

Effectiveness Of Legal Communication in Social Networks: A Study on Executive Authority Practices in ‘Vkontakte’

Eficácia da comunicação jurídica nas redes sociais: Um estudo sobre as práticas do poder executivo no “Vkontakte”

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Abstract

This article explores the practice of legal communication by executive authorities on the Russian social network “Vkontakte.” The findings emphasize the growing importance of legal communication in social networks as more individuals use the internet for communication and information exchange. This study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of legal communication on social networks by government authorities, identify effectiveness indicators, and propose recommendations for enhancing communication efficiency. The research methods included content analysis of official websites and “Vkontakte” accounts, as well as a review of selected studies. The results outline the advantages and challenges of legal communication in social networks, highlighting accessibility, cross-border provision of information, large audience reach, free access to legal information at any time, and the dynamic update and supplementation of such information. Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of legal communication in social networks by executive authorities are also provided.

Keywords: Legal information dissemination; Government communication strategies; E-government; Public administration online.

Resumo

Este artigo explora a prática da comunicação jurídica por parte das autoridades executivas na rede social russa “Vkontakte”. Os resultados sublinham a importância crescente da comunicação jurídica nas redes sociais, à medida que cada vez mais pessoas utilizam a Internet para comunicar e trocar informações. Este estudo tem como objetivo realizar uma análise abrangente da comunicação jurídica nas redes sociais por parte das autoridades governamentais, identificar indicadores de eficácia e propor recomendações para melhorar a eficiência da comunicação. Os métodos de investigação incluíram a análise de conteúdo dos sites Web oficiais e das contas “Vkontakte”, bem como uma revisão de estudos seleccionados. Os resultados descrevem as vantagens e os desafios da comunicação jurídica nas redes sociais, destacando a acessibilidade, a disponibilização transfronteiriça de informações, o grande alcance do público, o livre acesso a informações jurídicas em qualquer altura e a atualização e complementação dinâmicas dessas informações. São ainda apresentadas recomendações para melhorar a eficácia da comunicação jurídica nas redes sociais por parte das autoridades executivas.

Palavras-chave: Divulgação de informação jurídica; Estratégias de comunicação governamental; Governo eletrônico; Administração pública em linha.

1 Introduction

Legal communication plays a crucial role in ensuring the transparency and fairness of the legal system, developing legal culture, and protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens (Carey, 1989). It encompasses various forms of interaction among legal relations participants, including the following:

- ♦ legal education and enlightenment—the transmission of knowledge and information about legislation, rights and duties, ways to protect one's interests, etc.
- ♦ legal aid and consultations - providing professional assistance and advice on legal issues, protecting the rights and interests of citizens (Caldeira, 1988).
- ♦ interactions with government authorities—interacting with the police, the prosecutor's office, security services, and other authorities on matters of law enforcement, investigations, etc.

In the context of digitalization and the development of an information society, the issue of legal communication becomes more prominent as traditional forms of state-citizen interaction evolve (Chernysh; Pogrebnaya, 2020). The transformation of legal communication is associated with the constructive and extensive use of electronic means of communication, such as the active implementation of electronic formats for filing lawsuits in courts, submitting reports to tax authorities, and submitting various applications to government bodies. This leads to the formation of a new paradigm of interaction between society and the state (Van Dijk, 2020).

The digital communication format ensures rapid information exchange, and the use of information and communication technologies in interactions between government bodies and the population allows for the effective protection of citizens' rights and legitimate interests. It facilitates the harmonization of contradictions and ensures the support of ongoing dialog between society and the state, shaping the digital culture of society (Meier; Gilbert; Börner, 2020). Social media accounts of governmental bodies become an effective means of legal communication as they increase citizens' awareness of legislative changes, broadcast legal content in popular and accessible formats, and reduce the distance between authority and the population.

This phenomenon, especially in social networks, requires further qualitative research. Legal communication is the process of transferring information, knowledge, experience, and culture in the field of law among different subjects: citizens, legal entities, government bodies, and public organizations (Cronen; Pearce; Changsheng, 1989). Legal communication in social networks can occur in two formats: between government bodies and citizens and between specially qualified individuals consulting via social network accounts (Wild; Dormagen, 2021). This study focused on legal communication between government bodies and the population due to limitations in the scope of the research.

This research aims to comprehensively analyze legal communication in the social networks of federal government bodies and identify effectiveness indicators of legal communication in social networks.

2 Literature review

Many experts have explored legal communication issues, focusing on their functions, roles, and significance. However, there are few works dedicated to addressing legal communication challenges in the online environment, especially social networks (Demers; Sullivan, 2016). The digital format of legal communication bridges distant subjects as virtual space is borderless, open, and decentralized. It aims at developing horizontal connections, openness, and self-organization (Yuvaraj *et al.*, 2021). Social networks facilitate precedent practices, online voting, roundtables, and debates.

Selected studies highlight the advantages of using legal communication in social networks, such as the following:

- ♦ accessibility (Chernysh *et al.*, 2020; Stewart; Stewart, 2017; Nelson, Simek; Foltin, 2009; Sparrow, 2016).
- ♦ cross-border information provision (Lovari; Valentini, 2020; Marsden, Meyer; Brown, 2020).
- ♦ broad audience reach (Strahilevitz, 2005; Lei *et al.*, 2023);
- ♦ free access to legal information (Filipova, 2023; Baumann *et al.*, 2020);
- ♦ availability at any time (Gómez-Galán *et al.*, 2020);

Additionally, social networks enable government bodies to provide timely and objective information about legislative innovations, interpret legal issues, maintain regular contact with citizens, and prevent legal violations through encouragement of awareness and lawful behavior. The effectiveness indicators include the following:

- ♦ Subscriber numbers (Papakyriakopoulos; Serrano; Hegelich, 2020; Brady *et al.*, 2023; Meier *et al.*, 2020);
- ♦ citizen inquiries (Fan *et al.*, 2020; Van Dijck, 2020);
- ♦ published posts (Sossamon, 2011; Lipschultz, 2020; Tóth, Wachs *et al.*, 2021);
- ♦ views (Minotti, 2008; Fuhse, 2021; Jacobowitz, 2014; Persily; Tucker, 2020).

Studies highlight that these indicators are influenced by many factors, such as content quality, relevance, and user activity. By analyzing these factors, we can conclude that the number of subscribers is growing or decreasing (Wild *et al.*, 2021).

Legal communication is crucial for inducing lawful behavior; hence, it needs to be practical, empirically validated, and aimed at enhancing government-civil society interactions.

3 Methods

To identify indicators of the effectiveness of the legal communication of executive authorities, we conducted an expert content analysis of official websites and official accounts in the social network “Vkontakte” of sixty-three executive authorities of the Russian Federation. As of February 8, 2024, data on the presence of accounts in the social network “Vkontakte” are relevant. We conducted a comparative analysis of the information on official websites and in the “Vkontakte” accounts of state bodies using the following criteria:

- ♦ presence of an account in the social network “Vkontakte”;
- ♦ presence of links to the account in the social network “Vkontakte” on the official website of the state body;
- ♦ number of subscribers in the social network “Vkontakte”
- ♦ frequency of publication, response to comment;
- ♦ frequency of visitor comments to the account;
- ♦ frequency of reposts by account visitors;
- ♦ possibility to leave a comment.

To identify the advantages of legal communication in social networks, we analyzed the works of researchers dedicated to legal communication in the online environment. In this study, we used a desk review of works and a comparative analysis of works. For a comprehensive analysis, studies were selected that contained definitions of “legal communication”, “communication of state authorities”, and “legal communication in social networks”. In searching for relevant documents, we adhered to the “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses” (PRISMA) standards. The PRISMA guidelines require that all stages of the search and verification be detailed and recorded by researchers. The PRISMA flowchart consists of four stages: identification of articles, screening of articles, determination of the eligibility of studies, and final compilation of the list of studies for inclusion in the systematic review.

Step 1: Data collection We selected works written by scientists on the following topics: “legal communication”, “legal communication of state authorities”, “legal communication in social networks”, and “indicators of effectiveness of communication in social networks”. A bibliographic search was conducted in the Scopus database, Web of Science <https://scholar.google.com/sv/scholar>, on official websites. We collected a total of 500 publications in several categories. Step 2. The data were filtered using the selection criteria. Studies were selected according to the following criteria:

1. The presence of at least three publications on the topic of “legal communication” by the authors in the last 10 years;

2. A numerical predominance of more than 50% of the studies on legal topics out of the total number of publications by authors;
3. The author's profile must indicate that his or her publications are thematically related to the legal sciences;
4. The work must be written between 1989 and 2023. With this approach, 250 publications were initially selected (Step 3). The data were filtered by reading the full text. We read the full texts of the articles for which it was difficult to determine the relevance of the topic by title and abstract. After careful selection, 35 studies were selected. The use of this methodology allowed us to highlight the advantages of legal communication in social networks and indicators of the effectiveness of legal communication in social networks.

4 Results

In analyzing scientific works, the advantages of legal communication in social networks were identified, including the following:

1. Accessibility of legal communication in the digital environment.
2. Cross-border provision of legal information.
3. Large audience.
4. Free access to legal information.
5. Access to legal information at any time.

The accessibility of legal information on social networks is a key advantage and convenience offered by the internet. With information accessible online, users can find, view, and use a vast amount of data and knowledge with minimal effort (Stewart; Stewart, 2017).

The key advantages of accessing legal information on social networks include global access and search convenience. The internet allows access to legal information from anywhere in the world, making legal information accessible to people in different countries and regions (Filipova, 2023; Marsden; Meyer, 2020; Nelson; Simek; Foltin, 2009). Various search tools and mechanisms help users find the necessary legal information online quickly and efficiently (Demers; Sullivan, 2016; Sparrow, 2016).

In addition to the identified advantages of legal communication in social networks, frequent updating and supplementation of legal information in the digital environment, as well as the possibility of repeated viewing at any time, are also advantages. Legal information on social networks is continuously updated and supplemented, providing users with up-to-date data and keeping them informed of the latest legislative changes and legal practices.

However, in addition to the advantages of legal communication in social networks, several disadvantages, such as unequal access, are noted. Unequal online

information access can be due to various factors, including geographical location, socioeconomic differences, education level, and technological literacy (Brezhnev, 2023).

Geographical location can affect internet access and overall information access. In some regions and countries, broadband internet access may be limited or expensive, hindering equal access to online information (Baumann; Lorenz-Spreen, 2020).

Socioeconomic differences can also play a significant role. In societies where a large part of wealth and power is concentrated among a small group of people, less affluent population layers may have limited access to information technologies and the internet (Wei; Gong; Song, 2023).

Education level also influences the ability to access information. People with higher education levels are generally better prepared to use the internet and other information technologies, which may facilitate greater access to information in these individuals than in those who are less educated (Vinson, 2010).

Finally, technological literacy can also play a role in unequal online information access. Some people may struggle with using computers, smartphones, and other devices, limiting their ability to search for, receive, and use information (Turdialiev, M., 2023).

Another disadvantage of legal communication in social networks can be technical problems. Technical issues in accessing information online can be related to various aspects, such as internet connection problems, equipment issues, and software problems (Lackey Jr.; Minta, 2012).

Internet connection problems can include access issues, quality issues, and security issues. Equipment issues may involve malfunctions of computers, smartphones, routers, and other devices (Lei *et al.*, 2023). Software problems can include software bugs, compatibility issues, and update issues. Additionally, technical problems can arise from various factors, such as outdated equipment, lack of technical support, and users' lack of knowledge and experience (Tóth; Wachs, 2021).

5 Discussion

We consider legal communication to be related to government bodies that disseminate legal information through their websites, with direct online communication with officials through social networks being a demanded form of interaction and influence (Lovari; Valentini, 2020). The work of government bodies in spreading legal communication is especially relevant when the average user spends up to four hours a day on social networks, with the main activity being browsing social networks (Persily; Tucker, 2020). According to the ITU and GSMA Intelligence in 2023, the number of social network users is 4.8 billion, approximately 60% of the world's population. The growth of social network users is constantly increasing, with the increase in new users in 2023 amounting to 138 million (Global Digital Report 2023). These trends show

that social networks have great potential and should be used for establishing legal communication between citizens and the government. Social networks can become a source of dissemination of official legal information from the state and attract citizens for discussion and decision-making (Gómez-Galán, Martínez-López, Lázaro-Pérez, 2020). The potential of social networks as the most accessible and effective way to ensure legal communication should be fully utilized (Strahilevitz, 2005).

The study focuses on the analysis of government bodies that have accounts in social networks in Russia. According to statistics, the number of agencies communicating with citizens through social networks is constantly growing. Just in 2021, the number of government bodies informing citizens about main events and legal innovations in social networks increased from 3 to 21. Accordingly, the audience also grew, so for 2023, it amounted to a total number of subscribers of 67 thousand citizens, which is 35% more than in 2022. We faced the task of determining the indicators of the effectiveness of the legal communication of federal executive bodies in social networks.

The most popular social network used by government bodies is Vkontakte. To determine how government bodies run social networks today, we studied 63 official pages of federal executive bodies in Vkontakte from October 2022 to October 2023. The first assessment involved the number of subscribers (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of subscribers on the “Vkontakte” social network of the Federal Executive Bodies of the Russian Federation

N	Number of subscribers	Federal Executive Bodies
1	Over 100,000 subscribers	Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation; Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation; Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations; Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation; Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing; Federal Tax Service of Russia; Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation.
2	Over 99,000 subscribers	Roskomnadzor; Rosgvardiya; Rosreestr; Ministry of Sports of the Russian Federation; Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation.
3	10-50,000 subscribers	Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation; Federal Labor Service; Rosstat; Rostourism; Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation; Department of Labor and Social Protection; Ministry of Economic Development.
4	Over 10,000 subscribers	Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation; Russian Aviation; Rostekhnadzor; Ministry of Agriculture of the Russian Federation; Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation; Rosstandart; Rossotrudnichestvo, etc.

As experts rightly note, one of the main indicators of the effectiveness of legal communication in social networks is the number of subscribers (Papakyriakopoulos; Serrano, 2020). The number of subscribers is not static, so it is important to determine the audience growth rate if there is one (Yuvaraj, Srihari; Dhiman, 2021). Audience growth is not linear; it fluctuates due to various factors, such as the appearance of posts with relevant legal information and the use of new communication formats such as “Q&A” (Brady; McLoughlin, 2023).

The dynamics of audience growth are determined by the percentage ratio of the number of new subscribers to the number of nonsubscriptions over a specific period. For example, in February 2023, the subscriber count was 181,606, with an increase of 900 subscribers over the last month, calculated as $900/181000 \times 100$, resulting in a growth rate of 0.476. Thus, in addition to the number of subscribers, the audience growth rate, which can also be negative, indicating less effectiveness of the conducted legal activities, should be added to the indicators of the effectiveness of legal communication in social networks (Fan; Pan; Zhang, 2020).

Other important indicators of the effectiveness of legal communication in social networks include the number of views, which also matters, but it is important to consider the total number of views across all posts over a certain period (Fuhse, 2021; Minotti, 2008). The number of views indicates the interest shown by citizens in legal information posted on social networks (Jacobowitz, 2014).

Among the effectiveness indicators of legal communication, experts name this the number of posts (Lipschultz, 2020). However, it is difficult to agree with this opinion; rather, the quality of information, not its frequency, is important, so posts should be made on a regular basis, but an increase in the number of posts does not indicate the effectiveness of communication.

An important indicator of the effectiveness of legal communication in a social network is the engagement rate, which reflects feedback from the audience (Sossamon, 2011). The demand level can be calculated using the following formula: the number of inquiries/the number of subscribers * 100%. For example, there were 762 inquiries in February 2023 on the social network of the Federal Tax Service of Russia, and 181,606 subscribers were found, resulting in $762/181606 \times 100 = 0.419$.

In the analysis, posts with legal information were divided into the following types: “hot posts”, which determine the sociability coefficient. These are posts that gather many comments, and the calculation formula is as follows: number of comments/number of subscribers * 100%.

The term “viral posts” determines the dissemination coefficient. These are reposts, meaning the forwarding of legal information to other individuals, with the calculation formula: number of reposts/number of subscribers * 100%.

“relevant posts,” which determine the attractiveness coefficient. These are posts that receive many “likes” according to the following formula: number of “likes”/number of subscribers * 100%.

The analysis of more than half of the federal executive bodies' accounts in Vkontakte identified leaders in active publication of legal information, concluding that the most active accounts publish an average of more than 46 posts per month, with 39 out of 63 departments engaging in the most active legal communication (Table 2).

Table 2. Dynamics of Posts by Federal Executive Bodies on the Vkontakte Social Network

N	Agency Name	Number of Posts
1	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation	380 posts
2	Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation	253 posts
3	Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation	138 posts
4	Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation	80 posts
5	Russian National Guard	133 posts
6	Department of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Russian Federation	76 posts
7	Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation	65 posts

After analyzing the accounts of federal executive bodies on the “Vkontakte” social network for effectiveness indicators of legal communication, it can be concluded that the following steps contribute to productive activity in the online community:

- ♦ Regular publication of relevant legal information;
- ♦ No access restriction to the account or the ability to comment on content;
- ♦ Mandatory responses to comments and inquiries;
- ♦ Conducting legal communication based on the principles of openness, relevance, and reliability;
- ♦ Using informal norms in legal communication;
- ♦ Using hashtags for quick dissemination and the search for legal information;
- ♦ Running a “legal question–answer” column;
- ♦ Direct surveys on the effectiveness of legal communication.

The analysis showed that the most effective federal executive body accounts in social networks used innovative approaches not only for presenting legal information but also for directly addressing subscribers, accessible presentations of legislation, legal acts, departmental instructions, and closer engagement with subscribers through personalized communication.

6 Conclusion

The study identified these advantages of legal communication by executive authorities on social networks:

1. Digital accessibility of information.
2. Cross-border information provision.
3. Large audience.
4. Free access to legal information.
5. Anytime access.
6. Frequent updates.
7. The ability to review legal information at any time.

The key effectiveness indicators include the subscriber count and growth rate, view count, and engagement rate, particularly the dynamics of inquiries and responses.

The study's scope was limited by the sample size and the number of analyzed accounts. Initially, 500 studies, including monographs, reports, and statistical data, were reviewed, 35 of which were selected for their insights into legal communication features.

Future research should explore the mechanisms underlying the avoidance of selective responses by government bodies to citizen comments on social networks.

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