities (which can be interpreted as trust in the authorities - in general).

Hypothesis 1: "Content in social media affects public trust in the government".

Hypothesis 2: "The transparency of the communication process in social media affects public trust in the government".

Hypothesis 3: "The government's response (speed of response) to citizens' inquiries affects public trust in the government".

The next hypotheses concerned the impact of the discussed variables on gaining public engagement in the actions proposed by the authorities.

Hypothesis 4. "Content in social media affects citizens' engagement in the actions proposed by the government".

Hypothesis 5. "The transparency of the communication process in social media affects citizens' engagement in

the actions proposed by the government".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study confirmed that the main goal of the authorities' activity in social media is to build trust and achieve public involvement in the actions proposed by the authorities. At the same time, the analysis showed that of the three components of the communication process selected for the study (variables "Content", "Transparency" and "Responsiveness"), only the first two have an impact in relation to the two expected results: "trust" and "engagement". It was also found that the detailed components of the communication process have different meanings and different impact on building trust and public involvement in the current conditions of Uzbekistan.

The first three hypotheses concerned the impact of the selected three components on gaining public trust in the content distributed by the authorities (which can be interpreted as trust in the authorities in general).

The hypothesis that "Social media content has an impact on public trust in government" was confirmed by the following results: in the General Public research group, the "General content" category showed a correlation of +0.61 with "General trust", and in the Government Representatives group, this correlation was +0.76.

The second hypothesis, "The transparency of the communication process in social media has an impact on public trust in government", was also confirmed: in the General Public research group, the "General transparency" category showed a correlation of +0.62 with "General trust", and in the Government Representatives group, +0.76.

However, the hypothesis "The government's response to citizens' inquiries has an impact on public trust in government" was not confirmed for both research groups.

The next hypotheses concerned the impact of the discussed variables on achieving public involvement in the actions proposed by the authorities.

The hypothesis "Social media content has an impact on citizens' engagement in government-proposed activities" was confirmed. In the General Public research group, the "General content" category showed a correlation of +0.43 with "General engagement", and in the Government Reps group +0.39.

The hypothesis "The transparency of the communication process in social media has an impact on citizens' engagement in government-proposed activities" was also analyzed. The hypothesis was confirmed: in the General Public research group, the "General content" category showed a correlation of +0.46 with "General engagement", and in the Government Reps group +0.33.

Also in this aspect of the research, the specific hypothesis "The government's response to citizens' inquiries has an impact on citizens' engagement in government-proposed activities" was not confirmed for both research groups.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the government can build trust among citizens through social media, in particular through valuable content and ensuring transparency in the communication process. However, the aspect of responsiveness, including the speed of response to citizen requests, is not that important.

Now that we know what influences the achievement of public trust (valuable content and transparency of the message, which can be understood as its credibility), we can ask to what extent trust is important for achieving commitment to the proposed actions.

The data were analyzed to verify the main hypothesis: "Trust is an important component of the process of public involvement in the actions proposed by the authorities". In both research groups, the correlation between a positive attitude (demonstration of trust) towards three components of the communication process (variables "Content", "Transparency" and "Reactivity") and the declaration of commitment ("I am involved in the actions proposed by the government") was analyzed. The general conclusion from the research is that this hypothesis was confirmed.

In the General Public research group, a positive correlation was found for the answers to the first two variables: 1) "I trust the content" +0.53 and "I am

involved" +0.43. 2) "I trust transparency" +0.55 and "I am involved" +0.46. For the third variable, "I trust responsiveness," no correlation was found.

Also in the Government Reps research group, a positive correlation was found for the responses to the first two variables, although with different strengths: 1) "I trust content" +0.70 and "I am engaged" +0.39. 2) "I trust transparency" +0.80 and "I am engaged" +0.33. In this research group, no correlation was found for the "Responsiveness" variable.

It should be added that in the entire study, no statistically significant correlation was observed for such independent variables as "gender," "age," "education," and "profession."

Another interesting phenomenon that the data showed is the fact that public officials in Uzbekistan declare a higher level of trust in the content and transparency of social media, and at the same time a lower willingness to engage in activities proposed by the government they themselves represent. Perhaps this can be interpreted as a potential source of the problem of lack of authenticity and sincerity, or perhaps even a certain cynicism and distance towards the tasks they perform in the media.

The final research problem in the conducted study was to understand the positions and expectations of both sides of the government-society dialogue in relation to individual aspects of communication in social media. The research question was: "What opinions do representatives of the authorities and representatives of the general public express on individual aspects of the process of communication in social media?" The obtained results allow us to conclude that the positions of the parties in the government-society dialogue are in many respects divergent, and even contradictory.

The group of social media professionals with whom the focus group interviews were conducted indicated that providing citizens with access to current, relevant and useful information is the driving force behind the development of social media platforms in this country. At the same time, it was noted that a common practice in Uzbekistan was that messages from the authorities mainly serve to disseminate information about politicians themselves, their achievements and to encourage citizens to support the government.

The media experts who participated in the study indicated that in order to effectively respond to the voice of citizens, the best solutions are hotlines, complaint registers and citizen portals. Thanks to them, society can feel that its voice will be heard.

The requirement that the authorities communicate with society in such a way as to ensure a two-way flow

of information is always relevant. However, this also means a demand for civic activity, so each side has its role to play here. Of course, one can expect more from the authorities, i.e. from the stronger side, because it is equipped with material and human resources. However, in the statements it was indicated that the authorities of Uzbekistan do not have sufficient structures and the right people to deal with the appropriate response to citizens' questions or demands.

On the other hand, social media are equipped with numerous functions that allow monitoring the communication process (tracking threads, documenting dates, authors, keywords, etc.). This means that with the current development of information technology, citizens have a greater opportunity to exert pressure on the authorities. They have access to such tools as electronic archives, preserved copies, communication statistics, and influential networks of contacts, including international ones. As a result, both sides should strive for increasingly higher competences in this dialogue, understanding the importance of mutual understanding, which is ultimately beneficial for the overall development of the country. In this way, attempts to obtain one-sided benefits, such as short-sighted manipulation of public opinion, gaining applause, or spreading false news, will be avoided.

Novelty of the work

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the theoretical layer of this study. An original, new model of the process called "Government-Society Dialogue" for social media was formulated. In addition, variables that have previously been studied separately (Bennett & Manoharan, 2017; Liao et al., 2020; Omar et al., 2013) were included in a unified study.

The study sheds valuable light on the extent of social media used by the Uzbek government and then relates these factors to Uzbek citizens' trust in the government and Uzbek citizens' engagement in proposed activities.

Limitations of the study

In addition to important theoretical and practical implications, the study also has some limitations, which mainly result from the fact that it was conducted in only one country in its specific conditions. Therefore, the formulated conclusions may not have full reference to other societies or to another moment in history, especially taking into account dynamic changes.

Therefore, it can be recommended to continue similar studies in different countries based on different research samples. In this way, it is possible to significantly expand the basis for formulating analyses

of the communication process in different cultural and economic conditions.

The second limitation results from the fact that the analysis concerns social media, a relatively new phenomenon based on extremely fast-developing technology. All parties to this process are in the process of learning individual applications and understanding the meaning and consequences of the undertaken activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study indicate that the process of communication via social media implemented in contemporary Uzbekistan is not satisfactory for either party - i.e. citizens and authorities. Citizens indicate that the content provided by the authorities does not sufficiently meet quality criteria and the communication process itself is not transparent. As a result of the above shortcomings, the influence of the authorities' messages on citizens is limited and does not build trust or the expected involvement of Uzbek citizens in public affairs. There is no feedback from society, despite the formally declared openness on the part of the authorities (which was repeatedly mentioned in the speeches of the President of this country).

Based on the results of the study, a number of recommendations can be formulated regarding the conduct of the Government-Society Dialogue. They refer to the specific situation in Uzbekistan, but can probably be applied to other countries and societies.

The authorities should be expected to include the following elements in their communication:

- the content conveyed should be of value to the recipient
- the content conveyed should be credible (true, verified, up-to-date)
- to ensure transparency of communication, provide sources and dates
- ensure diversity of sources, including providing dissenting and opposing opinions.

An additional postulate, although not as high a priority as the first one mentioned above, will be: "ensuring the highest possible responsiveness, i.e. appropriate representatives of the authorities should respond to citizens' demands, complaints and other reports". However, as the study has shown, the speed of response is not that important.

It is worth noting their particular importance in the face of the widespread use of modern technologies, including social media platforms. On the one hand, they

significantly facilitate the role of the broadcaster for anyone who wants to be active in social media. Speaking in the media is not reserved exclusively for people such as a spokesperson or a press office, so you can expect responses from many representatives of the authorities. It should be emphasized that this technology (the so-called Internet 3.0 generation) creates the possibility of action for both parties, what is more, it even forces such action. Both parties can and should therefore be both senders and recipients. If one of the parties does not use both of these functions - such media cease to be "social". Instead of dialogue, we have a monologue, i.e. a one-way message. It is therefore something that is associated with the concept of propaganda, and in the post-Soviet society such associations have particularly negative connotations.

In addition, the study emphasizes the important role of transparency, providing sources and counter-opinions. Transparency can play a significant role in strengthening positive connections and networks between various government entities and citizens. An important task will be to continue raising awareness of the functioning of the media both among the authorities and among the citizens of Uzbekistan, especially since the country is striving to disseminate digital literacy and even export digital services (source). Ministry of Digital Technologies, 2023).

Without in-depth knowledge of communication processes and without digital literacy, it will not be possible to implement the vision of civil society in this country. It should be emphasized that in recent years, the Uzbek government has initiated numerous projects and programs aimed at creating and testing new technologies, as well as overcoming the digital divide that still exists in the context of gender and location. Of course, a significant challenge remains the issue of building the technical conditions for the Internet, as well as other regulations that will support the vision of e-government and e-society in practice. A communication system that is open, valuable, transparent and participatory will serve to build institutions of mutual trust and optimal use of social potential, which ultimately leads to the development of a given country.

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