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## Technologies of the Electoral Process: A Field Study of the Possibility of Informative Communication

*The article focuses on the role of social technology in the Russian electoral process. On this basis, the author provides answers to more general issues concerning such questions as whether it is possible in the Russian context to combine social stability and informative political communication; whether a conflict-free processing of objective information can be achieved; whether political communication can extricate itself from self-referential isolation around the issue of social unity and address the real challenges facing society; and whether the authorities will be able to transition from motivative-integrative social technologies to object-information technologies.* 5  
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## Communication theory: From motivative solidarity to informative descriptions

In this article, a specific example from the electoral process in Russia will be used to reconstruct the social technologies for avoiding objective descriptions in the political and media sphere. The theory of communicative systems developed by a number of foreign researchers, in particular Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas, will serve as the theoretical foundation of the present study of several social technologies present in the electoral process. From this kind of “high theory”<sup>1</sup> a mid-range theory can be derived—a theory of communicative media. On the one hand, this relates to the proliferation of different forms of communication (print, electronic media, etc.), and on the other hand, extends to generalized symbolic communicative success (truth, power, money, faith, property, etc.).

These approaches serve as explanation of real functioning social technologies, which in and of themselves are not developed by theorists, but rather by enlightened members of the ruling class who are familiar with the mechanisms of the formation of public opinion and electoral technology. Social technology of this kind has been exhaustively developed in what are now the classic works of W. Lippmann,<sup>2</sup> J. Tsallera,<sup>3</sup> and P. Champagne.<sup>4</sup>

Lippman’s key idea constituted the spatiotemporal limitations of single individual perception, forcing the individual to reach out to Others in search of information on key contemporary issues. This or that Other specializes in a particular aspect of politics and is endowed with special powers, and, thereby, serves the function of a cognitive instrument—a means of observing the global community and global history. The individual’s observational range is fundamentally limited by his or her integration into the social context and the social dimension of communication. The individual, exercising choice in the voting process, is necessarily dependent on the information supplied by some Other: by “competent” sources (e.g., a politician in the media) or specially authorized representatives (e.g., a member of an electoral commission).

Thus, in the generation of information, there are initially two—often opposing—goals: the objectivity of the data and the consensus of the Other. At different times and in different societies, one or the other pole of generating communicative and meaningful information has received higher or lower value. But as a threshold that separates modern and traditional communication technologies—information-oriented communication and consensus-oriented communication—I would single out the basic distinction between the sacred and the public. In my opinion, all traditional,



premodern societies retained an orientation toward secrecy, taboo, and a prohibition on communication, exempting from public discussion great swaths of social reality, and in this sense, making prohibition one of their most important social technologies. 60

Another idea developed by the above-mentioned theorists is the forced stereotyping of certain individuals making observations—the reduction of the complexity of the external world as the only means of its communicative processing. “Information is a highly selective and stereotyped version of events.... The public is unlikely to want to maintain a high awareness of the limitless world that is far beyond its immediate experience.”<sup>5</sup> This stereotyped, reduced representation of the outside world has little to do with the actual, objective situation. 65

However, the “exposure” of a stereotypical picture of reality is, of course, fraught with disappointment and, as shown by sociological studies,<sup>6</sup> is psychologically undesirable for individual observers. After all, this would constitute the destruction of their firmly established system of values and ideals, formulated perhaps in childhood as an unproblematic foundation of reality. Exposing such a reductive worldview can even be described as taboo, since it may threaten social harmony, mental stability, and the cultural identity of the community. 70 75

In this sense, disguising the actual complexity of information really is an important condition for the normal functioning of society and culture. Lippmann vividly depicts this kind of reductive perception by giving the example of Miss Sherwin, the main character of S. Lewis’s novel *Main Street*.<sup>7</sup> 80

In premodern societies, the first things to be removed from communicative discussion are the foundations of the social order, values, ideals, principles of government, and the basis of morality and religion. In such societies, the thematization of the social order could prove devastating. Indeed, if morality is a form of universal assessment (i.e., any action, experience, or communication can be evaluated on their worthiness or unworthiness), why not apply the same principle to God, the state, and even morality itself? Why must the state, God, and morality be a priori virtuous when an equally probable alternative is possible? 85

Premodern societies are established via the process of sacralization, prohibition, secrecy, and censorship. The secrecy and prohibition of many topics of public discussions and the formation of collective ideas are an effective means of preventing corruption in the broadest sense of the word, that is, preventing the disintegration of the social order. What, then, is the function of sacralization? 90 95

I believe that secrecy in premodern societies and prohibitions on public knowledge served as a guarantee against mistakes and the abuse of

knowledge and as a means of neutralizing dangerous communication; however, the primary function of secrecy is its role in addressing the problem of integration. 100

Thus, secrecy ties society together through the rejection of common knowledge. For different observers, an identical object can have different meaning depending on the position from which the observation is made. For instance, depending on one's perspective, the planet Venus can serve as either the Morning Star or the Evening Star. Meanwhile, what is hidden from observers is precisely what unifies them. This is the fundamental logical distinction between sense and reference. Reference, the self-identity of the object (e.g., the planet Venus), is accessible only to a second-order observer. In the absence of opportunities for second-order observation or information-oriented communication, a prohibition on general knowledge about the object is a very effective technology. 105 110

Premodern societies are differentiated along the axis of knowledge and ignorance. If general knowledge is absent from public discourse, no one can make a mistake in its application, discover its falsehood, or abuse its power. It is forbidden to speak of the sacred, and therefore it cannot be subjected to the corruption of words, be distorted, or be exposed to the effects of harmful magic. It is this kind of prohibition on the discussion of general knowledge and the development of collective ideas that binds a community together through the elimination of the dangers of public discourse. 115 120

I think no one can doubt that Russian society is governed by secrecy as well as a prohibition on public discussion of the most important issues.

- Political control is implemented through illegal structures and is not subject to public law, as, for example, the presidential administration, to say nothing of the Ozero Cooperative. These structures are analogous to the historically well-known secret councils; 125
- in our contemporary society, the reasons for the most important political decisions, as a rule, are not published or explained. There are no clear explanations why many of the higher-level ministers were replaced, despite the declared success of the president's previous term; 130
- the means of public communication are censored;
- the images of senior politicians are sacralized, and the private lives of public officials are shrouded in mystery;
- in the economic sphere, public procurement and state contracts are conducted with minimal public procedures—public auctions and tenders; 135



- in the political sphere, the ruling political class is a closed corporation, the infiltration of which is made possible by extremely shadowy means and on the basis of highly obscure procedures. Also taboo is the question of why access to power is granted to these individuals, and not others; 140
- in the spiritual sphere, there exists a monopoly on religious ideology, but the question of why this ideology and why the representatives of the church have a monopoly on the definition of public morality is excised from public discussion.

There is no doubt that modern Russian society is organized around 145  
 communicative prohibitions—banning discussion of topical issues and  
 subjects. But what is the alternative to a sacralized society? In terms of  
 our approach (strictly separating motivative-integrative and informational  
 communication technologies) such an alternative is the information society.  
 In this case, we are talking not only about virtual communication, tele- 150  
 communication, and social networks. We are talking about the information  
 society in a fundamental sense, the crucial transformation of the structure of  
 communication, which Western-style societies have undergone. Modern  
 societies are dominated by an objectivist environment. The key problem  
 of communication (receiving media representation, publication) is the sub- 155  
 ject of communication, but not communication itself, is evaluated in terms  
 of its danger (or utility) to social stability.

R. Merton's concept of latent functions is a classic example.<sup>8</sup> According  
 to Merton, in the mythological narratives and rituals of premodern societies,  
 the subject of communication is communication itself. Thus, in the magical 160  
 communications of the call to rain, the subject of communication is not the  
 situational-natural phenomenon of rain. The latent subject of communica-  
 tion is the *de facto* cohesion of the community. After all, it is through the  
 magic of communication that community members gain the opportunity to  
 verify the existence of group solidarity, and this is precisely the efficacy of 165  
 magical practices, of communication technologies in the traditional premo-  
 dern society. In this sense, communication in primitive societies is funda-  
 mentally self-referential: when appealing to a deity or totem,  
 communication communities are in essence referencing only themselves. 170  
 They offer no information about the world outside their community.  
 Magical dances, rituals, and narratives have as their referent a special  
 type of message—the message of group cohesion. Thus, communications  
 in premodern societies concern not descriptions of the outside world, but  
 are above all self-descriptions of the community, that is, self-reference, not  
 external reference. 175

In connection with this, let us now turn to the specific case of Russian society. The tradition of self-reference is characteristic of Russian society and the Russian authorities. In Russian society, any call for publicity or objective information (e.g., a call for the objective results of an election or the real preferences of voters) are interpreted as self-referential messages. In the best-case scenario, the authorities interpret objective descriptions of reality as claims to their power, and at worst as the machinations of external enemies. Thus, what is discussed is not the informational content of the communication, not the proposed topic of discussion, but the nature and meaning of communication itself. In the communication of the opposition, the focus of the authorities becomes the motivation and bias of the message, the way in which oppositional discourse threatens the social stability and integration of the nation. However, this is not the same as “evil intent.” Here we are dealing with a fundamentally premodern type of communication, where the communicative message is evaluated primarily on its motivative-integrative semantics, and not as a claim to an informative description of the situation.

Information concerning the objective state of affairs is rejected and censored not for objective reasons, but on the basis of the character of the message; for example, as a result of its potential ill intent. Statements made by election observers are interpreted as those of notorious slanderers, that is, the emphasis of the discussion shifts from an objective evaluation of the communication to the evaluation of the collective personality. In general, the problem of the information content of the communication is replaced by the problem of motivation and the potential danger of such discussions for community cohesion, its stability. (In this sense, the dimension of communication shifts orientation from a concern with object to a temporal dimension). Stability takes precedence over information.

Is it possible in the Russian context to combine social stability and informative communication? Is it possible to have a conflict-free processing of objective information? Is it possible to be extricated from this isolating communication, when all communication is considered to be solely about collective unity, as if the counterparty were always motivated by conflict or consensus? How can the problem of the interdependence of actors (Ego and Other) within the community be resolved?

Ego in premodern societies interprets the Other as the Ego of the Other, and locates in the Other its own expectations. This is the orientation of the current Russian authorities: any objective criticism of the socioeconomic situation from the opposition is interpreted as a politically motivated grab for power—thus, locating its own motives in the Other.



Modern Western societies have achieved the necessary balance of social cohesion and informativeness. Modern societies differ from premodern, because they have made the transition from primarily motivative or integrative communication to primarily informative communication. In modern societies, conflicts are operationalized and transformed into sources of innovation. For example, this is the case in scientific communication with its competition of citation indexes. Such is the case with price competition. A similar situation occurs in the mass media systems with competition for novelty. The same is observed in judicial proceedings—a competition between the defense and the prosecution. In all these areas, conflict is invariably associated with a public presentation of competing positions, and not a secret selection and the prohibition of certain messages.

There is no reason to give up opportunities to modernize political communication in Russia through operationalization and optimization of political conflicts. This conflict is associated with the very different resources of observation of those in power and the opposition. The opposition's potential for conducting informative and objective descriptions is far greater, because of the simple fact that it is not involved in actual management and is not bound by the need to reinforce accepted collective binding decisions, to transmit power along vertical lines. The opposition is free from self-referential processes. It is less burdened with the need to strengthen stability, and the task of maintaining certain, albeit minimal, levels of integration. Simply put, the opposition is not burdened with the need to reflexively respond to current challenges and threats. That is why the opposition observes and sees more completely. In modern Western societies, the opposition serves an external referential function, commenting on the complete, and not just the immediate, state of affairs.

The objectivist setting, the collision of competing informative descriptions of the outside world is only superficially fraught with conflict. In modern Western societies, distinct communicative systems (political, economic, religious, and scientific) transfer conflict to separate spheres. The conflicts do not affect the society as a whole. We might say that society functions as a massive ship, divided into many compartments. Crisis or a break in one compartment does not affect the total buoyancy of the ship. In this sense, politics is not a special sphere, dominating over all other types of communication or social systems. And in Russia the political framework should not dominate all communication with an exclusive focus on the maintenance of social cohesion and stability. On the contrary, conflict between power and the opposition, or integrative and descriptive communication strategies will galvanize, but does not destroy society. The mechanism for the selection of successful positions is their public presentation.

The key marker of modernity is the transformation of traditional communication and related communication technologies. These kinds of communication technologies have at least two social and technological components: one motivates integration and provides cohesive behavior, and the other offers informative descriptions of the external world. It is the second that involves publicity and rejects secrecy and prohibitions on communication.

### **A case study: Observations of the second-order in the Russian electoral process. Fieldwork**

In the present state of Russian society, there exist two communication technologies: the object-informative and the consensus-motivative. Their collision can be seen in the recent parliamentary and presidential elections.

The Russian election situation is significantly different from that of Western societies. In modern Western societies, the task of controlling and observing is governed by automatic object-informative technology (technical in the true sense of the word), where the influence of consent-based communication is reduced to zero. In other words, agreement on the results of monitoring (controlling) the electoral process is achieved automatically, and does not require the introduction of additional means of surveillance. Information coming from the electoral commissions necessarily ensures a consensus in the discussion of the election results.

By contrast, in Russia (a transitional country) the function of surveillance or electoral control is purposely differentiated (Territorial Election Commission, Municipal Election Commission, and Precinct Election Commission) according to competing communicative systems, each of which implements its own communicative technology and its own second-order observations (observation of the observer).

Consensus-building communicative technology (monitoring of the observation of the electoral commissions) is implemented by the apparatus of the ruling party. Informative-object communicative technology is realized by a number of independent institutions (the association *Golos* [Voice], *Grazhdanin-Nabliudatel'* [Citizen Observer], *Liga izbiratelei* [League of Voters], and others).

The author of this article was personally involved in the implementation of the second type of communication technology as a precinct election commission member with an advisory vote at the voting location number 2553 in the precinct of Novo-Peredelkino, Moscow (school number 1467). This polling station gained notoriety because the votes cast in favor of the United Russia party greatly exceeded those in the neighboring areas.



The main type of social technology implemented in the 2012 presidential elections can be defined as a reduction of impersonal communication relations. (There was a shift from generalized, symbolic, and binary media to *face-to-face* relations, which presupposes a communicative agreement, depending on personal relationships, preferences, and dependence on hierarchies). 300

Among these media in contemporary electoral communication are the personal reports of voters as presented in the form of lists in voter books. In turn, the ballot is a binary code (or medium form) of selective communication receiving basically two values (one negative and one positive).<sup>9</sup> In today's modern Western society there are specific, generalized symbolic media that feign "objective" or informative-meaningful symbolic representation of a specific structure of interests (and to some extent social structure) of a given society. 305

Practically, the specific social technology of reducing object-oriented observation in favor of face-to-face relations was realized as follows. Within the Precinct Election Commission a cohesive core was composed of people of interrelated personal connections and job dependency. While members of the commission from political parties and independent members were excluded on a variety of (arbitrary personal) grounds. 310 315

The second type of reduction of the electoral process toward face-to-face communications was the compiling of an additional lists of people whose jobs allegedly required uninterrupted job cycles. As a rule, this group was composed of people personally known to the members of the Precinct Election Commission or who consented under personal pressure by the authorities to take part in voting outside their electoral districts. According to the Precinct Election Commission, these individuals were unable to vote at their designated districts due to reasons of employment. The number of such jobs that required an uninterrupted work cycle suddenly increased tenfold within two months (from the December elections of the State Duma). Here a third type of communication technology was implemented, which we can call the "subjectivization" of the electoral process. This was the case with the so-called absentee ballots. Thanks to this Russian *know-how* (oriented toward autonomous communication media) the objective flow of electoral communication was augmented with a variable of a personal nature, the specific situation of the individual who for personal reasons is unable to attend the designated polling station on election day. 320 325 330

Simultaneously, independent and party observers tried to implement object-informative communication technologies and the corresponding type of monitoring focused on "objective" media communication—the actual personal (passport) data in the electoral lists. This was the attempt 335

to monitor compliance with the passport data in the voter books. However, the chairman of the Precinct Election Commission made a personal decision to prohibit checking voters' passports. Thus, voters who were allegedly personally recruited to participate in particular districts were allowed to cast their ballots. Needless to say the chairman of the Commission represented the "traditionalist" position of "secrecy" regarding the personal information of the voters. 340

The technology of reducing the objectively formalized electoral process to a form of face-to-face communication was also expressed by the personal intimidation of Precinct Election Commission observers by the authorities. 345

It may be noted that an important factor of the objectification of face-to-face communication and a return to the object-informative-oriented modus was the presence of a new type of communication, audiovisual recording. This new means of communication "objectified" the process by synchronizing events in the real-time dimension of communication and precise localization of communicative events at a given point of space-time, which significantly limited opportunities for personal arbitrariness with personal-collective communication. 350

In general, with regard to electoral technologies, the object-oriented dimension of communication and its spatial and temporal dimension are mutually dependent on each other, while the collective-personal dimension (its arbitrarily set values and meanings, dependence on variables such as personal pressure and group coercion) demonstrated some autonomy and was opposed to the other two. 355

## **Conclusion** 360

Based on the field data, we have shown the underdevelopment and lack of independence of electoral communications, which have yet to mature (differentiate) into a communication system with its own binary schematizations and distinct media observations. This is reflected in the clash of two fundamentally different types of communication technologies, those that are oriented toward consensus building and those that are oriented toward an object description of the electoral process. 365

A key feature dominating the motive-integrative form of communication technology is the reduction of electoral communication to face-to-face communication (private retaining of those involved in the process, private pressure, and recruitment of allies), as well as tabooing "dangerous" data and excluding "compromised" information from the public sphere. 370

However, this study can also yield a different interpretation. For instance, we may conclude that the current Russian electoral system has no properly



functioning social technologies, but rather functions based on ideologically driven social practices, which are based not on scientific research, but on traditional and authoritarian ways of social management, which are nevertheless as effective today as they were in the past. However, the fact that they cause such social disturbance as a result of their dubious legal nature serves as the basis for their rejection and dying off in the near future.

## Notes

1. See N. Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997) [English translation: *Theory of Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)]. For some versions of this approach in Russia see I.T. Kasavin, "Epistemology Communications Strength and Weakness Analytical Optimism," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2014, no. 7, pp. 39–49; I.T. Kasavin, "David Hume. Paradoxes of Knowledge," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2011, no. 3, pp. 157–71; Iu.A. Antonovskii, "Understanding and Consensus in Scientific Communication," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2015, no. 2, pp. 45–57; A.Iu. Antonovskii, R. Barash, et al., "A Systematic Theoretical Approach to the Explanation of Social Reality. Philosophical or Sociological Methodology?" *Voprosy filosofii*, 2016, no. 1, pp. 17–42.

2. See W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, 1922).

3. See G. Zaller, *Proiskhozhdenie i priroda obshchestvennogo mneniia* (FOM, 2004).

4. See P. Champagne, *Faire l'opinion. Le nouveau jeu politique* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1990).

5. Zaller, *Proiskhozhdenie i priroda obshchestvennogo mneniia*, p. 40.

6. If "special news programs or newspaper articles provided the least opportunity for in-depth coverage of the issues, people would not read them ... people do not read and do not carefully study election coverage in newspapers and magazines. The news with its deluge of specific facts was unequivocally characterized as boring and causing confusion," writes D.A. Graber in *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide* (New York, 1984). See also other psychological interpretations in this style: N.A. Kasavina, "Existential Experience as Phenomenon of Culture," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2014, no. 10, pp. 46–56; N.A. Kasavina, "Existential Experience: Experience of Its Way and Genesis of Its Structures," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2013, no. 7 pp. 63–72.

7. "Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield. Pictures of French and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them, and the professionals do not try. They think of them as, say, two hundred divisions. But Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and so if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were engaged in a personal duel. Perhaps if you could see what she sees with her mind's eye, the image in its composition might be not unlike an Eighteenth Century engraving of a great soldier. He stands there boldly unruffled and more than life

size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind. W. Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, 1922), pp. 12–13.

8. R.K. Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions," *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Illinois: Free Press, 1957). For a discussion about a Russian version of this approach see I.T. Kasavin, A.Iu. Antonovskii, L. Markova, et al., "Humanities and Social Technology (a Roundtable Discussion)," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2013, no. 9, pp. 3–30. 420

9. The voting ballot as a binary code or a form imposed on the media (collections of personal data registered in the voting books), is a functional analogue of the distinction "form/medium," implemented in other communication systems (science with the binary code of true/false, the legal system with the binary code of legal/illegal, the political system with a binary code of power/opposition, the economic system with a binary code or the communicative media of money). N. Luhmann, *Media kommunikatsii* (Moscow: Logos, 2006). Communication oriented toward isolating binaries, obviously, does not depend on personal relationships and offers other means of achieving consensus (and operationalization of conflict), rather than face-to-face communication. 425 430