

## Social Media Perspectives in Informational Society

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### Abstract

The main aspects of social media and various attempts of its interpretation are reviewed in the article. The concept, main functions of social media are highlighted, its positive and negative sides and expected tendencies of development are presented. Position of social media optimists is shared in the article according to which, functions and importance of social media is positively seen and understood despite certain resistance. The above phenomenon entirely changed the communicative paradigm of the epoch which became a reason for significant social transformation, on its part. In particular, engagement of citizens in social-political processes, social awareness and level of democracy sharply increased which predetermined significant expansion of area of opportunities of an individual.

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**Keywords:** Informational society, social media, social network, social media optimists and pessimists

### Introduction

The new informational and communication technologies have introduced rather new standards of public life. Internet became the main basis upon which the main aspects of social development are based. Therefore, it is the reference point where fundamental changes were well identified not only in terms of communications, but also in the form of the entire communication paradigm change. It exerted a great influence on social and political life, introduced new symbols, concepts and meanings which became a part of the everyday life.

The concept of informational society is not the sole concept describing a new stage of social development in modern social philosophy and sociology. The following concepts are used to characterize the state of the modern society: "post-industrial society", "knowledge society", "post-bourgeois society", "technological society", "post-market society", "digital society", "network society", etc. Such terminological variety is explained by a qualitatively new reality as it represents a significant change of political, economic, social and cultural life of society which is based on increase of

significance of informational capital and intellectual activities and making them the main style of social life.

One of the most significant phenomena which accompanies formation of informational society is development of social media.

The purpose of this article is to show the main aspects of social media, outline the concepts and functions, present its positive and negative sides and understand the expected tendencies of development.

There are many definitions of social media. Regardless of the fact that the above definitions focus on various aspects of social media, they are not contradictory and mostly express its diversity.

According to Webster's dictionary, social media is forms of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos) (23).

Apart from this general definition of social media, we can outline its various features which are mainly accentuated by the above media researchers. For example, in the opinion of Heidi Cohen, social media covers a wide range of content: including videos, audio, photography, PDF, PowerPoint. Sharing by e-mail and through the social network is possible within the framework of one or several platforms of social media. This allows users to create, comment and generally get involved in social networking, increases information dissemination speed and the wide range, provides opportunity of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication. It enables communication both asynchronously and synchronously in real time, using wide means of network access, telephones, computers etc. (22)

Part of researchers accentuates effectiveness of using social media in marketing and discusses its aspects within this context, as dissemination of business idea, brand creation, communication with customers etc. became easier by means of the social media.

There are various perceptions, various interpretations of the issue in connection with the social media aspects and they are established in the form of ideas of the "new media optimist" and "pessimist" researchers. Both part of researchers have rather strong arguments and none of them can be ignored, however, it should be mentioned from the beginning that the arguments regarding the positive influence of social media are stronger.

One of the most significant aspects of social media is that it allows disseminating the news faster than the traditional means of communication, radio and TV, could manage. Therefore, development of social media made essential changes to the understanding of the journalist and consumer, significantly changed the journalistic process common for the traditional media. A journalist is not associated only with person having education any

more. So-called "civil journalism" was developed where any citizen connected to the Internet has an opportunity to express his/her opinions and disseminate information. A journalist acquired a wider meaning. Social media helps to unite the people who possess information and allows the consumer to be available for the target audience everywhere and always. On the other hand, recipient of information is not a passive object as well, but a feedback is established between the issuer and recipient of information by means of social media. The process of communication becomes interactive and the consumer personally becomes a creator and disseminator of new information in this process.

Social media researcher Glenn Reynolds, the author of the book "An Army of Davids" considers that while the power was in the hands of few professionals earlier, now the power is in the hands of many inexperienced people, beginners. This is the area where news can be created by everybody (the name of the book, "An Army of Davids" also originates from here). In his opinion, bloggers look like David who fights with the goliath media (i.e. traditional media) (14). Significant part of researchers considers that the above events raised social awareness and made a qualitative change in the process of communication.

Frank Webster provides a different interpretation of this process. In his opinion, unawareness of social issues by many people under modern conditions is caused by the fact that media is oriented at info-entertaining which is even compared to fast food outlets in terms that as fast food outlets offer food of low quality and harmful for health to consumers, the same does the modern media. As a result, the audience which finds it difficult to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy information from this "menu", is forced to rely on images and personal features when making significant decisions (19).

Social media enthusiasts do not agree with this opinion. In their opinion, social networks are not intended only for entertainment. This is a place where one can study social norms, interaction, narratives, personal and group stories etc.

One of the significant signs which positively differentiates the new media from traditional media is the function of the fastest social mobilization of social media which became particularly stronger after creation of Twitter. A number of examples may be provided to illustrate how the fast and effective mobilization of society occurred through it. It is effective means for stimulation of civil activism of population even in the case when the authoritarian regime imposes restriction on other means of communication. It is far more difficult to control Internet activism. Accordingly, activist networks may put the most significant problems for society on the agenda through the Internet and urge political actors to accentuate them. Therefore,

social media optimists concentrate on its function - to oppose the monopolistic possession of power of the political elite over means of communication by which citizen-based democracy is facilitated.

However, this opinion also has opponents. One of the significant problems when considering the information disseminated through social media is that differentiation between rumors and facts may be vague which may create real problems in terms of reliability of information. This, on its part could cause dissemination of wrong information and misleading the society.

Matthew Hindman provides data that majority of people who use the new media to receive information, visit primarily several webpages. Therefore, according to him, despite the excess of information, it cannot be directly correlated with increase of the level of democracy. Moreover, according to some researchers, the new media may even cause weakening of democracy because "citizen journalists" disseminate much unchecked information. (4) Social media researcher Andrew Keen asks a rhetoric question to describe this process – "When everybody is an author, who can be trusted?!" (4, 36).

Michel Foucault used to say prior to development of social networks that the worldwide web creates a certain masked panopticon because the world citizens have brought the spy ears of the state in their homes and it is possible that the wires through which they enter information into our homes can likewise take the information from our house and bring it to other concerned people (11). This threat was intensified under the conditions of development of information technologies and there have been many cases of surveillance and blackmail of citizens and later it is circulated through the social media. This event is demonstrated in such an acute form sometimes that even causes fundamental social-political changes in the society.

There are different opinions among researchers on the role of social media in acquisition of social capital. According to some of them, social media has a favourable instrument of acquiring and maintaining of social capital which is demonstrated in the ability of transformation of social life of the individual as it facilitates connection of people, giving an impetus to their relations and self-realization. Such actions of users have both a rational and emotional meaning. Rational because here the "user" is allowed to "sell" himself/herself to potential employer, position himself/herself as a qualified person interesting for society which will result in increasing one's social capital. Accordingly, apart from rational reasons, self-representation in the Internet may have emotional reasons which also serve self-affirmation. Despite the above positive aspects, social network as the bearer of function of definite facilitator of social relations has its opponents who first of all focus on the virtuality, excessive convenience and flexibility of these

relations. It strongly differs from real social relations which require development of other skills. According to Zygmunt Bauman, "But it's so easy to add or remove friends on the internet that people fail to learn the real social skills, which you need when you go to the street, when you go to your workplace, where you find lots of people who you need to enter into sensible interaction with". (20)

One more important aspect of social media is its function to control social norms. This can be considered as a positive characteristic, however, the issue is related to violation of privacy which on its part, has negative consequences because individual becomes more unprotected from various rumors and disclosure of details of personal life.

In the opinion of one of the researchers, Daniel J. Solove, in big cities where anonymity and privacy are at the high level, society is not able to control norms and Internet performs this function. But at the same time, it has a certain negative side which means that the so-called "Internet shame" is very acute sometimes and sometimes it becomes a "digital burden of the respective person and it becomes impossible to withdraw or change it. (16)

Critics consider violation of privacy as the most significant problem of social media. In particular, private life of Internet users is less protected. The most interesting thing is that individuals often disclose this information themselves which afterwards becomes damaging for them. Susan Barnes introduced a term "privacy paradox" to describe the phenomenon that people care about protection of their privacy and at the same time, disclose much detailed information in the social network themselves. This threat deserves great attention from the media, while social networks offer more and more functions to user for protection of their privacy. Users have to maintain balance between demand of privacy and the desire to make an impression (18).

There is a variety of opinions regarding the prospects of development of social media and its role. However, there is an opinion that its importance will be increased together with development of technologies and this will be demonstrated in various social areas. The level of internetization of this or that country should also be taken into consideration. In this context, opinion of Umberto Eco on the new two-class society is important where in his opinion, the society is divided into "users" and "non-users". The first includes young, educated, high-income professionals from the most prestigious fields and the other includes politically and socially passive, less educated and lower-income people interested in mass culture products which are not necessarily older (17).

Results of the quantitative research on social media conducted in Georgia in 2013 to a certain extent summarize and reflect basic theoretical narratives which are outlined in the scientific literature. In particular, several

positive aspects were outlined as a result of the research which were expected by respondents: raising public awareness - 28.5%, increase of democracy of the country under the conditions of information abundance - 24.6%, expansion of social networking - 22%, increase of the role of social networks in civil activities - 19%.

The following basic factors were outlined among negative prospects: replacement of virtual reality by actual reality - 32%, stealing and misuse of personal information - 28%, use of social media as a political control instrument - 17%, difficulty of identification of reliable information under the conditions of information abundance - 17%. (1, 145-147).

### **Conclusion:**

To summarize, we may see that both positive and negative results are common for development of social media. Researchers may be divided depending on which results they give advantage to. Therefore, there are categories of "optimists" and "pessimists" among researchers.

Opinions of both groups can be briefly summarized. According to "optimists", development of social media has the following results:

- 1) increases civic engagement and accordingly, level of democracy;
- 2) intensification of relations between various groups;
- 3) facilitation of self-representation of individuals and accumulation of social capital;
- 4) increase of international attention to local problems becomes easier;
- 5) facilitation of economic development and modernization.

According to "pessimists", development of social media has the following results:

- 1) Democracy of social media is only illusive and the situation is not changed actually. On the contrary, the state may use social media for surveillance on its citizens;
- 2) Relations of social groups formed by the Internet are very weak;
- 3) Social media is available to comparatively small groups of citizens as compared to traditional media. Therefore, researchers talk about "digital inequality", "digital controversy";
- 4) Privacy of individuals is violated by means of social media;
- 5) A threat of mixing reality with virtuality occurs.

In my opinion, positive functions and characteristics of social media are much more substantial rather than negative. Therefore, formation of social media should be reviewed as the fact which became the basis of significant changes which is expressed by increase of the social engagement and level of democracy. Accordingly, today an individual is not limited by a specific social environment and the area of self-affirmation is significantly extended which gives the individual a chance to realize his/her skills to the

maximum extent possible. Also, development of social media caused elimination of the problems common for the traditional media. Today we have an irreversible increase of influence of social media all over the world, including Georgia. Increase of influence of social media in the Georgian reality is also predetermined by the fact that the traditional media cannot ensure proper public awareness. Therefore, social media which is free from various types of influences, opens the discussion space which is avoided by the traditional media.

Certainly, all significant changes do not have only the positive side, however, it should also be considered that the humankind cannot refuse to use those fundamental goods. This would be the same as to refuse using cars in the fear of significant increase of victims as a result of car accidents. It is certain that the "new media" has caused new problems, for example, the fact that recently terrorists have tried to promote their ideas and recruit new members mainly through the Internet which is done rather successfully and yet the civilized world is powerless before them. However, the main mistake of social media sceptics is that they pay less attention to the basis of changes and pay the entire attention to negative details which regardless of their reasonableness cannot outweigh the goods brought by development of social media. The task of researchers should be to study and analyze the problems created as a result of development of social media but the positive significance of the factor determining social media as fundamental changes is evident as compared to its negative aspects.

Due to the above mentioned reasons, we should positively evaluate the prospects of social media development in Georgia which will become more "social" because as the country becomes internetized, more and more users will be engaged in it. Accordingly, influence of social media on social-political processes will increase more. Certainly, it should be mentioned that Georgia also cannot avoid the accompanying problems which causes social media development. Therefore, proper research of this issue is important for reduction of possible negative results.

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