**Opportunities for digitalization of volunteering of older people during the pandemic**

Konstantin Galkin

Sociological Institute of FCTAS RAS, St. Petersburg, Russia

**Characteristics of the problem**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with the widespread active development of information and communication technologies and the transfer of communication and interaction into the online space. Communication, work, and civic activism that took place on the web became the most important tools for countering the emerging socio-economic crisis and created opportunities for coordination for various groups. Researchers of volunteer activity note the importance of using digital technologies in the work of volunteers [Morrow 2020]. Compulsory measures to distance the older and minimize offline communication contributed to their feeling of isolation and loss, and the transition to digital volunteering made it possible to include in the community and a tool to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness [Basheva, Ermolaeva 2020; Briones et. al. 2021].

Digital technologies play a significant role in containing the COVID-19 pandemic. They make the diagnosis of the virus effective, contribute to the coordination of various services, obtaining the necessary advice, finding solutions, minimizing complications after the virus, and also set opportunities for digitalization of volunteering and helping people, which occurs at a distance, but plays an important role.

Volunteering for the older and for the older is considered as a separate group of volunteer activities [Parfenova 2020].

Digitalization of volunteering as a research concept is at the intersection of interdisciplinary boundaries. One of the priority approaches used by researchers is the concept of "digital humanism". He considers the practice of digital volunteering as one of the ways to broadcast and create new knowledge within the framework of the dissemination and use of digital technologies themselves [Kovaleva, Plashienkova 2020].

Digital volunteering can be defined as practices using the Internet to organize volunteer events, search and collect information, create a database of potential volunteers, and interact with volunteers [Silva 2018].

**Scientific novelty of the study**

In the article, I consider the digitalization of volunteering practices of the older as a new element of sociality. I also adhere to the position that digital volunteering is a special kind of activity, and not a continuation of offline volunteering, which is a scientific novelty, since in most studies digital volunteering is considered as a direction of offline volunteering. Although the phenomenon itself seems relatively new, the context of the pandemic contributes to the consideration of these practices from a different perspective. Separately, it should be noted the role of the older, who integrate into new practices and use devices and interfaces that are unusual for themselves, and volunteer assistance programs.

**Methodology**

The empirical base of the study was made up of data obtained during semi-structured interviews with older people living in St. Petersburg and in villages in the south of Karelia. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were collected, which, due to the epidemiological situation, were conducted online (n=20). As an additional method, the diaries of the older were analyzed, in which they recorded the peculiarities of their volunteer activities.

The age range of informants: from 65 to 73 years. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, informants were forced to stop offline activities and switch to digital volunteering, which consisted of various activities: searching for information, consultations for wards (mainly older and people with cancer), counseling and assistance on online volunteer platforms (for example, searching for certain medications or doctors-specialists).

**Results**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of volunteer organizations can be viewed in different ways. On the one hand, the pandemic situation has greatly disrupted their usual way of life, created new challenges, especially offline, on the other, the transition to digitalization has become an important prospect for development, it has allowed volunteers to remain involved in volunteer activities. There are also their own peculiarities, volunteering becomes more reflexive and episodic, which fits into the general contexts of the features of volunteering and becomes more noticeable and significant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is digital forms of support that are becoming the main types of volunteering for the older during lockdown periods. They had positive effects, namely, they helped to overcome exclusion, both for older volunteers and their wards, improved their dialogue, created a space for support and communication, interaction and overcoming feelings of isolation. The most successful and popular formats of the activities of older volunteers were work with the content of groups; communication and provision of necessary consultations; search for information about specialists and coordination of communication with them; search for statistical data on COVID-19 cases and treatment of this disease.

In addition to the obvious benefits, the process of digitalization of the activities of older volunteers has also opened up problems related primarily to the lack of "live" communication, lack of mobility opportunities.

**References**

Basheva O.A., Ermolaeva P.O. (2020) Cifrovizaciya deyatel'nosti rossijskih volonterov v chrezvychajnyh situaciyah: vliyanie pandemii ili samostoyatel'nyj trend razvitiya? [Digitalization of the Russian Emergency Volunteers’ Activities: A Pandemic Impact or an Independent Development Trend?]. *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya ekonomicheskie i social'nye peremeny* [Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes], (6): 376—402.

Briones R.L., Kuch B., Fisher Liu B., Jin Y. (2011) Keeping up with the Digital Age: How the American Red Cross Uses Social Media to Build Relationships. *Public Relations Review,* 37 (1): 37-43.

Kovaleva T.V., Plashienkova Z. (2020) Paradigmaticheskie izmeneniya ponyatiya gumanizma v ramkah kommunikacii cifrovogo obshchestva [Paradigmatic Changes in the Concept of Humanism in the Framework of Digital Society Communication]. *Medialingvistika* [MediaLinguistics], (7): 108-112.

Morrow J.A. (2020) Alone Together: Finding Solidarity in a Time of Social Distance. *Space and Culture,* 23 (3): 315-319.

Parfenova O.A. (2020) Vovlechenie pozhilyh v volonterskuyu i grazhdanskuyu aktivnost' kak instrument preodoleniya social'nogo isklyucheniya [Engaging Older People in Volunteering and Civic Activities as a Tool to Overcome Social Exclusion]. *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya ekonomicheskie i social'nye peremeny* [Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes], (4): 119-135.

Silva F., Proenсa T., Ferreira M.R. (2018) Volunteers’ Perspective on Online Volunteering - A Qualitative Approach. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing,* 15 (4): 531-552.