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## COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY OF MOSCOW RESIDENTS:

### MAPPING MAJOR PATTERNS AMONG THE YOUNG DWELLERS

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#### Introduction

Competitive urban environments enhance policy makers and urban developers to raise the standards of urban management and planning to create conditions attracting existing and new residents. Still, a significant number of prioritized development trajectories are impossible without strong communicative components and civic engagement for sustainable human capital, business and cultural development. Cities and metropolitan areas can be seen as dynamic structures and processes. Dwellers witness constant changes, improvements and modifications that have become a norm of the modern urban life. Such changes are usually provided by infrastructural enhances in the broader sense, therefore, all the processes are coordinated and influenced by overall communicative urban system. It includes communication mediums, technologies, software and cultural practices that became major drivers for changing the experience of interaction between dwellers and the city itself. Understanding the communicative logic of urban spaces, communities and major communication flows, along with formation of integrated models of urban communicative processes becomes a fundamentally important task. On a par with other factors, its solution contributes to the sustainable development of society [Pichugina, 2017].

Urban communication has intense impact on social infrastructure design and social processes in general. People tend to associate themselves with places of their residence. The problem of citizen's identity and residents' role in urban planning and decision-making has been broadly discussed among Russian scholars through a number of interdisciplinary studies [Chernyavskaya, 2011; Pirogov, 2012; Dyagileva, Zhuravleva, 2012; Tykanova, 2013; Antonova, Rakevich, 2016]. The existing definition of a citi-

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#### Abstract

This exploratory research questions communicative patterns of Moscow metropolitan area residents: practices, attitudes to the city and technological tools used for information search and communication matters. Applying communicative ecology concept on the city level, author analyses data collected by an online survey ( $N = 200$ ) to distinguish key communication patterns within three dimensions: social, technological and discursive. Among the major communication patterns, we identified significance of the strong ties among residents, relatively low level of membership in social and civic society organizations and exceptionally low level of involvement in local community problem-solving. The study delineates several problems of communicative ecology and prospective directions on urban communication research in Moscow.

**Key words:** urban communication; communicative ecology

zen or an urban resident implies such characteristics as: civic engagement, transformation of the urban space through various instruments of participatory involvement. Therefore, Ivanov argues about the inconsistent usage of the definition of an "urban dweller" or "residents" for the contemporary discourse as the research results show the main factors stipulating residents to choose the city are economic stability and availability of green areas [Ivanov, 2016]. Yet, horizontal ties constituting communities along with the institutional tools for civic involvement and communication became rather weak back in early 2000's and hitherto, which is supported by low political interest and civic activity [Kashirskih, 2014]. Enhanced development of technology and rise of social standards in urban areas, shifts the attention of sociologists and policy developers towards the research of communicative patterns that drive urban interconnectedness. Scholars,

policy-makers and civic activists are engaged in developing a theoretical, practical and technological basis for transformation of cities towards the increased well-being of citizens, sustainable and continuous development. Addressing characteristics of the urban communication system, important insights in values and place of an individual in this urban landscape can be derived. The presented exploratory study delineates several issues in public management, information distribution and civic practices drawn upon the gaps in communicative system, or communicative ecology of Moscow residents. The research is focused on both, online and offline mediated interactions within the communicative ecology model. The author distinguishes major patterns on three layers of communicative processes: social, discursive and technological.

### **Ecological Approach to Urban Communication**

Urban communication research as an academic field appeared in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century at the junction of urban and communication research and has been mostly driven by technological advancement determining societal change [Kvyat, 2015]. New forms of media and communication are shaping the way individuals experience the city and structure their everyday practices, affecting the overall level of well-being. Yet, the lack of normative perspective continuously characterises research within the field [Brenner, Schmid, 2013]. Communication along with consumption patterns, lifestyles, rules and rituals of dwellers vary due to historical, cultural, spatial and technological reasons and thus create an ecosystem that supports the complexity of urban culture [Krätke, 2003]. Scholars conducting research on urban communication rely on various theoretical and methodological approaches.

For the purposes of this study, we are focusing on ecological approach to communication at a city level. Such approach provides us with minimal restrictions for interpretation, which is essential for an exploratory research. Pioneers of urban scholarship Chicago school (or Ecological school) sociologists considered cities as a new form of the societal, “pattering the urban growth and social differentiation” [Park, Burgess, 1925]. Initially researchers saw evolutionary, biological stimulus in urban life sociality, which unconsciously leads toward the creation of the most effective urban space because of biotic struggle. Thus, “highlighting the role that media institu-

tions and communication practices play in how different communities within a city may or may not speak to each other” [Aiello, Tosoni, 2016]. The Chicago school considered communication to be an underlying process of community development and “primary means to understand social phenomena” by which various types of activities are integrated into the whole [Krukeberg, Tsetsura, 2008]. The early Chicago school addressed various communication and transportation factors as primary factors of ecological organization in urban areas [Park, Burgess, 1925]. Operating within sociocultural research tradition, Chicago school successors would criticize the objectivity of the research on people settlement and put the stress on role of culture and traditions [Firey, 1947]. Still, the ecological approach was influential within academic thought as Hawley (1944) proposes the concept of human ecology to describe the phenomenon of human organization. The media ecology concept, developed by McLuhan in the 1960’s, provided a resonant framework for media production and consumption analysis and despite wide criticism, is still widely used among communication scholars. Considering environmental issues in developing areas, the political ecology concept was influential in 1980’s. Subsequently, the ecological anthropology was and is still used widely to explain cultural and ethnical dynamics in communities which still provide a solid methodology with the communicative aspect. An ecological approach allows to overlook the various contexts that constitute individuals’ surroundings, societal nature of communication, which is constituted through elements varying from social contacts to urban infrastructure. Thus it has been applied to outline the issue of individual, community and information communication technology (ICT) [Meyrowitz, 1985]. The concept of communicative ecology originates in David Altheide’s “ecology of communication,” and refers to the ways how “information technology and communication formats operate in the effective environment and are intertwined with activities,” which therefore influence the social order as a means of cultural control [Altheide, 1994]. With the penetration of new technology, linkages between users changed likewise, the media consumption became more complex, allowing the diversification of personal communicative ecologies. Therefore, communicative ecologies of individuals share many characteristics in common, which drives urban communication research on the levels of communities, organizations, neigh-

bourhoods and cities. The concept is widely used as a theoretical orientation in a research on urban communities [Matsaganis, 2016]. For example, the significant amount of studies guided by Markus Foth on neighbourhood communication (with an emphasis on ICT usage) is conducted within communicative ecology framework: e.g., development of community portals in urban villages (2008) or research on social networks of inner-city apartments (2007).

As mentioned earlier, communicative ecology is a layered model of three with a focus on social, discursive and technological dimensions. The following chapter describes all three with the emphasis on the developed research methodology.

*The social level* refers to the people and social structures. Remarkably, it occurs both in physical and digital dimensions, as individuals maintain their social networks to match their needs via mediated communication channels [Rainie, Wellman, 2014]. In this study, we address two criteria to map the social level: social interaction patterns and level of social engagement. The criterion of social interaction patterns depicts the major day-to-day communication patterns. It refers to the type of resident's social circle, their level of communicative activity and belonging to urban communities. Throughout the research of communities' development, Jeffres [2007] introduces the concept of "communication capital" which is defined as "communication patterns that facilitate social problem solving in the community," depicting sustainable communities. Still, sustainability criteria may vary from one community to another along with diversity of communication capital components, but it always enhances the capability of effective problem-solving and social reproduction. While effective problem-solving criterion relies on transparent governance and level of civic involvement, the social reproduction is maintained on an everyday basis throughout the symbolic interaction. Here we emphasise the role of social engagement, which attributes to the involvement of residents in community issues through the participation in local formal and informal organizations. It is essential to note here, that the definition of community in Anglo-Saxon tradition may not be applicable to Russian urban life. Glazychev [1994] argues that atomization of residents was quite intensive in post-soviet cities: "In continuous attempts to [find] the approaches for survival and development of Russian citizens into communities (as it

is called in Western tradition), I was stubbornly searching for the "molecule" of urban life. The integrity <...> that may become a sign of societal. Obviously, neighbourhoods (administrative districts in urban areas) are not a pure representation of this idea — if they can be called neighbourhoods, then only with a large share of convention." Therefore, in the context of this research, we refer to the communities as groups of individuals organized on a principle of shared interests mostly, and separate it from territory-based self-organized unities. To avoid reducing social layer to social relations themselves, we offer the following conceptualization, linked to the categories that can be found in research on local identity [Samoshkina, 2008]. First of all, it is self-identification with neighbourhood/district, indicating whether locals see themselves as a part of the community. Secondly, the neighbourhood/district interaction referring to the overall communication level among the dwellers. And the third, the aspect of civic involvement, which we assume to be dependent to self-identification and the intensity of interaction with others within the neighbourhood/district level.

*The discursive level* comprises the themes and content of communication. For this dimension of inquiry, we explored the most active requests of the citizens and attitudes towards the urban communication system. Researchers agree that the way mediating the access to information and individuals who are not physically close, is challenging and changing constantly patterns of human interaction [Wellman et al., 2003]. Thus, the extent to which urban landscape can be understood on physical, social and ethnographic levels by the residents and how is it different from the city depictions of the tourists will define the visibility of such a city.

*The technological layer* is referred to the set of infrastructural communication means that provide information exchange within the community. Global digital transformation is shaping routines of residents, their work and leisure practices to maintain communication, informational capacity and connectivity in metropolitan areas [Castells, 1992]. Scholars argue that the computer-mediated communication would affect various aspects of residents' life: from interpersonal relations to community building and communication with authorities and public services providers, with an extended impact on city government and development [Jeffres et al., 2013]. To interpret this dimension of residents' communicative ecology, respondents were asked

to measure public places availability for their leisure and civic activities, as possibility to gather, conduct meetings and see other which thus sets the preconditions for formal and informal public dialogue. Digital environment was another focus at this level. As Moscow has reached 90% of Internet users in 2015 and remains the leader of digitalization among Russian metropolises [Skolkovo, 2016], the extent to which residents confirm the trend is unclear along with the highlights on the most common patterns of digital usage. Here we refer to the experiences of residents with various digital tools (e.g., applications, web-sites, online services) to communicate and coordinate their city-related activities.

### Method and Data Collection

An online survey ( $N = 200$ , aged 18–40, convenient sampling of HSE (National Research University Higher School of Economics) students) was the major tool of data collection on that stage of research. The questionnaire was distributed via email among HSE students (Integrated Communication Department), who were further asked to complete the form and share it. More than half respondents (62.5%) aged 18–25, 27% — 26–35 years old, 8.5% — 36–40. Respondents over 40 years old were excluded from the survey sample due to underrepresentation. Gender distribution was 60% of female and 40% male respondents. The data collection was held within two months from April through May 2016 with an average response rate of 45%. Survey was conducted to depict main attitudes of residents towards the city, the perception of communicative environment and the usage of technology available at the city level. The total number of questions in the survey was 12, mostly multiple-choice questions with an opportunity to provide own reply. First block of survey questions was built to distinguish the patterns of social interactions and the level of civic engagement considering community issues. Respondents were asked to self-evaluate their patterns of interactions with others and choose the most applicable options of leisure activities planning (e.g. spending time with family and friends, meeting with people outside close social circle etc.). Next criterion was the level of engagement. First, we asked about the membership in local communities of different kind: civic engagement, interest clubs, volunteering, professional associations etc. We asked also whether residents participated in any local issues over past 6 months. Second block

had a focus on the evaluation of characteristics of Moscow and addressed the discursive level in our research. Respondents were asked to mark any of 26 characteristics, which in their opinion can describe the city. Most of characteristics were developed on the dichotomy principle and derived from Drucker and Gumpert's criteria of communicative city [Gumpert, Drucker, 2016], which included the following: diverse/homogenous; developed transport infrastructure/traffic-jam city; liberal/democratic/tolerant/corrupt; city of fast information penetration; progressive/outdated; social/city of lonely people; pleasant for living/depressing; safe/dangerous; technologically advanced; city where problems are solved quickly. The third block questioned dwellers attitudes on spaces and places availability (on a scale from 0 to 10) and practices of digital tools consumption. Respondents were asked to choose digital services they used in a past 3 months (e.g. navigation, healthcare, news and events search, places, business activity launch, guidelines for action, etc.). The results of this study are presented in 3 blocks (social, discursive and technological layers) in accordance with communicative ecology model.

### Findings

#### *Mapping Social Layer*

**Social interaction patterns.** Given criteria was evaluated through several survey questions that asked respondents about their everyday social interactions as for their leisure activities which outlined the social network of the respondent. As results show, most of the people socialize with their friends or family members (over 60%), few respondents marked both spending their leisure alone and not feeling belonging to any of urban communities. Insignificant number of respondents marked that they consider as a member of an interest club with which members they would spend their time (4%) and only 2 people out of the sample are using digital technologies to find the company for an occasion. Within given sample respondents chart a trend to uphold stronger ties in terms of socializing opportunities. Likewise, membership and feeling on belonging to any of urban communities is low as people do not associate their membership in urban communities with such characteristic as belonging.

**Level of engagement.** What are urban communities like: do residents feel belonging to any



kind of social organizations formal or informal? We questioned the membership in local communities of different kind: civic engagement, interest clubs, volunteering, professional associations etc. Respondents mostly noted that they do not feel belonging to any of city communities, therefore contradictory half of them mentioned that they are members of some leisure activity club. Still, the confusion demonstrated in the replies indicate to the certain level of misunderstanding when it comes to the concept of community. The survey showed that identity of residents is less likely to be built through the practices of participation and/or community membership. Only third of the residents demonstrated their association with a leisure activity club, organization or another urban community. For the further research, we assume that definition of community may vary significantly based on age or previous experiences of people. It is therefore crucial to understand the discourse of community involvement and its relation to other spheres of the urban life.

#### *Mapping Discursive Layer*

**Attitudes to the City.** Main findings drawn upon the responses of residents evaluating their attitude to the city are provided below. The number of times marked by respondents is provided in brackets. General attitudes of residents split as almost equal number of responses was collected to the characteristic of pleasant for living (41) and depressing (35) city. Significantly, Moscow is recognized by most of the residents as a diverse city (147). Importance of this characteristic applies to the developed earlier criteria of urban diversity as an essential aspect of the dynamic urban environment, that links individuals with different backgrounds in public places and spaces, fulfilled with activities and opportunities. An important part of urban diversity, such as cultural diversity, was also acknowledged by respondents. Multicultural surrounding is crucial for understanding the communicative nature of city. Continuing the line of communicative sufficiency, we addressed the subjective characteristic of feeling social or excluded: respondents marked Moscow as a social (53) almost as often as the city of lonely people (42). Thus, the replies collected do not provide definite answer on the question if Moscow is linking people together or not as the number of replies in favour of this factor is tended to the opposite. Corruption (65) as a characteristic relies significantly on the citizen's attitude towards officials and hereafter is

connected to the civic activity and thus reflects in the overall trust level to the city officials. Here we can assume the linkage between the level of tolerance, democratic procedures and liberalism (26) with the criteria of low civic involvement. As in Moscow the trend for increased technologizing and digitalization is highly supported by authorities, the level of information penetration (69) shall be significantly higher when it comes to the news spread and transparency of the information access. Residents need news and updates on the projects conducted both by administration and civic society to feel themselves involved in the urban society life. Based on the results of this sample survey, Moscow filled with the multiple information sources is yet perceived as a city with a decent score of the information penetration. There may be multiple reasons for this. On the one hand, it can be information overload with the "noise" thus distressing the information from the receivers. On the other hand, it can be the consequence of the low transparency level within various types of reporting. The survey displayed low results on problem-solving variable as well. Only 12 respondents have chosen characteristic of fast problem solving applicable to Moscow. This can be the sign for official's ineffective governance. Sustainability as an essential goal for the community existence is linked tightly with the system to respond quickly to challenges appearing. Consequently, Moscow is perceived by citizens as a progressive city of a constant change (55), rather than outdated (6), which is a sign for urban space being developed in the accordance with citizen's expectations. Yet the characteristic of a dangerous place (33) was marked significantly more often compare to safe (9). Other characteristics mentioned by respondents were "full of stress" and "fast city where everything is happening and killing you, but in another place, you get bored." Stress mentioned in both replies is another significant disqualifying factor for communicative city, which influences the well-being of citizens. Disadvantages of this system appear at the level of functioning in different spheres of urban life starting with city being simply dangerous for citizens, to the slow respond to the challenges community is facing due to the lack of communication and transparency. Nevertheless, apart from the problems, survey outlined the strengths of urban space as it is diverse and promoting the development.

One of the survey questions addressed the practices of citizens' online tools usage in every-

day life. Summarizing the results, the most popular were the options considering leisure time planning, routine needs, healthcare and housing services. Response options of the civic discourse such as volunteering, local legislation, city politics and municipal financial reports were marked by less than the quarter of respondents. Lowest place in the hierarchy was taken by information sources considering local history and religion.

#### *Mapping Technological Layer*

**Places and spaces availability.** In one of the survey questions respondents were asked to evaluate the accessibility of the public places in Moscow on the scale from 0 (hard to find any/hard to access) to 10 (many places, easy to access in terms of availability, price, open hours). With the average score for 7.87, Moscow, in the eyes of the respondents, is a city providing enough of the opportunities for socialization and meeting others. Places to organize different activities or just to observe and feel yourself included into the common process of urban life. Noteworthy that the lowest grades (below 5) were given by representatives of North-West administrative district. Therefore, we can assume that there may be slight difficulty to provide a holistic evaluation on the public places availability: results may vary from district to district. Still, multiple factors influence the availability characteristic e.g., physical availability, entrance price, working hours. As there may be few public places for gathering in the neighbourhood, the working hours can be restricted which makes it impossible for the whole segment of residents to use such places on their needs. Availability of the simple place where people can set an interest-club or just organize the space for a discussion can potentially increase the civic involvement of community.

#### *Digital Sufficiency and Usage*

We also asked to mark the web-sources and applications used by the residents during the past three months to find information about the city they needed. Responses showed strong linkage with the findings of the previous question as the navigation tools and news web-sites were the most cited. Remarkably, web-sites of Moscow government departments were marked pretty often as 16% of respondent answered they were looking up for this information. Local communities in the social media were not popular among

the respondents, which proofs one of the findings in the previous chapter on low involvement in the community issues. The lowest score was gained by the local municipality web-sites (4% of respondents).

#### *Conclusion and Further Research*

For the inquiry, Moscow communication system was examined on the three layers: social, discursive and technological. Current research confronted severe difficulties in terms of data collection and results interpretation. Thus, research sample was rather scarce, the attempt to delineate communicative ecology of residents opens further research opportunities. We suggest applying given framework on a smaller scale communities, as the approach is useful to measure the communicative system, identify local problems.

Communication patterns of social layer identified significance of the strong ties among the residents, relatively low level of membership in social and civic society organizations and exceptionally low level of involvement in local community problem-solving. Remarkably, even though residents participate in some social activities on a constant basis, they do not feel themselves as a part of the local community. We assume for the further research that the definition of community may vary significantly based on age or previous experiences of individuals. It is therefore crucial to understand the discourse of community involvement and its relation to other spheres of urban life.

Moscow was accessed as diverse multicultural, problems of corruption, poor traffic regulation and cultural advancement were noted, however, respondents mentioned relatively low response to the emerging urban problems on the city level. Deficiency of the public interest and civil involvement on a local level is supported by the discourse on informing, civil agenda is restricted and prospects for the non-moderated discussion are limited. Likewise, survey results show that residents are not actively engaged in the civil activities on neighbourhood or city level, though the intentions for such involvement were identified, they are not supported.

Inquiry on the technological level of communication system showed a significant level of technological enhancement within the services provided by officials in the spheres of healthcare, housing services and education. Level of the technological penetration is significantly high

as many urban services become digitalized and obtain popularity among users. Although, there is a lack of options oriented towards the public dialog between citizens and officials. Linking these findings with the previous ones on comparatively slow information penetration on city problems, we conclude that further research on individual information seeking strategies is required. Changing nature of network urban communication appeared and recently the concept of networked individualism [Foth, Hearn, 2007]. Thereby, with the focus on residents' networks and digital tools used for its maintenance, deep-

er insights onto urban communication can be reached to explain communicative nature and make linkages with other social processes. Besides, it will be inquisitive to inquire how the urban space is influencing the attitudes formation towards the community involvement. As the urban space in a big city is significantly diverse and extensive, citizens have multiple opportunities to join various interest groups and organizations, get engaged in discrete activities and projects, yet they do not fully accept such opportunities.

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О.Г. СОЛОВЬЕВА

## КОММУНИКАТИВНАЯ ЭКОЛОГИЯ ЖИТЕЛЕЙ МОСКВЫ:

ОСНОВНЫЕ ПАТТЕРНЫ КОММУНИКАЦИИ СРЕДИ МОЛОДЕЖИ

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Применяя модель коммуникативной экологии на уровне города, исследование представляет собой данные, собранные методом онлайн-опроса ( $N = 200$ ), и определяет ключевые паттерны коммуникации молодых жителей Москвы в трех измерениях: социальном, технологическом и дискурсивном. Основные характеристики коммуникации, обнаруженные на данном этапе исследования: важность сильных связей между жителями, относительно низкий уровень членства в общественных организациях и низкий уровень участия в решении проблем местного сообщества. В исследовании определяется ряд перспективных направлений для исследования коммуникативной экологии и городской коммуникации в Москве.

**Ключевые слова:** городская коммуникативистика; коммуникативная экология