

## REGIONAL MEDIA STUDIES AS A RESEARCH AREA

### МЕДИАРЕГИОНАЛИСТИКА КАК ВОЗМОЖНАЯ ОБЛАСТЬ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ: К ПОСТАНОВКЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ

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*This article presents an attempt to distinguish Regional Media Studies as a separate and unique research sphere in contemporary Russian Mass Media Studies. The authors believe defining this*

*research sphere is a logical and justified step that corresponds, on the one hand, to the scientific understanding of the contemporary system of Mass Media and, on the other hand, to the development of adjacent areas of humanitarian and social knowledge. Understanding the specifics of regional media production and media consumption is important not only for understanding current Mass Media processes, but also for the research and assessment of the social and economic situations in the region.*

**Key words:** *Regional Media Studies; territorial media behavior; media systems; mediatization.*

*Данная статья – попытка постановки вопроса о выделении специальной проблемной области в современных российских исследованиях массмедиа – медиарегионалистики. Выделение этой проблемной области, с точки зрения авторов, логичный и обоснованный шаг, соответствующий, с одной стороны, логике научного понимания современной системы массмедиа, с другой – логике развития смежных областей гуманитарного и социо-гуманитарного знания. Понимание специфики регионального медипроизводства и медиапотребления важно не только для понимания процессов массмедиа, но для исследования, оценки ключевых социально-экономических характеристик региона.*

**Ключевые слова:** *медиарегионалистика; территориальное медиаповедение; медиасистемы; медиатизация.*

Changes in the role, place, functions and essence of Mass Media in contemporary Russian society have numerous social consequences. These consequences have not yet been revealed, classified, and studied in detail. The research demonstrates different

degrees of interest to these problems: some of them have become core issues of contemporary research while some are still on the periphery. This phenomenon is easy to explain, as transformational processes imply the changes of emphasis, priorities, and habitual hierarchies. It can be said that in analyzing different present-day problems, we can only feel the existence of some of them or simply note them in the discourse rather than study them (Regiony v rossiiskom mediaprostranstve, 2014). This article will focus attention on one of these problems, or to be more exact, on a topic area, which all scholars consider as urgent and up-to-date, but whose terminology and analytical tools are only now emerging. That requires drawing attention to the social phenomena appearing due to the influence of media, realized through media, communicated by means of media. In other words, these are social phenomena blended with media while at the same time possessing regional specifics.

It is obvious that the creation of a new term with the prefix “media-” is bound to encounter some resistance. The contemporary “pre-paradigmatic” state of Mass Media Studies has led to the emergence of a large number of separate research areas thematically unified under the title “Media Studies”: Media Psychology, Media Linguistics, Media Economics, Media Management, Media Education, etc. Thus attempting to introduce yet another “Media” discipline requires that we remember the words of William of Ockham: “*Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate*” (Plurality must never be posited without necessity).

The emergence of the new term can be justified by the exhaustion and inefficiency of existing definitions and terminology used to describe and explain new realities. Is it possible to discuss this topic concerning social consequences of new regional media realities, taking into consideration the fact that the existing terminology does not allow to describe the present situation or to complete research?

Certainly, yes, but only to a certain extent and in cases regarding changes in territorial behavior of Russians.

This fact must be underlined in order to emphasize the topicality and importance of not numerous but representative studies devoted to the past and present of regional journalism. These works solve important research problems. Today regional Mass Media model transformations and social consequences are not included in the research.

Our main point of concern is the fact that the social and economic consequences of transformations are excluded from social and economic ratings and other regional research. These studies do not investigate the role, place, influence, and details of the media in major regional processes, nor do they study regional media as the major creator and implementer of social meanings and behavioral models. For many reasons, the media component of transformational social and economic processes in the various regions is not taken into consideration, and the practice of “avoiding the media factor” in regional ratings has become commonplace (Chernov, 2013a).

The novelty of the proposed approach lies in the fact that it offers a specific and complex analysis of the role the media plays in the everyday social and economic life of a particular region of the country. We consider this approach to be essential due to the enormous regional differences existing within our country. These differences are of diverse in nature. First, it is necessary to mention regional economic differences that are related to economic structure, income level, dominant employment, demographics, cultural differences, levels of access to various social benefits and social services such as quality education, healthcare and culture, including access to information and its databases. It is generally acknowledged that the different level, depth of penetration, and the

cost of Internet service largely determine information inequality. Despite all the efforts to overcome it, information inequality still creates significant regional distinctions. These distinctions are very substantial, as they define and form differences in lifestyle, and in territorial behavior. Thus, these distinctions determine differences in regional media behavior as well. The structure and hierarchy of the factors influencing these distinctions in regional mediatization processes deserve a special investigation. At present such research is not possible due to insufficient amount of regional statistics and sociological and marketing data. But even the little available data is sufficient to raise a question as to the validity of the regional approach. Let's take average wages in different Russian regions as an example. 2013 RIA Rating research shows that the differences range from slightly more than 12 000 (Dagestan, Kalmykia) to 54 000(Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area) rubles per month, that the rate of wage inequality (Gini index) in all regions is higher than 30 percent, and for Russia in general is estimated at 37.8 percent. Certainly, the problem of information inequality has a complex nature that is mainly determined by the structure of the national media system. Traditionally in the Soviet and early Post-Soviet eras, it was the function of the federal mass media organization to shape the media scene of the country while the main function of the regional media was restricted to the local media scene. Nationwide information was provided by national print media, national television, and to a lesser extent by radio broadcasting. However researchers who performed a recent study of the regional media scene point out, "today in our country only one of the two basic elements of media system – newspapers and television – functions adequately. The daily press is in the extremely difficult situation: there is no real federal distribution of national newspapers (the only exception is, perhaps, "*Rossijskaya Gazeta*"), and the circulation

of regional print media is extremely low” (Vyrkovsky, Makeenko, 2014). The structure of television broadcasting also differs significantly in various regions, though introduction of free multiplexes provides a certain minimum number of channels that are available regardless of the population income level. However the availability and the cost of internet access are becoming important factors in either leveling out, or on the contrary, increasing information inequality, especially for certain social groups.

Until now, in our country no complex research has been conducted on factors of information inequality determined by regional specifics. It is obvious that these specifics can vary greatly and can be determined by the economic level of regional development, geographical location, climate, cultural norms and many other factors. One of the most important factors is the economic and political management of mass media.

At present we can only state this fact, leaving more detailed research for a separate study

Though attempts to overcome regional differences made by the government of the Russian Federation consist primarily of leveling budgetary provisions, they also extend into the information sphere. The latter manifests itself in the process of the transition to digital broadcasting, the creation of multiplexes, the extension of Internet-coverage areas, and reduced costs for Internet access.

In fact, the tension between the state policy of the socio-economic equalization of all regions, real regional situations, and social practices, provides a unique research topic that is likely to be of interest not only to Russian but also to foreign researchers. Today we have a unique opportunity to explore a variety of cultural and social phenomena caused by contradictory trends and influences. We can also – at least approximately – define the role the media plays in these processes. The media influences territorial behavior

and thus demands close attention and specialized research tools, but as of yet, such tools have not been developed.

When speaking about the current state of affairs of media regional studies, it is necessary to note the fact that interest towards regional measurement of media behavior, its specifics, and its manifestations is only now emerging and with quite a superficial character.

Let us consider a recent example. At the request of “*Lenta.ru*” and economic columnist Arina Borodina, TNS Russia decided in 2013 to study preferences of TV-audiences in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Ufa, Volgograd, Samara, Yaroslavl, Tula, Vladivostok, Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk, Yekaterinburg, Stavropol, Kemerovo, Barnaul, Izhevsk, Novosibirsk, Perm, Rostov-on-Don and Tyumen. “Asking TNS Russia to do this research,” says A.Borodina, “I was sure that there would be little or no difference in audience perception of the most popular TV-programs in different regions of Russia. I thought that only rating positions of the programs and series might differ from city to city. But the results shocked me.” (...) “It turned out that TV-preferences not only reflect social peculiarities of the audience but they also demonstrate a great difference between TV-audiences of various regions of the country. Especially if we compare this data with all-Russia data which I have been analyzing weekly for more than ten years” (Borodina, 2014). If the Tyumen audience prefers a criminal series on NTV, the Vladivostok audience prefers “Avatar” while the Moscow audience watches the title fight between V.Klichko and A.Povetkin, it is clear that these cities take completely different approaches to TV-viewing. Only programs on national TV-channels were analyzed, and if we include the data from cable TV, satellite TV, etc., the distinctions are likely to increase rather than decrease.

This example contains information well known to those who research regional media preferences. Essential distinctions are

apparent in a comparative analysis of media consumption in regional markets that are geographical neighbors, but have different socio-cultural characteristics. For example, more than 10 years ago, sociologists carrying out the “Media Measurements” project in the Vologda region noted the following distinctions: 1) distinctions among all-Russia and regional TV-viewing and 2) distinctions in TV-viewing among the citizens of Vologda and Cherepovets: two cities 135 km away from each other (while Vologda is an administrative center, Cherepovets is an industrial center of the Vologda region) (Mekhova, 2004).

Thus, the abovementioned observation made by “*Lenta.ru*” is indicative of the fact that regional distinctions in TV-viewing preferences are a general tendency, common to the whole country. Though the nature of these distinctions is not always obvious, they should be taken into consideration and paid special attention.

It is important to emphasize that the research conducted is significant not only as a confirmation of existing distinctions, but also the very fact that it exists is crucial at a time when the problem of regional distinctions is being placed on the national agenda. This problem is treated in a public relations-focused, non-academic and very vivid way.

Attention, not only to similarities but also to distinctions in the sphere of Mass Media Studies, can be treated as the reflection of specific trends in this sector. It is distinctions and differences that in the digital era have become the main means of targeting, the means that make up the audiences of niche TV-channels. In a sense, researching, understanding, communicating, and resolving the distinctions have become the main goal for cable, satellite and Internet channels. Though Russia has a rather limited number of TV-channels and programs, the fact that research shows that there is a demand for such variety, is significant.

At the same time however, the distinctions revealed by this research are only the tip of the iceberg. It merely scratches the surface of serious distinctions among regional media behavior models, which are extremely obvious in TV-viewing (though the distinctions exist in all media). It is logical to assume that these distinctions will deepen if we were to include broadcasting (including TV) channels in general.

Let me emphasize the problem's newsworthiness. It seems natural that it is only now that regional distinctions are attracting the attention of researchers. As already mentioned, this can be explained in part by the dominating market logic of differentiating the development of media content, by the logic of "uniqueness" and "distinctions". At this crucial moment of transition to a digital reality, the concept of the role of regional media changes. This can be seen in the desire to understand the logics and prospects of their development (Vyrkovsky, Makeenko, 2014).

At the same time, it is obvious that this is not the only reason attention to this problem is now growing. One additional reason is more global. It consists of a cardinal change of habitual models and logics of interaction between society and the media. It is the change that has already been defined as mediatization. Mediatization calls into question the developed models of media behavior and demands reconsideration of the locus and topos of a person's interactions with different forms of media.

Herbert Schiller noted that the concept of communication includes much more than just messages and the communication systems that transfer these messages. Communication defines social realities, and in this sense affects labor management, technology, education, and free time (i.e., it influences lifestyle) (Schiller, 1973). Marshall McLuhan studied the communicative and social nature of information channels and the ability of humankind to

turn newly created objects and tools, and devices and discoveries into new communication channels. But mediatization goes beyond the classical statement that “the channel is the message”. Instead of the concept of “media centrism”, there appears to be a concept of “media diffusion”.

The concept of mediatization is spreading and is being cemented in scientific discourse. But some unique characteristics of the phenomenon have already been defined. In her recent article, L.M. Zemlyanova examines this concept in the context of innovations in the conceptual and terminological pool suggested by contemporary Communication Theory, and cites the explanation of the concept offered by Stig Hjarvard. According to his definition, mediatization is the process by which core elements of social and cultural activities (e.g. politics, religion, education) are affected by media, and at the same time, depend on them. As a result, to some extent, such activities are performed in the course of interaction with various forms of media, while the content and the structure of social and cultural activities are affected by media, i.e., by its institutional, esthetic and technical means (Zemlyanova, 2013).

V.P. Kolomiyets suggests that one should differentiate between mediatization as a historical process that increases institutionalization of media, and mediatization as a modern process that overcomes the institutional framework, and transforms into a meta-process. From this point of view, mediatization treated as a meta-process is similar to globalization, individualization, and commercialization. Therefore, the problem of researching this meta-process goes beyond the problem of the number and typology of media, thus, it assumes the research of the process of changing media from being incorporated into daily practice, into media ecology.

It is obvious that research of the activities of individuals constructing their social and cultural reality by means of mediatized communicative actions (Kolomiets, 2012) demands new approaches and methods. From this perspective, media eluding can be explained by the fact that a media environment is contextualized by a complex set of practices, assumptions, habits, and competences, and cannot be measured with conventional tools used for the analysis of distinct categories. The matter is not only that media phenomena change and increase in number, but that some deeper processes undergo changes as well. Mediatization is not the modernization theory (or the Theory of Changes), but a new approach to the Theory of Mass Media and Communication, and to Social Theory as well (Kolomiets, 2012).

It is important to emphasize that mediatization has two approaches: global and regional. It covers all spheres of a modern person's life. In this regard it is global, though its concrete manifestations and realizations are always localized and caused by local circumstances (Chernov, 2012, 2013b).

These regional characteristics and measurements of mediatization as a social phenomenon require a special and complex inquiry.

They can serve the object of a special study within the field of Regional Media Studies. The core interests of this research area can be specific social practices, resulting from regional circumstances and contexts. These social practices are realized through media. They use media, and they produce and study media products, channels of their distribution, etc. At this level and at other levels, the ratio between the global and regional components is obvious. The Internet shapes global trends, but because of the great difference in access costs in the regions, the difference in the level of competition between regional Internet-providers, different

penetration rates of the high-speed Internet, and, finally, great differences in lifestyles, educational levels, and demographic characteristics of the population in different regions, global trends have very different regional target positioning.

The first and the second multiplexes will be used, consumed in different ways in different regions depending on their current or initial level of penetration of cable and satellite TV, and their quality of Internet access. It is possible to continue this list adding cultural, historical, economic and demographic distinctions.

In the context of our country with its vast area and inequality among its many regions, territories, metropolises, large cities, towns, and villages in their access to financial, educational, and informational resources, and their cultural and even “civilizational” distinctions, heightened awareness of the specifics of “mediatization loci” is quite justified.

Whether or not any settlement or city can be called a locus when we describe the mediatization process, is up for debate. Sociologists and political analysts, the first to investigate new research areas adding social contents to the sphere that traditionally was the domain of Economic Geography, are well aware of this debate. During these arguments a polysemic and widespread definition of a region was accepted: a region is defined as an independent spatial, geographic, administrative-territorial, institutional, political, economic, social, historical, cultural, ethnic, and demographic dimension (Volkov, 2004). It is quite logical to use this term in the research of media.

Thus, an interdisciplinary approach in Regional Media Studies is necessary and the main interdisciplinary ties are quite clear. These are the most obvious. Regional Studies has recently defined the problem of differentiating between global and regional issues in social, economic, and cultural aspects, as the main object of study.

The American geographer and economist Walter Isard, who laid the foundation for fundamental studies of the second half of the 1960s, is considered to be the founder of Regional Studies (Isard, 1960). In Russian science, similar approaches began to develop at the end of 1980s within the framework of Political Science, Economics, Anthropology, and Sociology (Analiz tendentsii razvitiya regionov Rossii: tekhnologiya regionov, vyvody i predlozheniya, 1996; Zubarevich, 2003; Modernizatsiya Rossii: territorialnoye izmereniye, 2011). Institutionalization of this research area happened when Russian Regional Studies and Foreign Regional Studies were introduced into university curricular. As a research topic, regional specifics and regional identity has already become commonplace in sociological and political studies.

In earlier works it was assumed that regional studies researches the industrial and territorial structure of the economic complexes of Russian regions, the main forms of economic organization, regional and trans-regional economic ties, and economic reforms in regions during the formation and development of a market economy (Morozova, 2004).

Later works placed the emphasis on social components. Russian Regional Studies takes certain revenge in those spheres that were earlier “closed” to researchers. It concerns, first of all, the problems of federalism, territorial asymmetries, regional depressions, inter-budgetary relations, foreign economic regional activity, uncontrolled population shift, and ethno-political conflicts, among other problems (Volkov, 2004).

Regional Media Studies is an integral part of Regional Studies in general. Moreover it is possible to define an even narrower sphere of research in the field of Regional Media Studies based on the research of the territorial (regional) behavior of Russians. “Any behavior is geographically determined”, sociologists I.P. Ryazanov

and A.Yu. Zavalishin say (Ryazantsev, Zavalishin, 2006). They note that the basis for their monograph on Russian territorial behavior, is a priori statement that territorial behavior represents a form of behavior—the main feature of which is the obvious direct connection with the territory (the place, the district, the region, the country, group of countries (macro-region)) where this behavior is observed (Ryazantsev, Zavalishin, 2006).

Territorial determination of individual, group, and mass behavior caused by long-term factors (from climatic to cultural and historical) distinguishes this form of social behavior from other forms.

The influence of geographical factors causes the formation of a regional behavioral pattern, which becomes the basis for the ultimate behavioral norm. The basic model of territorial behavior is a norm (a social fact, a rule, a tradition) influencing the social behavior of the subjects.

The authors of the research say that territorial behavior, among all other forms of social behavior, has the most integrative character, as it includes all possible types of behavior that have regional specific features (economic, political, religious, educational, ethno-cultural, migratory, etc.) (Ryazantsev, Zavalishin, 2006).

Regional Media Studies can become a new line of research studying the specifics of territorial media behavior of a people. We believe the field of Regional Media Studies focuses on two interconnected but not identical problems: the specifics of regional media systems (media production) and the specifics of regional media consumption. The connection between these two areas of Regional Media Studies is obvious. In each separate case a special research and assessment are required.

## Conclusion

In summation, we will attempt to define Regional Media Studies. Regional Media Studies is a branch of mass media research, studying territorially influenced media behavior (media consumption and media production) as a certain behavioral pattern, regionally determined, long-standing, and creating the means and forms of mediatization specific to each region.

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