Russian Educational Communities In Social Networks As An Alternative Way To Exchange Knowledge

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Abstract

In 2021, humanity can hardly deny the importance of digitalization in the education area. While the pandemic ruined the familiar landscape of teaching, interest in remote ways to exchange knowledge has increased significantly. This article is an attempt to observe one of the popular phenomenon in Russia — educational communities in social networks. All over the world, educational organizations use social media as an additional tool for communication between teachers and students. However, in Russia, it can be considered a separate educational method. To start a discussion on this topic, I analyzed groups in the Russian social network Vkontakte (a Russian analogue of Facebook), considered the reasons for the popularity of this phenomenon, and compared it with other ways of information exchange. There is a theory that social media can help raise the level of education in remote regions and among groups that traditionally have a low level of access to education. Although the technological capabilities of social networks are limited, this is compensated by a larger audience and a low entry threshold. Further study of educational online public communities in social networks in the context of their impact on the dissemination of knowledge among mass audiences can help improve the overall level of education in many countries.

Keywords: education, social network, educational communities, Vkontakte, Russia

1. Introduction

In 2021, humanity can hardly deny the importance of digitalization in the education area. While the pandemic ruined the familiar landscape of teaching, specialists started to practice different ways of remote education. In July 2020, the Networked Learning Editorial Collective (NLEC) published a paper named 'Networked Learning: Inviting Redefinition'. The authors observed the shifts in the definition of Networked Learning and shared the proposal to open up a discussion about "the place of critical and emancipatory dispositions within current descriptions of networked learning. In proposing an updated characterization of the essence of networked learning, the paper suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to collective social projects that require both inquiry and action" (Networked Learning: Inviting Redefinition, 2020).

These ideas about new ways of understanding what network learning is can be related to the increasingly popular phenomenon in Russia — educational communities in social

networks. This article is an attempt to observe this type of educational process and show how it is represented in Russia.

2. Background

During the last few decades, people produced a lot of different ways to get an education online.

One of the most popular is massive open online courses or MOOC. It is considered that the first course which then was named MOOC was made in 2008 (Matt Crosslin, 2018). Nowadays, online courses are not something unusual. In 2021, almost every educational institution offers courses on one of the most popular platforms like Coursera, EDX, Skillshare, or Skillfactory, Stepik, and others in the Russian Federation. Noticeably, most of these courses look similar and consist of videos, texts, and tests to check participants' results.

However, the first MOOCs were designed differently. For instance, the authors of the first course — George Siemens and Stephen Downes — wanted it to be an experiment in a new learning theory which they called connectivism (Kovanovićet al., 2015). The idea was to shift the traditional approach when the instructor is the centre of the course and give students more freedom to choose their own way of learning. The aim was to help people use networking and social connections, as well as technology as a part of the sense-making process of learning (Siemens, 2005). This context did not last long, as a new format of MOOC appeared a few years later (Matt Crosslin, 2018).

Which of the following formats of online courses are more effective in terms of reaching people's educational goals nowadays? Matt Crosslin in his qualitative research 'Exploring self-regulated learning choices in a customizable learning pathway MOOC' (2018) tried to figure it out. After the interviews with participants, he concluded that each student of online courses is unique and needs to choose their pathway of education. It gives us an idea to take a closer look at the past and think about the necessity to bring back the ability to customize learning experiences instead of making more and more similar online educational products. This inference can be an explanation of the popularity of online educational communities we are going to talk about in this article.

The main question is whether content consumption in social networks is an educational process. According to the definition by Networked Learning Editorial Collective, it is. In 2020, they concluded that "networked learning involves processes of collaborative, cooperative and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action, underpinned by trusting relationships, motivated by a sense of shared challenge and enabled by convivial technologies" (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020). Another definition of Networked Learning, is "the bringing together of learners via personal computers linked to the Internet, with a focus on them working as a learning community, sharing resources, knowledge, experience and responsibility through reciprocal collaborative learning" (McConnell in NLEC, 2020, p. 4).

Thus, learning online does not demand the presence of the usual roles of teachers and students. We can talk about collective spontaneous communities which aim to share and produce knowledge. In this context, communication of certain groups of users on different social media platforms as Facebook, Instagram, or Vkontakte (a Russian analogue of Facebook) can be discussed as networked learning.

There are several reasons why people participate in such activities instead of or in addition to more traditional face-to-face, online or blended educational processes with a key figure of a teacher.

1. Free access. Everybody with an Internet connection and the ability to use a computer or smartphone can subscribe to social media groups, leave a comment or read an article.

2. An opportunity to control the image of an online personality. The individuals can control their representation. They could behave in a certain way, choose certain photographs as their profile pictures, act without fear of being judged because of appearance or social status. "Technology potentiates active diverse communities of learners who may be judged more on the content of their contributions than on the colour of their skin, socioeconomic status, or other features" (Schrader, 2015).

3. Freedom from a social pressure environment. Individuals who are self-conscious about their voice, accent, language skills, or inability to interrupt can get a better chance to interject their thoughts (Arasaratnam-Smith, L. A., & Northcote, M., 2017).

4. Wide circle of possible communication. On social media, a person can send a message to every person, even a prominent one.

Nowadays, social media themselves encourage users to produce educational and useful content. For instance, in 2019, TikTok launched a section named TikTok University. Social media offers the users to produce videos about art, science, language, design, and other areas.

3. Analysis of Russian educational communities on social media

The international agency "We are social" released a report about digital trends in the period from January 2020 to January 2021. According to the report, the Internet coverage in the Russian Federation stood at 85.0% and the number of social media users in the Russian Federation was equivalent to 67.8% of the total population. Interestingly, the average user spent more than 2 hours on social media every day.

The most popular social media are YouTube with 85.4% of internet users aged 16 to 64, Vkontakte with 78.0%, WhatsApp with 75,8%, and Instagram with 61.2% (Datareportal, 2021). In this article, I am going to observe educational online communities in Vkontakte.

Can we divide all educational communities in this social media into specific groups? To answer this question I analyze the list of communities offered by a popular media about education in Russia, called "Мел" (Maksimov E., 2016). The online magazine listed 14 groups on social media Vkontakte where readers can find content about science, linguistics,

and humanities. The author of the article wrote: "Vkontakte is not a platform only for memes and silly selfies but a place for enlightenment". Among 14 given online resources we can distinguish the following categories:

1. groups existing only in social networks where the content is produced by a limited group of people: 8 groups, including "Чайная ложка живописи"/"Chaynaya lozhka zhivopisi" (more than 79,000 subscribers), "ТЕАТР. Спектакли. Новости культуры"/"TEATR. Spektakli. Novosti kultury" (more than 84,000 subscribers), "Книги/Аудиокниги"/"Knigi/Audioknigi" (more than 654,000 subscribers), "Daily English: английский по фильмам"/"Daily English: angliyskiy po filmam" (more than 576,000 subscribers), "Образовач"/"Obrazovach" (more than 448,000 subscribers), "ИСТОРИЯ МОДЫ"/"ISTORIYA MODY" (more than 310,000 subscribers), "Философия материализма"/"Filosofiya materialisma" (more than 25,000 subscribers), "Английский как по нотам"/"Angliyskiy kak po notam" (more than 116,000 subscribers);

All of these communities are united by the fact that their creators are a person or a group of people who wanted to share information on a particular topic with a wide audience. There are groups on the list where moderators publish screenshots from films with quotes for people who study English. There are public communities where creators share collections of books on different topics or talk about paintings. Perhaps the most interesting example is the public "Образовач"/"Obrazovach". Its creator is a journalist Andrey Konyaev, former editor-in-chief of the "Science and Technology" section on the website lenta.ru. For political reasons, he left this media in 2014, and he created this public on the Vkontakte social network afterwards. The peculiarity of "Образовач" is its focus on a very wide audience. The team of authors does not only publish scientific news but also draws original images for each of them — funny comics or memes. Thanks to this, news that might seem complicated to a large number of unprepared readers attracts their attention and is perceived easier. This community was founded in 2014, and in 2015 the scientific media N+1 was created on its basis. This is a fairly popular example of how educational communities in social networks are transformed into mass media or even online courses in the Russian Federation. A few more examples are in the following category.

2. groups created for the distribution of articles from the website where the content is produced by a limited group of people: 3 groups, including "VertDider" (more than 310,000 subscribers), "КиберЛенинка"/"CyberLeninka" (more than 302,000 subscribers), "The Batrachospermum Magazine" (more than 65,000 subscribers);

"VertDider" is a non-profit project engaged in the voice-over of popular science videos. It appeared in 2013 on Vkontakte, after that the organizers created communities on other social networks and made a website. Students of the Faculty of Biology of Moscow State University created "The Batrachospermum Magazine" as a printed university's newspaper. Afterwards, they began to share knowledge with a wide audience on Vkontakte.

"КиберЛенинка"/"CyberLeninka" is a Russian scientific electronic library built on the principle of open science. On the Vkontakte, the authors do not just talk about the project, but

publish scientific articles, adapting their announcements to a wide audience using enticing illustrations and intriguing headlines. In the comments to the posts, people express their opinions and communicate.

3. groups existing only in social networks where the content can be produced by an unlimited number of subscribers: 2 groups, including "Совмод"/"Sovmod" (more than 74,000 subscribers), "Агит-история"/"Agit-History" (more than 38,000 subscribers);

In these communities, people share information by themselves. They publish their photos of postcards, posters, images of the architecture of the modernist period, and some historical facts. Administrators act as moderators, deciding which content should be published.

4. groups created for the distribution of articles from the website where the content can be produced   by   an   unlimited   number   of   subscribers: 1   group,   named "ПостНаука"/"PostNauka" (more than 489,000 subscribers).

Unlike the several groups listed above, the project on the popularization of science "ПостНаука"/"PostNauka" appeared in the format of a website. However, the main communication with the audience still takes place on social networks: the site has articles, videos, courses, but there are no comments and interaction opportunities for users. Whereas Vkontakte is developing heated discussions under almost every post, and there are more than 300 messages in the discussion with the proposal of topics and authors.

In the given list, communities of educational companies are not represented. However, it is a significant part of the educational social media landscape. Online courses and different enterprises often share videos of lectures, guides, and posts for free to attract new customers or employees. Examples of such publics are "Академия Яндекса"/"Akademiya Yandexa" (more than 72,000 subscribers), "Skillbox: образовательная платформа"/"Skillbox: obrazovatelnaya platforma" (more than 398,000 subscribers), "Geekbrains" (more than 225,000 subscribers), "Журнал «Код»"/"Zhurnal Kod" (more than 121,000 subscribers). All these communities can be assigned to the second category: groups created for the distribution of articles from the website, content is produced by a limited group of people.

Communities of educational companies are most similar to online courses. While in the projects listed above the main emphasis is on the dissemination of information and might be more similar to the work of the media, in these communities we can notice a great emphasis on interaction with the audience. For example, the "Журнал «Код»" has a whole section with tasks where subscribers can give answers in the comments, there are tests, there are step-by-step instructions for independent projects. There is a chat where people can leave questions, there are video lectures and an audio podcast. This community uses almost all formats that various online courses implement on specialized platforms.

If we search for all Vkontakte communities in the education category, we will get an outstanding figure of 876,023 public communities or 2,7% of the total number of online communities. The content published on the community pages can be very different: video lectures about frontend developments or algorithms in "Академия Яндекса"/"Akademiya

Yandexa", science news in "Образовач"/ "Obrazovach", pictures with quotes in English movies in "Daily English: английский по фильмам" /"Daily English: angliyskiy po filmam". However, all of the above helps to share knowledge and improve the overall level of education in various fields.

4. Public online communities in social networks as one of the formats of the educational process

If we take a closer look at the communities listed above, we will notice that all of them look familiar with the conventional features of the educational process. According to Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer, learning takes place when three core components: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence — interact (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, Archer, 1999). I suggest we look at the educational communities we are talking about from the point of view of compliance with these components.

Social networks' public communities have the following formats of information exchange:

— the main feed where a person can find information. Reading educational posts on social networks is a standard process of gaining knowledge. People do the same when they read textbooks or listen to a teacher at a university. It is a cognitive presence. If the content is produced by a moderator we can also talk about teaching presence.

— comments, when subscribers exchange their opinions and discuss the topic. Communication is an integral part of any educational process. It facilitates a social presence.

— forums, where subscribers can offer their themes or make some kind of common projects. This format can be compared with the seminars in the university and with homework assignments performed in a group. This part of the process also can be attributed to social presence.

— an assessment that in social networks is expressed in the number of "likes". Another feature aiming to help people to feel seen by others, a social presence.

To sum up, despite the new space for the transfer and acquisition of knowledge, which certainly has its technological limitations, the process remains quite similar. "This is true for online and face-to-face learning: both involve technology and embodied affective and social experiences. This becomes clearer when we consider learning as extending over time, beyond formally scheduled occasions" (Tim Fawns, 2008).

We know that modern students indicated that they are using social media in their own learning (Smith, 2016). However, the majority of researchers and teachers consider social networks as an opportunity for additional communication with students. When we talk about educational products for developing countries or people experiencing difficulties in accessing education, society refers to ICT (Information and Communication Technology) usually involving a large number of changes to the entire educational system. However, it has a lot of barriers like allocation of proper funds, level of teacher knowledge, government policies, and

the gap between the various sections of society (Sharma, 2003). Networked learning in social media can be an option to overcome these difficulties and make education more accessible in these regions. It allows sharing knowledge remotely, and interacting with people who reside in another country. This is one of the main advantages of this educational method, which makes it important to continue studying it.

Apart from all the benefits, we should be aware of the drawbacks of the social network education phenomenon. Such as misinformation and data biases: 'fake' news publishers posting 'fake' news stories, and often disseminating them widely using 'fake' followers (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018; Lazer et al. 2018 as cited in Ribeiro, Henrique, Benevenuto, Chakraborty, Kulshrestha, Babaei, Gummadi, 2018). This can be especially dangerous in the category of communities where subscribers themselves offer information. The moderators' efforts may not be enough to thoroughly verify its authenticity.

5. Conclusion

We observed educational communities on social networks as a particular phenomenon, analyzed the popularity of this method of obtaining information in Russia through a social media Vkontakte, and compared it to other ways of receiving education.

The aim of this article is to start a discussion about the opportunity to produce a separate educational product on social networks. There is a theory that social media can help raise the level of education in remote regions and among groups that traditionally have a low level of access to education. Although the technological capabilities of social networks are limited, this is compensated by a larger audience and a low entry threshold. Further study of educational publics in social networks in the context of their impact on the dissemination of knowledge among mass audiences can help improve the overall level of education in many countries.

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