SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES IN AMERICAN WEB-BASED DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Aim. The paper is aimed at revealing how various discourse elements characteristic of American electronic social networks facilitate the imposing social and cultural values on large audiences of their users. The goal is to find out how linguistic, cognitive, and cultural issues merge in creating new and reinforcing traditional values via web-based discourse.

Methodology. The research is based on content and context analyses.

Results. The research has revealed that American Web-based discourse incorporates the *family* as a vital life meaning. Discourse on *faith* reveals the lack of unanimity among social networks users who openly express their attitudes towards religious issues. Posts and comments on popular digital platforms demonstrate that *freedom of speech* which has long been accepted as an unshakeable achievement of American democracy is now under attack by cancel culture supporters.

Redearch implications. Research results contribute to the theory of Web-based discourse and cross-cultural communication and complement such university courses as *Communication in American social media*, and *Cross-cultural communication*.

Keywords: social media, digital platforms, cross-cultural communication, modern technologies, Faith, freedom of speech, cancel culture

СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ И КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ ЦЕННОСТИ В АМЕРИКАНСКОМ ИНТЕРНЕТ-ДИСКУРСЕ

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Аннотация

Цель работы – установить, как различные дискурсивные элементы, характерные для американских электронных социальных сетей, способствуют распространению социальных и культурных ценностей на большие аудитории их пользователей. Работа нацелена на выявление особенностей соединения языковых, когнитивных и культурных тем в создании новых и усилении традиционных ценностей в интернет-дискурсе.

Процедуры и методы. В исследовании проблемы бытования социальных и культурных ценностей в американском интернет-дискурсе были использованы контент-анализ и контекстный анализ.

Результаты. В результате исследования было установлено, что в американском веб-дискурсе *семья* имеет основополагающее для жизни американцев значение. Изучение данного дискурса обнаружило отсутствие единого взгляда на веру среди пользователей социальных сетей. Анализ постов показал, что *свободу слова*, долгое время воспринимавшуюся как незыблемое достижение американской демократии, атакуют сторонники культурной отмены.

Теоретическая и практическая значимость. Результаты исследования вносят вклад в теорию интернет-дискурса и межкультурной коммуникации и могут обогатить такие университетские курсы, как «*Интернет-лингвистика*» и «*Межкультурная коммуникация*».

Ключевые слова: социальные сети, цифровые платформы, межкультурная коммуникация, современные технологии, свобода слова, вера, культура отмены

Introduction

Not long ago social, cultural, and political issues were communicated to large audiences through newspapers, the radio, and TV. In the case of printed newspapers, the interaction between the audience and the source translating ideas and values was delayed and censored, if ever existed at all. The advent of call-in radio and TV talk made it possible to involve common people in shaping the attitudes via expressing their opinions and sharing their experiences publicly. Though the access to the audience was restricted by the editor's selection of speakers who dialed the telephone numbers of the radio station or TV program, the impact of the public on culture and civil society was quite tangible.

In contrast to traditional media, digital media from the very beginning joined informative and communicative functions. There appeared "more formats, such as disseminating news events via Twitter … commenting on politics in blogs, and accessing online-only news websites" [8, p. 35]. A wide range of digital mass media and social media has built an extensive virtual space to communicate various opinions and attitudes to large audiences without the interference of editors or other censors, the only exception being the invective language moderation. Speaking metaphorically, "everyone can publish their own thoughts without any institutionalized gatekeepers [9, p. 74]. The net of digital platforms, created by modern technologies, has bridged the virtual world and the real one and produced a revolutionary change in meaningful communication. Researchers argue that social media has become "another place in which people live, alongside their office life, home life and community life" [10, p. 7]. Statistics show that the audience of digital platform users is increasing every year, for example, in 2021 about 5% of the people on Earth used Twitter and the USA had about 77, 8 million active Twitter users[1]. According to the portal Statista, in the US over 70% of the population holds social media accounts, visiting social networks and media-sharing platforms has become "an integral part of many American internet users' daily routines"[2].

By visiting digital platforms and joining internet communities, people, first, handle their connections with their families, friends, peers, and colleagues. They are able to make comments on the statements of politicians, celebrities, social, and cultural icons, assess their significance and thus pave the way for the reinforcement of traditional values and the creation of new norms and issues. The development of new norms, rules and codes is in a permanent state of flux, because "the values of a person, social group and people are those landmarks, goals that they strive for in the process of their life" [2, c. 147]. Communication in social media encompasses both – rational and emotional elements, emotions go hand in hand with evaluation and contribute largely to media hypes, the understanding of which shifted from "political media scandal, mostly evoking emotions such as outrage and protest" to the media phenomena that "can be triggered by any kind of deep emotion" [7, p. 317].

An extensive study of global social media platforms and the prevailing genres showed that "it is the content rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matters" [10, p. 1].

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[1] Kemp S. Twitter statistics and trends. In: *DataReportal*. Available at: https://datareportal.com/essential-twitter-stats (accessed: 25.01.2022).

[2] Dixon S. Social media usage in the United States – Statistics & Facts, 2022. In: *Statista*. Available at: https://www.statista.com/topics/3196/social-media-usage-in-the-united-states/#dossierKeyfigures (accessed: 25.01.2022).

Worldwide platform access promotes global and local attitudes in a broad scope of areas ranging from individual relationships to political issues. Social media and networks in contrast to broadcasting media communicating information to large audiences, made it possible to reach groups of people different in size, possessing different political and cultural views. This niche media "is widely believed to be a source of change in political behavior and public opinion" [6, p. 482].

Since the dawn of the digital technological revolution, social media declared its mission as equipping people with the instrument and power to produce ideas and share their outlooks and attitudes. This is the way that social values are built in social media, when people seek those sources, which reflect their expectations and conform to their beliefs and standards. It has become obvious that via the users' connectivity social digital platforms modify and mold social, political, cultural norms, and traditions afresh. Digital platforms have turned into a home for seeking relations and friendship, love, and attachment. "Click-baiting strategies" [4, p. 334] support and accelerate value transformation. Nevertheless, it is undeniable, that "the real effects of technology depend upon how it is wielded. It can be used to inspire and catalyze change just as easily as it can be used in ways that are detrimental to society"[1]. Though the technology itself is value-neutral, it permeates every corner of individual and societal life and thus creates a field for value assumptions and value judgments to pop up. After some time, due to digital platforms ubiquity, these values may or may not be embedded into the set of societal norms, habits, and traditions. On the other hand, social media has become "the market places where gossip, breaking news, and media hypes spread" [7, p. 317] which are tightly linked to the so-called attention economy that "brings with it its own kind of wealth, its own class divi-

sions – stars vs. fans – and its own forms of property"[2].

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The ubiquity of digital platforms provides the opportunity for social institutions and individuals to express their attitudes, share them with large audience of the net users, and eventually shape new societal values and reshape the traditional ones. The increasing number of American users of social networking platforms and high digital circulation of American newspapers have turned the problem of the attitudes and societal values language manifestation into a challenge for linguistic research. Some scholars argue that the study of social interaction represented in language and discourse is of crucial importance for contemporary linguistics [3, c. 96]. The problem dealt with in this paper is how linguistic means, social and cultural contexts "forge a preferable turn of public mindset" [5, c. 44]. The study suggests answers to the questions "What issues do Americans frequently discuss in Web-based discourse?" and "How conceptually integrated are American participants of Web-based discourse?"

Material and Methods of Research

The material of the research was borrowed from digital platforms Twitter and YouTube. The methods used in this study include content analysis, descriptive method, linguocultural analysis, lexical and semantic analysis, and interpretive analysis.

Discussions

According to the survey conducted by Pew Research Center in November 2021, *family* is the source of meaning for most Americans, no matter, what their ideological background is or whatever political views

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1   Vogels E. A., Rainie L., Anderson J. Tech is (just) a tool. In: *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/06/30/tech-is-just-a-tool/ (accessed: 22.01.2022).

2   Goldhaber M. H. The Attention Economy and the Net. In: *First Monday*, 1997, vol. 2, no. 4–7. Available at: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/519/440 (accessed: 22.01.2022).

they have[1]. It is noteworthy that social media accounts of leading American politicians begin with words about their family and marital status following the information about their official job or position, for example, President Biden writes on his Twitter:

a) *Husband to @DrBiden, proud father and grandfather*[2].

Vice President Kamala Harris has the following in the introduction on her Twitter account:

b) *Wife to the first @SecondGentleman. Momala. Auntie*[3].

Posts on social media give evidence of American striving for family tenacity. In 2020 during the election campaign Hunter Biden, second son of the current US President was accused of having suspicious relations with some business people in Ukraine. It was a harsh time for Hunter Biden's family. To support him, Naomi Biden, his daughter, published the following post on Twitter:

c) *Though the whole world knows his name, no one knows who he is. … the truth of a man filled with love, integrity, and human struggles*[4].

Social media is a place where people talk about the importance of family ties and family heritage, and share their family stories. Naomi Biden in a few lines in her Twitter account told the followers about the tragedy that fell upon Joe Biden's family when his first wife and an infant daughter died in a car crash and the early death of Beau Biden,

Naomi's uncle. Her post creates a profoundly positive image of her father and the whole family:

d) *He and Beau were one. One heart, one soul, one mind. They grew up with the weight of knowing that each day they lived was a day that their sister, my namesake, and their mother lost*[5].

Such words as *the truth*, *integrity*, *heart*, *love*, *soul* are bound to get imprinted in the mind of N. Biden's followers and make the scandal less important and even negligible, because these words are acknowledged as the salient linguistic representation of the *family*.

Faith is among the topical issues in American social media. Its discussion runs as a two-way street: statements coming from the representatives of social institutions and comments coming from ordinary users. Attitudes to Faith have become a kind of litmus test for how politicians and common Americans are able to tackle social issues caused by conflicting political interests, goals and values [1]. Faith is represented as a heterogeneous phenomenon split into various divisions, which reflect the diversity of American society and social media users. Looking back at the two years of Covid-19 survival, Vice President Kamala Harris wrote on her Twitter account:

e) *Our faith has been tested. But it is that same faith – our faith in God, our faith in humanity, and our faith in what is possible – it is that same faith that has seen us through and helped us to see the light in one another*[6].

Kamala Harris's post spreads over various outlooks on life – religion, relationships, humanity, and politics. Being conceptually multi-tiered, it is likely to provoke different comments, which can be gathered into the four groups: 1) sharing the meaning of the post, 2) assessment of Kamala Harris as

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1. Silver L., Van Kessel P. Both Republicans and Democrats prioritize family, but they differ over other sources of meaning in life. In: *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/11/22/both-republicans-and-democrats-prioritize-family-but-they-differ-over-other-sources-of-meaning-in-life/ (accessed: 22.01.2022).

2. President Biden. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/POTUS (accessed: 01.02.2022).

3. Kamala Harris. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris (accessed: 01.02.2022).

4. Naomi Biden. Though the whole word knows his name, no one knows who he is. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/NaomiBiden/status/1308823998415933440?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E13088239984159334 (accessed: 01.02.2022).

5. Naomi Biden. Though the whole word knows his name, no one knows who he is. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/NaomiBiden/status/1308823998415933440?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E13088239984159334 (accessed: 01.02.2022).

6. Kamala Harris. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris (accessed: 01.02.2022).

a politician, 3) attitude to faith, 4) political opinion. The words and phrases *compassion*, *acknowledgment*, *grievers*, *blessing*, *positive thoughts*, *beautiful said*, etc. employed in the comments serve as the evidence of sharing the post's meaning.

Comments that assess Kamilla Harris as a politician dwell upon the role of the church in American society. Users resent politicians, including the current Vice President, mentioning God and faith without reason as a kind of speech embellishment:

f) *How I long for politicians, especially in a country with such a healthy separation of church and state, to stop talking about God, and faith, belief without reason, like it's a good thing.*

g) *God? We have watched politicians such as yourself systematically X God out*[1].

Some users see the incongruity between the public role of the Vice President and her appeals to religious issues, and do not believe Kamala Harris as a politician:

h) *keep religion out of your role as VP.*

i) *I wish your posts wouldn't mention religion.*

j) *No faith in you or your administration whatsoever. Your nothing but empty words.*

k) *Lie like a big old dog*[2].

Moreover, Twitter users claim that this statement enhances the social and cultural divide existing in contemporary American society:

l) *"Our faith in God" suggests that nonreligious people don't matter in this country.*

m) *There are millions of atheists in this country. There is no "our" faith in a god when speaking for the people of this country. Don't exclude us, VP Harris*[3].

Out of 54 relevant posts only five contained a positive assessment of Kamala Harris as Vice President which is metaphorically reflected, for example,

n) *thank you madam vice president for having Americans at heart*[4].

The analysed posts comprise a controversial and hot issue because, as the survey conducted in October 2021, shows more and more Americans support the separation of church and state which goes hand in hand with The First Amendment to the United States Constitution[5]. Comments on Kamala Harris' post reflect that religion and faith are not universally accepted values in American society, and easily accessed digital platforms provide ordinary people with the opportunity to make their voice heard even if their opinion differs from the institutionalized one. Thus, users, who oppose the separation of church and state, write the following:

o) *Without faith we are dead. Faith faith faith. God is working for our good.*

p) *More and more Americans don't believe in God any more. Our Country is falling apart without God's guidance*[6].

Opposite views are expressed by such clichés as *there is no God*, *I don't believe in all that fairly tale,* etc.

The report *The conditions that enable meaning* published by Pew Research Center in November 2021 demonstrate that freedom and independence are among the top five sources of life meaning[7]. The report contains a reference to the statement made by one American respondent:

q) *meaning comes from "freedom of religion and freedom of the free exchange of ideas*[8].

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[1]　Kamala Harris. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris (accessed: 01.02.2022).

[2]　Ibid.

[3]　Kamala Harris. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris (accessed: 01.02.2022).

[4]　Ibid.

[5]　In U.S., Far More Support Than Oppose Separation of Church and State. In: *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewforum.org/2021/10/28/in-u-s-far-more-support-than-oppose-separation-of-church-and-state/ (accessed: 01.02.2022).

[6]　Kamala Harris. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris (accessed 01.02.2022).

[7]　Vogels E. A., Anderson M.,Porteus M., et al. Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment. In: *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/ (accessed: 28.01.2022).

[8]　Ibid.

It might seem surprising that some respondents tied freedom and family into a single value:

r) *To be able to live a life with the freedom to choose and to take care of family*[1].

"The Internet was most often viewed as a means of democratizing public institutions, and an instrument for the implementation and protection of human rights and freedoms" [11, p. 548]. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects freedom of speech, however, some people think, it is under threat nowadays. Contemporary social media has drastically changed the way people challenge others' views and criticize them. Easy access to digital platforms brought about the social practice called *cancel culture*. Social networks grasped the term *cancel culture* after it appeared in the TV show *Love and Hip-Hop* in 2014. A young man in the show decides to be through with his girlfriend because she is pregnant and tells her about his decision: "you are cancelled"! Very soon the phrase lost connection with the show, turned into a catchphrase, and became a name of social media boycotting any person, especially a celebrity or public figure if some of the social network users consider their words or actions contradicting or disrupting rules and norms of tolerance and political correctness. The majority of Americans (about 49%) asked by Pew Research Center in September 2020 to share what they understand by *cancel culture* defined it as "actions taken to hold others accountable". Nevertheless, about 14% of respondents believe cancel culture is "censorship of speech or history", which "[is] trying to silence someone that does not have the same belief as you", "it's the rewriting of history to make people comfortable by ignoring facts"[2].

Sharon Stone, a famous American actress talking on a popular *Just Jenny* radio show said cancel culture is "the stupidest thing I have ever seen happen" and added "people have done so much more than one sentence"[3]. The talk appeared on a digital platform YouTube and received both positive and negative comments.

In terms of money and financial well-being, canceling a person or company results in stripping them of their income – labels stop releasing their albums, publishers postpone production of their books, and TV people stop inviting them to their shows. In 2019 Natasha Tynes, a Jordanian-American communications professional and digital writer made a post on Twitter: "When you're on your morning commute & see @wmata employee in UNIFORM eating on the train. I thought we were not allowed to eat on the train. This is unacceptable. Hope @wmata responds"[4]. It is well-known that *Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority* (WMATA) prohibits eating on Metro. Natasha Tynes posted a photo of the woman, she was black and as soon as Twitter users saw the picture, they attacked Natasha Tynes accusing her of racism. Almost immediately, *Rare Bird* publishing house announced they were "taking appropriate actions to cancel Tyne's novel *They Called Me Wyatt*"[5]. In February 2022, "ABC News suspended W. Goldberg for two weeks after she made inaccurate claims that the Holocaust was 'not related to race' "[6]. Whoopi Goldberg, one of the most famous and celebrated American actors became a target for cancel culture attackers.

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[1]   Ibid.

[2]   Vogels E. A., Anderson M., Porteus M., et al. Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment. In: *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/ (accessed: 28.01.2022).

[3]   Sharon Stone Thoughts on Cancel Culture. In: *SiriusXM : YouTube channel*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0uCmFm9h0Y&ab_channel=SiriusXM (accessed: 09.02.2022).

[4]   'Natasha Tynes wmata' search. In: *Twitter*. Available at: https://twitter.com/search?q=natasha%20tynes%20wmata&src=typed_query (accessed: 20.12.2021).

[5]   Ibid.

[6]   Whoopi Goldberg suspended from 'The View' after Holocaust comments l GMA. In: *Good morning America : YouTube channel*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF4xotY3BZ8&ab_channel=GoodMorningAmerica (accessed: 28.01.2022).

Focusing attention only on a singular word or expression is a typical characteristic of cancelling culture as a cognitive and linguistic phenomenon. In the case of Whoopi Goldberg, defenders of political correctness intentionally missed what the actress said about Holocaust: "[Hollocaust] is about men's inhumanity, … this was evil"[1]. Reluctance to analyse oral or written texts, get an insight into other person's life outlooks and desire to conform to the social and moral mainstream constitute the basis of "cancel culture" practice. People all over the world have been testing others' words and behavior since the dawn of humankind. Nowadays criticism generated by professional journalists or experts, published on pages of printed media has been pushed out by pungent comments of any Internet user, whose aim is not only to call people out to behave decently by observing rules of tolerance, but to "remove celebrity status or esteem from a person, place, or thing"[2].

Conclusion

Contemporary values shaped in modern societies, including the American one, have faced a strong challenge from web-based media, social networks being the most powerful among them. Globalization and development of the World Wide Web (WWW) have made social, political, and cultural issues spread rapidly and globally. Technologies have armed people with the potent instrument of communication, influence, and dominance. Digital media facilitates promotion of culture growth and enhancement of the attention economy. There is no denial that nowadays it is not only social, political, cultural institutions that forge the importance and usefulness of any societal and scientific phenomenon in all areas of human existence, due to easy access to various channels in WWW, but individuals as well. Twitter, and YouTube as mixtures of social media, blogging, and texting exert no less influence over public mindset formation than other digital media, including TV and newspapers. Contemporary values take shape within the digital triangle "public institution – web-based media – individual". Efforts of each side of the triangle are aimed at promoting some concept or idea and converting it into a value that is likely to be accepted and shared by large groups of people. The ultimate goal of these endeavors is to make people behave accordingly. Words, sentences, and texts emanate socially and culturally important concepts and values.

With the advent of various digital platforms and social media language has turned into a versatile tool and heavy weapon to reinforce societal values that have stood the test of time, and at the same time, dilute the traditional ones, transform them and shape new values and social practices. Language as autonomous sign system functions as a filter between a person and information coming from the outside world. This information is interpreted differently in dependence on objective and subjective conditions. A variety of interpretations is a derivative of social heterogeneity. That kind of heterogeneity accounts for the opportunity to create not one but several models of reality. This fact allows mass media and social networks to produce impact on different groups of people. The study has shown that family, faith, and freedom of speech appear to be sustainable moral codes in American Web-based discourse. Discourse on faith reveals the lack of unanimity among Twitter users who openly express their attitudes to religious issues. Posts and comments on Twitter demonstrate that freedom of speech that has long been accepted as a cherished achievement of American democracy is now under attack by cancel culture supporters.

1   Ibid.
2   Vogels E. A., Anderson M.,Porteus M., et al. Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment. In: *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/ (accessed: 28.01.2022).

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