

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the role of social networks in shaping public opinion and the mechanisms of communicative influence. It argues that, amid the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies, social media platforms have evolved beyond mere tools of communication to become strategic instruments for directing social consciousness. Using Uzbekistan as a case study, the paper explores how social networks contribute to fostering civic engagement, environmental awareness, and moral values through initiatives such as *Green Space* and *BookChallenge*. The analysis traces the stages of public opinion formation and reviews key theoretical frameworks underpinning this process, including collective information theory, the “spiral of silence”, and network communication theories. The findings indicate that social networks play a crucial role in strengthening civil society institutions in Uzbekistan, enhancing the transparency of state policy, and positively shaping youth consciousness.

### **Keywords**

social networks, public opinion, communication, digital society, civic engagement, media literacy, information technologies, social campaigns, Green Space, BookChallenge, Uzbekistan.

Today, the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies exerts a profound influence on all spheres of human life, particularly socio-political processes. The Internet and social networks have emerged as the most powerful instruments of information exchange within society. In the Republic of Uzbekistan, the number of Internet users exceeds 20 million, with over 90 percent actively engaged on social networking platforms.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, social networks have become not only key channels of communication but also vital instruments for shaping public opinion, disseminating information, and promoting social campaigns.

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<sup>71</sup> Ministry of Digital Technologies of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2024). *Development trends in the digital sphere of Uzbekistan: Annual report*. Tashkent.

Through these platforms, diverse segments of the population have gained the ability to voice opinions, discuss societal issues, and propose social initiatives. This, in turn, contributes to the deepening of democratic reforms, the strengthening of civil society institutions, and the expansion of social consciousness. From this standpoint, analyzing the influence of social networks on public opinion and assessing their role as communicative tools within social campaigns constitutes an important and timely scientific endeavor.

The aim of this study is to identify the role and mechanisms through which social networks influence the formation of public opinion and to assess their effectiveness by analyzing selected social campaigns implemented in Uzbekistan. In the contemporary media environment, social networks have become an integral component of the global communication system. Compared to traditional mass media, they offer significant advantages in terms of speed, interactivity, and audience reach.

The principal communicative functions of social networks encompass the rapid dissemination of information, the exchange of opinions, and the facilitation of public debate. In addition, they serve as platforms for civic mobilization, image construction, and collective monitoring and analysis. As such, social networks act not merely as channels of information transmission but as dynamic environments in which social meaning, public perception, and civic identity are continuously negotiated and reshaped.

In the context of Uzbekistan, the most widely used social media platforms are Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. According to the *We Are Social* (2024) Digital Report, 53.2 percent of Uzbekistan's population are active social media users—a figure among the highest in Central Asia.<sup>72</sup> This widespread connectivity underscores the deep integration of digital communication into everyday life and highlights the growing importance of social networks as a locus of social interaction and information exchange.

The continuous flow of information in digital spaces draws increasing attention to the broader process of societal digitalization. While the digital transformation of society brings notable benefits, it also introduces challenges.<sup>73</sup>

Social networks exert a generally positive influence on public opinion, they also entail significant risks associated with manipulation, disinformation, and the dissemination of false or distorted content. Therefore, a systematic analysis of the mechanisms through which social networks shape public opinion is essential to

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<sup>72</sup> Digital 2024: Uzbekistan, We Are Social & Meltwater, February 2024 Report

<sup>73</sup> Systems Used in Information Flow Management. H. Mamarajabov, D. Shukurov and Sh. Eshchanov 2025

ensure their effective and responsible use in strengthening social stability and civic engagement.

Public opinion may be understood as the collective expression of social attitudes, evaluations, and perceptions that emerge over a specific period in response to socially significant issues. Its formation is a multidimensional process that integrates psychological, sociological, and communicative factors. Understanding how these dimensions interact within digital environments is crucial for assessing the transformative role of social networks in contemporary societies.

With the rise of social networks, the dynamics of public opinion formation have undergone a fundamental transformation. Information flows are no longer controlled by centralized media institutions but are instead generated, distributed, and reshaped interactively among millions of users. This shift has given rise to the notion of “*social media democracy*”, in which individuals actively participate in public discourse by expressing their views, either under their real identities or through chosen pseudonyms, thereby redefining the boundaries of civic communication.

In contemporary sociology, the process of public opinion formation is often conceptualized as progressing through three interrelated stages. The information stage marks the emergence and initial circulation of data or narratives concerning a social issue or event. The discussion stage follows, during which diverse users engage in debates, commentaries, and opinion exchanges that shape the interpretive framework of the issue. Finally, the consensus stage reflects the crystallization of a dominant viewpoint within the public sphere, signaling the consolidation of public opinion.

Across all these stages, social networks play a pivotal role. Their immediacy enables users to respond rapidly to new information – particularly through features such as “Stories” and short-form updates – which allows for real-time monitoring of public sentiment and shifts in collective mood.

The following theoretical frameworks are instrumental in explaining the mechanisms of public opinion formation in the digital era:

- The theory of mass communication emphasizes the classic model of information exchange, focusing on the interaction between the sender, the message, the communication channel, the receiver, and the resultant effect.
- The “spiral of silence” theory posits that individuals who perceive their opinions as being in the minority tend to withhold expression, particularly in public or online spaces, to avoid social isolation. On social networks, this dynamic

may lead either to the homogenization of viewpoints or, conversely, to counter-movements where marginalized opinions find alternative spaces for articulation.

➤ The network communication theory asserts that in the information society, the configuration of networked structures determines the dynamics of power, influence, and opinion formation. In this context, “managing information flows” effectively translates into “managing thought,” highlighting the strategic role of connectivity and data control in shaping collective consciousness.

Taken together, these theories elucidate how social networks have evolved into the primary arena for constructing *virtual public opinion* in today’s information environment. Users are no longer passive recipients of content but active participants and co-creators of meaning, capable of influencing social narratives and discursive trends on a global scale.

Between 2020 and 2024, Uzbekistan experienced a marked increase in the number and scope of social campaigns conducted through social networks. According to data from the Ministry of Digital Technologies, more than 450 social initiatives were implemented during this period across various online platforms<sup>74</sup>. These initiatives addressed a broad range of social priorities, including the promotion of healthy lifestyles, environmental protection, the defense of women’s and youth rights, as well as charitable and ecological activities. In these processes, social networks have functioned not merely as channels for information dissemination but as powerful instruments of civic mobilization and collective engagement.

One of the most prominent examples is the “*Yashil Makon*” (*Green Space*) campaign, initiated under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which aimed to foster environmental consciousness and promote a culture of tree planting. The campaign generated widespread participation and digital visibility, with more than two million posts shared on Telegram and Instagram under the hashtag #YashilMakon. As of April 9, 2024, over 127 million trees had been planted nationwide within the framework of this initiative<sup>75</sup>, effectively shaping public opinion toward environmental stewardship and sustainability.

Another noteworthy initiative is the “*BookChallenge*” campaign, launched by the Youth Affairs Agency to cultivate reading culture and intellectual engagement among young people. The campaign attracted over 500,000 participants via Telegram channels, resulting in the distribution of more than 30,000 books. Beyond its direct outcomes, the initiative contributed to strengthening the positive

<sup>74</sup> Ministry of Digital Technologies. (2024). *Development trends in the digital sphere of Uzbekistan: Annual report*. Tashkent.

<sup>75</sup> <https://kun.uz/news/2024/04/10/yashil-makon-bahorgi-mavsumida-127-million-tup-daraxt-ekildi-ekologiya-yazirligi#!>

informational environment of Uzbekistan's digital space by promoting constructive content and participatory civic discourse.

It is evident that *Instagram* and *Telegram* have become the most influential platforms in the formation of public opinion in Uzbekistan. Issues raised on these networks quickly evolve into topics of public discussion, thereby creating an essential feedback mechanism for state institutions and civil society organizations. Recent social campaigns in the country display several distinctive characteristics that highlight the transformative role of social media in civic communication.

**Speed of information dissemination:** messages and updates spread to wide audiences within seconds through social networks, ensuring immediacy and broad reach.

**Emotional engagement:** the use of videos, infographics, and personal stories enhances social sensitivity and empathy toward pressing issues.

**Collective action:** users perceive themselves as part of a community united by shared goals and values, which strengthens social solidarity.

**Feedback mechanisms:** public reactions and online discourse contribute to refining state policies and improving institutional responsiveness.

**Public-private collaboration:** partnerships among bloggers, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations are establishing a more sustainable framework for public opinion formation. Campaigns such as "*Yashil Makon*" (*Green Space*) and "*BookChallenge*" vividly illustrate how social networks can effectively reshape public attitudes and mobilize civic participation. These processes demonstrate that social media platforms in Uzbekistan now function not only as channels of information exchange but also as strategic instruments for cultivating social awareness and collective responsibility.

The findings of the conducted research demonstrate that social networks have become one of the most influential instruments for shaping public opinion in contemporary Uzbekistan. Social campaigns implemented through these platforms have played a decisive role in:

- enhancing civic engagement,
- reinforcing environmental, social, and moral values,
- promoting transparency in government policy, and
- positively influencing the consciousness and behavior of young people.

Given these outcomes, the development of scientifically grounded social marketing strategies for social networks, the strengthening of information ethics, and the improvement of media literacy represent urgent priorities. Future progress in this sphere will depend largely on consolidating institutional cooperation among government bodies, media organizations, and digital influencers. Such

collaboration can ensure the sustainable and responsible use of social networks as tools for public communication and social development.

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