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LEAD ARTICLE

Are online influencers trustworthy? The virtual audience's response to online influencers' endorsement in China

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Abstract
Although 'go-social' becomes an important part of the public's daily life in China, online users suffer from information overload increasingly when they get exposed to different online contents shared through various social media communication channels today. To compete on digital audience's attention and increase online communication effectiveness, online influencers are commonly employed by communication practitioners. However, questions like how powerful online influencers are and to what extent digital audience can be motivated by online influencers have not be answered appropriately. Hence, a 2x2 online experiment was used in this pilot study to identify how the use of online influencer endorsement with various social powers affected virtual audience's response toward the message and their decision-making. A total of 86 participants were voluntarily recruited from mainland China. The study indicated that the use of referent power and expert power could positively predict virtual audience's perception toward the promotional message. However, if online campaign would like to call for action and influence audience's behavior, the use of online influencers with expert power could be more effective than that with referent power.

Keywords
Online communication, online influencers, opinion leaders, electronic word-of-mouth, referent power, expert power, communication effectiveness.

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Introduction

Social media have been widely used by the young, especially children in global scale (Advertising Education Forum, 2012). Facing the significant 'go-social' trend contributed by the public (Tuten & Solomon, 2014), communication practitioners gradually put the marketing budgets to the online communication and promotion. Besides, social media is a critical component of corporate internal and external communication strategy, and an effective tool to do brand management (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Studies prove that digitalization and the use of social media could positively benefit company's business growth and performance when competing in the market (Galloway, 2007; Shideler & Badasyan, 2012; Spurge & Roberts, 2005).

Compared with traditional media, social media communication is more effective thanks to its sticky nature (Confos and Davis, 2016; Montgomery & Chester, 2011). Many studies have been conducted to identify the relatively most effective digital communication channels and formats used to influence digital audience's involvement and their buying behavior (Dias & Agante, 2011; Hudson & Elliott, 2013; Redondo, 2012; Soontae & Kang, 2014), and the differences between traditional media communication and social media communication (Hang & Auty, 2011; Montgomery & Chester, 2009). However, most extant studies were considered from the communication vehicle's and technology's perspective, and fewer attention has been paid to the interaction between a source and receiver in the online communication process. Besides, questions like how powerful online influencers are and to what extent digital audience can be motivated by online influencers have not be answered appropriately. Hence, to bridge the research gap, this pilot study was conducted and 2x2 online experiment was employed to test how the use of online influencer endorsement with various social powers affected virtual audience's response toward the message and their decision-making.

Literature review

Social power and online influencers

Different online influencers have diverse social powers. The concept of power is hand in hand with leadership theories (Shafritz et al., 2015) and commonly discussed in organizational communication setting (Chiu et al., 2017). Social power with five levels was first developed by French and Raven in 1959, namely coercive power, reward power, legitimate power, expert power and referent power (Shafritz et al., 2015). Among them, coercive power and reward power are contradictory to each other. The first one focuses on the fear of punishment while the second one highlights the desire of incentives. Legitimate

power means designated power assigned to that position, which is related to the corporate or bureaucratic hierarchy, while the remaining two emphasize the perceived knowledge image and perceived admiration. The social power concept has been widely used in organizational communication studies such as employer-employee relationship and leadership (Chiu et al., 2017; Gülgöz & Gelman, 2016), interpersonal relationship (Narayanan et al., 2013), social dominance (Hawley et al., 2009), etc. However, previous studies barely applied and tested the impact of social power on online communication effectiveness. To fill in this literature gap, social powers, particularly reference power and expert power, were introduced to this project in that the first three powers like coercive, reward and legitimate power are closely tightened to organization communication between employers and employees thanks to the organizational hierarchy, and they are not applicable to online promotion between influencers and audience.

Influencer marketing was closely related to word-of-mouth as both of them relied on the referral's recommendation and endorsements to expand the impact of message dissemination and to improve the communication effectiveness (Gladwell, 2002; Rogers, 2003). With the development of the Internet, the use of influencer marketing has been expanded to digital world (Rhoda, 2014). Influencers were also named as opinion leaders with stronger public reputation and higher public familiarity than common people (Meng & Wei, 2016). The use of influencer marketing could boost the conversation between the source and online users (Roberts, 2010), and even influence the online users as well as their decision-making (Padgett, 2016). Although extant research explained the overall impact of online influencers on communication effectiveness, few studies have been conducted to identify and test those factors affecting the online influencer's communication effectiveness such as social power. To fill in this literature gap, social power, particularly expert and referent powers, was introduced to this study. Generally, expert and referent powers were grouped as personal power whereas the remaining three powers were viewed as formal power (Robbins & Judge, 2013). This study only analyzed the impact of personal power instead of formal power as few online influencers have formal power entitled by formal organization or bureaucratic hierarchy, and most of them are well-known and reputational due to their expertise and likeability.

To analyze the impact of social power on online influencers' endorsement, celebrities and industry experts were used in the pilot study. Compared with self-branded influencers who are online influential people doing personal branding by themselves, celebrities and industry experts have obvious public familiarity and visibility thanks to frequent media exposure and professional

image development and management done by public relations team. Besides, both celebrities and industry experts were assumed to possess expert power and referent power, and public are more familiar with public figures. According to Daniel Boorstin's publication titled *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America* (1971), celebrities are more likely to be symbolized by their name rather than their performance and contributions in celebrity industry. Industry experts refer to the well-known people with professional skills and intelligence like doctors. The reason why celebrities had expert power was that expertise was perceived valid assertions (Erdogan, 1999). It was about perceived expert image in target audience's mind instead of the knowledge possessed by the endorsers (Erdogan, 1999). Previous study done by Speck, Schumann and Thompson (1988) showed that expert celebrities could positively enhance audience's buying intention. As to the referent power, both celebrities and industry experts were assumed to possess that power as long as target audience liked them (Tom et al., 1992). To test the online communication effectiveness, the following two questions were raised:

Research question 1: Can the use of online influencers with referent power or expert power affect virtual audience's attitude toward the communication message?

Research question 2: Can the use of online influencers with referent power or expert power affect virtual audience's behavioral intention?

Computational trust and persuasive communication

One of the key purposes to use online influencers is to ensure that messages could go viral among target audience. On the Internet, viral marketing was about using e-WOM to customize the communication message and enhance the persuasion effectiveness among virtual audience (Cho et al., 2014; Porter & Golan, 2006). The identification of qualified influencers could improve the communication outcome, while source trust was defined as a key element affecting the viral marketing performance (Cho et al., 2014). Chaiken (1980) also pointed out that information receivers evaluated the information value based on the perceived trust about the information sender. The perceived social trust could influence the audience attitude (Sussman & Siegal, 2003) and even their behavioral intention (Dholakia, 1987). Recent study done by Lin, Spence and Lachlan (2016) proved that authority with expertise was highly credible on the Internet. Fogg and Tseng (1999) even tested that authority was a key part of computational trust and credibility. Based on the prior studies, we assumed:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the perceived expert power online influencer has, the stronger computational trust could be.

Hypothesis 2: There is significant interaction between perceived computational trust on influencer with expert power and (a) virtual audience's attitude toward the message as well as (b) their behavioral intention.

Besides, Busch and Wilson (1976) used to conduct an experiment to test salesperson's referent power and expert power, and the results claimed that referent power and expert power were significantly related to buyer's perceived trust on the salesperson. However, no existing studies tested whether identical impact, especially impact created by referent power, could be applied to online communication. Hence, the following research questions were proposed and answered in this study:

Research question 3: Is there significant interaction between the perceived referent power employed by online influencers and computational trust?

Research question 4: Is there significant interaction between perceived computational trust on influencer with referent power and (a) virtual audience's attitude toward the message as well as (b) their behavioral intention?

The other reason why marketers and communicators have been using online influencers to do promotion is to achieve persuasion. According to Powers (2007), persuasion was about influence. Current persuasion studies could be divided into three stages, namely persuasion effectiveness, identification of individual factors that could influence message processing, and interaction effect created by multiple determinants in message processing (Clark, 2014). Persuasion was also considered as a way to affect targets' will including attitude and even behavior (O'Keefe, 2012). Messages with different persuasion intentions had significantly diverse impact on participants' behavior. For example, a study done by Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) proved that explicit persuasion intention was more likely to encourage participants to take action. Based on this research finding, hypotheses 3 was proposed.

Hypothesis 3: The use of explicit persuasion intention is more effective than that of implicit persuasion intention in general.

Methodology
Sampling method

Convenience sampling was used in this study. Totally, 86 participants were voluntarily recruited from mainland China to do this pilot study. Among them, 60.5% of participants were aged from 18 to 24, followed by participants aged 25-34 which accounted for 22.1%. Totally, 36 males (41.9%) and 50 females (58.1%) were involved into this study. 80.2% of the individuals had a bachelor's degree or above.

Talking to their social media usage behavior, 64 participants claimed that they were using Weibo, the alternative of Twitter in China, when the online

experiment was conducted. 25.6% of participants mentioned that they did not use Weibo at the moment they did this online experiment. For participants with Weibo usage habit, 21 participants pointed out that they used Weibo everyday while 19 individuals used Weibo less frequently (once per week). Only 17 participants were Weibo heavy users. Among them, 10 participants consumed Weibo contents once per half day while the remaining 7 participants read Weibo posts once per hour.

Procedure

To test online influencers' communication effectiveness, 2x2 experiment was conducted, including 2 types of online influencers and 2 types of messages with or without explicit persuasive intention. Totally, 4 experimental stimuli were designed and manipulated, namely celebrity endorsement with explicit persuasive intention, celebrity endorsement with implicit persuasive intention, industry experts' endorsement with explicit persuasive intention, and industry experts' endorsement with implicit persuasive intention.

Four experimental stimuli were evenly and randomly assigned to 86 participants. Before the experiment conduction, all participants were asked to read the informed consent statement carefully. For those individuals voluntarily participating in the online experiment, each of them was asked to follow instructions to read one experimental stimulus, and then structured as well as close-ended questions were raised to test their responses. The measurement of the online experiment contained four key parts including manipulation check relating to online influencers' familiarity and persuasive intention, participants' attitude toward the message and endorsed event as well as organization, questions indicating participants' behavioral intention, and questions to collect participants' basic demographic information.

The experimental stimuli were developed on the Sina Weibo's mobile version as Sina Weibo has been widely used in China. It was even reported to have 361 million active users each month as of June 2017 and 92% of penetration rate was contributed by mobile devices (Xinhua, 2017).

As to the experimental scenario, target was put on the public affair (protecting the natural environment), and the latest online communication campaign in China titled 'Protecting Endangered Chinese Pangolin', which was organized by non-profit organization – The Nature Conservancy, was chosen before the experiment was conducted in late October, 2017. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) was one of the leading conservation organizations around the world. The two manipulated online influencers were Jack Ma and Jackie Chan. Both of them have similar fan base on Weibo, the first with 22.54 million

fans and the second with 29.74 million fans. Besides, Jack Ma was the Lead Founder of TNC while Jackie Chan was the campaign ambassador. Although the campaign theme and online influencers were selected from the real life, the experiment messages were crafted and manipulated by the author in this study. Two types of messages were designed with either explicit or implicit persuasive intention. Both messages highlighted the campaign theme at the beginning with application of hashtag (#Protecting Endangered Chinese Pangolin) to create a topic on Weibo platform and used informational appeal to describe the hard situation where Chinese pangolin suffered. The difference between the two messages was that the one with obvious persuasive intention emphasized 'call for action' at the end of Weibo post by encouraging target audience to not get involved in the Chinese pangolin-related business deal.

Talking to the measurement of expert power and referent power, revised scale of French and Raven's social power developed by Hinkin and Schriesheim (1989) was used in this study. Totally, four items were employed to test the online influencer's expert power while 5 items were used to evaluate the online influencer's referent power. As to the perceived expert power, 7-point scale measurement was used to test how participants perceived the influencer's expert power (Cronbach's = .91, M=4.67), and the following four items were tested: influencer's professional knowledge, influencer's relevant personal experience, influencer's reasonable suggestions, and influencer's credibility in specific industry. As to the perceived referent power, 7-point scale measurement was also employed to test the perceived referent power (Cronbach's = .89, M=4.82) from five aspects including sense of approval, sense of personal acceptance, sense of self-importance, perceived reliability and likeability, perceived respect.

Experimental manipulation

Online influencers' familiarity and the message's persuasive intention were manipulated in this study. Manipulation check relating to influencer's familiarity was performed by participants indicating on 7-point scale (1= extremely unfamiliar, 7= extremely familiar): 'How familiar are you with the Weibo user who sent the post to you?' (M= 4.84, SD= 2.15). Among 86 participants, 38.4% of them claimed that they were extremely familiar with the online influencers used in this online experiment while 12.8% of participants mentioned that they were extremely unfamiliar with the two online influencers used in the study.

Moreover, manipulation check for persuasive intention was tested on 7-point scale (1= extremely weaker, 7= extremely stronger): 'How persuasive is the Weibo post you read?' (M= 4.93, SD= 1.34, p= .718). *Table 1* showed there was no significant persuasive difference between the two types of messages

used in this study. The message that author assumed to be explicitly persuasive (M= 4.89, SD= 1.40) received similar level of participants' response on the message persuasiveness like the one assumed to be implicitly persuasive (M= 5.00, SD= 1.24).

Table 1

Results of manipulation check on persuasive intention (N=86)

	Message persuasiveness (Mean)
Message with explicit persuasive intention	4.89
Message with implicit persuasive intention	5.00
Message with different persuasive intention (1= explicit persuasive intention; 2 = implicit persuasive intention)	4.93
N	86
se (of estimate)	.144

*$p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Independent variables

Table 2 reflected that there was no significant power difference in the two selected online influencers. As to the referent power, selected celebrity (M= 4.77, SD= 1.13) and industry expert (M= 4.88, SD= 1.49) has similar perceived referent power (t (84) = -.391, p=.697), and same as the perceived expert power (t (84) = -1.398, p=.166). Selected celebrity (M= 4.47, SD= 1.36) was perceived as professional as selected industry expert (M= 4.91, SD= 1.51).

Table 2

Results of manipulation check on influencer's power difference (N=86)

	Reference power (Mean)	**Expert power (Mean)**
Selected celebrity	4.77	4.47
Select industry expert	4.88	4.91
Power difference	4.82	4.67
N	86	86
se (of estimate)	.140	.156

*$p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Dependent variables

In this study, communication effectiveness was tested on two levels, attitude toward the message and behavioral intention. 7-point scale measurement was used to test how participants perceived the message (Cronbach's = .95, *M*=5.70), and the following six items were tested: extremely bad – extremely good, extremely negative – extremely positive, extremely dislikeable – extremely likeable, extremely disagreeable – extremely agreeable, extremely insincere – extremely sincere, extremely useless – extremely useful. Scale questions (1= definitely no, 7= definitely yes) were also applied to test behavioral intention (Cronbach's = .96, *M*=4.91), and the following four aspects were covered in the experiment: whether you will continue to follow updates relating to the campaign, whether you will participate in this campaign, whether you will invite others to follow the updates relating to this campaign, and whether you will invite others to participate in the campaign.

Data analysis and results

To analyze the data, regression analysis, Pearson correlation, and PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) were used to test the moderation model proposed in this study.

The power of online influencers and communication effectiveness

In order to answer research question one, regression analysis was employed to test the relationship among referent power, expert power, and virtual audience's responses to promotional message in affective level. According to *Table 3 Model 1*, the whole model explained 51% of the variance of virtual audience's attitude toward the communication message (F (49, 48) = 42.41, R = .51, $p < .001$). Online influencer with perceived referent power (b = .356, $p < .01$) and online influencer with perceived expert power (b = .227, $p < .05$) could positively predict the way virtual audience perceived the promotional message. Online influencer with perceived referent power (Tolerance = .32, VIF = 3.16) and online influencer with perceived expert power (Tolerance = .32, VIF = 3.16) didn't have multicollinearity effects of independent variables in this study. Results indicated that both referent power and expert power were significant predictors of audience's attitude toward the promotional message.

Research question two was about whether referent power and expert power were significant predictors of virtual audience's behavioral intention. *Table 3 Model 2* showed that expert power had an impact on virtual audience's behavioral intention (b = .58, $p < .001$) while referent power could not predict audience's behavioral intention (b = .044, p = .76). The whole model explained 47%

of the variance of virtual audience's behavioral intention toward the promotional message (F (67, 76) = 36.29, R = .47, p < .001). Online influencer with perceived referent power (Tolerance = .32, VIF = 3.16) and online influencer with perceived expert power (Tolerance = .32, VIF = 3.16) didn't indicate multicollinearity problem in this study.

Table 3

Regression results of perceived online influencers' power and communication effectiveness

	Model 1: Attitude toward message	**Model 2: Behavioral intention**
Perceived referent power	.356** (.112)	.044 (.142)
Perceived expert power	.227* (.101)	.580*** (.128)
Constant	2.920	1.986
N	86	86
se (of estimate)	.32	.400
R^2	.51	.47

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

Perceived power and computational trust

Hypothesis one and research question three were developed to analyze the relationship between online influencer power and perceived computational trust. H1 predicted that expert power was positively correlated with the perceived computational trust in virtual audience's mind while research question three would like to figure out whether there was correlation between referent power and computational trust in virtual world. *Table 4* indicated that both referent power and expert power were positively associated with perceived computational trust. Compared with expert power (r = .56, p < .01), referent power (r = .62, p < .01) had a stronger relationship with perceived computation trust. Hence, H1 was proved whereas research question three was answered.

Table 4

Pearson correlation results on influencer power and computational trust (N=86)

		Referent power	Expert power	Computational trust
Referent power	Pearson correlation	1	.827**	.618**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
Expert power	Pearson correlation	.827**	1	.555**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
Computational trust	Pearson correlation	.618**	.555**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

Moderation analysis for computational trust

To test H2, PROCESS was used in this study to evaluate the moderation impact of computational trust on expert power and virtual audience's attitude and behavioral intention. *Table 5.1* and *5.2* reflected the results. When computational trust was low, there was a non-significant positive relationship between use of expert power and virtual audience's attitude toward the communication message (b = .20, 95% CI [-.05, .44], t = 1.58, p = .12). At the mean value of computational trust, there was a significant positive relationship between use of expert power and virtual audience's attitude toward the communication message (b = .29, 95% CI [.13, .45], t = 3.53, p < .001). When computational trust was high, there was also a significant positive relationship between use of expert power and virtual audience's attitude toward the communication message (b = .39, 95% CI [.21, .56], t = 4.47, p < .001). The whole model explained 56% variance of audience's attitude towards promotional message, but there was no significant interaction impact between computational trust and perceived expert power on audience's attitude (R = .56, F (3.00, 82.00) = 42.50, p = .16).

Table 5.1

Regression results for moderation analysis for computational trust on expert power and attitude (N=86)

	b	***SE B***	***t***	***p***
Constant	5.62 [5.42, 5.82]	.10	54.67	$p < .001$
Computational trust	.35 [.16, .53]	.09***	3.75	$p < .001$
Expert power	.29 [.13, .45]	.08***	3.53	$p < .001$
Computational trust x Expert power	.07 [-.03, .17]	.05	1.43	$p = .16$

Note: $R^2 = .56$.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

Table 5.2 showed the regression results for moderation analysis of computational trust on audience's behavioral intention. When computational trust was low, there was a significant positive relationship between use of expert power and virtual audience's behavioral intention ($b = .45$, 95% CI [.17, .73], $t = 3.20$, $p = .002$). At the mean value of computational trust, there was a significant positive relationship between use of expert power and virtual audience's behavioral intention ($b = .55$, 95% CI [.38, .72], $t = 6.42$, $p < .001$). When computational trust was high, there was also a significant positive relationship between use of expert power and virtual audience's behavioral intention ($b = .66$, 95% CI [.47, .84], $t = 6.98$, $p < .001$). The results told us that the relationship between expert power and audience' behavioral intention would emerge no matter the level of computational trust was low, average or high. In other words, the whole model explained 48% variance of audience's behavioral intention toward promotional message, but there was no outstanding impact of perceived expert power on audience's behavioral intention under the moderation of computational trust ($R^2 = .48$, F (3.00, 82.00) = 25.48, $p = .21$). Based on *Table 5.1* and *5.2*, H2 was rejected.

Table 5.2

Regression results for moderation analysis for computational trust on expert power and behavior (N=86)

	b	*SE B*	*t*	*p*
Constant	4.83 [4.61, 5.05]	.11	43.94	$p < .001$
Computational trust	.08 [-.13, .28]	.10	.75	$p = .46$
Expert power	.55 [.38, .72]	.09***	6.42	$p < .001$
Computational trust x Expert power	.08 [-.04, .19]	.06	1.26	$p = .21$

Note: $R^2 = .48$.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

Moreover, PROCESS was applied to research question four to identify whether there was a significant interaction impact between perceived computational trust and influencer with referent power on (a) virtual audience's attitude toward the message and (b) their behavioral intention. *Table 6.1* indicated that moderation effect of computational trust on referent power and virtual audience's attitude was not shown up by a significant interaction effect ($b = .06$, 95% CI [-.02, .14], $t = 1.42$, $p = .16$).

Table 6.1

Regression results for moderation analysis for computational trust on referent power and attitude (N=86)

	b	*SE B*	*t*	*p*
Constant	3.72 [1.72, 5.73]	1.01	3.69	$p < .001$
Computational trust	.03 [-.32, .38]	.17	.17	$P= .86$
Referent power	.04 [-.48, .56]	.26	.15	$p = .88$
Computational trust x Referent power	.06 [-.02, .14]	.04	1.42	$p = .16$

Note: $R^2 = .55$.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

Table 6.2 described the results for moderation effect of computational trust on referent power and virtual audience's behavior intention. The moderation effect was not of significance (b = .12, 95% CI [-.00, .24], t = 1.98, p = .05). When computational trust was low, there was a significant positive relationship between use of referent power and virtual audience's behavioral intention (b = .28, 95% CI [.06, .50], t = 2.51, p = .01). At the mean value of computational trust, there was also a significant positive relationship between use of referent power and virtual audience's behavioral intention (b = .36, 95% CI [.20, .52], t = 4.48, p < .001). When computational trust was high, significant positive relationship between use of referent power and virtual audience's behavioral intention could be identified, as well (b = .44, 95% CI [.28, .61], t = 5.31, p < .001).

Table 6.2

Regression results for moderation analysis for computational trust on referent power and behavior (N=86)

	b	***SE B***	***t***	***p***
Constant	4.74 [1.82, 7.66]	1.47	3.23	$p < .05$
Computational trust	-.41 [-.91, .10]	.25	-1.60	$p = .11$
Referent power	-.18 [-.93, .58]	.38	-.47	$P = .64$
Computational trust x Referent power	.12 [-.00, .24]	.06	1.98	$p = .05$

Note: R^2 = .37.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

In this case, the answer of research question four should be 'No'. Perceived computational trust cannot adjust the impact of influencer's referent power on audience's perception toward the endorsed social media message and audience's behavioral intention.

Moderation analysis for persuasive intention impact

Even though the two types of messages used in the experiment were perceived no significant difference on persuasive strength, the overall moderation effect of message persuasive intention on message effectiveness could still be tested. *Table 7.1* reflected that persuasive intention had no significant moderation effect

on the relationship between influencer power and virtual audience's perception toward the promotional message (Expert power: b = .02, 95% CI [-.07, .11], t = .35, p = .73; Referent power: b = -.03, 95% CI [-.11, .06], t = -.64, p = .53). No matter which message type, with or without explicit persuasion, was employed in the experiment, there was always a positive relationship between influencer power and audience's attitude toward the message.

Table 7.1

Regression results for moderation analysis for persuasion intention on perceived power and attitude (N=86)

	Persuasion intention x Expert power				**Persuasion intention x Referent power**			
	b	***SE B***	***t***	***p***	***b***	***SE B***	***t***	***p***
Constant	3.00 [.85, 5.15]	1.08	2.78	$p < .05$	1.70 [-.33, 3.72]	1.02	1.66	$p = .10$
Persuasion intention	.24 [-.20, .68]	.22	1.10	$p = .28$	.43 [.02, .83]	.20*	2.10	$p < .05$
Power	.24 [-.25, .73]	.25	.98	$p = .33$	.53 [.08, .97]	.22*	2.34	$p < .05$
Interaction	.02 [-.07, .11]	.05	.35	$p = .73$	-.03 [-.11, .06]	.04	-.64	$p = .53$

Note: R^2 = .55 (persuasion intention x expert power); R = .58 (persuasion intention x referent power).

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

What about behavioral intention? *Table 7.2* showed that persuasion intention cannot significantly moderate the impact of influencer power on audience's behavioral intention (Expert power: b = .10, 95% CI [-.01, .22], t = 1.75, p = .08; Referent power: b = .11, 95% CI [-.01, .23], t = 1.89, p = .06). In this case, H3 was rejected.

Table 7.2

Regression results for moderation analysis for persuasion intention on perceived power and behavior intention (N=86)

	Persuasion intention x Expert power				Persuasion intention x Referent power			
	b	***SE B***	***t***	***p***	***b***	***SE B***	***t***	***p***
Constant	3.92 [1.18, 6.65]	1.38	2.85	$p < .05$	4.14 [1.23, 7.05]	1.46	2.83	$p < .05$
Persuasion intention	-.29 [-.84, .27]	.28	-1.02	$P = .31$	-.24 [-.82, .34]	.29	-.83	$P = .41$
Power	-.01 [-.63, .61]	.31	-.04	$p = .97$	-.16 [-.80, .48]	.32	-.49	$p = .62$
Interaction	.10 [-.01, .22]	.06	1.75	$p = .08$	.11 [-.01, .23]	.06	1.89	$p = .06$

Note: $R^2 = .51$ (persuasion intention x expert power); $R^2 = .42$ (persuasion intention x referent power).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Discussions and conclusions

This pilot study was conducted between late October and late November, 2017 to test whether the use of online influencers with different social powers could have any impact on communication effectiveness. The results indicated that the use of referent power and expert power could positively predict virtual audience's perception toward the promotional message (research question 1). However, compared with expert power, the use of referent power in online promotion cannot effectively influence virtual audience's behavior (research question 2). Both perceived expert power (H1) and referent power (research question 3) could win the trust from virtual audience effectively, but the computational trust built between online influencers and virtual audience could not moderate audience's perception toward the promotional message and predict their behavior later (H2 and research question 4). Moreover, the message persuasive intention couldn't significantly contribute to the outcome of promotional message delivery when influencers were used to do online endorsement (H3).

Some marketing insights could be identified based on the research findings mentioned above. To enhance the good image of online campaign, marketing and communication practitioners could invite online influencers to do testimonials for their campaign. When doing online communication, online influencers are more easily to build trust with virtual audience. If they personalize referrals and recommendations for endorsed brands and products, virtual audience are more willing to have a positive attitude toward the referrals and recommendations. This also partially explains the prevalence of over-endorsement (Hung et al., 2011) for one specific online influencer in China. For example, Papi Jiang, famous online influencer and comedian in China, who successfully endorsed 155 brands in 2017 (Du, 2018). The brand choice ranges from sports brands like New Balance to auto vehicles such as Chevrolet and Nissan. In addition, if the campaign aims to call for action and influence virtual audience's behavior, marketers and communicators should be more careful when selecting and even employing online influencers. Compared with online influencers with referent power, online influencers with expert power are more credible and trustworthy. Furthermore, if virtual audience perceive the online influencers equipped with either referent power or expert power, the online campaign could be effectively communicated, and the promotional message could be persuasive even though the endorsed message itself doesn't include any explicit persuasive intention/strength.

Limitations

Some limitations exist in this study. First, since this study is a pilot one, the sample size is not large enough. It may influence the generalizability of research results. Besides, this study chose to test online influencers' communication effectiveness in the context of NGO- or corporate social responsibility-related online campaign. Different campaign natures may have an impact on the conclusions drawn in study. Hence, future studies can apply the identical experimental design to other online promotion campaigns like commercial campaigns promoting corporate products and services and test the power of online influencers. In addition, action gap may occur as measurement on audience's behavior focuses on their behavioral intention instead of actual behaviors or actions. Future studies may take measurements about actual behaviors into consideration.

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CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Regional TV content in the process of transformation: From syncretism to multimedia

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Abstract

The article is devoted to examining the condition of the regional television in modern Russia within the framework of digitalization of broadcasting and multimedia development. The mosaic, syncretic nature of television can be considered using the method of morphological analysis which was developed in one of our previous works (Miasnikova, 2010). While a weekly programme grid (theoretically, but not always in practice) is viewed as a stable system of programming elements, a real TV programme looks like a constantly changing set of broadcasting units that is created based on characteristics of human perception, daily needs of the audience, in accordance with the policy of channel programming, as well as the business interests of its founders and owners. This set is in constant motion while a television programme exists as the main unit of TV broadcasting. This paper analyses, how the regional TV content has been specifically transformed lately under the influence of the processes directed towards the development of multimedia platforms. Obviously, in the near future there will be a radical reformatting of all regional Russian television. One of the ways to solve the problem is to take advantages of multimedia. The paper studies the successful experience of collaboration of the TV company 'Studio 41' with the Internet channel ETV in Yekaterinburg (Russia) and gives a recommendation for purposeful training of specialists (including television journalists) in the multimedia sphere.

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Regional television, TV content, syncretism, morphological analysis, multimedia.

Introduction
The fragmentary, mosaic nature of television is defined by the concept of 'syncretism', which means the unity of disparate fragments, different in content, form, tempo, rhythm, emotions, etc. Under the mosaic of television, we understand the combination of various elements of a TV programme, i.e. different kinds of TV shows: informational, entertaining, artistic, educational, etc. Besides, this mosaicalso concludes in constant movement and interaction of its 'fragments'. Full syncretism is achieved very rarely. Regional TV content has to transform, adapting to new conditions. So, in the paper we will consider specific examples and try to analyse this matter, based on our method of morphological analysis, as well as methods of empirical observation and interviewing.

TV syncretism and the method of morphological analysis
The social psychologist Abraham Mohl proposed the term 'mosaic culture' (Mohl, 1973) to denote modern culture in general. The nature of television as a mosaic created 'from the world of journalism and politics, books, Broadway and the arts' was defined by Canadian scientist M. G. McLuhan (McLuhan, 2007). He characterized the syncretism of the phenomenon studied by the terms 'synesthesia', denoting the united life of feelings and imagination, and 'tactility', by which the interaction of feelings was understood. American researcher A. A. Berger characterized television as an ever-changing mosaic (Berger, 2005). The mosaic nature of television was fixed by scientists-semiotics R. Bart, D. Bell, U. Eco, Ch. Pierce.

In our country, the terms 'synesthesia' and 'syncretism' relatively screen arts were first applied by Sergey Eisenstein (Eisenstein, 1964). He also saw the origins of the synesthetic abilities of screen creativity in primitive syncretic 'diffuse-complex' thinking. Victor Shklovsky, describing television as a 'resurrecting word', stressed that it revived something long forgotten by our culture (Shklovsky, 1983). Later, Valentin Mikhalkovich proposed to consider television against the background of previous cultures (Mikhalkovich, 1998). Olga Nechai noted that television 'seems to be returning to a new round of civilization, at a new technical level, to the forms of syncretic communication that existed at the early stages of human development'. (Nechai, 1981). Leonid Kozlov, calling television 'a new form of spectacular culture,' advised 'to carefully study all of its 'pre-artistic' traits and features' (Kozlov, 1976). And then he also drew attention to the fact that 'the television spectacle should be viewed

primarily as a flow, as a change and alteration of heterogeneous structures, as a multisyllabic and non-closed duration, as a multifaceted mirror of the real life flow surrounding man' (Kozlov, 1976). One should not separate individual programmes in this 'flow'. The researcher also revealed that it is the variety of performances (from academic and artistic to stadium) that requires the most diverse ways of responding from the audience on television.

Researchers Vsevolod Vilchek and Yury Vorontsov also mentioned the ability of television to create a syncretic, multidimensional, three-dimensional image of reality, where the same event can be shown both documentarily and by staging techniques (Vilchek & Vorontsov, 1977). Kirill Razlogov found layering and roundaboutness in a set of forms and headings of the programme, giving a certain 'depth' to television space. According to his observations, this layering manifests itself in a combination of direct reporting with the most complex variants of a consistent transformation of reality; and in the appearance of a new type of screen structures, conditioned by the necessity of decorating the 'voids' in broadcasting (inserts, announcements, advertisements); and in the combination of reproducing individual works with a commentary; and in the structure of these works themselves (telefilms, telecasts), that includes various techniques, even degrees of convention (Razlogov, 1982).

As we can see, television clearly demonstrates the undivided unity of spiritual (internal) and material-practical (external) activity-related operations. These operations alongside some others create, correspondingly, internal (modeled in consciousness) and external (structurally and signically represented) forms. A study of television syncretism with satisfactory efficiency can be carried out with the help of the above-mentioned method of morphological analysis. It consists in studying (taking into account various categories of the morphology of television) a multi-layered broadcast space at all major levels of its morphological structure, as well as all the products of creative activity that give this space the form in which today's real television exists. Theoretically, the study of television syncretism allows us to reveal the essence of television and to identify it as a socially creative communication activity of a special, syncretic type. And in practical terms – it should help to improve the processes of TV programming and communicating with the audience.

Situation analysis

These days the noticeable changes are taking place within the Russian TV space. The set of generic, specific, genre, style, problem-thematic and programme elements of a TV programme, demanded by the audience, is significantly reduced. Programme syncretism is being actively destroyed. The Feds do it in

pursuit of profit and quite consciously. The regions are forced to act this way under the influence of circumstances. First, during the creation of the All-Russia State TV and Radio Company holding, now – in connection with the cancellation of the plan for the creation of the 3rd multiplex in Russia, originally intended for regional TV companies.

The audience is noticeably fragmented, it is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. The audience leaves large channels and comes to cable channels and decimeter networks. Small thematic TV channels draw viewers away from the big ones. Russian federal channels rely today on a limited set of genres and formats, they demonstrate a direct opposition of similar programmes to one another, simple and rigid broadcast grids, as well as a large amount of advertising. They follow the same rigid, market, so-called competing TV programming model. The bet is made on serials and game shows. Information is replaced by propaganda. Educational and artistic programmes disappear from the programme grid. They are replaced by entertainment slots. On the air, there is a general increase in the volume of recreational genres and formats, such as reality shows, reality-show experiments, comedies and their variations.

At that, the 'First Channel' still uses more complex structured broadcast grids. It demonstrates a slightly larger variety of forms. But here, along with the information and publicism, there is an extensive array of entertaining shows, games, music, humor and propaganda formats. The channel is functioning as a large commercial enterprise. Unfortunately, the main state channel 'Russia 1' is also forming its broadcasting policy on the same frankly market-oriented scheme. Advertising also plays an important role on it, along with serials and shows. Moreover, universal channels tend to use the same patterns (First, Russia 1, NTV), as those that declare their narrow thematic focus, for example, STS or TNT. These channels, spared from traditional news – the 'milestones' of the TV programme, substitute art with entertainment, limit their artistic broadcasting in favor of crime-entertaining series, a small number of outdated feature films, rude comic formats and trivial reality shows.

In all these cases, preference is given to a winning, easily recognizable, familiar form. But such content, unfortunately, happens to be vapid, primitive and tendentious as a rule. The same formats wander from one channel to another, and the necessary, useful genre forms disappear from the air.

A rare exception among the thematic channels today is 'Culture'. Moreover, 'introducing itself as the first national thematic channel in Russia, "Culture" has become the first universal channel, while the others at the time of its appearance could be called thematic channels of 'hot' accidents and no less 'hot' entertainment, – Litvintsev notes (Litvintsev, 2007). That is, the channel

'Culture' has more opportunities to vary its forms and types of programmes due to the fact that it is free from advertising. As a result, it preserves genres forgotten by others (such as television plays, literary readings or TV-lessons) and cultivates modern popular genres: talk shows, games and serials, including documentary and animation.

The range of genres and formats is narrowing at the regional stations as well. But, as it was said above, it is forced to change. The television content of the regional Russian stations, many of which originated in the early 1990s, during the commercialization of broadcasting and the creation of small private companies, definitely leaves much to be desired. Today, there are absolutely no artistic, educational, analytical programmes of these stations' own production and almost everywhere the news, genres of advertising and PR dominate. Moreover, the local product is frankly meager and unsightly.

The reasons for the crisis of regional TV channels are explained by different reasons. Some associate it with the unprofessionalism of channel creators, with the transformation of the entire system of our television because of the future transition to digital broadcasting, with outdated equipment, with the need for technical 're-equipment' and at the same time with the lack of funding, with the dependence on local authorities and private media business. As a result, today the regional channels tend to reduce air time; it also leads to the disappearance of their own programmes, the outflow of qualified personnel, and the decline in the quality of content. The former full broadcast TV-companies are experiencing financial, technical, personnel crisis in Russia.

Searching for a way out

Today it is obvious that in the near future there will be a radical reformatting of all regional Russian television. Igor Mishin, the founder of Yekaterinburg Channel 4, sees four ways out of the situation. The first is to cooperate with the local branches of the All-Russia State TV and Radio Company. The second is to agree among themselves on the creation of one hundred percent programmable powerful regional channel with the best programmes. The third variant is to go to the cable channels. The fourth is to become an Internet TV and take advantages of multimedia. 'Let's imagine, that there are no regional TV companies on the air, but there are local editions on the Internet. Its number of views will immediately increase. Now they are scanty, but not because of their bad work, it is because the need for local information is satisfied with traditional channels, which are 20 years old. And what if they do not exist? Hence, there is an interest. Especially TV receivers themselves become aggregators of content from different environments, a person will not care at all, they will no longer clarify,

from where the signal comes to them. Journalists who will remain working in their cities will work in these Internet editions, saving their professional skills, and if they could not work on the air, they would begin manifest themselves on the web' (Vyugin, 2013).

Today the situation in Russia is unique like nowhere in the world. A lot of Russian towns with a population of 30 thousand people have their own airtime television companies. There are hundreds of television studios that shoot interesting stories, documentaries, films, entertainment and children's programmes, receiving money from advertising, either from local authorities or from a wealthy sponsor who pleases his/her self-esteem this way. But there are too many stations like these. Their number exceeds the needs of the audience. In addition, because of their low power, they can't compete with large channels and their demonstratively entertaining content. The Russian model of the regional company, which has morning prime, evening prime, some special projects on topical or nostalgic topics, is clearly out-of-date. And it is simply impossible to programme differently many of our regional companies today. Modern television simply ceases to function as a full-fledged programme. The regional TV stations are no longer capable to realize the round-the-clock broadcast. They also can't rely anymore on the old network partners, who they worked for a long time with. Sooner or later these partners will leave them, because as a result of digitalization they will not need the regional stations.

But nobody can afford to keep a separate channel in the region at the level of any federal one. Everyone understands that it will probably be necessary to unite. However, the model of such an alliance has not0 been worked out yet. Other scenarios for further development of media assets are also proposed: under the control of the regional authorities, in the form of paid broadcasting, transition to the Internet. Such an experience is already taking place in Yekaterinburg, and it is successfully tested in the world.

ETV is the Internet channel in Yekaterinburg, which is now taking part in a successful Internet project: the collaboration with the 20-years old TV company 'Studio 41'. Today 'Studio 41' (also known as '41 Channel') broadcasts on air only 3 hours a day along with its network partner – the channel 'Domashniy'. ETV creates its own products in 24/7 format. Moreover, some of the content is purchased, and some are made by grants. According to the general director of '41 Channel' and ETV Vladimir Zlokazov, the association of media assets, belonging to the same owner, is the most reasonable way in terms of saving money.

April 24, 2018 has become the second birthday for the ETV Channel, as on this day the major changes in both the nature of the broadcast and the content of

the Internet channel were announced. After a serious analysis of the channel s rating, the broadcasting timetable was changed. For example, the daily repetitions of useful and musical programmes, not claimed by the audience, were cancelled. But the music programme itself, where local musicians performed, remained. The programme with the participation of animal lovers and the animals of the Yekaterinburg zoo, with which the channel had been successfully cooperating for a long time, also survived. The programme entitled 'Guests of Yekaterinburg' continued to appear. Some programmes were transformed, but their teams remained the same. The changes didn't touch social programmes entitled 'Cuisine' and 'The taste of life', beloved by the audience. In some cases the airtime of documentary projects and original programmes, especially those that attracted spectators, was changed.

But the main thing was the increase in the volume of information broadcasting. Thanks to the cooperation of the ETV and '41 Channel', news began to issue in an updated format. Vladimir Zlokazov says: 'Why are we doing this? We do not have enough airtime on '41 Channel' in order to give as many details as possible about the events that take place in Yekaterinburg... We need to tell how it happened, get the opinions of experts and viewers <...> And it is necessary to add emotions' (More air and broadcasting on Yandex, 2018). Now the programme entitled 'Major news of Yekaterinburg' is released simultaneously on the air of '41 Channel' and on the Internet channel ETV. Moreover, the ETV s news anchors also work on the air of '41 Channel'. The whole team of the news anchors consists of seven people. But, there are only two of them in the frame every evening, in the same way it usually happens on all world TV channels. This is done not only to change the picture on the screen, but also to discuss the events in a live dialogue.

In addition to the premiere of the two leading ones, the length of the programme itself also increased, and now it lasts an hour. Changes also affected the work of reporters. The timekeeping of the slots increased, which required journalists to study the topics in greater depth. There are direct inclusions. On the site of ETV, where the information programme goes live, there is a feedback option. Thus, the news anchors have the opportunity to answer questions from viewers. And those who watch the news not only on the site or on the YouTube channel, but also on TV, can share their opinions on the phone. Traditional voting is preserved. Now the powerful information and production service ETV is also involved in the preparation of the content for newscasts. Topics covered in the newscast are discussed in 'The sum of opinions' programme on ETV. The fact is that the specialists cannot get more than five minutes during the information programme. And the programme entitled 'The sum of opinions' on ETV gives

an opportunity to discuss the problem in a more detailed way. Generally, the benefits of Internet broadcasting are being used.

The news anchor Alexei Fayustov says: 'This is a very cool format, it gives a field for discussion. We can discuss the news, express an unpopular point of view, argue or just express emotions. We used to work alone, but here we are a couple. And we need to feel each other. It comes only with vast experience, with the hours on the air' (Varkentin, 2018). This amazing innovation of the regional channel provides the anchors with a unique opportunity to inform the news and immediately discuss it on the air. Multimedia is initially focused on a dialogue and communication with users. 'This will allow viewers to get a full picture of the day, but in an ideal scenario it is to form their attitude to what we will talk about, what we will show. And to compare their opinion with what is trendy today <...> The transition to a new format allows us to show more shades of an event', – that is how Fayustov explains the essence of the changes (Varkentin, 2018).

As you can see, '41 Channel' and ETV successfully present themselves as city media, uniting traditional television and global Internet opportunities, which allows them to submit content in various forms that are attractive and convenient for the audience. In other countries, this experience has been tested for some years already. The changes have been going on lately 'at such speed that everything has changed more radically than in all previous years', – says Carey Bergland, the reporter for the news editorial office of NBC-4 (USA, California). – Today you do not need to wait for the news: it can appear on the web-site, on the cable channel – anywhere. We must change, because the former principle ('wait until our 6-hour issue') does not work anymore – people do not want to wait. Then you need to understand how to deliver the news to them, for example, transforming our stories for a web-site' (WEB-TV NBC-California.., 2011).

In this case, a legitimate question arises: how do the stories for a network differ from the television ones? Some journalists keep the texts unchanged, others write only for a web-site, supplementing stories with photographs. Nowadays journalists have to build their work at several levels: editing texts, posting online, broadcasting on air. And while the news release depends on some definite time, the information on the web, on the contrary, can appear instantly. Moreover, this information should contain a local angle of the event to make it interesting to the inhabitants of a particular region. News on the web can be stated more broadly than on television, and then supplemented. The main thing for a journalist is to inform more and faster. 'On the web, it s good that there are no specific standards of presenting information, unlike conventional

TV methods, where the standard structure is well-known', – says Jonathan Lloyd, the online editor of NBC. – The web has more flexibility <...> This is the 'beauty' of the network that complements TV'. (WEB-TV NBC-California.., 2011). The information that is not included in the main newscast is called 'raw news' and is offered to bloggers. 'So today s audience, having a huge choice, is extremely dispersed' (WEB-TV NBC-California.., 2011), – says Bob Long, the vice-president and director of the news editorial.

Moreover, the audience is very active, as it produces news itself. After all, multimedia are designed for the dialogue with the user and also for the experiment. As a result, the former attitude towards the web as a certain billboard is changing. Now it becomes clear that 'a web-site can attract an audience to the station itself, that a website is part of the same news organization', – Jonathan Lloyd concludes. And 'the relationship between web journalists and television journalists is changing toward mutual understanding' (WEB-TV NBC-California.., 2011).

Conclusion

So, the form of 'existence' of air television is the programme. The study of the laws of TV programming and programme policy of a particular TV channel or separate parts and blocks of programme content is extremely important for winning the sympathy of the audience, which is increasingly leaving today for information in other media environments. It is equally important to comprehend content the internal structure of television in terms of the content, presenting it theoretically as an integral universal system of stable morphological categories that are in the process of their functioning in certain hierarchical relations with each other. In practice, the diverse programme units that make the TV content look like a motley mosaic, which we define by the term 'syncretism'. However, as this article shows, today, Russian TV media, as well as the whole world of television, observe significant changes. The audience's demand for a more or less harmonious set of TV programme elements is noticeably reduced. Television ceases to function as a full programme. The regional TV stations are no longer capable to fulfill the round-the-clock broadcast. They lose their old network partners.

The cable channels and decimeter networks beat the large broadcasters. The Internet becomes a real opportunity to save editorial staff, working in different regions of Russia. The audience is noticeably fragmented, goes into small niches, on specialized platforms. There are no previous mass audiences, as it was several decades ago. Mostly, modern television sees more opportunities for its survival and development in multimedia, which allow to present information with the help of various media platforms, audio-visual and text and become

a way out and salvation for regional broadcasters. Its capabilities have not been mastered and adequately studied yet. It is necessary to study and master them as soon as possible. Besides, we need to start a purposeful training for specialists (including journalists) of a broad profile to prepare them for work in new multimedia conditions.

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ARTICLE

Shift to political topics as the main content strategy of American cable news

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Abstract
The content strategies of American 24-hour news channels are undergoing significant transformations in the digital environment. While TV so far remains one of the most preferred news sources for Americans, it still has to find the new ways to attract and to keep the audience (especially younger audience). One of the transformation trends that proved to be successful for cable news has been the shift to mostly political coverage. The author focuses on the highest rated prime time cable shows and explores the extent of political items and strategies of their presentation.

Keywords
24-hour news channels, political news, channel brand, American cable news, prime time cable shows, anchor role, digital environment.

Introduction
The birth of cable television in the late 1970's is considered by some researchers to be the starting point of digitalization in broadcast (Vartanova, 2011). 24-hour news channels began to emerge in the same niche soon after the start of the era of cable TV. The United States of America is the country that gave the world the concept of non-stop news broadcast. That's why American experience of 24-hour television news in the new digital consumption environment seems especially valuable.

Today there are three main cable news channels on the American market, and the competition is very tough: CNN, Fox News Channel and MSNBC. There are also financial news channels on cable (CNBC, Bloomberg, Fox Business

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Network), but being specialized, they are not the objects of our research. Also, CNN's sister-channel HLN, originally meant as the place to get the main headlines of the day in 15 minutes, is providing non-stop coverage, but its present concept of 'news by day and mysteries and investigations by night'[1] is quite different from authentic 24-hour news. In this article research focuses mostly on the three main cable channels.

By the end of the 20th century the Internet, and later blogs and social networks turned into the main serious competitors for all traditional media. However, studies show television to be in the most favorable position in this respect: 'Americans who prefer to watch news still choose TV, while most of those who prefer to read the news have migrated online' (Mitchell et al., 2016a). The same study found TV to be the most popular news platform for 57% of U.S. adults. However, most of them are over 50 years old. Only '45% of those 30-49 and 27% of those 18-29' often get their news on TV (Mitchell et al., 2016a).

Cable news channels have started to try new content strategies in order to keep their older audience and to gain younger viewers in the digital environment. Ratings also remain another strong factor that drives the channels' search for the new forms of engaging the audience.

For example, starting from the late 2000's politics gradually became the dominant topic on the U.S. cable news channels air. The study conducted in 2016 shows cable news channels to be one the most preferred sources of political information (Mitchell et al., 2016b). Of course, one cannot underestimate Donald Trump's presidency as another serious reason of the strong boost of the air time given to politics. For instance, the volume of political news on CNN in 2017-early 2018 doubled compared to 2013 (the correlation of political items in the news show to the total quantity of items in the news show).

Literature review

The process of digitalization of television has been in the focus of many researchers. The main scholarly approaches of technological determinism, media economics and audience studies, reflected in the works of McLuhan, Habermas, Napoli, Hujanen, Williams and others, are systematized by E. L. Vartanova (Vartanova, 2011). Particularly, she studies and describes the 'channel branding' trend in terms of digitalization by the school of media economics (Vartanova, 2011). Researching this trend further, we can suggest that prime time anchor's

[1] From the company's web-site: https://edition.cnn.com/specials/videos/hln

name (and face), as well as prime time shows, are a significant part of channel branding.

The importance of channel branding is also partially analyzed by K. E. Zadorozhnaya, who examines the era of post-network television in the United States and notes the shift from 'channel-driven' to 'menu-driven' viewing habits (Zadorozhnaya, 2010). Even though the digital audience is driven by 'menu-driven' model of TV-viewing (Zadorozhnaya, 2010, 120–121), channel's reputation and brand name is still one of the main instruments used to attain the audience.

S. L. Urazova analyzes television as an institution and looks at the main transformations triggered by digital environment, exploring in-depth the conflict between showmanship and reality (Urazova, 2013). Her findings made us think of redefining the role of an anchor in today's cable news.

There are current studies describing the habits of modern news consumer and annual media reports, showing the main trends in the economics of the American television. Both were crucial for analysis and building our further research.

Some key studies were conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016-2017. One of them found cable news channels 'have become a destination for political news', topping the list of the most helpful source types for news about the elections (Cable News Fact Sheet, 2018). The same study found 55% increase in combined prime time viewership for the three major news channels in 2016.

The dominance of political news on cable proved to be not only popular with the audience, but also profitable as a business model. According to SNL Kagan, the total revenue for CNN, Fox News and MSNBC was up by 10% in 2017 (Cable News Fact Sheet, 2018).

We decided to take this research further and find out exactly how much politics and in which form is being offered on cable prime time shows. We are assuming that the ratings boost speaks for the success of this format. Another important aspect that is closely connected with the content transformation is the transformation of anchor's role and functions, as well as the transformation of journalist's role.

The **goal** of this research is to find out exactly how politics is changing the concept of 24-hour broadcast news and what content strategies are used by some of the most demanded prime time cable shows to survive and expand in the digital environment.

The main **research questions** are:

How significant is the volume of political news on cable?

Which formats are in high demand?

What is the ratio of news and commentary in the highest-rated cable news shows?

Are the traditional functions of an anchor changing? If so, how?

Hypothesis

The highest-rated shows on evening prime time cable news are political and personality-based. Politics in the Trump era is the major and the most essential theme of the 9 pm hour on any of the three cable channels (we expect to find at least 75% of political items in the overall show rundowns). The line between news and commentary is blurring, anchors and reporters allow themselves to express personal opinion, to tell the viewer what's good or bad and to judge the news of the day. 'Talking heads' and various discussions are replacing textbook journalism and objective analysis.

Methods

This research was conducted from July 2017 through October 2018. We analyzed TV-programming of the three main U.S. cable news channels (CNN, Fox News and MSNBC). We decided to focus on the highest rated time slot for cable news channels – the 9 pm ET hour. Two of the shows in our focus – 'Hannity' and 'The Rachel Maddow Show' – are the top two shows on cable news in the recent Q3 report for 2018. CNN comes in at #23 and #24 with 'Cuomo Prime Time' and 'Anderson Cooper 360°', which are the highest rated shows for the network (Katz, 2018).

We formed a sample of randomly selected 9 pm weekday shows from 2017-early 2018. For each channel the sample consisted of 10 shows. We picked five dates (Monday through Friday) from 2017 and five more from 2018. This gave us the opportunity not only to analyze the overall numbers, but also to forecast some current trends. Even though our sample does not include weekends (for the mere reason of different weekend programming), we consider it representative, as we are dealing with 24-hour news, where each show has a form and style, which are pretty constant. The character of information that goes into the show is also more or less constant. The daily news items that fill the show are variable. For this reason the same show will have the same fundamental formula on any given day, which is what we are trying to study. The only thing we were trying to avoid in our random selection of dates was major breaking news or big state holidays. Our goal was to select typical, neutral news days.

We realized that flagship evening prime time shows allowed anchor commentary and could include commentary more than any typical daytime

news hour. Our goal was to study the extent of this commentary and its appeal to the viewers, as well as the extent and the character of political coverage.

The shows in the sample included:

1) For CNN: Anderson Cooper 360°, Cuomo Prime Time (had a test run in January 2018, started regularly airing in June 2018).

2) For MSNBC: The Rachel Maddow Show

3) For Fox News: Hannity

Each show was one hour long (including commercials).

The two 'constructed' short weeks (weekdays only) were formed from the following dates:

1) 2017: 17th July, 22nd August, 20th September, 10th November, 21st December;

2) 2018: 11th January, 7th March, 3rd April, 7th May, 15th June.

We also analyzed TV schedule for each channel on their official web-sites (https://edition.cnn.com, https://www.foxnews.com, http://www.msnbc.com). We calculated the overall weekly amount of separate shows and the amount of shows with obvious political focus in their descriptions on the web-sites (for instance, 'The Daily Briefing' on Fox News or 'The Situation Room' on CNN). We counted each show only once, and skipped reruns. Multi-hour shows (like 'MSNBC Live' or 'Fox & Friends') we counted as one.

Our main research methods were content analysis and comparative content analysis.

Finally, a brief clarification of several key terms which we are using throughout this article:

1) political coverage – by which we mean any air time given to news about politics;

2) political news items – by which we mean any politics-related news in any format or genre, presented within one particular show;

3) political shows – by which we mean those cable news shows, which original conception and purpose are focused on delivering and analyzing only political news.

Results

Our research confirmed the hypothesis of extensive political coverage on all three cable news networks in their prime time, but the results exceeded our expectations. We also found that evening anchor's duties now do include impressive amount of commentary, which differs on each channel. Finally, we argue that all the three cable prime time shows are using nearly identical guest-heavy format, however each show has its unique distinctive style.

Shift to political discourse

To analyze the extent of the 24-hour news channels' switch to political coverage we decided to look at two main aspects: the share of political shows in the overall schedule and the actual extent of political news within prime time news shows.

The overall schedule analysis shows that about one third of overall programming on each channel is Washington-oriented (*Table 1*). The numbers in the table show the total amount of shows per week (excluding overnight reruns).

Table 1

The share of political shows in the overall cable news weekly programming

Channel	**Overall shows,** N	**Political shows,** %
Fox News	83	32
MSNBC	89	27
CNN	80	30

We noticed that political programming is heavier on weekends on MSNBC (3 political shows on a typical weekday versus 4.5 on a typical Saturday or Sunday) and weaker on CNN (4 political shows on a typical weekday versus 2 on a typical Saturday or Sunday) and Fox News (5 political shows on a typical weekday versus 1 on a typical Saturday or Sunday). However, these are only the shows marked as political in their titles and descriptions[2].

The more important aspect, however, was to find the actual extent of political coverage in the highest-rated prime time shows, which do not have clear political focus in their descriptions. The sample analysis of the topics covered on air over the two constructed periods proved that prime time coverage of 24-hour cable news channels is indeed dominated by politics (*Table 2*).

[2] Some examples of the shows clearly marked as political are: 'Hardball with Chris Matthews' (description: 'the place for politics'), 'AM Joy' (description: 'in-depth interviews and perspectives on political stories'), 'Inside Politics', 'The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer' (description: 'the latest in political news and international events'), 'Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace' (description: 'from the policy debates to political fights') etc.

Table 2

Political topics in cable news prime time

(%, the ratio of political versus other news items in a show)

Channel	Political news	Other news
Fox News/Hannity	92	8
MSNBC/Maddow	80	20
CNN/Cooper, Cuomo	83	17

Looking at the numbers for each year, we can say that the amount of non-political news items in 2018 dropped on CNN (down 50%) and Fox News (down 30%) and rose on MSNBC (up 50%). However these numbers right now are speculative and require further verification.

Donald Trump is an important factor in the ways politics is covered on these three channels. However, each of them covers Trump differently. Right-wing Fox News remains loyal to conservative values and mostly praises Trump allowing little to none critique. The channel also opposes itself to the rest of the media, calling major channels and publications biased. MSNBC continues to provide liberal agenda and finds ways to negatively mention Trump in most of political stories. CNN has found itself in the middle of an ongoing war with the current leadership (Schonfeld, 2018). The channel not only critiques Trump, but also tries to regularly factcheck him and his statements.

Here are just some of the examples of the polarized cable Trump coverage in prime time:

- Sean Hannity (Fox News): 'We'll always be fair and balanced. We're not the destroy-Trump media' (1st June, 2018); 'President Trump is slamming the Russia investigation, is rightly calling it a witch hunt and a democratic hoax created because Hillary Clinton lost the election' (11th January, 2018); 'So now the media is trying to attack the president, his mental health, which is completely ridiculous, so idiotic for so many reasons' (11th January, 2018).
- Rachel Maddow (MSNBC): 'These are incredible organizing feasts. <…> We watched from the very beginning people coming together and protesting their member of Congress in the Trump era' (3rd April, 2018); 'When the president's campaign chair was convicted of eight felonies and almost at the exact same moment the president's lawyer pled guilty to eight felonies, most of us went slack-jawed, right? Wow, 40 years from now, this is the day I'll brag about having been alive for, right?' (22nd August, 2018).
- Anderson Cooper, Chris Cuomo (CNN): 'Anger feeds the same instincts that drive what Trump said' (11th January, 2018); 'We begin, though,

keeping them honest with the White House being less than transparent, less than honest about the payoff to an adult film actress, Stormy Daniels' (7th March, 2018).

There is also an interesting trend in the on-air relations of the three cable news channels. They do mention each other and run soundbytes (short taped comments) from each other's air. The way they do it can be summarized in the following statements:

- Hannity (Fox News) refers to MSNBC and CNN anchors and reporters, sometimes runs their soundbytes, criticizes them and makes fun of them, labels the channel as 'destroy-Trump media' and 'fake news' (example from 11th January, 2018: 'This has been a conspiracy theory manufactured by the industrial fake news media complex that has been spread <…> by the likes of CNN and conspiracy TV MSNBC').
- Maddow (MSNBC) refers to CNN anchors and reporters and praises their job (example from 11th January, 2018: 'Tweet is from CNN's Manu Raju, he's a very good reporter').
- Cooper/Cuomo (CNN) refer to Fox News anchors, offering subtle critique of their reporting and ethical skills (for example, on 10th November, 2017 after running part of Hannity's interview with Republican Senate candidate Roy Moore about allegations of sexual assault, Anderson Cooper remarks: 'That's called leading a witness, by the way').

Summarizing, we can suggest that prime time cable news has nearly completely morphed into cable political news, with Hannity presenting the heaviest political coverage on Fox News. Two of the channels show polarized bias remaining loyal to their original conception: conservative Fox News and liberal MSNBC. CNN, which used to label itself as neutral, in the Trump era proves to be closer to liberal stance.

Guest segments

One of the major trends in the evening prime on cable is the shift to 'talking-head'-based genres on air. Guests are the essential part of all the flagship shows we analyzed. We also checked the transcripts and full episodes for other shows on the three cable news channels and found the same tendency. A panel of experts discussing various political news of the day is now an important attribution of cable news shows. Some panels (mainly on CNN) consisted of 5-6 guests at a time. In our sample there were no cases of opposing views presented within the panels. Most of them agreed on major viewpoints.

Guest panel turned out to be mostly essential on the 'Hannity' show: 77% of the news is accompanied by panel discussion and analysis. Only 57% of news

items on the CNN shows and 50% of 'The Rachel Maddow Show' had panel- or guest participation.

The ratio of single- and multiple-guest interviews was more or less even on Fox News and CNN. 'The Rachel Maddow Show' was the exception: all of the interviews were conducted with one guest at a time (*Table 3*). 32% of Ms. Maddow's guests were reporters from other media (mostly print) who broke news stories she was presenting.

Table 3

Guest interviews and analysis in cable news prime time shows, %

Channel	Single guest	2+ guests
Fox News/Hannity	40	60
MSNBC/Maddow	100	--
CNN/Cooper, Cuomo	54	46

Most of the airtime, apart from guest segments, is filled with anchor reads and comments. The orthodox broadcast news genre of reportage (presented in the form of a 'package') is rarely used in the highest-rated shows we studied. In our sample we found only **three** reporter packages on CNN (4% of the news items) and none on MSNBC and Fox News.

News versus commentary

Another important research question we tried to answer was the ratio of news and commentary on the most popular cable news shows. To figure it out we analyzed only those show segments that contained no guest interviews, debates or other show promos. As our focus was only on anchors and reporters, we studied various anchor reads (with or without soundbytes), reporter live shots and packages. As commentary we marked any segments containing opinion, judgment, views expressed with personal pronoun *I*, clear positive or negative connotation, in-depth situation analysis showing alleged causes and consequences that benefit certain political viewpoint.

The results were expected and surprising at the same time. The expected part was with Fox News and MSNBC prime time programs, the surprising – with CNN, where we found much less commentary than stated in our hypothesis (*Table 4*).

Table 4

News and commentary from cable news prime time anchors, %

Channel	News	Commentary
Fox News/Hannity	44	56
MSNBC/Maddow	46	54
CNN/Cooper, Cuomo	86	14

Most part of the commentary normally could be found in long opening monologues of Sean Hannity and Rachel Maddow. Closing show monologues (much shorter in their total running time) also contained commentary examples. Here are some: *'Let us be clear, the mullahs of Iran are not good people. They've killed Americans in Iraq. They fought proxy wars. They want death to Israel and death to America. You cannot trust these people'* (Hannity, 7th May, 2018); *'I have a special message for the abusively biased media that once again is trying to smear me'* (Hannity, 3rd April, 2018); *'So I'm uncomfortable with the peace that I have arrived at as a person who talks about the news for a living on that stuff. <…> I don't cover misstatements and lies from senior administration officials and the president himself and vice president. <…> I have a very uneasy piece even with myself about that day to day granular, embarrassing, wrong, exploitative stuff'* (Maddow, 11th January, 2018).

CNN's 9 pm hour does not necessarily start with a long monologue, although on some days there are such examples and they do contain commentary: *'The facts of the day are as ugly as it is instructive'; 'I don't want to teach my kids and your kids a bad word. My president decided to make that choice'* (Cuomo, 11th January, 2018). With CNN, the examples of commentary are subtler and they lay not so much in the language but in story selections (adult actress Stormy Daniels allegations of her involvement with Trump, John McCain banning Trump from his funeral, Melania's approval rating being higher than her husband's, etc.) and the clear course to prove Trump and his administration wrong. Every show includes factchecking statements Trump made verbally or in a written form, dissecting them and convincing the viewer the President cannot be trusted.

Overall, commentary segments on Fox and MSNBC are longer than on CNN. Some Maddow shows contain mostly commentary and present one major story of the day at different angles. Our sample contains no appearances of channel's correspondents (either live hits or pre-taped reports) and only one phoned-in report ('beeper') with MSNBC's Capitol Hill producer.

CNN had the highest number of live and pre-taped reports (14), twice as much as Fox News (7). Looking at the ratio of commentary and news in 2017 and 2018 we can so far suggest that it stayed nearly flat on Fox News and MSNBC,

while on CNN the number of commentary segments jumped significantly in 2018 (up over 25%).

The findings here lead us to believe that the traditional role of a news anchor is now transforming and one of the essential parts of this transformation is the blurring line between the duties of a news anchor and a news commentator. With heavy political coverage, cable news anchors are starting to openly express their opinions on air.

They are also comfortable sharing personal stories with their viewers and making themselves the subject of the news they present. Consider, for example, the story of Rachel Maddow buying a canoe, which she told the viewers closing her 15th June, 2018 show or the 'Hannity hotline' which the host often closes his show with. CNN's Chris Cuomo talks about his kids when he criticizes Trump for using the word 'sh*thole'[3]. Thus, we can talk about anchor's star power. Prime time anchor's personality needs to be one of the viewer attractors.

In this respect we can also look at a broader picture. American television news is traditionally built around dominant anchor, although this was not the case in the mid-1940's (Conway, 2007). One can also suggest that when CNN was the only source of 24-hour news, it didn't matter that much which anchor was delivering it. Nowadays, when the competition is tough, anchor's personality can be a powerful ratings booster, and this is the card each U.S. news channel is actively playing.

Naming the news show by the name of its anchor (or host) has long been one of the traditions in American television (and not necessarily news – consider, for instance, 'The Ed Sullivan Show' which ran on CBS from 1948 to 1971). Cable news is actively using this tradition, trying to capitalize on the star-power of the most recognizable anchors. For example, titles of 12 out of 16 (75%) MSNBC shows in a typical weekday line-up are based on the first and last names of their anchors ('MSNBC Live with Ali Velshi', 'Andrea Mitchell Reports'). CNN and Fox consider some of their anchors to have enough star-power to be able to name shows by their stand-alone first or last names ('Wolf', 'Hannity'). Overall, on the three channels the share of the show titles containing full or part of anchors' names in them is shown in *Table 5*.

[3] This was the lead story on most of CNN shows on January 11th, 2018. Don Lemon devoted the entire 10 pm hour to its coverage. He also was very outspoken in his opening and closing monologues, sharing personal stories and providing pure commentary to show his feelings.

Table 5

Anchors' names as part of show titles

(%, in relation to the total number of shows in a typical weekday schedule[4])

Channel	Full name	First or last name	Either full or partial name
CNN	15	15	30
Fox News	46	15	61
MSNBC	75	6	81

Overall, the expansion of the role and functions of an anchor leads to another shift in cable news. It is becoming personality-centered. This trend surely contradicts textbook journalism, but seems to be working in the digital environment, where consumers are drawn to the news interpreted in a way that supports their political preferences as opposed to neutral presentation, which leaves further analysis and final opinion up to the consumer.

Conclusions

To sum up, we argue that it is necessary to redefine the concept of 24-hour cable news in the digital environment. American cable news market proves to be an example of the changing strategy of broadcast news in the 21st century, at least in the highest-rated prime time shows. The concept of 24-hour all-topic-news is morphing into the concept of 24-hour political news and talk. Strong ratings are the evidence of success. We can also argue that this trend is hardly going to change as long as Donald Trump remains in the White House.

The findings of this study suggest that the basic ingredients of today's prime time news shows on cable are: extensive amount of political news (over 80%), guests and guest panels presenting the same rather than opposing views, and anchor commentary which becomes just one part of his/her star-power and overall channel branding.

This formula is the base of every show we analyzed, however each of them has its distinctive style. Sean Hannity is the only anchor openly praising Trump. He is opposing himself and Fox News channel to the rest of the media, depicting himself as the only source of real news, openly telling the viewers in oversimplified terms what they need to consider good or bad. His shows start with extensive monologues, often without supporting video, the rest of the program includes live reports from the White House and guest panel or panels

[4] Calculations are based on CNN/U.S., Fox News and MSNBC TV schedule for Thursday, August 9, 2018.

to react to the opening monologue and other stories. Here we found the highest volume of anchor commentary.

Rachel Maddow also starts off with long monologues with complicated analysis delivered in a very conversational way. Her show is the only one that never uses guest panels and prefers to interview one guest at a time. Most of these guests are reporters who broke various anti-Trump stories in other media. There are no live or taped reports from network's correspondents. The volume of commentary on the show is almost equal to Hannity's.

Chris Cuomo and Anderson Cooper are the prime time anchors with the least amount of commentary and the highest volume of news items in the show (presented as tells, live and taped reports). However, the amount of political content is slightly higher than on MSNBC. The shows heavily rely on guest panels (sometimes managing to fit up to 6 guests on air at the same time). One of the strategies (used by CNN not only on prime time shows) is to factcheck Donald Trump and to prove him wrong. Sometimes it overtakes the primary journalistic mission of reporting the news.

Overall, we are observing a strong shift to constant political coverage, presented by network's star anchor whose duties have been expanded to commenting the news, expressing personal views and judgments and who is supported by a whole league of regular 'talking heads' filling the air time by their reactions to anchor's monologues and other news items (sometimes limited to one major story).

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