Innovative Media Technologies as a Way to Address Socially Important Issues

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Abstract

The article analyzes dysfunctions of mass media in modern society, states the communicative essence of problematization of the contradictions existing in society. The main purpose of the article is to analyze the functions of media communications concerning socially significant problems that reflect the contradictions existing in the society. As a part of structural and functional analysis, we have come to the conclusion that the problematization of social contradictions is considered as the result of interactions between individual and collective social subjects, taking place in the social environment that has a systemic character. The author identified nine basic functions of modern media sphere in the construction of socially significant problems The author summarizes the dynamics of civic self-organization in the course of collective definition of socially important topics and reveals the significant role of mass media in their collective representation and elaboration of the ways to resolve them. The author clues the importance of multivariance and unpredictability of the processes of social and political self-organization of citizens in the course of design of socially important issues of present-day society.

Keywords: Social problems; Mass media; Social structures; Social interests; Social contradictions; Communications; Mobilization of society; Communication technologies; Civil society; Policy

Introduction

In the social transformations of recent decades new contradictions, settlement of which requires information and communication configuration of social subjects' efforts, adequate to contemporary challenges, become more and more obvious. Modern media are not only the main source of information on the contradictions of the society functioning, but also communicative means concerning the development and settlement of these contradictions. Therefore,

Mediasphere determines the dominant trends in the public perception of socially important problems and the formation of attitudes of different social groups in respect of these problems.

Mediasphere in modern society is the main space, where socially significant range of problems is constructed, as currently it is the media that is not only the main source of public information on the contradictions of society functioning, but also communication means concerning the development and settlement of these contradictions [1]. It is Mediasphere which determines the dominant trends in the public perception of socially important problems, definition and formation of attitudes of different social groups in respect of these problems.

The approach to the analysis of functions (dysfunctions) of media sphere in solving socially important problems suggested in this article is based on the identification of the communicative nature of problematization of contradictions existing in society. By means of communications some or other social contradictions are involved in Mediasphere and become the subject of public attention.

Research Method

The methodological basis of this study is the concepts of modern researchers in sociology and political science, communication theory and journalism, which are developed on the basis of the spectrum of neo-institutional approach, structural functionalism, political science concepts of the public sphere, the theory of "participation journalism".

Neo-institutional theory of D. North [2] and researches of institutional prerequisites for collective actions [3-5] the concept of network self-organization of modern societies, stated in the works of M. Castells et al., as well as studies of special aspects of self-organization of virtual communities are important for theoretical researches of the scientific problematics.

Theoretical and methodological basis of this research includes the concepts of contemporary researchers in political science, communication theory, and journalism, which are developing on the basis of synthesis of the neo-institutional

approach, structural functionalism, synergy as the theory of self-organization, politological concepts of the public sphere, and the theory of "concerned journalism".

The important implication for theoretical studies of the set scientific problem have the neo-institutional theory by North and studies of the institutional collective action prerequisites [3,4,6] as well as the concept of network self-organization of contemporary societies, stated in works of M. Castells [7,8] and the studies of self-organization peculiarities of virtual communities [7].

Research methods: systemic, structural and functional and comparative-historical methods of theoretical analysis.

Results

Therefore it is necessary to agree with M. Poster and a number of other researchers that as an interactive communication system where information is reproduced in unlimited amounts, the Internet is instantaneously spread and radically decentralized, requires researchers to revise the existing ideas about the nature of politics, political institutions, and political technologies.

To reduce the interactive media only to a new and more effective tools of communication would be a mistake, because, as the poster says, there are fundamentally new forms of interaction that are at the basis of new virtual communities [9].

Interactive media provide various social actors with the necessary information by personalizing its contents, assuming a dialogue and feedback to exclude intermediaries [10]. Hence the possibility of a direct interaction of individuals with regulatory and government agencies in matters of not only providing and consuming public services, but also establishing control over production of public goods. As noted by A. Buehl [11], who studied the social changes in the digital era, the effects associated with many users allow them not only to interact with one another, but also to solve the issues collectively.

Interactive media is a multiple-valued concept used to describe new forms of communication of producers and consumers of content, for whom the factor of co-production of content based on digital technologies is of paramount importance. The social nature of interactive media is reflected in a widespread term "social media" [12]. A. Kaplan and M. Haenlein [13] define social media as a group of Internet applications based on the ideological and engineering capability of web 2.0, which allows users to create and share content.

In today's Russia the development of interactive media and their role in addressing socially important issues is notable due to three main trends. The first trend reflects the development of the Internet and broadening of accessibility to the Internet. The second trend is in developing the content of network-based projects. And the third trend reflects the development of ideas on the impact of interactive technologies on the social reality.

The current state of the interactive media sphere for Russian society is characterized by the following features. Formation of integral communication spaces, which are structured by interest groups (involving new users characterized by a variety of sociodemographic and geographic attributes) is rapidly.

The Russian Internet "is aging" and shows active promotion to the regions, including through the use of smartphones and mobile services [14].

It can be assumed that the increased Internet activity of Russian individuals is a kind of compensation for "atomization" of society. If so, the potential of interactive media in the integration of civil engagement around issues of social contradictions and addressing socially important issues is difficult to overestimate [15].

The essence of changes taking place in relation to development of interactive communication technologies consists is the transfer of communications in a virtual domain allowing to dramatically expand the scope of communication parties by releasing them from local territorial restrictions [3]. Virtual communities function as extraterritorial, thus entailing a number of very important repercussions, including based on the incorporation of varied local knowledge in a common project [16].

In this context, the concept of network describes the logistics of sophisticated communication systems overcoming geographic determinants (any network, from supermarket chains to a virtual interaction user network, strives to expand the geographic availability by simplifying communication between any nodes as much as possible) [17]. The effectiveness of building any socially significant issues in interactive media is also related to network activity of capital [18]. Interactive technology denuded the information nature of various forms of capital (financial, social, cultural, human, etc.). Capital represents information about resources that can be detected, shared and transfered. A mechanism of resources sharing lies at the basis of the network community making it easy to convert different forms of capital in social actions to solve the problem.

Discussion

Interactive communications allow to convey the local experience to another location and reproduce the already traversed path at minimum expense. Formation of standards and procedures by interactive communities can significantly facilitate the movement of intellectual capital.

Therefore, network-based interactions are also of economic importance. In the classical market concepts inadequate attention is paid to the issue of communication failures and informational "noise". These concepts operate mathematical models and theoretic objects such as the "invisible hand", "Pareto optimum", etc. Exemplarity of these models suggests

that information distortionlessly and quickly reaches all market participants, and it occurs in an infinitely short time. However, the market appears as a field of symbolic exchange with possible communication failures resulting in significant transaction expenses. Enhanced interactive social medium can significantly reduce the expenses associated with information exchange within broad social groups.

However, network effects do not change all the spheres of socio-political and economic life. There are social spheres where network effects are vital. These are financial markets, labor markets, many corporations, interest groups, information and communication systems, the mass media [19]. That is why the socially significant issues arising in areas that have already been network-based are as promptly and adequately read by interactive media as possible.

To the contrary, socially significant issues caused by contradictions in non-networked areas are to a lesser extent represented in the interactive media. Or, if similar issues are involved in the interactive media environment, the effectiveness of addressing such issues will be significantly lower, and in this case the interaction of interactive communities with regulatory and government agencies will be marked by communication barriers. As an example, there are numerous projects on corruption, transparency of elections, etc. Here, the network-based self-organization of individuals faces the authorities organized according to non-networked principles and integrated into the hierarchical relationship of the power hierarchy. The effects of such communication failures may be due not so much insurmountable qualitative difference in these areas, as the various stages of expansion and networked communications [20].

The institutional basis of the difference between the network-based and non-networked segments of society can be conceptualized on the basis of distinction by S. Kirdina of two "institutional matrices". "Matrix is an existing stable system of basic institutions that govern the operation of the related basic social spheres - economic, political, and ideological" [20]. Moreover, the author identifies two ideal types of qualitatively different institutional matrices aggregating a real diversity of social relations of society, i.e., X-and Y-matrices, characterized by complex forms of basic institutions (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Differences between "X" and "Y" Matrices.
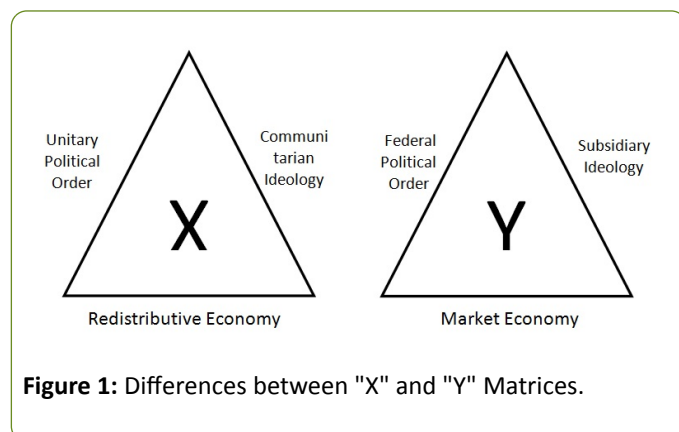
Next will be discussed the differences between the two institutional matrices "X" and "Y".

Institutional "X-matrix" is characterized by the following features:

- *In economics: presence of s*upreme qualified property, redistributiveness (accumulation and coordinated distribution of resources and benefits), cooperation, labor and cost reduction;

- In politics: administrative division, centralization-based hierarchical vertical power structure, assignability of leaders, unanimity and the possibility of settling disputes through the involvement of other institutions [6,21,22].

- In ideology: focus on collectivism, egalitarianism and order.

Institutional "Y-matrix" is notable for the following features:

- In economics: rule of private property, market exchange, competition, wage labor, focus on increased earnings;

- In politics: federal structure, governance and subsidiarity, elective principle, multiplicity of parties and reliance upon democratic majority, resolution of disputes through courts;

- In ideology: focus on individualism, stratified inequality, freedom.

S. Kirdina showed the dynamic combination of institutions of "X-matrix" and "Y-matrix" in today's Russian society. If shortly before the reformation period the Soviet society was dominated by outdated institutional forms of "X-matrix", with the institutions necessary for the institutional equilibrium existing mainly in the informal sector, including illegal forms of market exchange in Soviet society, the reform process of 1980-1990s attempted to put into practice the institutional elements of "Y-matrix". Further, since the late 1990s, Government's efforts are focused on adapting to the new conditions peculiar to Russian base institutional forms of "X-matrix" [21].

It can be assumed that the ratio of interactive and non-interactive media, the contraposition of which has acquired political subtext in Russia (as opposed to "TV Party" and "Internet Party"), reflects the fundamental contradictions between the two "institutional matrices." This assumption is based on the fact that various institutional forms will be determined as "basic institutions" in a given society. According to T. Zaslavskaya [23] "societal types of communities are determined by a small group of "basic institutions", the image and likeness of which are copied by the rest".

As noted by I. Dzyaloshinsky, developing the typology of institutions by S.G. Kirdina in relation to the media sphere, the media relating to a type of "X-matrix" are a means of public information and propaganda aimed at ensuring the influence of power on public opinion ("journalism of influence").

The media formed in the institutional environment of "Y-matrix" type are the form of "citizen journalism" or "journalism of participation." Value-driven modern Russian media business is the end product of norms and principles peculiar to both institutional matrices [24].

If we keep in mind the difference described by S. Kirdina, the conclusion can be drawn that the development of

innovative interactive media in Russia should be described as a trend associated with the expansion of influence of institutional "Y-matrix" forms.

Thus the ratio of network and non-network areas of Russian society and the possibility of interactive media structuring of socially significant issues (including behavioral stereotypes of communication parties) will reflect a complex combination of two institutional matrices described earlier.

In today's Russian society, the combination of those "institutional matrices" is predetermined by its transitional nature, as expressed in the logic of free market exchange combined with the logic of public administration regulation.

Both logics determine the difference in media design of socially significant issues. This difference becomes the subject of a series of focused panel interviews conducted by the author of the thesis in 2011-2013 to obtain qualitative data that characterize the attitude of the respondents to media structuring of socially significant issues.

Focused panel interviews were conducted for the groups of interviewees divided by type of media activity, as well as by secondary sociodemographic attributes (age, education, field of activity) for the research purposes.

As the research objective of the focus groups, the need was to identify differences in attitude towards socially significant issues constructed in non-interactive and interactive media, including an analysis of willingness to participate in settlement of the issues discussed, relation of these issues to personal interests of interviewees, study of peculiarities of credibility to information sources or communication partners.

To participate in focused interviews, interviewees were selected in a random manner, and they were grouped on the basis of a preliminary questionnaire survey seeking to identify the type of interviewee's media activity. Interactive type of media activity included interviewees using the Internet as a primary source of information among all possible sources of information in the majority of cases. For these purposes, the preliminary questionnaire of focus group participants came through the possession of the personal computer and Internet access, as well as frequency and purpose of Internet experience.

Six focus groups were formed each featuring 9 to 12 interviewees.

The study found significant differences in relation to the socially significant issues, in the interactive and non-interactive social media, respectively. In particular, the study of television audience on the issue of coverage of issues such as domestic violence, rectification of the consequences of forest fires and floods, found a relatively high degree of indifference to the issues discussed and unwillingness to participate in their settlement. Focus group participants explained indifference and inactivity in relation to discussion of socially important issues as follows:

- This perspective is indeed not so significant and attracts undue attention to the detriment of other equally important issues;

- The issues discussed have no solution, or at least such solution does not depend upon the efforts of individuals;

- Victims are to blame themselves or their suffering is the outcome of recompense, therefore, helping them does not make sense;

- There are currently too many similar problems and everyone should focus on solving their own problems, rather than trying to help the world ("I have my problems to the brim," " I prefer not to look like scenes");

- Credibility to the media is undermined, and the discussed perspective has indirect relation to reality ("we are unlikely to discover the truth").

Thus, the motives of indifferent attitude of interviewees to the socially significant issues covered in traditional media are quite conscious and cause social anomie and alienation. Moreover, the findings of focus groups support the hypothesis that the interviewees, who initially did not have a positive attitude to the victims of a problem, acquire more stable negative attitude to both victims of the problem and discussion of the problem situation as affected by repetition of information about the issue in the media sphere.

Conclusions

Another part of the interviewees, who initially treated the victims of a problem situation with compassion, shows a more diverse evolution of their attitude to the given issue: from the loss of interest due to the sheer repetition of information to frustration, loss of sensitivity and apathy. Increase in empathic attitude towards the victims and the desire to help was a bit rarer among the initially positively disposed participants of focus groups. However, here again the continued delivery of negative information caused a decrease in sensitivity to the problem. Moreover, the interviewees often laid the blame for their choice of evasion strategy on TV journalists and authorities.

Different results were obtained in focus groups to unite interviewees whose media activity is focused on interactive media. The position of those interviewees is more subjective, in the assessment of socially significant issues they are less likely to refer to the opinion of authoritative sources and are more likely to deploy the concept of "interest" ("This situation is of interest for me, and I am ready to take part in..." or "I find this issue not interesting, since it does not appeal to me directly").

The second difference is the focus of users of interactive media on technification of addressing socially significant issues. This is particularly reflected in positive interviewees' assessment of interactive projects aimed at self-organization of individuals in addressing socially significant issues and, on the contrary, negative evaluation of the limited use of interactive media by the authorities.

And the third difference is the peculiarities of credibility of interviewees focused on interactive media. Information distributed by interactive media has a higher level of credibility, although the overall level of critical attitude towards information for interviewees focused on interactive media is higher than for those focused on traditional media. Accordingly, it appears that credibility is relatively high to other users who are in the same groups with interviewees organized in social media. The interviewees explain their relatively high credibility by common interests, positive experience of interaction and availability of standard rules and procedures to block the activity of offenders.

Focus groups, therefore, support the point that the development of socially significant issues in interactive media will have a more pronounced anthropocentrism and humanism, as it is quite natural for this type of media. Whatever institutional and information networks may be discussed, the front-line player turns out to be just an active individual (it is not fortuitous that M. Castells (1997), for example, refers it to "a networked individualism").

Therefore, in a blurred institutional environment and critically low radius of credibility typical for modern Russian society, restoring normal functioning of sociality can be stimulated by the development of interactive media environment to create the institutional and organizational conditions for changing the life of a particular individual involved in interactions with others.

The quality of social relations, transparency and stability of cooperation procedures, expanding of the radius of credibility hereupon are the conditions that the interactive media allow to create to strengthen the institutional framework of media structuring and find solutions of socially significant issues.

In addition to strengthening the institutional framework, each interactive project offers organizational forms of emerging interactions that are not merely reduced to a virtual domain, but associated with real formation of social groups and communities.

We can assume that interactive media are able to transform the life cycle of perception of socially important problems due to their ability to establish social interactions around the problems discussed. The stability of these interactions will depend on the ability of interactive media to show and reconcile the interests of participants in the discussion of this problem.

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