

# Show-Oriented Elections: The Technologies and Social Consequences

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# Show-Oriented Elections: The Technologies and Social Consequences

DOI: [10.19181/vis.2018.25.2.515](https://doi.org/10.19181/vis.2018.25.2.515)

**For citas:** Ezhov D. Show-oriented elections: the technologies and social consequences. Vestnik Instituta Sotziologii. 2018. No 25. P. 130–144. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19181/vis.2018.25.2.515>.

**Abstract.** This article, using the 2018 Russian presidential election as an example, examines the technologies used to align politics with spectacle. The author's opinions and conclusions are based on a theoretical foundation in the form of the "show-orientation" concept, it being a device inherent to modern civilization, associated with a universal distribution of mass media and means of mass communication. Current manifestations of media-biased social and political life are characterized by a universal distribution of traditional and innovative sources for broadcasting event reports. The rapid worldwide development of the internet serves as additional motivation for spreading show business technologies within the realm of politics. The use of show business technologies is especially pronounced during election cycles and electoral campaigns. The author highlights and thoroughly analyzes the following technologies of converging politics with spectacle: event promotion technology, personality promotion technology, targeted informational terrorization technology, performance creation technology and political hype technology. The convergence of politics and spectacle specifically manifests in the form of show business stars directly participating in a campaign, integration of media industry representatives into the electoral process as candidates, strategy for media coverage of electoral campaign topics, turning televised debates into a political show, as well as creating artificial hype around certain events and personas. The use of certain technologies was evident during the 2018 Russian presidential election campaign. As for the social consequences of show business attributes encroaching on the political process, and especially the election itself, they come down to the fact that this leads to the mass perception of traditional political values being undermined. The end goal of spreading show business technologies, given the context of show-orientation being a device of modern civilization, is an eventual simplification of how the public perceives objective reality.

**Keywords:** elections, election campaign, showization, mass consciousness, mass media, public policy, information terrorism, political performance, political hype

The enhanced role of mass media and means of mass communication in politics, trends accompanying the contemporary election process, and expanding range of technologies used in the course of election campaigns in the context of their impact on the electoral consciousness refresh interest in studies of elections in the context of show as a phenomenon and process. The real-world examples that give evidence of the convergence of politics and spectacle, which is systemic and cross-national by nature, are recorded in various manifestations as part of election campaigns held in contemporary states, including the Russian Federation. Therefore, identifying the specific features of holding negotiations in the context of show as objective reality being civilizational by nature appears to be relevant. The set goal is being achieved by analyzing the show elements integrated into the technological component of the contemporary election process, as well as by projecting potential social consequences of inclusion of show business technologies. The study object is the show as a phenomenon and process; the subject matter covers the technological component of the election process in the context of show and potential social consequences of inclusion of show business technologies. In producing judgments and conclusions, the author relies on the hypothesis built on the assumption that, in the present-day society, the show represents objective reality being civilizational by nature, against the background of which political subprocesses integrating show elements proceed, including the election process, the nature of which predetermines the direction of transformational trends in relation to the mass consciousness state. This article examines the symbiosis of politics and spectacle using the 2018 Russian presidential election as an example.

## Show as a phenomenon and process

In interpreting the show as a phenomenon and process, as well as in adapting it to the modern social discourse context, we proceed from the definition of the corresponding phenomenon provided by Yu. M. Romanenko and essentially coming to the following: “Show (a noun derived from the English verb “to show”; literal translation into Russian – (show-off, ostentation)) means a mindset inherent to modern civilization associated with a universal distribution of mass media and means of mass communication, an endeavor to make a parade of something, crowd manipulation; satisfaction of the exaggerated psychological need for spectacle, expansion of visual culture targeted to take layman’s fancy; continuous tracking and non-stop demonstration of extraordinary events (from natural disasters to of hostage taking by terrorists). The show itself represents information

terrorization – an extreme method of implementing the capabilities of the fourth estate (mass media). Two forms of show-oriented presentation aimed at drawing attention are distinguished – sensation and exclusive. As their motto, showers may use lyrics of the song by Freddie Mercury – The Show Must Go On (no matter what) [Romanenko 2003: 469].

Being civilizational by nature, the show covers all social spheres, including politics, and the conceptual basis of the phenomenon in question is apparently the show or performance being a specific variety of socio-political interaction interpreted in the form of a spectacle. For instance, according to O.A. Pichugina, “the publicity of politics has led to the very essence of politics losing its temporal and historical basics and, as of today, it represents the show, well-designed in terms of technology; at the same time, the transformation of emerging phenomena into a spectacle increases the degree of integration of the political sphere with social, economic, cultural and religious spheres” [Pichugina 2012: 101].

The politics show process is discussed in the papers by O.Ye. Grishin and A.D. Mitrofanova. The authors attribute the development of the corresponding process to the emergence and distribution of new advertising and PR technologies in the political and social spheres, determine its essence as using show business technologies during political communications, and highlight the most popular political show technologies: political performance, talk shows, comic shows, concerts, engagement of show business stars in election campaigns, and flash mobs [Grishin, Mitrofanova 2015a: 118–119].

The penetration of show elements into politics in terms of the show civilization concept is interpreted in the works by S.N. Ilchenko, who emphasizes the manipulative nature of show business technologies. In the context of positioning show business technologies as an outcome of extensive development and universal distribution of media resources, the author particularly stresses that “the show civilization does not guarantee adequate perception of TV broadcast products by the audience. Furthermore, in the political show business, the entire toolkit – visual, verbal and dramaturgical – is targeted to shifting the perception of a certain “picture” in the direction set by its creator” [Ilchenko 2016: 111].

Indeed, in the present-day world, a consumer of a product positioned in the politics market in the form of ideas, concepts, strategies and programs, inevitably faces the manipulative impact of the content transmitted by a wide range of technical facilities. Under the influence of the corresponding technological impact, political and electoral preferences are shaped and social priorities are transformed. In recent years, the mediatization of social and political life is distinguished by the presence of

not only traditional mass media (among which the television must be highlighted), but also a vast data array, the access to which is provided through the development of the World Wide Web. Therefore, we are inclined to consider the television and web sources as the priority distribution channels for show business technologies primarily due to the high level of demonstrativeness and visualization provided through the use of their information. In addition, it should be noted that show business technologies are inclusive in terms of their capabilities of penetrating into events and processes of various nature, which enables judging on the critical importance of their comprehensive scientific understanding as part of the defined theoretical and methodological context.

### Politics and spectacle during election campaigns: alignment technologies

In our opinion, one relevant manifestation of show of the world of politics in the present-day society is the use of several specific methods to align politics and spectacle that are extensively applied during election campaigns. For the purpose of notional classification, we are inclined to distinguish the following technologies: event promotion technology, personality promotion technology, targeted informational terrorization technology, performance creation technology (performance technology) and political hype technology (hype technology). The said varieties of technologies get widespread in the course of political sub-processes, in particular, through their transit from the mass culture.

It is expedient to interpret using the above mentioned and similar show business technologies during election campaigns as a current trend, which continuously expands in space. The events related to the election competition between the candidates for U.S. President in 2016 are still green in our minds. In the opinion of N.P. Popov, it combined political show elements and real discussions of issues relevant to the society [Popov 2016]. In the interest of research, and to illustrate the corresponding real practice techniques and methodologies, we suggest focusing on the examples noted during the 2018 Russian presidential election campaign.

The *event promotion technology* is fairly traditional and is based on the method of engaging show business, sports or other public figures being popular among the general population in positioning political processes to ensure the attention and interest of the broad public audience. This technology has been used as part of election campaigns for quite a long time and is widespread in the election competition. In particular, the use of this and

similar methods in the former USSR countries is analyzed in detail in the work by O.Ye. Grishin and A.D. Mitrofanova [Grishin, Mitrofanova 2015b].

During the 2018 election campaign, a substantial number of facts of show business stars' engagement were noted. First of all, we should specify the following models of stars' integration into the process in question: registration as confidants of candidates and participation in social advertising to attract voters to polling stations.

For instance, as an example illustrative of the first model, be it noted that confidants of candidate for President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin particularly included Valeriya (singer), S. Mikhaylov (singer), Timati (rapper) and other. The second model was most vividly implemented in the form of a picturesque video that went viral on the Internet with actor S. Burunov starring in it. The video story is about a man who originally had no plans to go to the elections, but is ultimately afraid to miss them after seeing a frightening dream: he wakes up and goes to the polling station. The video is jokey and comic by nature, but still, it is targeted to forming the audience's understanding of the fatefulness of presidential elections. From the technological point of view, considering the demonstrativeness, spectacularity and associative methods underlying the video, it fully reflects the specifics of elections in the context of show as a civilizational mindset and may be regarded as a variation of an efficient voter turnout project being viral by nature and created using show business technologies.

Engaging the Olympic champions (K. Kaprizov, Ye. Medvedeva) in the election campaign, primarily in order to improve voter turnout, also appears to be technologically smart in terms of positive impact on voters. The above mentioned fact takes on particular importance for the promotion of elections as a significant political event given the response to the negative information background for the Russian Federation when Russian athletes participated in the Olympics in Pyeongchang, in the context of achieving the goals aimed at strengthening the national identity.

The said technological methods are obviously aimed at promoting the very idea of elections and are focused on shaping a stable positive attitude to such event among voters at large.

The *personality promotion technology* in the context of show is based on the uncontested recognition of paramount importance of mass media influence in the present-day society and predetermined use of resources provided by the media industry, to achieve (improve) the effect of recognition of a particular person. The technology that was originally used by show business figures also takes root in public politics.

For instance, the participation of persons whose primary activities are associated by the mass consciousness with some other areas (show business and contemporary media) as candidates in election campaigns becomes typical. By the example of the 2018 Russian presidential elections, we clearly see the implementation of this trend in practice. In particular, the candidates included Lucky Lee (showman and President of Association of Strip-clubs of Russia), M. Kozlov (psychologist and Dom-2 TV project participant), Ye. Gordon (journalist and popular song writer), and K. Sobchak (TV host and “society girl”).

Their attempts to take part in the Russian presidential elections ended up differently, but one common feature was that each of the said persons when appearing on the media scene, even associated with the election process, was betting on the show. For instance, Lucky Lee who dropped out of the election race at the nomination stage is remembered for visiting the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (CEC of Russia) wearing provocative, inappropriate clothes, as well as for his addresses to voters in YouTube that contained statements, such as that the current authorities “have left for outer space”. M. Kozlov who was not eventually admitted to participate in the Russian presidential election is memorized for bringing blank papers in gift boxes to the CEC of Russia instead of filled in nominating petitions, as well as for his plans to create the “ministry of happiness”, legalize soft drugs, and introduce DOM-2 reality show hosts O. Buzova and K. Borodina into the Cabinet of Ministers. Ye. Gordon who withdrew from election on her own initiative is remembered for her slogan “Gordon for Women!” and the statement on her unwillingness to take part in the farce and show, which left the CEC of Russia puzzled. Among them, K. Sobchak made the most impressive progress during the election campaign: she got to its final stage and won 1.68% votes, according to the official data.

Considering the fact of K. Sobchak’s participation in the election and the result she achieved, we should make the following note. The nomination of K. Sobchak is generally in line with the public political space concept explicated by the total show phenomenon. However, against the background of other election competition participants (might-have-been, though) whose primary activities are associated with the show business and media, the “Sobchak Against All” campaign, which may be interpreted as a political and technological project, notwithstanding its external attributes common to the show in politics, in our opinion, pursued a more ambitious goal. The stratagem selected should be considered as a method of opposition to election boycott by the protest-inclined part of voters given that in 2011–2012 K. Sobchak was one of activists of the so called “white-ribbon” movement. This largely explains her direct participation as a candidate for President of the Russian

Federation in the 2018 election campaign, which, nevertheless, does not negate the generation of show elements during the election competition. In fact, considering the entire campaign of candidate K. Sobchak, from the nomination until the debates, in the context of the show phenomenon would be justified.

A general trend in applying the technology in question by media persons during the 2018 election is that they mostly purported to come into the spotlight another time in order to draw attention to themselves using such a high-level event, rather than to actually compete as candidates.

The *targeted informational terrorization technology* as per the definition provided above reflects the very essence of show. As previously noted, the show itself represents information terrorization, or, in other words, an extreme method of implementing the capabilities of mass media. Within the political discourse, the implementation of this technology draws on the advocacy principles contemplating the monopolistic nature of interaction between actors of the political and communication process. In the election process, this method is commonly used in its counter-version and is largely similar to the technology of spreading compromise materials in terms of content. From our point of view, two fundamental differences between the latter and the technology in question are the availability of a threshold in terms of the degree of aggression in presenting materials and a consistent line of psychological suppression of the main character in the information space. In this case, the information flow is targeted to potential recipients of the political product, i.e. voters, and its content is simplified to the maximum extent in order to ensure its successful comprehensibility by the general public. Information is distributed using the most common transmission facilities (primarily television). By contrast, the spread of compromising materials may be sporadic and targeted to a more specific audience segment. Given that the information terrorization technology is a tool of planned election projects, claims to present exclusive materials and contemplates a step-by-step elucidation of the key topic as part of consistent implementation of the predetermined scenario, positioning it as the very essence of show appears to be decisively correct. The ultimate goal of using this technology is to generate a stable perception of the image of the media project's main character in the minds of information recipients, in combination with achieving the manipulative effect with respect to them. Consistent circulation of information enables the audience to perceive the project planned using this technology as a full-fledged film series, watching which day by day becomes customary.

During the 2018 election campaign, the information terrorization technology was used in its entirety to implement the strategy of information positioning of P. Grudin, candidate



for President of the Russian Federation nominated by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, on federal TV channels. It was based on the presentation of activities of the candidate for the highest public office in his position of CEO of Sovkhoz Imeni Lenina CJSC in an explicitly negative way. The information campaign contemplated for engaging former employees of Sovkhoz Imeni Lenina CJSC that stated their own versions of what the presidential candidate's activities as part of exercising his duties of the Sovkhoz's CEO were like as the main characters within the segments integrated into the campaign. The appearance of the former employee of Sovkhoz Imeni Lenina CJSC that accused P. Grudinin during the TV debate broadcasted on Russia 1 TV channel as a confidant of candidate for President of the Russian Federation M. Suraykin nominated by the Communists of Russia party on the day before the voting date may be deemed the peak of show and culmination of information terrorization for manipulative purposes as part of P. Grudinin's positioning.

We regard the *performance creation technology (performance technology)* as a direct tool for generating a political show (given the subject matter of the study) in the context of a particular election campaign. Using this technology in practice provides for affecting voters through engaging the maximum visualization and show by means of using media resources. As its component, the performance technology may include the intended distraction of spectators from the key topic and shifting the emphasis to a secondary or unrelated issue using a wide range of means for attracting attention, the only limit to which is human imagination. It is important to note that this technology becomes increasingly common for election debates, which are, in turn, regarded by the scientific literature as a form of political technologies that integrates political show elements [Selishchev 2009], and its application is targeted to a relatively wide audience.

The 2018 election campaign was distinguished by plenty of performance technology applications, predominantly during TV debates. We have already mentioned the fact of participation of the former employee of Sovkhoz Imeni Lenina CJSC in the debate as a confidant of candidate M. Suraykin. It should be noted that the legend of her appearance on the TV air and events that followed, which eventually led to a fight between candidate M. Suraykin and M. Shevchenko, confidant of candidate P. Grudinin, broadcasted live fit into the context of the political performance technology being considered, because they keep with the best traditions of staging such acts to draw attention of the audience.

Another bright example of performance during TV debates between election participants is the verbal confrontation between candidates V. Zhirinovskiy and K. Sobchak that took

place previously and involved obscenities. It ended up with one candidate spilling water out of the glass at hand on the other candidate.

Be it noted that such performances may be both planned and spontaneous, but in either case, they pursue the same goal. In the context of show, such goal is to add visual appeal to a process seemingly being dull and uninteresting to a common spectator. Another issue is that such methods of on-air outburst during debates downplay the culture of holding them, as well as the overall culture of election competition. However, this problem is outside the scope of our study and requires to be considered separately.

The *political hype technology (hype technology)* is based on the idea of generating media excitement, often artificial, for certain events or persons, which are not interesting as such in most cases. The word “hype” is a neologism adopted from the English language, in which “hype” means annoying advertising, pure and simple, and may be interpreted as overblowing media furor out of nothing. Illustrative examples of hype are widely available in the current media discourse and are designed for mass audience. Among them, common are the cases of generating artificial excitement for little-known persons (before their integration into the media space) that become main characters of various talk shows (like “Pust Govoryat” (“Let Them Talk”) (Channel 1), Pryamoy Efir (“Live”) (Russia 1), etc.). Political hype, just like any other kind of hype, is normally initiated online and disseminated via informal channels in order to affect the target groups distinguished by unsettled electoral preferences. One specific feature of hype technologies is their short-term effect, and their primary goal is to produce a newsworthy event for discussion, which is insignificant in terms of content. In theory, the distribution of a modern phenomenon, such as hype, may be explained by the adaptation of the media virus concept, which was examined in detail by D. Rushkoff. In his opinion, media viruses are memes and meme complexes that change the perception of local and global events [Rushkoff 2003].

Hype as a direct outcome of show and distribution of web technologies did not leave out the 2018 election. In our opinion, treated as political hype should be videos and movies posted online by unofficial leader of non-systemic opposition A. Navalny not admitted to participate in the presidential election (due to having a criminal record), under the guise of investigations by the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) led by him. For instance, the online distribution of information and videos involving one Nastya Rybka (Anastasiya Vashukevich), who has become a tabloid star within a short time owing to web technologies, and whose revelations were aimed at discrediting the Russian elite, may be interpreted as a typical pre-election

spread of information targeted to a narrow group of persons with unstable electoral preferences tending towards extreme methods of expressing political protest, which is aimed at generating furor around topics, which the mass consciousness does not regard as fundamental.

One of the brightest examples of using hype technologies during the 2018 election campaign is the development of the “Grudinin’s whiskers” topic, which is likely to be transformed into an Internet meme. During his interview to Yu. Dud on February 6, 2018, candidate for President of the Russian Federation P. Grudinin promised to shave his whiskers live if he gets less than 15% of electoral votes. He took the second place with 11.77% and within one week (according to the information appeared) he delivered his promise by recording and posting the video of himself shaving his whiskers. Be it noted that in this case, we see the top class of post-election hype implemented in the objective context of show. Even if videos, pictures and news are fake, it is noteworthy that the topic, which has nothing to do in matter with the event, to which the main character of media messages disseminated was participant to, caused excitement and wave of discussions after the election was over, which is the goal of hype.

The dynamics of hype distribution in the society constitute grounds for producing a suggestion on the total hype in the future to particularly cover the world of politics. This trend stems from the continuous deepening of the show process, which is the object of this study.

## Social consequences of show

Considering the body of judgments described above, it is hard to escape the fair conclusion that elections and spectacle are inseparable in the context of modern civilizational mindsets. However, we should clarify that the technological cross-section we have provided only reflects the uppermost layer of their combination. In fact, the present-day society is involved in more profound processes that, when affected by media technologies, contribute to the transformation of public consciousness. Therefore, it appears to be important to make some notes on the social significance of the show.

It was the Roman satirical poet Juvenal who wrote that people dream of two things – bread and circuses. The present-day show civilization provides circuses to the fullest extent, as the society has an exaggerated need for them. Another issue is that technologies used by communicative process subjects are pronouncedly manipulative by nature and are geared towards stupefying information recipient’s consciousness, as a result of

which the corresponding profile of its future transformation is shaped. Revealed during the study is the permanently increasing integration of show elements into politics in general and elections specifically, which is implemented in the form of transit and adaptation of technologies traditional for the show business, and stems from the growing significance of information resources. It poses new questions with regard to the assessment of the extent of objectiveness and adequacy of what is going on by the general public.

Given the context of show that accompanies, the perception of modern political and election processes, we must state that, being objectively expressed, it contributes to the deflection of the traditional model of political values in the mass consciousness. The aim of introducing show elements into political and election campaigns is to simplify the absorption of objective reality by the audience.

Subject to the direct impact of mass media and web resources acting as show agents, the event promotion technology, personality promotion technology, targeted informational terrorization technology, performance technology and hype technology will remain the tools for shaping public moods in the future. This combination of methods and techniques is common for election campaigns and was directly used in the competition between candidates for President of the Russian Federation, the example of which is used for this article in order to achieve the set goal and cope with tasks contemplated by it. However, one must not rule out that in the foreseeable future we will likely witness the application of their more advanced modifications. This process is irreversible due to the absence of any alternative to the show as the mindset inherent to the modern civilization.

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