

# Development of civic activism as a strategy of public regulation in the field of information security

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**Abstract.** This article explores the evolving landscape of civic activism in Russia within the realm of information security, with a particular focus on safeguarding children from harmful content. The study's primary objective is to assess the scale of civic activism, examine its stages and effective strategies, and explore motivational mechanisms driving citizen engagement. Employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys, case analysis, focus groups, and expert interviews, the research spanned from 2019 to 2023. Findings reveal a transition from spontaneous to more structured and institutional forms of civic activism. Participants underscored the need for tighter governmental regulation of the information sphere, clarifying harm criteria, and enhancing legal accountability. The article underscores the role of NGOs and civil society in augmenting governmental efforts and notes the prevalence of specific psychological characteristics among civic activists. The unification of interpretations of harmful content and the formation of civic structures represent significant trends in the evolving civic activism landscape. In summary, this study underscores the pivotal role of civic activism in ensuring a safer digital environment for children and reveals its potential to stimulate more robust governmental responses to information security challenges.

## 1 Introduction

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a global social movement to protect children from the destructive and dangerous influence of information with the support of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNICEF, and UNODC. This also led to international mechanisms for protecting children from harmful information, particularly the 2020 Child Online Protection Guidelines [1]. In 2023, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report [2] recommended banning the use of mobile phones in schools, citing worsening academic performance, disruptions, cyberbullying, negative effects on self-control and emotional stability, and increased anxiety and depression associated with the use of smartphones by children. Environmental costs are the negative consequences of total digital

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infrastructure. According to the report, every fourth country has banned smartphones in schools (France introduced restrictions in 2018, and the Netherlands plans to do the same by 2024).

The 2021 analytical note by the ITU highlights the need for a multifaceted strategy protecting children on the Internet as the riskiest information space. Among the key areas of child protection, the ITU Guidelines on Child Online Protection [1] suggest promoting digital technologies to enhance civil society participation, including the popularization of digital literacy [3] as a crucial condition for preventing the consequences of digital risks. The document recognizes the importance of non-governmental organizations as bearers of expertise and information that can be an invaluable resource in providing services to children, parents, guardians, and educators to advance the online protection agenda and, more generally, the public interest. According to these guidelines, risk monitoring is one of the most important tasks of civic activism and includes mechanisms for reporting abuse and reprehensible or illegal behavior in the online environment [4].

To effectively respond to risks for children on the Internet, it is proposed to implement an inclusive multilateral national strategy for the protection of children in the information environment, which would include the development of new policies. This strategy is aimed at coordination between all stakeholders, including government ministries, law enforcement agencies, social and medical services, the ICT industry, the research community, and public organizations [5]. The reasons to comprehend the existing challenges and propose these mechanisms within the framework of international cooperation, the presentation of information security as an environmental problem, and the lack of regulation on the part of large technology companies are factors of civic activism in ensuring the security of the information field and building civil institutions for controlling information flows [6].

In the modern world, the impact of information on all spheres of personal development and manifestation is extremely high. All segments of the population are subject to information stress, but children are especially vulnerable [7]. To protect the younger generation from negative and dangerous information, citizens join forces, create parental control groups, and strive to use tools of social influence and regulating the information field. An important task is to study this experience, the motivational structures of civic activity, and effective strategies for their manifestation.

Informational influence on an individual has reached a point when it might become uncontrollable. Civil society reacts to stressful information using both conscious and spontaneous strategies. The professional and legal response of government institutions follows the manifestation of civic activity, as evidenced by the dynamics of legislative changes concerning dangerous information (harmful or prohibited for dissemination): from banning tobacco advertising to gender transition.

The law of the Russian Federation allows the participation of public associations, non-profit organizations, and citizens in the implementation of public control, including monitoring the circulation of information products and children's access to information. Forms of civic activity are classified as political activity, social assistance, and public control. Public control over the flow of information is widespread in the information field. Civic activism in the information field is a tool for citizen participation in the management (inclusion of the governed in management) of information flows. The social need underlying this process is expressed by the motive of limiting the arbitrariness of power and helping the government in achieving common goals, the desire for social balance achieved with the help of social communication tools. The basis of civic activity is citizens' awareness of insufficient state control capabilities and recognition of the need for reforms (the assessment of information risks).

Civic activity in the field of preventing the risk of harm from information is a special form of solidarity among potential victims (communities of people who protect the health

and safety of nature and society), which are most often parent associations. Legislation in the field of child protection allows for the participation of public associations, non-profit organizations, and citizens in the implementation of public control, including monitoring the circulation of information products and children's access to information, for example, through the creation of hotlines. Statistics on the examination of information products within the framework of Federal Law No. 436 "On Protecting Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development" [8] show the role of civic activism in the practice of protecting children from unfavorable information under this law. The public (non-profit organizations and individuals) ordered almost a quarter of high-profile paid examinations from 2013 to 2023. Appeals to the Commissioner for Children's Rights under the President of the Russian Federation also emphasize the role of civic activism in the realization of children's right to a safe information environment. In 2022, there were 32% more requests than the previous year. This institution becomes an intermediary between public authorities and civil rights activists.

In 2022, the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs issued over 35,000 decisions to recognize information as prohibited for dissemination. This information aimed at popularizing criminal communities (6,977 cases in 2022), information about methods of committing illegal actions related to the denigration of honor and dignity of minors (257 cases in 2022), distribution or use of personal data of minors (150 cases in 2022), information that induces minors to engage in non-traditional sexual relationships with peers (3,249 cases in 2022), and information that can harm the health or development of minors, justifying violence and cruelty towards people or animals (965 cases in 2022). Currently, there are 5.42 million profiles on daily monitoring of their network activity, including suicidal behavior, school shootings, criminal imitation, and drug propaganda.

## 2 Literature review

In most modern interdisciplinary studies, the interaction between people and information is covered. The influence of the information space on the audience (the masses) is described in the theories of mass communication: two-step flow of communication by P. Lazarsfeld and E. Katz [9] and the theory of communication models by J. Grunig, T. Hunt [10]. J. Bryant and S. Thompson in "Fundamentals of Media Effects" [11] criticize the simplified approach of the gradual-linear model which considers the intensity of media influence on the following scale: "strong – limited – moderate – strong." They emphasize the need to develop a more accurate and broader meta-approach to the study of media effects that would include three levels of influence on the communicant: behavioral, affective (emotional), and cognitive.

M.V. Akram [12] dwells on the negative impact of social media through risks and threats (cyberbullying, Internet addiction) and proposes to focus on positive effects (broadening one's outlook, developing social skills) and reduce negative consequences (distorted body image, sexual behavior disorders, etc.). This approach is considered traditional and is widespread in modern pedagogy. The information field is filled with content that children cannot use positively.

The specific use of digital technologies as new cultural tools influencing the formation of a modern child and teenager is studied by a group of scientists from Moscow State University [13]. In trying to overcome the evaluative "positive – negative" approach, the principle of optimality is put forward. This approach is perfect for conscious media consumption but is difficult to apply in childhood. The classification of digital risks is also discussed in the works by S. Livingstone and M. Stoilova [14].

Civic activity is considered from various perspectives [15]: as a necessary element of democracy; an indicator of living standards and education of citizens; a form of self-government and self-organization of citizens; a type of opposition to the state (protest

activity); a phenomenon of civil culture; a type of support for positive actions by public authorities and stimulation of reforms; a phenomenon that ensures the effective collective activity of citizens in the form of social networks based on common values to create social capital. Scholars pay attention to various aspects of civic engagement institutes, including adaptation to the digital environment [16, 17], changing functions of civic activism [18], intercultural perspectives [19], information openness of civil structures [20], incentives for civil participation in online platforms [21], state subsidizing of various types of civic activism [22], and development of new digital practices [23-25].

In studying the strategies and mechanisms of civic activity in the information sphere, scholars emphasize the principle of synchronicity, consolidation of efforts, and synergy of *all systems* for managing the information security of children as a coordinated internal and external interaction and change using *resources* in the process of achieving a common goal. This is a condition of effectiveness and a key to achieving the goal of protecting children from harmful information.

Having many years of experience in holding conferences and workshops for experts in the civil regulation of information processes [26-29], we can highlight that the Russian practice of civic activism in the field of protection from destructive information has different interpretation of harm and legal mechanisms for regulating the information field.

It should be noted that the information security system in general, and the system of protecting children from threats and dangers in the information (digital) sphere in particular, is significantly influenced by a huge number of different factors, among which the following can be distinguished: the level of development of engineering surveys [30], the practice of judicial protection of relevant subjects [31, 32], the level of information security in educational processes [33], the level of international migration [34], the development of rules for centralized management of technical means to counter threats to information security [35], the level of development of legislation in this field [36, 37], the level of development of artificial intelligence technologies [38], neurotechnologies [39], and other digital technologies [40], the level of import substitution with safe domestic products [41], the level of development of means of protection of information and communication technologies [42], the level of ensuring information security on the Internet [43], as well as effective state innovation policy [44].

### 3 Methods

The methodology for studying personal values involves the use of qualitative methods, i.e., narrative analysis to identify positive and negative attributes of influence and a focus group interview.

We surveyed representatives of public associations and non-profit organizations working in the field of child protection: parent associations (committees, assemblies, unions, and movements). The survey was conducted in two stages (December 2020 and September 2023), which allowed us to correlate results and identify new trends. One hundred and twenty representatives of these organizations participated in the survey. The general sampling embraced customers for the examination of information products. The survey contained questions regarding legislative gaps and problems of law enforcement in the field of protecting children from harmful information, their age classification, the most dangerous types of information products, interaction with regulatory authorities, the examination of information products, the activities of organizations in this direction, and the integration of efforts by civic activists.

Narrative approach to a focus group is a method of qualitative (in-depth) assessment of the audience's attitude to the narrative (content), the study of images and metaphors, associative connections, and values-based and semantic structures. This approach described

by T. Sarbin [45], D. McAdams [46], and M. White [47] for psychological practice and therapy relies on the personality's ability to constantly present, represent (remember, reproduce, restructure), and rethink social experience. The focus groups and research interviews conducted with undergraduate students attending the "Narrative Design and Storytelling" course at Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University in 2023 helped us formulate principles for analyzing the digital narrative. In particular, the following positions are dominant:

1. The cognitive and semantic background of a media text. The "control message" is examined;
2. The psychological and emotional background of a media text;
3. The information stress caused by the aggressiveness of a media text;
4. The attitudes, values, and values-based and semantic structures of a media text;
5. Stereotyping "ideal" behavior (the formation of behavioral patterns and socialization strategies).

This approach was used when conducting focus groups among representatives of the civil community applying for the status of an expert in the field of assessing harm from information products and negative (destructive) narratives. These focus groups allowed us to develop a unified criterion for assessing destructive media content and to conduct training in public control groups.

In a group of public control, including representatives of public organizations and civic activists who were to be assessors of the harm caused by information products, we analyzed information content from the viewpoint of safe exposure to certain products (the "Sign of Aquarius" video clip by the "Vintage" music group).

The survey was conducted anonymously. When conducting focus groups, all respondents were informed about the purpose of this survey and the method used to process their interviews. The interviews were recorded only with their consent. Their interviews were analyzed in a generalized form, and the confidentiality of personal data was ensured.

## 4 Results

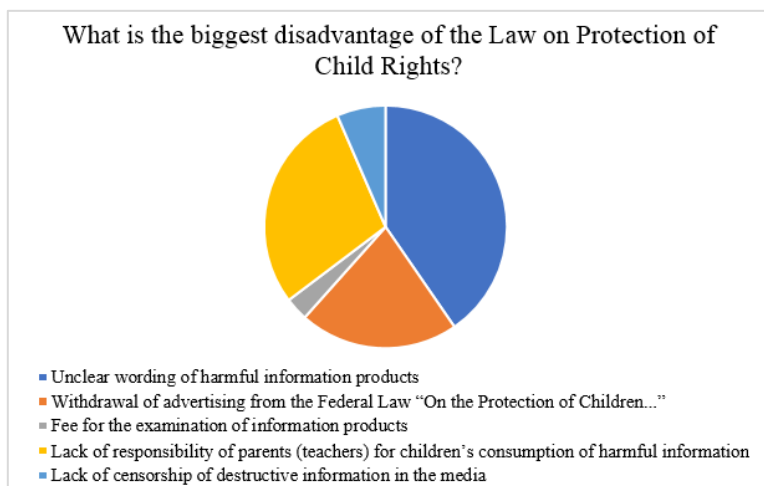
In the course of our survey on methods for improving the system of protecting children from harmful information, representatives of non-profit organizations expressed the following opinions: to impose the death penalty for the dissemination of illegal information; to gradually implement total state control over information; to introduce uniform moral standards mandatory for all age categories; to call for interdepartmental interaction with public associations and media security experts [48]. Such multipolar and harsh judgments indicate the complex understanding of tasks, the lack of legal mechanisms for regulating the information sphere, the limits of government regulation, and the desire for imposing maximum control over information rather than developing conditions for the self-regulation of information risks [49-51].

The survey of representatives of public associations and non-profit organizations whose activities aim at protecting children from negative information showed the vulnerabilities of existing practices. The results were as follows: the main purpose of appeals to regulatory, supervisory, and law enforcement agencies or the court is to hold accountable distributors of harmful information (31.1% in 2020 and 50% in 2023) or inappropriate advertising (18.4% in 2020 and 20% in 2023). A third of the respondents claimed that their complaints were neglected (or rejected) in 2020 and only 10% of them were considered in 2023. The information was recognized as prohibited and removed from the information space according to complaints from a fifth of the respondents in 2020 and more than half of the respondents in 2023. These data show an increase in the effectiveness of civil initiatives, perhaps due to

changes in the modern political and legal reality and tightening regulation of the information sphere.

According to the respondents, their complaints in 2020 were rejected for the following reasons: legal shortcomings in the information sphere (60%) and problems of law enforcement (40%). The same results were shown in 2023.

According to social activists, the main problems of legislation in the field of protecting children from information are as follows: unclear parameters of harmful information products (40% in 2020 and over 60% in 2023); the lack of responsibility of parents (teachers) for children's consumption of harmful information (30% in 2020 and 0% in 2023); the removal of advertising from the scope of the Federal Law "On Protecting Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development" (22% in 2020 and 18% in 2023) (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Reasons for the spread of destructive information in the information field (2020).

Many respondents highlighted the lack of legal responsibility of adults, both parents and teachers. The main problems in ensuring information security by the state are as follows: a narrow range of control functions (47%), insufficient liability measures (40%), and no single regulatory body (9%), which coincides with the 2023 survey.

In 2020 and 2023, information posted on the Internet (70%), gaming (14%), network and cable TV (8%), and other video products (6%) were recognized as the most harmful information products for children.

Most respondents (83% in 2020 and 100% in 2023) considered it necessary to create a unified national structure of public control. A fifth of them (2020) and a third of them (2023) stated their readiness to cooperate with government bodies to ensure the information security of children. The respondents mentioned the following solutions to the protection of children from information exposure: "excluding harmful content from the information space of children" (blocking, restricting access), developing a "management and control mechanism" (tightening the liability of information agents), and "creating an ideological basis" (developing a clear structure of values and a unified state ideology).

The second stage of the survey was conducted in 2023 and demonstrated the same results without significant deviations from the results of the first stage. Thus, we can conclude that there are the following trends: a request for tightening government regulation of the information sphere; increasing the effectiveness of civic activism aimed at combating harmful content; a request for clarifying the legal criteria of harm caused by information; the integration of civil structures to combine efforts and ensure the security of the information space.

The focus group study showed that the following parameters can be used to evaluate negative information.

1. The cognitive and semantic background of a media text. The study covers the “control message” or semantic message. Is it positive (supports the values of goodness and life) or destructive? In 90% of cases, the impact is negative or destructive, and in 10%, it is neutral (“I lost everything but nothing hurts”, i.e., an attitude of not accepting one’s feelings, “Loneliness”, “Do not make any effort to change one’s attitude”). Conclusion: the message is negative. The best assumption is that “losses and violence are normal”.

2. The psychological and emotional background of a media text. The emotion (the key emotion conveyed by the message) is explored. What do I feel when I conceive this message? In 87% of cases, negative emotions were identified (negative connotation: fatigue, emotional stress, resentment, deceit, procrastination, intrusion, sadness). In 13%, the neutral connotation was determined (sympathy, confusion, desire to help, sorrow). Conclusion: some information product drives the audience into a negative psycho-emotional state (disappointment, despair, bitterness). The mechanism of emotional induction comprises three stages: attraction and sympathy – deception and manipulation – rejection (defense, chaos).

3. The level of information stress (information density). The density of information influence (activity) is studied. Answering the question “Is the presentation of information commensurate with your usual speed of perception? (tempo, rhythm, frame rate, speed of speech, change of modality and formats)”, 78% of the respondents mentioned an increased level of stress (two times higher than usual), and the rest perceived this information as normal and familiar. A disproportionately high frame rate of the video sequence is noted: a fast change of frames, many geometric shapes and lines, fragmentation, contrast, splitting, “many complex impulses”, “the rhythm of the music is calm but visually difficult: I do not have time to examine everything”. Conclusion: the consumption of this information causes a high level of information stress. The threshold for perceiving information was exceeded by an average of two times.

4. The attitudes, values, and values-based and semantic structures of a media text. The consistency of a given media text with the participant’s worldview is examined. The emphasis is laid on images and semantic descriptions. Answering the question “Do the audio-visual series of images and metaphors agree with the content you comprehend? Do you experience cognitive dissonance? Does it contradict common stereotypes?”, 100% of the respondents claimed their traditional values were violated: “a sinner disguised as a saint, Orthodox ethical values are violated”, “there is a skull (a symbol of death) tattooed on the womb (female belly)”, “gender stereotypes are trampled on: men wearing skirts, leggings, and heels”, “an inverted cross”. Conclusion: these information products convey attitudes and values-based and semantic models that contradict moral norms (masculine – feminine), Orthodox ethics, and life-affirming, humanistic culture (the value of death).

Stereotyping “ideal” behavior (the formation of behavioral patterns and socialization strategies). The actions, intentions, and behavioral strategies of the character in a given video are examined. Answering the question “Are the strategies (patterns) of the characters’ behavior socially approved and safe?”, 100% of the respondents believed that it was a demonstration of negative behavioral stereotypes (“The behavior of characters is socially disapproved”, “destructive behavior is based on basic instincts”, “demonstration of dependent behavior”). Conclusion: stereotyping the role of the victim and dependent behavior, where violence and suppression of the will are the norm. The conclusion of focus groups is as follows: the content can be regarded as destructive and dangerous in conformity with the expert opinions and conclusions presented above.

## 5 Conclusions

Civic activism in the field of information security can be recognized as a phenomenon of alternative regulation and control over the information environment in modern society, not so much opposed to the state but stimulating its reactivity in relation to threats and risks. This readiness to consolidate civic structures to prevent risks of harmful information, combined with common opinions on the interpretation of various factors of content harmfulness, encourages the formation of a corresponding trend. The unified interpretation of the consequences of perceiving information products as negative might be associated with general personal characteristics, for example, special sensitivity or receptivity to even slightly abnormal behavior, which explains the standard feature of activism through the phenomena of indifference and altruism.

Negative states and feelings associated with the perception of content and characterized by high intensity are projected by civic activists onto all consumers of data products and especially onto vulnerable social groups (children). This circumstance relates to the mechanism of motivation. In addition to the common interpretation of risks, its components include awareness of the need to intervene in the control over the information space caused by the shortcomings of state legal regulation. In turn, this determines various forms and directions of civic activism, for example, monitoring risks, amending and clarifying existing regulations (especially regarding the formulation of harm criteria), tightening the legal liability of participants in the circulation of information, and state subsidies for activities to assess the harmfulness of information.

The development of civic activism in the sphere of information control directly correlates with the prevalence of individuals who have the psychological characteristics of responding to non-normative behavior, low stress resistance to active influence and low sensitivity, and common values and attitudes that contribute to the unified interpretation of risky and harmful content.

Therefore, further research should focus on the prevalence of these psychological characteristics among civic activists and its correlation with forms of active civic behavior.

## Commentary on open data access, ethics, conflict of interest

This scientific work does not relate to commercial products, therefore there is no conflict of interest. Access to audio recordings and transcribed expert interviews is available upon request to the authors of the article.

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