Reality and virtuality of the mass media space

Anna Baychik[2]
Saint Petersburg State University, Russia

Abstract

The paper explores the concepts of media space, mass media space, information space, and virtual reality. In this paper, we consider different approaches to the concepts, describe the logic of the sequence of appearance of the phenomena of information, media and mass media space and reveal their common features and distinctive characteristics. Along with such new characteristics of the media space as digitalization of information, fragmentation of the media space, specialization of the audience, and hypertrophied socio-cultural significance, we distinguish virtualization of the mass media space as one of the dynamic characteristics. We consider virtualization as a means of representing the world in other dimensions and planes and as a means of orientation in the surrounding world. The final part of the paper is devoted to the consequences and capabilities of virtualization of mass media space and to the concept of virtual reality. The analyzed material of scientific developments allows us to conclude that virtual reality is a reality, ontologically grounded by a person's desire to create an alternative world, manifests itself here and now, mainly signally, unlike the virtual reality of art, radically changes the space-time continuum and has orientation much broader in terms of impact.

Keywords

Experts in the field of mass media research argue that modern society is not only permeated with media communications, but also significantly shaped by them, so it is quite natural that social reality acquires the quality of media reality. The result of representation of physical and social space through media is the

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[2] **Corresponding author:**
Anna Baychik, Saint Petersburg State University, Russia
Email: a.baychik@spbu.ru

mediatized 'sense of place', which is based on different criteria of evaluation and perception that determine various aspects of its manifestation: 'social' (when a person appreciates primarily social relations and connections set in the place given), 'instrumental' (when a place is evaluated in terms of job opportunities, entertainment, standard of living), 'nostalgic' (the image of a place is related with past experiences), 'theatrical' (a place is perceived as a stage on which the drama of live unfolds), 'environmental' (when esthetic experience and the sense of union with nature are important), etc. All of these understandings and shades of feelings that 'inhabitants' of precise places have in their everyday life may be strengthened and directed by media communications (Nim, 2011).

The semantic precursors of the term 'media space' were the phrases 'information space', 'information field', 'information environment'. In 1986, Appadurai proposed a theory of the structure of modern society in the form of a construct of 'imaginary worlds', a socially constructed community imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of it. Besides, he identified five levels of this imaginary, virtual space: ethno-space formed by global streams of people: tourists, labor migrants, refugees and displaces people; media space or media landscape formed by media and new media; techno-space formed by technologies available for the society at the moment; financial space made by cash flows; space of ideas consisting of state ideologies and usually opposing ideologies of social movements (Shcherbakova, 2016). According to Appadurai, media landscape is a kind of a 'superfluid substance', which permeats the society and is an integral part of the everyday life of the community. As a result, mass communication media turn to the decisive factor of the abstract lie of people in the modern world.

With the growing popularity of media studies, the terms 'media environment' and 'media sphere' appear, denoting a set of conditions in the context of which media culture functions, 'a set of information-communicative means, material and intellectual values developed by mankind in the process of cultural and historical evolution, contributing to the formation of public consciousness and socialization of an individual' (Kirillova, 2005). Media culture through the mediation of mass communications connects a person with the world around them and, according to Kirillova (2005), includes the culture of information transmission and the culture of its perception. At the same time, the above-mentioned definition of media culture covers in the institutional aspect the term of media space (Simons et al, 2021).

In Russian sociology, the term media space in its most general form is used to identify the media system or media picture of the environment, meaning a set

of media texts. Media space is also positioned as a special reality, which is part of the social space organizing social practices and ideas of agents of the system of production and mass information consumption.

Nim writes about the diversity of approaches to the study of media space, defining: 1) text-centric approach, in which the media space is considered as a set of all media texts, namely 'discursive' space; 2) structural approach, i.e. media space is a system of mass communication media, a social field; 3) territorial approach, when media space is characterized as a media market or information space of a region, city, country; 4) technological approach, in which media space through modern technologies acquires the status of 'virtual' reality; 5) ecological approach, i.e. media space is a habitat permeating all the social spheres (Nim, 2013).

According to the researcher, such a variety of approaches indicates quite fruitful attempts of conceptualization of media space, though there is no sociology of media space as a research program yet. Of course, the list of approaches to media space research is not exhaustive. Many terms widely used in journalism at first, then gradually move to academic publications. The term 'media space' has not become an exception. Though in English literature the term 'media space' started to be used in the 1980s in works by Stults and Harrison to identify 'digital environment in which groups of people can work together even if they are not in the same place and at the same time' (Shults, 1986). If the category 'information space' was widely used in last 10–15 years of the last century, the term 'media space' became widespread both in journalistic and scientific literature only at the beginning of the present one. Despite the wide use of the category 'media space', it meant all the space of information use and, in fact, it repeated the meaning of information space.

It is important to mention that in different speech contexts, the phrase 'information space' is currently used to identify various types of sets: texts (in the broad meaning), transmitted and stored information, data in any professional sphere or in the sphere of social activity, messages circulating in the society this or that way, etc.

At the same time, it would be incorrect to identify the media sphere with the information space when dealing with it. It seems quite significant, based on theoretical developments devoted to information space, to reveal the features and specific characteristics of mass media space, which in modern conditions is an independent phenomenon. Sidorskaya (2021) writes about it discussing the variants of media space: 'If the media space is perceived as a media system – both traditional and new, then it is worth considering this phenomenon as a

part, a segment of information space – based on what is collected, processed, produced, interpreted and disseminated in the media space by print and digital media'.

Monastyreva (2017), having reviewed the context use of the term 'media space', came to a number of conclusions that are considerable for studying of this phenomenon. First, the term 'media space' is interdisciplinary in nature, since on the one hand, the contemporary media space is studied by very different specialists – journalists, educators, sociologists, political and cultural scientists, lawyers, psychologists, but on the other hand – the media space itself serves as a platform for functional expression of various social spheres. Second, in many cases, the term 'media space' is used without realizing and even scientific representation of the essence of the reflected phenomenon. Third, this is synonymous use of other categories or unconscious substitution of some by others that differ both 'vertically' and 'horizontally': 'information space', 'media space', 'media environment' that embrace each other or function as segments of the media space – 'educational media space', 'regional media space' and others.

In our opinion, it is the most promising and reasonable to approach to study the media space comparing it with other types of 'spaces'. This can be done by comparing the information, media and mass media spaces. In fact, the media space is one of the most important components of the information space. Omelin (2003) suggests quite a simple scheme demonstrating the state of media space in the information space. The author considers the correlation of a particular – media space with information space as the whole in the frames of the same geographical boundaries, but he also includes the space of mass communication into the scheme. That is, the information space appears to be the widest phenomenon that includes the space of mass communication and an even smaller media space.

Moreover, he understands the media space as 'a set of subjects of the media sphere (individuals and communities), texts transmitted by them (this process is considered as communicative – purposeful dissemination of information that serves a reason to an action) and the collective addressee perceiving these texts – mass audience both targeted and the widest' (Omelin, 2003: 35-36).

The addressee of a message within the information space can be not only the mass audience, but also a group and an individual. In the context of the media space, the object of dissemination of information is only the mass audience, moreover, the process of transmission information itself turns to be indirect, technical 'mediators' are needed between a sender and an addressee. Thus, the space of mass communication is not equal to the information space in general.

Discrepancy in understanding of categories 'media', 'mass media' and their interpretation provides a formal key to the main understanding of the media and mass media space. 'One of the definitions of the term "media" ("mass media", (mass) communication media) tells that these are technical means of creation recording, copying, circulation, storage, dissemination, perception of information and its exchange between the subject (author of a media text) and the object (mass audience)' (Kozhevnikov, 2010: 32). As we can see, the term of media is used similarly to both media and mass media. Perhaps, for everyday use, differences in the terms of media and mass media are not considerable and they can easily substitute each other. However, for the academic use, these categories have differences, and sometimes crucial, if it refers to characteristics of features of the phenomena and processes in which these phenomena are involved.

Svitich (2013) mentions that 'the Russian term 'SMI' usually correlates with English mass media or media, but in this form it acquires a broad interpretation. Mass media then include not only periodicals, TV, radio, Internet, but also cinema, sound recording production, pocket editions, photography, and even cable nets.' The researcher highlights: 'Mass media imply means and technologies that are intended for communication with the mass audience' (Svitich, 2013: 32).

Thus, we can tentatively conclude: 1) the concept of 'SMI' is similar to mass media, that is why, when substituting this Russian term, one should use the term 'mass media', not 'media'; 2) media, unlike mass media, embrace a wider range of phenomena and it is naturally that mass media space has its own features, though it may seem as part of media space.

The space of mass communication is not limited by media space. For example, though data sets stored in public libraries are included into the space of mass communication, they are not part of the media space.

Researchers argue that media so far cannot be understood only as a sphere of journalistic activity. Convergence layer going far beyond journalism is 'the media space in which all the types of social communications are carried out and information and communicational systems, means, ways of communications, contents are converged (or not converged)' (Convergence in Communications and Beyond, 2000).

According to Leontiev (2010), media space can be understood in a narrow sense as a variety of connections and interactions, as well as gaps and opposition between agents of the field of journalism, and in broad sense — as a form of existence of symbols, symbolic capital and the sphere of its circulation, change, exchange. At the same time, the author insistently warns about wrongfulness of identifying the fields of journalism and media space.

Ponomarev (2008) deduces understanding of the information space, which makes up the set of all messages transmitted by social subjects using technologies and mass communication media, and among them are mass media messages that make up the media space as a field of information space. Thus, one can notice that belonging of media and mass media spaces to the informational one does not mean the identity of these spaces as both institutionally and functionally.

All the diverse assessments and judgements are caused by the fact that the concept of media space has many different meanings. This is where the reasoning of many scientists dealing with this issue begins. For some it is not a closed system of relations between producers and consumers of mass information, for others it is a social system, all elements of which are interconnected and subordinate to the general laws of development of the whole, for the third it is an unordered system of spiritual and value information offering a spiritual and cognitive environment free from dictate, convenient and essential for social decision of individuals, for the forth it is a virtual reality of management manipulating social consciousness, etc.

Noting the difficulty of finding a definition of media space, Dzyaloshinsky (2013: 69) writes: 'Nowadays, the concept 'media space' is apparently used at the same time in the Newtonian sense as a conditional territory on which information and its carriers are placed and where producers and consumers of mass information occasionally come to; and in the Leibniz sense — as a system of relations between certain subjects regarding production, dissemination, processing, and consumption of mass information'. The scientist considers essential to unite these approaches and identify media space as a virtual informational and communicational universe with conditional boundaries, created by participants of media processes, whose relations determine the metrics of the media space.

Yudina (2008: 151) considers the phenomenon of media space in the context of sociological tradition of social space study, that is why it is interpreted as part of social space that represents itself. 'Media space can be positioned as a special reality, which is a part of social space and which organizes social practices and representations included into the system of mass information production and consumption'.

Media system has a special quality, which arises as a result of information production reflecting events and phenomena of the world around, and its consumption. The system re-produces a social human, deepens and develops the relations between an individual and the society, integrates them into the social space. The quality of new system re-produced by the media space is a socialized personality integrated into the social space (Yudina, 2005).

Definition of the mass media space as part of informational space is sufficient only to begin discussion about its essence and substantial characteristics, especially as a particular does not always have all the characteristics of the whole, not talking about the opportunities of multifaceted approach.

Media space can have both physical and 'virtual' geography. Geo-political approach can be effectively used only when considering correlations between information and mass media spaces as between the whole and a particular. It is worth highlighting that media space is not a simple reflection of reality, it is a socially constructed understanding of the world.

It is considered that the most developed is the understanding of media space as a special symbolic sphere of culture. For instance, Appadurai (1997) defines media space as culturally-symbolic space-stream, which is formed with streams of images in the global cultural stream. At the same time, the media space is characterized as fluid, unstable space that serves as the 'building blocks of imaginary worlds' in which people interact.

Kulibaba (2007) considers the media space as a space that has an adapting, socializing and socially integrating function in culture. The scientist especially highlights its role as a channel of spiritual values at the global community level. Here the task of an individual, social groups and the state in general seems important – 'search for drivers in the media space for dissemination of integrating terminal spiritual values'.

While the cultural approach in a meaningful way allows discovering different images, concepts, texts in the information space, the media space includes knowledge, convictions, beliefs and value ideas.

Couldry and MacCarthy (2004) proceed from a logical conclusion: the repletion by digital media in all spheres of life leads to the fact that media and space cannot exist without each other, they are dialectically interconnected and condition each other. The media space itself, on the one hand, is material, because it represents the geographical space of specific structures of power and economy, filled with means of communication. But on the other hand, it is still 'virtuality' as opposed to reality. The dialectic of relationship between space and media in the media space, according to researchers, is such that media create connections between different spaces and times. At the same time, media in space draw a line of separation, generating alienation.

Falkheimer and Jansson (2006) substantiate the need to develop the geography of media communications – a discipline that develops a new theory of media based on the categories of mobility, convergence and interactivity, which require special study.

Mobility is manifested in the mobility of people and media technologies. Technological convergence is manifested in the development of multimedia technologies that allow combining several formats of information presentation (graphics, sound, video, animation) in one means of communication. Cultural – manifests itself in the blurring of differences between print and audiovisual media, mass and high culture, information and entertainment, education and propaganda, between 'texts' and 'goods'. The interactivity of new media not only makes it possible to interact at a distance, it can also manifest itself in the mutual increased 'sensitivity' of producers of goods and their consumers. The production of 'goods-marks' is becoming more and more personalized, aimed at constructing the individual identity of the consumer (Falkheimer, & Jansson, 2006: 9–22).

Adams (2009) defines the following areas of spatial study of communication: study of the geographical location of communication networks, their technical infrastructure and the geometry of the 'stream space' created by transmitting digital or other signals; the analysis of unique communication spaces supported by media; study of the mechanisms by which specific places get their meaning through media; study of the possibility of using various types of media communications in relation to the place and audience. Moreover, the concept of media by Adams is interpreted broadly, it includes not only the media itself (both traditional and new), blogs, social networks, websites and portals, but also all technical means of production, transmission and perception of information.

Versatile approaches to the study of the media space allow us to identify its most significant features, peculiarities and on this basis to develop the most effective ways of using the media space for the functioning of society. Thus, the culturological approach analyzes styles, genres, forms of representation of 'information units', communicative intentions and technologies of their implementation (Orlova, 2008).

Within the framework of sociology (and, in particular, sociology of culture, sociology of mass communication, sociology of public relations), socio-structural aspects of the media space, institutional forms of the mass media, typology of communicators and recipients, social functions of the mass media can be studied.

When studying the mass media space, we use a structural and functional approach, which allows us to detect a dual nature in it, because it has geographical characteristics that are often mistaken for structural and functional (Baychik, 2020). As Taisheva (2010) notes, 'it is possible to overcome 'spatial fetishism' in favor of the characteristics of the subjectivity of the mass media space through

its correlation with normative models based on the functions of mass media. In relation to the mass media space, it is adequate to use as a reference system several normative models representing various functional alternatives: the mass media are simultaneously agents of civil society, the market sphere and national development'.

The most important issue of media space study is the identification of its structure and the characteristics of the main elements. According to Yudina (2008), the modern media space is a system organized according to the network principle. The elements of this space differ in the degree of influence and mass, but they are all interconnected, and changes in one element of the system affect all the others. The researcher proposes to identify in the structure of the media space the main functional systems located in the media space, the subjects of the media space and the relations between the subjects about the functional systems and therefore identifies the following elements in it: mass media, which constitute the material, physical basis of the production and transmission of mass information; social relations of media space agents associated with the production and consumption of mass media; the information symbolic product in the form of which mass information is distributed.

Dzyaloshinsky (2013) proceeds from the fact that 'the basis of the media space is the means of production and distribution of mass information, as well as mass information itself. The subjects producing and consuming mass information, as well as regulating these processes, interact with the media space, but cannot be considered its elements. However, the actions themselves – the production of meanings, regulation, distribution, consumption – are important structural elements of the media space'.

Nim (2013), generalizing and critically considering the main directions of media space analysis in Western media studies, suggests the possibility of distinguishing three dimensions of media space:

1. Mediated space is a physical and/or social space represented through media. The result of 'mapping' of reality are media images and media texts. Mass media are not neutral in portraying reality, but bring certain meanings and essences to the places and events described, encouraging consumers of information to perceive them in a special way. These spaces and places are media representations that reflect and form the ideas and feelings of communication participants in relation to different spaces and places, real and imaginary.

2. A mediatized space is any type of social space (politics, economy, recreation, etc.) involving the use of media and/or experiencing their influence. The distributed media technologies b change the nature and configuration of the

space. The connection and mutual influence of the first and second dimensions of spaces lies in the fact that any mediatized space tends to become mediated, i.e. displayed, but not every mediated space is mediatized.

3. Media space is the material space of mass media networks and streams. The media space is a system of not only mass, but also interpersonal communications carried out with the help of technical means of communication.

Thus, the mediated space correlates with the content, the mediatized space correlates with the sphere of its distribution and consumption, the media space corresponds to the channels of production and transmission of information, i.e. the media themselves and the system of their interrelations. These interpretations of the concept of media space 'do not exclude, but rather, on the contrary, necessarily presuppose each other; they reflect different levels and directions of spatial sociological analysis of media communications'.

Noting the broad and versatile interpretation of the media space, Monastyreva (2017) highlights common points in the views of scientists on its essence: the core of the media space is the mass communication media, in particular the media; the media space, and therefore the mass media, is an active actor in the formation of other types of spaces (social, cultural, educational, etc.).

The study of the organization of the media space forces scientists to turn to its architecture. 'The modern media space is a system organized according to the network principle. This means that there is no vertical hierarchically built management structure and horizontal connections between individual elements prevail. This increases its adaptability, makes it possible to flexibly respond to market demands. System nodes, network organizational units are separate means of mass communication' (Yudina, 2008). The nodes of the system are interdependent, so changes in individual mass media affect the entire media space.

Modern societies create conditions, on the one hand, for the identity of the information and mass media space, and on the other, for their differences. Moreover, both similarity and difference are the result of the same means, factors and circumstances. Thus, technical equipment leads to repletion of the information space, as for the mass media space, in addition to repletion, new technical means allow expanding the circle of the journalistic community, the authors of texts and meanings are those who previously could only claim to be consumers of information.

Yudina believes that since 'the media space is a social system, all its structural elements: TV space, radio space, print space, Internet, etc., are interconnected and obey the general laws of the development of the whole.

In the political media space, a model of convergence of technical devices and professionalism is being implemented on the basis of convergent content creation formats and prerequisites for interaction and interpenetration are being formed already at the level of components of the media system. In a broad sense, convergence can be understood not only as the interaction of phenomena, but also as the interpenetration of technologies, the blurring of boundaries between them, merging. Media convergence is also the merging of a person with modern communication equipment and information technology.

Addressing this topic, Sharkov (2017) considers it a very important task to conceptualize the term 'media space' and the convergence of its elements in virtual space, as well as a clear designation of their role and place in communication studies and, in particular, in political communication.

Since the communicative platform of political activity is increasingly being transferred from traditional media to new media, we can talk about the convergence of heterogeneous communicative practices both as an objective process, and as a distinctive property of the information society, and as a property organically inherent to the system of mass communications.

As a result, the media space is expanding due to the use of non-journalistic media and technologies, in particular: PR, advertising, marketing; merging of communication practices, primarily journalism and PR; coordination of information policies of independent market players, in particular: individual media (as enterprises) and manufacturers of other kinds of products – corporations, industrial enterprises, institutions of science and education, etc.

In the media space, there is a convergence of different media from the standpoint of performing a common task simultaneously at several levels: when collecting and processing information, when using convergent formats for producing content, when interpenetrating competencies inherent to different types of journalistic activity.

Thus, the analyzed material of scientific developments allows us to assert that, despite the identical use both in journalistic texts and in scientific works of the terms 'media space' and 'mass media space', in strictly scientific terms, these categories, as well as the phenomena behind them, have differences, obscuring or deliberately ignoring which leads to significant errors.

The initial position of the discrepancy is the sources that generate them – the media, behind which are all the means of communication in society, and the mass media – exclusively the mass media. At the same time, the reservation should be taken into account that modern technical capabilities, thanks to the replacement of one-way communication with two-way communication, make

it possible to turn mass media into mass communication media. According to Yanglyaeva (2018), 'the direct creators of space and reality are the mass media. It is they who, often invisible to an ordinary person, to a layman, put together a puzzle, which is called built environment, i.e. 'artificially created environment' (environment, space). Today, the mass media, with all the abundance of technical and technological means in their arsenal, can easily transform space and time'.

Therefore, using the best practices in the field of research of spatial organization of information, we believe it is possible not only to describe the logic of the sequence of appearance of the phenomena of information, media and mass media space, but also to identify their common features and distinctive characteristics.

The category 'information space' should be attributed to the philosophical understanding of the fullness of the material world with information as a property of substance and it is advisable to interpret the phenomenon in a broad sense. Oral, visual information transmitted directly from individual to individual is the first stage of the information space in the social environment.

In relation to this broad meaning, in a narrow sense, the information space appears when using means of transmitting social information, starting with signs, sounds and ending with modern media means. In this sense, the information space is considered as a sphere of relations between people and communities about information. Therefore, the concept of information is used here in a functional sense, implying an alienated information product circulating in society.

The end of the XX – beginning of the XXI century was characterized by the repletion of society with the means of information and communication, creating a new qualitative state of the information space – the media space. Thus, the media space is a space in which information circulates based on the use of technical means of transmission. The information of this space is intended both for a specialized audience with the appropriate content, and for the mass. That is, the media space is created by all means working with information. Communication (transmission of information) in society takes place on the basis of all available means.

Mass media space is a space that is filled with information of a mass nature. The sources of information in it are the mass media, consumers are the mass audience. The mass media space is a subsystem of the media and information spaces in which mass information circulates. In the literature, the term 'media space' is often used. However, as we have shown above, the definition of 'mass

media' more accurately conveys the specifics of this phenomenon, which is important in the scientific study of it.

Due to the properties of information, the mass media space has the property of universality, since various areas of public activity find in it a means of realization of their intentions. However, despite the universality of its nature, the mass media space carries in its technological characteristics a national-specific coloring, expressed in the ways of creating, processing, distributing and storing information. Under the influence of the Internet on the traditional mass media, the media space acquires new characteristics.

Firstly, the fact that digital media have become the main suppliers of information allows us to conclude that the new media space, or more precisely, the mass media space, is based on digital technologies (digitalization of information).

Secondly, the fragmentation of the media space with their convergence are two sides of the process of development of modern mass communication media, enhanced by information technologies. The fragmentation of the information space resulted in the allocation of media and mass media spaces in it.

Thirdly, the quantitative increase in the mass media leads to an increase in the consumer's choice of information in the media space. In turn, the result of the diversification of the mass media space is the specialization of the audience, its orientation to specialized media.

Fourthly, being a catalyst for the process of globalization, the mass media space itself has been subjected to its ambiguous impact. 'Globalization trends initiate the processes of revaluation and rethinking of such basic concepts as information, information flow, information field, information resource, information potential. Their hypertrophied socio-cultural significance in comparison with the already familiar technical and technological nature provokes conflicts among the subjects of info-communication interaction, involving representatives of the scientific community in their discussion'.

Proceeding from the fact that the mass media space is a part of the social (informational, media) space, which is covered by one or another mass media capable of creating virtuality, then as the social environment is covered by visual mass media, it is increasingly virtualized. Virtualization is one of the dynamic characteristics of the mass media space as a means of representing the world in other dimensions and planes, but, on the other hand, it is a means of orientation in the surrounding world. The mass consciousness perceives the virtual space created by the media as an analogue of the real space, although in the course of mediatization there is a distortion of reality. However, the mass consciousness, reacting to the informational reality, transfers its reaction to the genuine reality.

Klikushina (2006) notes that the information space acquires for a person the character of a second, subjective reality. Is it possible to agree that 'the part of it that contains information inadequately reflecting the surrounding world, and those of its characteristics and processes that make it difficult or hinder the adequacy of a person's perception and understanding of the environment and themselves, can be designated as "virtual reality"'? It is hardly worth considering such phenomena and categories as the information space and virtual reality as of the same order. If information correlates with virtuality, then space and reality are much less connected, although they touch, because space can have both real and virtual expression.

Virtuality as a subject of study is interdisciplinary in nature. This is quite natural, because the concept of virtuality arises in various social spheres. Unlike elementary particles, which were characteristic of the studies of classical physics, quantum physics began to study virtual particles. In technology, specialists began to use a special type of modeling, which required avoiding the limitations of real space and the possibilities of creating illusions encountered in real practice. Virtual reality is also an environment for obtaining solutions, the implementation of which is faster and cheaper than similar solutions in the physical world. The virtual space has received particularly wide distribution and recognition with the professional and household computerization of society. It was for the designation of special computers that give the user an interactive stereoscopic image that the use of the term 'virtual reality' was proposed.

Undoubtedly, the immersion system of virtual reality provides universal tools for the embodiment of human fantasy. Exactly the tools. But the direction of fantasies, the purpose of their implementation in politics remain outside the brackets of scientific research. In our opinion, it is possible to identify this by referring to the segment of virtual reality that is created with or on the basis of mass media. In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between computer virtual reality and virtual reality created by the mass media. It is not without reason that scientists note that 'a person who cannot express themselves in real life finds refuge in virtual communication, and one who cannot realize themselves in real society plunges into social networks. This opinion leads to a widespread negative attitude towards virtual communication, especially social networks, as a refuge for those who could not find themselves in 'real' life. As to something that moves away from real life, replacing the solution of real problems with a simulation of communication and success' (Volobuev, & Kuzina, 2021).

Turning to the study of the nature of information and its essence, scientists take the concept of being as the starting point of reasoning, understood as

the totality of everything that exists and fixed by the concept of 'reality'. The Philosophical Dictionary (2001: 486) gives the following definition: 'Reality is the existence of things in its comparison with non-existence, as well as with other (possible, probable, etc.) forms of being'.

The material-informational paradigm of reality proceeds from the fact that the real world is formed by three fundamental components: substance, energy and information, which are self-sufficient and represent various types of manifestations of objective reality that exists independently of consciousness or is the result of the activity of consciousness, but exists both inside and outside it. At the same time, information was considered by them as a universal property of substance, its attribute. Therefore, this concept is called the attributive concept of the nature of information.

Scientists have identified the connection of the phenomenon of information with the structure of reality, and on this basis certain generalizing conclusions have been made. First, the structure of reality has the property of dualism, because it simultaneously includes physical and ideal reality. Both of these components objectively exist and interact with each other, having the property of mutual reflection. The ability of physical and ideal reality to reflect each other is their fundamental property, which creates the possibility of manifestation of various aspects of the phenomenon of information. Second, physical reality consists of all physical objects existing in the world, both material and immaterial (for example, electromagnetic, gravitational and other fields), as well as all processes occurring with these objects, their movements and internal changes. Third, the ideal reality includes all non-material objects, systems, processes and phenomena of reality and, in turn, has a certain structure. The information itself is not a physical object, but it belongs to the world of ideal reality. Although for its manifestation information needs objects (or processes) of physical reality, which serve as its carriers. Physical and ideal realities in the world around us are closely interrelated and can have a very significant impact on each other (Kolin, 2007, 2010).

When studying the issues of information in the structure of ideal reality, Kolin distinguishes three of its varieties, which are ontologically different from each other and have the specifics of the manifestation of the phenomenon of information in them. The ideal reality of the first kind arises as a result of the interaction of objects (or processes) of physical reality, manifests itself as a reflection of the properties of some objects (or processes) in the structure of other objects (or processes), exists objectively and independently of consciousness and is not a product of consciousness activity. Subjective ideal

reality of the second kind arises in the consciousness of an individual in direct interaction with physical reality as its reflection or under the influence of ideal reality of the first kind. Objective ideal reality of the third kind is a product of human consciousness activity, but existing outside of it. The intangible sphere of culture, in particular, belongs to this kind.

The proposed generic classification of reality perfectly fits the category of virtual reality, which should be attributed to the ideal reality, although there are some difficulties in determining its belonging to a specific kind. The proposed generic classification of reality perfectly fits the category of virtual reality, which should be attributed to the ideal reality, although there are some difficulties in determining its belonging to a specific kind.

Largely due to the new media, the mass media space has the characteristic of virtuality. The reality directly perceived by a person is primary, and the information that they perceive indirectly, through the means of communication, mass media, is secondary. Though this information reflects reality, a person does not perceive it directly. This is a reality that has gone through the process of mediatization.

There is an opinion that the term 'virtual reality' is used when one wants to emphasize the consideration that the information circulating in the information space does not always reproduce genuine reality (Dazyuk, 1988). From our point of view, this opinion correctly characterizes the process of mediatization, when a full and reliable reflection of reality in virtuality is not achieved.

Both virtual reality (the reality that the media reproduce) and virtual virtuality (unreal, but artificially created virtuality: models, computer games) are the product of media and the content of the media space. 'Every mediated space is a social construct and a cultural phenomenon, regardless of its ontological status. This space is a representation, a media image of places, territories and worlds that can have both a physical and a social nature (and, apparently, mostly heterogeneous), both real and imaginary. Such a space becomes a text that requires a discourse-analysis as a tool for its empirical study, and/or an image – in this case, a visual analysis of media images is necessary' (Nim, 2011).

Virtual reality of the media space appears and manifests itself as a result of the combined impact of a number of factors. One of them is the intersection and interweaving of the knowledge space and the information space.

The fact is that information tools are used to solve various social problems, because it is information that brings new knowledge. But the knowledge space has an inertial character, which makes it difficult to make changes. The dynamic nature of the information space not only contributes, but is also fundamentally

aimed at making changes. Therefore, the change, addition or denial of outdated knowledge occurs through the introduction of information.

Virtual reality of space appears as a consequence of the functioning of mass media. The vast majority of people currently receive most of the information indirectly, through the media or mass media. Events, facts reflected in the information space, and especially their interpretation cannot be adequate to reality due to the impact to which primary information is exposed during mediatization (Labush, & Puyu, 2019).

A personality is drawn into the virtual space due to its very properties. So, in reality, a person observes events from the outside, and with the help of technology, they move to the center of events, and their psyche functions in the mode of impulsive reaction, a person virtually self-presents themselves. Virtual self-presentation can be the realization of what is unattainable in real circumstances. In virtual communication, it becomes possible to express aggressive views, intentions, suppressed aspirations, taboo in reality, satisfaction of forbidden motives, desire for control, power over other people.

'However, in addition to dissatisfaction with real identity, virtual self-presentation can be created for a number of other reasons. The formation of a network identity that differs from the real one can be explained by the fact that people do not have the opportunity to express all sides of their multifaceted "I" in real communication, while network communication provides them with such an opportunity' (Sharkov, 2016: 102). That is, the identity is not replaced, but supplemented.

Virtual space as an illusory space is created through the interaction of individual consciousness and elements (matrices) of the collective unconscious. The virtual space in which political communications are carried out is a political segment that exists as a local socio-cultural space. And the virtual space, no matter how unreal it may seem, is still formed by referring to the original state of consciousness – it is not a physical space, it is a representation of the real, even if the representation itself distorts reality.

Virtual space can replicate the trends of the real world, but it does not always adequately replace it. Social interaction is affected by virtual communication, which has the following features:
- the development of mediated forms of human communication that allow ambiguous identification of communication subjects;
- strengthening the generative nature of communication (self-reproducibility);
- expanding the range of communication on the scale of 'locality of the act – publicity of the act';

- expanding the range of communication on the scale of 'particularity of consciousness – globality of consciousness';
- expanding of the cultural background of communication;
- weakening of the role of tradition in communication;
- strengthening self-referential communication;
- the growing marginalization of consciousness;
- reducing the authority of objective knowledge;
- increasing the authority of conventional knowledge;
- the transition from dialogue to polylogue in finding out the truth;
- blurring the boundaries of thesauri and pluralism of conceptual spaces;
- increasing the discursiveness of knowledge;
- expansion of sources and methods of obtaining and producing information;
- expanding opportunities for socialization and professionalization;
- changing the role of education in society;
- expanding hedonistic opportunities (Kapterev, 2002).

Not all of these features are affected only by the informatization and digitalization of society, but in general they create an objective and full-fledged characteristic of the communication features of the virtual space.

Although the concept of virtual reality is very common, there is no single understanding of it. Two most considerable points of view can be identified. One of them is 'critical', according to which virtual reality is recognized as significantly different from what is usually understood by reality, and then a legitimate question arises about the objective difference between the two realities, as well as about the criteria for the validity of virtual reality objects.

According to the second point of view, virtual reality is not only considered along with objective reality, but is also identified with it.

There is an attempt to justify virtual reality as autonomous and completely independent from objective reality, as evidenced by the fact that virtual reality objects may not have corresponding analogues in the objective world.

In general, virtual reality is considered as an artificial reality, as a reality directly related to computer technology and software. For the user – the subject of virtual reality – it seems to be as real as the world around them.

The mass media create patterns of behavioral, linguistic, and mental personal self-organization. 'These schemes, pictures of sociocultural everyday life are also realities, by coincidence of human existence in the world, no less important for them than the state of the material or natural environment. Media communication transcends the spatial and temporal connectedness of the direct

experience of individuals, and with their uncritical perception, the categories of the apparent can replace the categories of real being. But this secondary experience in the media world is pushed into the existential center and becomes the so-called communicative experience, which is a more relevant equivalent of objective reality. Constructs of common sense and situativeness act as a principle of socialization of the masses. New consensual forms of collective interaction are emerging, based on the transformation of behavioral stereotypes in the process of information interaction of individuals' (Mansurova, 2010).

Virtuality, like all other forms of information origin, has a spatial organization. The features of the virtual space include: intensity, interactivity, immersiveness, illustrativeness, intuitiveness. The intensity of space is related to the fact that in virtual reality the user should actively interact with the environment – receive information and react to its changes. Interactivity is understood as the possibility of dialogue with virtual reality objects, the ability to influence the situation. Immersiveness is determined by the degree of immersion of the subject in the virtual world, which can be verified by a kind of 'dodge test' proposed by Kruger. The authenticity of the virtual world is proved by the instinctive desire of a person to dodge a stone flying at their head, despite the awareness of the unreality of this object. The illustrativeness of virtual reality is manifested in the fact that the information presented to the user is in the most visual and emotional form, facilitating its perception, which ideally occurs not on an intellectual, but on a sensory-emotional level.

Nosov (1997) adds generality, relevance and autonomy to the noted characteristics. Origin is understood as the ability of virtuality to create a virtual reality of the next level, becoming primary for it. Moreover, such a process can continue indefinitely. Such a sign as relevance is presented in science as the existence of virtuality in the present reality, i.e. between the past and the future, generated by the activity of reality. The relevance of virtuality for a person presupposes involvement in an event when a person directly manifests themselves as acting or is in the illusion of action. Autonomy characterizes the ability of virtual reality to 'have' its own time, space and laws of existence, it leads to the acquisition of an alternative world that replaces reality.

Focusing on the characteristics of virtual reality proposed by foreign researchers Burdea and Coiffet (2003), Antonova (2008: 122) notes: 'If we agree with the definition of virtual reality as ideal, 'immersive' and interactive, then it will appear as a complex system with many parameters, including a huge variety of diverse objects. In this regard, a very important question arises about the local consistency of this system, which, as it turned out, cannot be

solved without a clear separation of the two levels of this system: the subject and the meta-level. The necessity of this distinction is connected with the issues of studying the mechanism of functioning of virtual reality objects. The fact is that the information we receive about a virtual object at the 'subject level' is sensorially incoherent, that is, contradictory. Sensory experience in virtual reality is very often contradictory and paradoxical, but the object of virtual reality, which consists of this kind of information, must be uncontroversial'.

Virtual space and its corresponding virtual reality are only one part, a segment of the media picture of the world formed by various mass media. The media picture of the world reflects the processes of constant change in political, economic, social and cultural reality, which is becoming more complex, information-rich and difficult to perceive and describe. But at the same time, we have to take into account that the media, thanks to their technical and technological properties, are used in politics to implement strategies aimed at changing the behavior of individuals, achieving certain political goals. 'A media space filled with political content turns into a political media space formed mainly by political actors interested in influencing their target segment, for example, the electoral audience. The most effective political influence on people is exerted by the visualized media space, i.e. the social environment in which they are under the influence of visual means that carry a political burden' (Sharkov, 2016: 97).

As a result, the audience is offered not a real picture of the world, but a certain construct. The constructed media reality is a simplified interpretation of what happened with a certain degree of approximativeness and conditionality, corresponding, in general, to objective reality.

Media reality tends to replace social reality. Individuals are subject to constant massive media pressure, due to which there is a gradual replacement of direct live communication with a broadcast image of reality. The consumers of media messages are moving from social reality to media reality, and they are no longer able to distinguish truth from fiction, which is directly possible in real life. Noting the interrelationships and dependencies of culture and values, values and virtuality, scholars write: 'Culture as a set of accepted values and norms has been largely captured by electronic hypertext, which combines, articulates and expresses meanings in the form of an audiovisual mosaic capable of expansion or compression, generalization or specification depending on the audience. The digital environment is no longer reduced to sending messages. The message is the decoding of the environment, because the media system is so flexible that it is adapted to send any message to any audience. Accordingly,

the message structures the environment. We assume that we are talking about a new culture, a culture of real virtuality, since our reality is largely made up of daily experiences gained within the virtual world' (Castells, & Kiseleva, 2000).

The mass media space created by the media turns into a totality that forms ideas, priorities, and the format of everyday and consumer behavior. The only way to oppose media reality is to get out of it, which is impossible in the digital age, also given new challenges brought by the digital environment (Vartanova, & Gladkova, 2022).

Virtual communication, along with the destruction of spatial barriers to dissemination of information, has also removed obstacles to the dissemination of opposing and antagonistic values, but not touching, and therefore not directly conflicting value systems. 'Utilitarianism and egalitarianism, created to unify a person under the consumer's template, rhizomatically grow on the basis of virtualization of information flows. Taking into account the global trend of unification in relation to the system of values within the whole of humanity, there is a real problem of preservation by local cultures of traditional values for them' (Volobuev, & Kuzina, 2021).

In the process of virtualization, not only value conflicts appear, but also contradictions in the assessments of the activities of people who generate these conflicts. 'Among the phenomena characteristic of modern mass media, the tendency to virtualize a fact or event should be particularly noted. Hoax, presented in the form of mockumentary, pastiche, fake or various types of infotainment, increasingly appears on the pages of the press, on television and on the Internet. At the same time, the line between a joke and misinformation is becoming increasingly blurred' (Poznin, 2014; Mustapha et al, 2022).

Another consequence of virtualization capabilities is a decrease in the 'pain threshold of public opinion'. Based on the ability of modern mass media to virtualize objective reality, to turn the chronicle of the course of real events into a set of clips, many bloody conflicts turn into a spectacle for the audience. The researchers note that 'the modern armed conflict develops in the genre of reportage and according to the laws of this genre, so that the news generated by it in its format corresponds as closely as possible to the format of the PR material necessary for the implementation of information and psychological impact technologies' (Manoilo, 2005).

The virtual expansion of media reality is on the agenda. Zamkov (2017) analyzes the possibilities of a promising direction of digital media – immersive journalism (immersive media), understanding by it such a technique of presenting digital content that extracts advantages for the user from the elements of the virtual environment. He notes that 'the most general goal of immersive

technology is to create a direct connection between content and its perception for deep immersion in the event environment of stories. The essence of the immersion effect itself is that it changes the observer's perception of their own position to the media image, i.e. turns them from an external observer into an internal one. At the same time, a number of spillover psychological effects may occur, such as a sense of presence, penetrating communication, participation (in interactive environments)'.

The author sees the prospect of the development of immersive journalism as the 'hottest' branch of the media industry in the fact that the synthesis of reality phenomena and knowledge in immersive virtual reality systems will 'blur' the boundaries between real world events and their machine simulation and create a mixed virtual world.

Baeva (2013) refers to the most significant consequences of the spread of digital culture, bearing in mind its existential and value-ethical aspects: the formation of a new type of value – virtual existence; the formation and development of digital culture that contributes to the solution in virtual space of such existential personality problems as death, loneliness, lack of freedom; technocratization and virtualization of the person themselves, gaining superpowers; the 'existential vacuum' that increases under the influence of virtualization, associated with the loss of the boundaries of reality; the decline in the role of real interpersonal communication and the transition to communication mediated by the information space; the formation of a new ethics of communication in which value pluralism becomes a new challenge to the moral imperatives of the individual.

Thus, the identified existential problems and risks take on new forms. By smoothing out individual contradictions of interpersonal and social relations, they create new, more complex causal relationships, which contributes to the development of other conflicts.

As a result, the analysis of the works of various researchers allows us to state that virtual reality as a property of the mass media space has the following characteristics: 1) this is a reality, ontologically grounded by a person's desire to create an alternative world; 2) it manifests itself here and now, mainly signally, unlike the virtual reality of art; 3) its orientation is much broader in terms of impact; 4) it radically changes the space-time continuum.

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