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DIGITAL REPUTATION OF THE EXECUTIVE POWER BODIES: DISCURSIVE FACTORS AND COMMUNICATIVE TECHNIQUES OF MANAGEMENT¹

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Abstract. The paper discusses the communicative techniques of reputation management of the executive power bodies in the Russian media space. Comparing the concepts of *digital reputation* and *digital image*, the authors argue that, unlike image which is purposefully implemented in the media environment, reputation reflects the internet users' real opinion about the activities performed by state institutions. The essential features of digital reputation are accumulative character, unpredictability and inertia. The authors define the discursive factors affecting reputation: ambiguously wide audience of the internet, distribution of target groups on different web sites, the unpredictability of users' assessments, some citizens' aggressive speech behaviour, etc. More than 2.5 thousand posts by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation published in the *Vkontakte* social network and *Telegram* messenger were selected as the material for the research. The impact of content on the internet audience was evaluated with the ER_{post} rate at the Popsters service. The authors argue that effective techniques of digital reputation management are the following: communication on a particular internet platform with regard to its target audience, attractive hashtags, the tone of involvement with the interlocutor, rejection of formal style clichés, and some others. The discursive factors of new formal communication are established, and the techniques of managing governmental bodies' positive digital reputation are described.

Key words: digital reputation, digital image, executive power bodies of Russia, discursive factor, communicative techniques of management, digital reputation management.

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ЦИФРОВАЯ РЕПУТАЦИЯ ОРГАНОВ ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬНОЙ ВЛАСТИ: ДИСКУРСИВНЫЕ ФАКТОРЫ И КОММУНИКАТИВНЫЕ СПОСОБЫ УПРАВЛЕНИЯ¹

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются коммуникативные способы управления репутацией органов исполнительной власти в русскоязычной медиасреде. На основании сопоставления понятий цифровой репу-

тации и цифрового имиджа утверждается, что в отличие от имиджа как целенаправленно внедряемого образа власти репутация отражает реальное общественное мнение о деятельности государственных институтов. Цифровая репутация имеет накопительный характер, обладает непредсказуемостью и инерционностью. К дискурсивным факторам, влияющим на репутацию, авторы относят неопределенно широкую аудиторию Интернета, распределение целевых групп по разным веб-площадкам, непредсказуемость оценок и агрессивное речевое поведение некоторых подписчиков. Материал исследования – более 2,5 тысяч постов Министерства науки и высшего образования России, размещенных в социальной сети «ВКонтакте» и в мессенджере Telegram. Влияние контента на интернет-аудиторию определялось посредством коэффициента ER_{post} в сервисе Popsters. Установлено, что эффективными способами управления цифровой репутацией являются следующие: выбор интернет-платформы с учетом ее целевой аудитории, привлекательные хэштеги, тональность заинтересованного разговора с собеседником, отказ от клише официальной речи. Выделены дискурсивные факторы новой официальной речи, и описаны средства формирования позитивной цифровой репутации органа государственного управления.

Ключевые слова: цифровая репутация, цифровой имидж, органы исполнительной власти России, дискурсивный фактор, коммуникативные способы управления, управление цифровой репутацией.

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Introduction

Since state institutions are required to ensure transparency and openness of their activity through media communication, the digital reputation has been gaining importance in the context of the digitalized dialogue between the executive bodies and citizens. Digital reputation is, in general terms, a poly-criteria-based evaluation of a particular object (for example, the activity of a state institution), which is formed in a media environment and reflects the opinion of a socially active part of internet users. Polycriteriality is associated with several evaluation bases, such as social attitudes, values, sociocultural stereotypes, personal motives, and the emotional sphere of the communication participants.

The digital reputation of the executive power correlates with the internet users' perception of the governmental bodies' activity. The perception is shaped through various sources of information: citizens' comments, website and blog content, subscribers' performance indicators in online communities, as well as other mass media in which the number of mentions of the governmental bodies is relevant. For this reason, contemporary humanities aim at a multi-aspect study of digital reputation management techniques (verbal, non-verbal, marketing) used by public authorities. Additionally, developing the techniques is imperative for shaping public opinion and maintaining trust in the executive. The digital

reputation of an executive power body (ministry, agency, administration, department, etc.) indicates the perception and evaluation by community members of the activity of the executive body in the sector they administrate: education, medicine, culture, transport, communal services, etc. Effective digital reputation management enables any governmental body to form and reinforce a favourable public opinion to achieve long-term success and sustainable development. The aforesaid determines the relevance of studying digital reputation as a performance indicator of the public authority.

Modern humanities represent a new approach to studying digital reputation within the framework of the integrative interdisciplinary approach involving findings from adjacent disciplines: philosophy, communication theory, information theory, management theory, discourse analysis, sociology, etc. [Ayusheeva, Soyfer, 2021; Borovikova, Rozanova, 2021; Botnar, Sizganova, 2020; Vokhidova, Savoskin, 2023; Efremov, 2022; Ilyicheva, 2021; Kurbangalieva, 2022; Lepina, 2023; Lisenkova, 2022; Okhapkina, Roganov, 2021; Petrusha, 2017; Rodina, 2022; Simonova, Agibalova, 2023; Sirotin, 2021; 2023; Spicheva, 2014; etc.]. The researchers emphasize that communication of the executive bodies in the media sphere becomes efficient in case they, first and foremost, provide the citizens with reliable information on the activities of the state governmental bodies and, secondly, if they do

publicity using a well-planned strategy. The latter implies the choice of a digital platform and informative content, thematic planning of the content and deciding upon the posting frequency according to seasonal trends.

The aim of our research is to identify effective communicative methods and techniques for any state governmental body's digital reputation management.

The tasks of the research are:

1) to define the concept of digital reputation as compared to the concept of digital image in relation to governmental bodies;

2) to identify extra-linguistic (discursive) factors that influence the digital reputation of the executive power bodies;

3) to carry out a comparative analysis of the official content created by the authorities in the *VKontakte (VK)* social network and the *Telegram* messenger in terms of identifying effective communicative techniques of digital reputation management.

The scientific novelty of the research is determined by systemising the current approaches to defining the concept of digital reputation, identifying key discursive factors that form digital reputation and describing communicative techniques to manage it.

Material and methods

The material under study comprises posts on the official page of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation in the *VK* social network and posts on the Ministry channel in *Telegram* messenger.

Using the continuous sampling method, we selected 2,539 samples, including 682 posts on the *VK* social network and 1,857 posts on the *Telegram* messenger, covering one calendar year (1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024). As the posts are in Russian, the authors had to translate the samples that are used in this article. Choosing the material, we considered the fact that, according to scientific observations, social networks and messengers 'are becoming the primary source of real-time operational information' [Baranov, Medyakova, Kislitskaya (eds.), 2021, p. 182], as well as the fact that the users of these web resources most actively participate in social life.

The research involved several stages of analysis. At the first stage we carried out an automated analysis of the material from the Popsters.ru service [Popsters...] with the aim to identify the marketing parameters of the posts. Of all the available metrics, we considered only the engagement rate (the ER_{post} metric), i.e. the rate of users' engagement with the published content. After that, we ranked the publications by the ER_{post} . In the final stage, we performed a discursive-stylistic analysis of the posts with high ER metrics, which we believe reveals effective digital reputation management techniques.

Discussion

Considering the controversial issue of distinguishing between the close but not identical concepts of 'digital reputation' and 'digital image', we can emphasize that a governmental body's *digital image* correlates with the speech activity of the body (the sender of the information). Meanwhile, *digital reputation* mainly arises from the feedback of internet users, conveying the perception of the content by the target audience. O.A. Mikhaylova and E.L. Shashmurina reasonably believe that the concept of image is associated with the idea of a purposefully created opinion, while reputation is formed unintentionally [Mikhaylova, Shashmurina, 2019, p. 93]. Other researchers share a similar view (see: [Baranov, Medyakova, Kislitskaya (eds.), 2021, p. 185]).

As for digital reputation (i.e. online reputation), O.A. Mityaeva assumes that it is associated with a set of evaluative perceptions of any organization by the internet target consumers [Mityaeva, 2022, p. 58]. The definition has several advantages that we agree with. Firstly, it focuses on the axiological aspect of digital reputation; secondly, it underlines that the discourse of internet users shapes reputation by itself; finally, it highlights the changeable and dynamic nature of reputation.

Researchers of the reputation phenomenon hold the widespread opinion that a single negative review or comment on the internet can seriously affect the reputation of the object of evaluation. To analyze the quantitative indicators of the digital reputation of a commercial organization, D.L. Kurbangaliev developed a technique for measuring the impact of assessments by the target

audience voiced in social networks. Based on the degree of influence on digital reputation, the author distinguishes two groups of factors: a) initial impact factors (likes, number of posts); b) profound impact factors (comments, reposts, subscriptions) [Kurbangalieva, 2018, p. 75]. Indeed, comparing the impact of the discursive factors, we conclude that reposts and comments make explicit, but not necessarily in a verbal way, assessment of the activity, thus largely contributing to the reputational enhancement. From our point of view, this conclusion also holds for the assessment of digital reputation of the executive bodies.

Although 'reputation is an elusive variable' [Kamshilova, Chernyavskaya, 2021, p. 50], it is vital for the executive bodies to gradually earn a digital reputation since it affects the loyalty of citizens to state institutions.

Considering all the factors, we can define the digital reputation of the executive as a multi-component indicator of state power. The indicator is formed in the media environment and reflects the opinions of socially active citizens. We assume that a digital reputation possesses a collective nature formed by the aggregate responses of internet users. These are reviews and comments on websites and blogs, mentions of some executive power bodies in social networks and messengers, and non-verbal reactions to publications.

Statistics about the activities of a governmental body, including the number of views its posts and publications receive, are the primary indicators of its reputation. We understand reputation as a relevant component of *the digital discourse of the executive power* (see: [Bazhenova, Shirinkina, 2023]).

Based on the review of the scientific publications and discursive and stylistic analysis of the material, we can identify the discursive factors which influence the perception of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation in society:

a) an indefinitely *wide audience* of internet users, mostly non-specialists in the administrative sphere of the executive;

b) *unstable* and *unpredictable* opinions of the users, including anonymous users and bots, causing *chaos* that paves the way for "nourishing" digital reputation;

c) *subjectivity* and *polarisation* in assessing influential figures' activities, *variability* of users' individual *preferences*;

d) *provocative speech behavior* of some internet users who, being confident in the impunity of their criticism, discredit certain actions of the authorities.

To conclude the above-mentioned, let us single out the main discourse-driven attributes of a *digital image* and *digital reputation* relevant to the executive bodies' activity.

Digital image is an image of a governmental body specially designed by PR specialists and purposefully implemented in the media environment. Positive images are created by explicit (external) means, such as corporate style, semantically meliorative language units, and illustrative materials emphasizing a public institution's success and high performance. Managing the image is relatively easy since it focuses on immediate results and favorable impressions. Managing digital images involves considering citizens' expectations, adjusting to their mentality and peculiarities of information perception, and using some techniques to make the image attractive (verbal, non-verbal, marketing, etc.). The general purpose of image management is to control the dissemination of information in the media environment on behalf of a governmental body.

An executive body's *digital reputation* is the public opinion about its activities based on feedback from internet users. Reputation is formed via interactions between an executive body and citizens, reflects the level of public trust in the power and has an accumulative nature. A good reputation is easy to spoil but hard to restore, as it is influenced by diverse factors ranging from political and economic to individual and psychological ones, which are difficult to foresee. Because of the spontaneity and time delay of any reputation, including digital reputation, effective management requires much effort, such as identifying adverse factors or using feedback communication to detect potentially negative impacts [Baranov, Medyakova, Kislitskaya (eds.), 2021, p. 268].

In communicative terms, linguistic components of a dialogue between the authorities and society deserve special attention since the speech patterns of the official content can both

promote and hinder the formation of the positive reputation of the authorities. Verbal communication is precisely the primary means of convincing citizens, shaping their public consciousness, maintaining a positive image of the state institutions, and managing their reputation, including the digital one. Language means, if chosen correctly, both influence the rational assessment of the authority and evoke positive emotions in addressees. Productive dialogue is not possible without a positive emotional response [Khazagerov, 2006].

The paper discusses communicative methods and techniques of digital reputation management. It presents the results obtained from the analysis of the empirical material – the content of the official public channels by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation.

Results

The analysis shows that various (verbal, non-verbal, marketing) means of influencing the addressee are used to form a positive digital reputation for a public institution in the media. In particular, these are the following:

- developing a content plan as a set of communicative strategies for a digital dialogue between the authorities and society, which takes into account the target audience of the internet platform;
- categorizing content by using *hashtags*;
- adopting a *selective* approach to the topic of publications;
- using a *convenient format* (division of cards, division of information in columns, sections, etc.);
- writing news in an *apprehensible* language;
- using various means of creating an *active dialogue*;
- avoiding *formal style cliches*;
- highlighting a *personality* as a principal character of the content;
- using *interactive* forms of communication (voting, polls, live broadcast, etc.);
- maintaining *interest* in interactions with interlocutors;
- utilizing *visualization techniques* (infographics, story photos, dynamic videos, etc.);

– *responding* timely to comments and messages from citizens.

Given the volume of the given paper is limited, we will focus only on some of the communicative techniques.

The content analysis proves that the contents and formats (ways of presenting material using the technical capabilities of certain platforms) of publications by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in the *VK* social network and in *Telegram* messenger differ since the Ministry's posts aim to influence different target audiences. Posts on the *VK* social network address mostly students, young teachers and researchers, while those of *Telegram* messenger target the academic community and administrative apparatus of higher education institutions.

The differences in choosing topics and linguistic form of posts targeting various audiences become apparent in the hashtags, specific to each online platform. For instance, the *VK* hashtags intend to evoke pride in students for an alma mater and a sense of involvement in university life, as well as foster respect for science and renowned scientists. This finding is traced through some words (including slang words) belonging to the 'Student Life' thematic group: *student*, *teacher*, *teaching*, *science*, *uni* (*#myunistudentday*, *#sciencefamilyteaching*, *#facesofscience*, etc.). With the personal and possessive pronouns *we* (*#wearetogether*), *my* (*#myuni*), *our* (*#ourneurostudent*), the content focuses on the audience consolidation and the achievement of corporate unity. The plane of content proves that the information in the *VK* social network, addressed to students and young researchers, discusses educational and scientific issues and reports on events meaningful to this very target audience: a) All-Russian competitions, Olympiads, national awards and startups; b) forums, festivals and congresses; c) special courses and internships; d) changes in the Russian system of higher education; e) particular features of admission campaigns; f) interesting scientific facts and popular science projects.

The automated quantitative analysis of the *VK* material revealed that the highest engagement rate (26.6) was recorded with the post (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_19533) devoted to the online competition 'Our Neurostudent'. The average engagement rate of posts under the corresponding

hashtag is 4.1. All of the posts about this competition received 4,411 ‘likes’, 22,605 comments and 1,971 reposts.

As for the *Telegram* channel by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the hashtags merely create an official image of higher education in Russia. In particular, names of priority development areas of science (*#priority2030*, *#importsubstitution*, *#technologyeconomy*, *#ecology*, *#internationalcooperation*, *#"Science"NationalProject*, *#uav* – unmanned aerial vehicles), and official abbreviations of universities (*#SUSU* – South Ural State University, *#TSU* – Tomsk State University) serve this purpose. The *Telegram* hashtags contain exclusively bookish, unemotional lexis to draw the attention of subscribers to the most essential aspects of the activities performed by the Ministry. In particular, official *Telegram* posts inform about: a) implementation of state educational programs; b) achievements of Russian scientists; c) appointments of university rectors; d) the construction and improvement of campuses; e) the events in which Minister V. Falkov participates.

In general, the topics of the *Telegram* posts are standardized reports, which, according to Russian legislation, must inform the society about the activity of the governing body. The strategy of the formal style communication does not correspond to the nature of social networks and digital channels. Therefore, it is obvious that the *VK* social network has a greater potential to influence public opinion, and thus a greater potential to form a positive digital reputation of the Ministry. Indeed, the audience reach of the *Telegram* channel is 1.5 times less (51.5 thousand subscribers) compared to the audience reach of the *VK* social network (77.6 thousand subscribers).

A difference in the number of internet users subscribed to the Ministry in the social network and the messenger, in our opinion, is due to the verbal attractiveness of the *VK* posts. The study showed that high engagement rate posts (from 2.00 to 26.55 in comparison with the average 0.31) utilize a variety of means facilitating a dialogue.

First of all, the viewers’ attention is drawn by *headlines* designed in the form of sentences that imply *semantic deficiency*.

For example, the headline *You are in the semi-finals!* to the post about the semi-finals of the competition “Our Neurostudent” is characterized

by vagueness, understatement, which encourages the addressee to turn to the text and read it to the end to understand to whom the message is addressed, which semi-finals are meant and which university reached the semi-finals.

By using a quotation, the headline encourages the addressee to learn who wrote these words:

(1) There was an unprecedented emotional lift, and it turned out that we could really take on the world (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_44552).

Headlines employ a question or question-answer technique to trigger the addressee’s interest in the publication. It holds the readers’ attention while reading to find the answer to the question posed in the headline. For example:

(2) Did you know that chlorine used in paper bleaching harms the environment? (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_44616).

Finally, headlines use *imperative speech acts*. In this case, it is explicated by an exclamatory sentence with an imperative, for example:

(3) Get your chance to become the main discovery of 2023 together with the Russian National Award “Student of the Year”! (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_41816).

The technique of semantic incompleteness of the statement for the headlines is in demand in the *VK* content of the executive as a means to control the addressee’s attention. This type of headline seems to engage citizens in a dialogue with the authorities and make them full-fledged participants in communication. This is confirmed by the high engagement rate set by the *Popsters.ru* service for posts with such headlines.

Another dialogue technique that draws the addressee’s attention to the content is call for an action, expressed in the *imperative form of the verb and located in the strong (final) position of the VK post*. For example:

(4) Read the cards for further details (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_17691);

(5) Return to the comments after taking the test and share your impressions (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_42774);

(6) Leave your favourite New Year songs in the comments - you may inspire someone to make a video clip or be inspired yourself < (https://vk.com/wall-167915299_43044).

Personalization of content by introducing a well-known scientist or an exciting teacher to the users encourages a dialogue between the executive and citizens in the *VK* social network. Personalities are shaped and presented to the target audience through quotes about their life, profession, universal values, etc. L.A. Artsimovich, physicist, O.B. Sirotinina, linguist, G.S. Lebedev, archaeologist, and others became heroes of such publications.

However, managing the digital reputation of a governmental body is not only about the topic of the post or the expressive verbal means used to attract the attention of the audience. A user-friendly format for presenting information is also of great importance. The choice of a format is closely related to the technology capabilities of the platform.

So, in the *VK* social network, publications are placed in the user's news feed among other news posts. Therefore, content managers for the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education insert colorful pictures, smileys and emojis to highlight the publications in the news feed to attract the audience. Thus, posts are displayed in various interactive forms (polls, quizzes, voting, cards, etc.). For example, users are immersed in the content either by exploring photos in a 'carousel' manner (i.e. a post with a certain sequence of photos or videos that can be scrolled through) or by taking part in some quizzes and polls.

One of the features of the *Telegram* design is the following: once a user is interested in a channel, they can immediately see the entire news feed. This is why there is no need for special ways of attracting the addressee's attention to certain publications. Therefore, the *Telegram* content design is undiversified (as a rule, a verbal block is accompanied by a photo or a video clip).

Analyzing the online platforms of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education we found that each of the platforms hosts both unique (non-repetitive) and duplicated content. Unique posts from *Telegram* messenger are characterized by a more formal tone, and the information is often presented in the style commonly referred to as 'from official sources'. The publications contain information about events with the participation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education held in the Ministry; events concerning appointments of rectors of higher education institutions and so

forth. The posts about scientific achievements are intended for a narrow circle of specialists and are presented in a formal language.

As a rule, the *VK* social network and *Telegram* messenger duplicate information about significant events in the life of Russian universities such as opening and developing new campuses, constructing new laboratories and lecture halls, making outstanding scientific discoveries, etc.

In the *VK* social network, an important means of forming a productive dialogue between the Ministry and users is timely feedback on the subscribers' comments and messages. Although the option to leave comments on posts is disabled in *Telegram* messenger, the engagement rate is measured by the number of views, reposts and likes. In our opinion, it seems complicated to manage the Ministry's digital reputation since users cannot leave verbal comments.

In the framework of our research, there arises a question of what mostly influences the addressee: the topic or the speech pattern of the posts? Preliminarily, we can state that there are periodic fluctuations in the demand for certain information topics depending on seasonal, socio-cultural and other factors. For example, holiday greetings in the name of V. Falkov, Minister of Science and Education, are invariably at the top of the engagement rate. However, the greeting texts are not particularly creative.

Dependent on content distribution and subscribers' target groups, the effectiveness of communicative techniques requires further research. Regarding our material, the following principle has been revealed: the *Telegram* messenger posts conform with the conventions of 'dry' formal register. For example:

(7) The research of scholarship applicants should be based on the priorities defined in the Strategy for Scientific and Technological Development of the Russian Federation (<https://t.me/minobrnaukiofficial/7781>);

(8) The principles of interdisciplinarity should be preserved in the implementation of basic higher education programmes with 4 to 6 years of training, and practice-oriented approaches to training should be strengthened (<https://t.me/minobrnaukiofficial/4469>);

(9) Scientific infrastructure of the "megasciences" class – a network of modern large installations necessary to ensure breakthrough research in the most important areas of science in the Russian Federation (<https://t.me/minobrnaukiofficial/7408>).

As we can observe, the above statements are dominated by stylistically colored words and phrases typical of formal style (*scholarship applicants, priorities, scientific and technological development, principles of interdisciplinarity, practice-oriented approaches*, etc.). This feature can be attributable to the fact that the *Telegram* target groups are university administrative boards and older representatives of the academic community, whereas the *VK* social networking service of the Ministry targets students, postgraduates and young researchers.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the concepts of ‘digital reputation’ and ‘digital image’ in relation to governmental bodies confirmed the assumption that they are not identical. *Digital image* as an image of a public institution in the media environment is the result of the purposeful activity of PR-service specialists. *Digital reputation* is a multiple criteria indicator that reflects the evaluation of the government’s activities performed by the socially active part of the population. As digital reputation is formed in the discourse of internet users (in reviews, comments, likes, reposts and other types of responses), it demonstrates, on the one hand, a collective and accumulative character; on the other hand, it is unpredictable.

The extra-linguistic, discourse-driven features of digital reputation identified in the study determine the complexity of its management and accentuate the need to develop a holistic system of actions. The content plan for digital reputation management should consider the communicative strategies of influencing target groups, considering the technical capabilities of internet platforms.

Based on discourse and stylistic analysis and content analysis of the publications posted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation on the social platforms *VKontakte* and *Telegram*, and the ER_{post} metric data, the study draws a number of conclusions.

The study revealed the following features of posts that have a significant impact on citizens’ evaluation of the governmental bodies’ activities: relevance of the topics to the target audience; attractiveness of hashtags; capacity of headlines to hold the addressee’s attention; use of dialogue

techniques; tone of friendly communication; and personalisation of content.

Convenient and attractive formats of posts (cards, carousel, videos, polls, quizzes, voting, etc.), as well as the options to repost and leave comments, contribute to involving citizens in the dialogue with the authorities.

The examined characteristics of publications in the media environment facilitate positive evaluation of the authorities’ activities, so they can be considered effective techniques of public institutions’ digital reputation management.

NOTE

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