

Faculty of Journalism  
Lomonosov Moscow State University

National Association of Mass Media Researchers

# **World of Media**

**Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies**

Issue 1, 2018

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# CONTENTS

## Lead article

Transformation of newsroom work in the digital era <i>Alexander Kolesnichenko, Andrei Vyrkovsky, Marina Galkina, Anastasia Obraztsova and Sergei Vartanov</i> .....	7
--	---

## Contemporary debate

Media theory in Russia: Current wave of fermentation <i>Elena Vartanova</i> .....	25
--	----

## Articles

Crossing ideological borders: How to contribute to depolarization within society and on a global level? <i>Monique José Ratheiser-van der Velde</i> .....	35
---	----

Social media as an effective communication tool for youth engagement on social political issues: Case study of the affirmative repositioning movement in Namibia <i>Fred Joshua Mwilima and Mutonga Matali</i> .....	49
---	----

Middle range theories in the research of information and communication media systems <i>Evgeny Dugin</i> .....	59
--	----

Media futurology: “Journalism of sense” and robotization of media industry <i>Kirill Zorin</i> .....	75
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# **LEAD ARTICLE**



# Transformation of newsroom work in the digital era

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## Abstract

The authors have conducted several in-depth interviews with Russian reporters. The results show that new technologies have substantially changed many aspects of journalistic work: particularly the search for information and newsmakers, communications among colleagues, genres of media texts have transformed. Changes have not significantly affected the size and structure of editorial boards. The practice of working from home has not gained ground either.

## Keywords

Digitalization, newsroom, new technologies, work, communications, information search, journalists' competencies

## Introduction

Journalism is one of those fields of human endeavor which have undergone a radical transformation in response to new technologies. Since the late 1990s, the Internet has gradually developed into a key environment for collecting information, publishing materials and interacting with colleagues. Social networks, which became popular in the late 2000s, have drastically increased both the number of authors appealing to the mass audience and the volume of the produced content, forcing journalists to search for new ways of competing for audience attention.

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The ongoing changes are in the centre of journalism researchers' attention. However, the focus is either on the systemic transformation of the media industry (Lukina, Fomicheva, 2005; Lukina, 2013; Amzin, 2016; Baranova, 2014), or on the new formats of journalistic products (Ulanova, 2017; Sotnikova, 2014; Lukina, 2009; Amzin, 2013), or on the media strategies under new conditions (Viren, 2009; Galustyan, 2012; Smirnova, 2013; Polynov, 2017). The research "Online Journalism: Adaptation to the Changing Reality" conducted in 2017 by Mail.ru and including 28 interviews with online project executives is also devoted to media survival in the digital environment<sup>2</sup>.

It has been acknowledged that in the context of the online environment materials should be prepared differently (Vyrkovsky, Liubimtseva, 2015), journalists should be managed differently (Vyrkovsky, 2013; Vyrkovsky, 2015) and students of faculties of journalism should be taught differently (Kornev, 2016). The role of social networks in information search and journalistic product promotion has also been acknowledged (Razumova, 2014; Dyachenko, 2016).

However, the technology of journalistic work has been studied much less, with the emphasis being either on journalistic products (Baranova, 2014) or on the discrepancies between the innovation claim and the actual situation attributable to inertia and journalists' unwillingness to change the work rhythm and undertake additional duties, as well as to inter-generation conflicts in newsrooms (Kallioma, 2011; 2013; Lischka, 2015). It was found that a typical response to editorial changes consisted in managers' attempt to "optimize" journalistic output at the expense of creativity (Gade, Raviola, 2009); Weezel, 2009).

This research aims to investigate how new technologies have influenced the working process of modern Russian journalists, which of these technologies are actually used, in which form and what the results are. The working process was considered as a whole, from searching for themes, collecting information and communicating with newsmakers to requirements to journalistic skills, changes in newsroom structure and relations with colleagues and superiors.

## Methodology

The hypothesis of the research consisted in an assumption that under the influence of new technologies all aspects of journalistic work have changed: information collection, communication with newsmakers and colleagues, writing copy, requirements to journalists' professional skills and competencies, genre structure of media texts, newsroom structure, attitude to working from

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<sup>2</sup> <https://media.mail.ru/#about>



home and engaging freelancers, managerial style and performance evaluation criteria of journalistic work accepted in a particular media outlet.

The research was conducted in spring 2017 using the method of in-depth interviewing. The respondents were journalists who had been in the profession for no less than 10 years. This eligibility criterion was applied to enable the interviewees to compare their current working process with the previous ones and discern the innovations more easily. The respondents were selected among staff of leading print and online publications, the most top-rated according to the Mail.ru<sup>3</sup> and Mediascope<sup>4</sup> companies and the most cited ones according to the Medialogiya company<sup>5</sup> (National media, n.d.). An additional criterion for selecting a media outlet was its reputation and recognition in the professional community.

All in all, 24 interviews were done with journalists from 17 media outlets: the Interfax, TASS, Regnum and Bloomberg (Russian service) news agencies, the Kommersant and Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspapers, the RBC, Russkiy Reporter, Forbes (Russian version) and Vokrug Sveta magazines, the Life.ru, Vzgl'yad, Dni.ru and Secret Firmy online publications, The Russia Today and Moskva 24 television channels and the Ekho Moskvyy radio station. The involvement of staff members of audiovisual media and the Russian service of one of the leading world news agencies made it possible to expand the context of the research, although the main focus was on Russian journalists who write texts.

This sample does not allow to identify the quantitative regularities revealing the prevalence of these or those practices in the work of modern Russian journalists. However, it enables one to detect qualitative shifts in the working process of media workers. Even in view of different technical equipment and technological advancement of Russian newsrooms, it is possible to assume that the working methods used in the most innovative ones will soon become, or are becoming, generally accepted. This is why the research leads to the conclusion about the changes in the professional culture of modern Russian journalists under the influence of new technologies.

## Results

Presenting the results, it is reasonable to focus on the most significant changes in journalistic work. The conclusions will be supported by respondents' utterances

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<sup>3</sup> <https://top.mail.ru/Rating/MassMedia/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/dannye\\_issledovaniy\\_auditorii\\_smi/](http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/dannye_issledovaniy_auditorii_smi/)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/105/> <http://www.spark-interfax.ru/ru/about>

with a specification of the kind of media where the respondent worked at the time of being interviewed and the respondent's status. The particular media outlets are not mentioned because the corporate rules of some of them require journalists to secure the top executives' approval of what they say; it was decided not to do so in order to make the journalists feel free to speak about the real, not ideal, state of affairs.

The results are organized in several sections: newsroom structure, communication among staff, communication with newsmakers, information collection, genre structure of media texts, requirements to journalists' professional skills and competencies, working from home and staff motivation. This allows to demonstrate the changes in journalists working process on each aspect of this process.

**Newsroom structure.** Here, the main change is the emergence of technical departments, responsible for various aspects of work on the website. It was found that while the creative editorial team does not change numerically or shrinks in response to the economic crisis, the technical departments have grown in size over the past years and in some media outlets they are numerically comparable with journalistic ones.

*“Now we have video operators, programmers, promoters, designers, artists, desktop publishers”* (the editor of a newspaper).

*“The staff has been augmented by those working with the Internet and social networks. Web designers, SMM experts. There aren't any new journalistic positions. The old ones have dropped in number”* (the editor of a magazine).

*“Some newcomers attempt to analyze large volumes of data using new technology and thus facilitate the work of writing journalists freeing them from fiddling with databases and collecting statistical data. These are staffing positions, too: big daters, data miners”* (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

*“An important figure of a website managing editor has joined the team. He determines the face of the publication in the enormous digital world. We have some new editors who don't know anything about the essence of our work but they have transformed our content into a website form. Now there isn't any magazine newsroom, there is a system of website channels, and the heads of these channels are the newsroom's organizational units. We also have a video producer and experts in website infographics”* (the editor of a magazine).

Another important change is an actual fusion of the offline and online parts of the creative editorial team, which means that all the journalists work for the publication's website.

*“The newsroom used to be divided into digital and paper. Now these have fused together, and there are just people who use paper to do the packing”* (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

*“We don’t see any dividing line between the newspaper newsroom and the website newsroom. It is a single department writing for both the website and the newspaper”* (the editor of a newspaper).

Similar processes occur in those cases when there is a formal division into the website newsroom and the print publication’s newsroom.

*“The website has a special editor with a team of journalists and members of support staff. But newspaper men work for the website, too. In the website newsroom, there are no authors of the needed profile, so the load is on the print newspaper’s team. The team has to appoint a man on duty, who, for a day, falls out of the process. And this is our pain in the neck. In fact, everybody works in this way, except those who can afford a large staff* (the editor of a newspaper).

**Communication among staff.** The main change here is a shift of communication to social networks and messengers. Most often, the respondents mentioned Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp, where closed groups and chats are created. Today, it is standard practice for journalists sitting at neighboring desks to communicate by writing instead of talking.

*“Now it is much quieter in the office. Staff members used to shout to each other. Any correction or problem was discussed aloud, and this was very disturbing. Through a messenger, you can give a task in writing and receive a written answer without distracting others. If afterwards the journalist hands in his text and the editor criticizes him for a mistake, the conflict can be easily solved because we can go back to their correspondence and find out whether the editor’s task was set incorrectly or the journalist failed to understand it. It is always clear from the correspondence who is to blame”* (the editor of an online publication).

*“A chat in a messenger is the main tool of our trade, and planning meeting are no longer relevant as they last hours a day days a week. Everyone is always involved. People who don’t care normally quit”* (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

Communication through messengers has actually replaced phone calls and email correspondence.

*“Inside the newsroom, we have a Telegram group where announcements are published. We also have department groups and technical groups. Everything is done through Telegram. Suppose I want my news item to be illustrated. I used to email designers but now I post my task in our corporate Telegram group, and a disengaged designer takes up the task”* (the correspondent of an online publication).

*“As far as I can see, all communication has moved to Facebook. People no longer use their phones to make calls. It sometimes happens that on Tuesday you open the messenger and see that on Monday someone sent you an urgent message. On Monday you had no time to enter the messenger but it didn’t occur to the sender to make a call. He believes that you must keep in touch all the time and every time you phone squeals you must check it. This is why I’m always on alert”* (the editor of a magazine).

**Communication with newsmakers.** This communication has also largely moved to social networks and messengers. Journalists hunt for newsmakers and contact them through social networks and make requests to press offices and receive press releases through messengers.

*“Facebook has become a communication channel. Many newsmakers choose to write you on Facebook. Emailing is very rare. Some time ago they asked to send our questions to their corporate email address. Now I don’t even know these addresses and sometimes I don’t even know their phone numbers”* (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

*“It is possible to communicate with some newsmakers on Telegram. Then they respond faster. Previously, you had to make a mobile phone call but the newsmaker could be busy and fail to answer. Now you write, and if the question is simple enough and requires a Yes/No answer or just one sentence, they normally respond promptly* (the editor of a newspaper).

*“If you subscribe to Telegram MFA, you don’t have to enter the MFA website, Twitter or Facebook MFA. You can read MFA news on your phone with all the links. There are closed Telegram channels, where anonymous sources post valid or invalid news* (the editor of a newspaper).

*“Having emailed a press release, press offices may promptly write you in the messenger: “Look, this is also interesting”. Besides, I send my questions through the messenger or ask them to be on alert because I have made a request”* (the correspondent of an online publication).

The respondents made a point that today even budding journalists can find high-profile newsmakers and contact them and that the problem of finding the required phone number no longer exists. This is so due to social networks and messengers and to such journalistic services as Nutcall.com (a phone database for newsmakers containing more than 60 thousand contacts) and Pressfeed.ru (a service publishing journalistic requests to which concerned public relations professionals can respond).

*“In terms of searching for contacts, social networks and services like Nutcall are very helpful: one can find phone numbers without turning to colleagues and*

*making corporate phone calls. This facilitates the search and saves time. And, which is most important, you spend less effort on preparatory work: searching for people, searching for contacts, first acquaintance, making an appointment”* (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

*“Our journalists use the Pressfeed service, which provides experts in various fields in response to a journalist’s request. A journalist can choose someone he hasn’t known before, which broadens the range of opinions for commenting events”* (the editor of a newspaper).

**Information collection.** A major innovation in this area is a wide use of online services providing access to documents or an array of data. Many respondents considered working with these services to be the main way of collecting information.

*“Now we have new databases such as regulation.gov.ru and kartoteka.ru, where data on legal entities can be found. Or the judicial statistics database. Some time ago they didn’t exist, and I simply can’t imagine how one could do the things we do today. For instance, revealing connections between companies* (the editor of an online publication).

*“The first thing I teach newcomers is to use the Spark database<sup>6</sup>. This is a primary database everyone must be able to work with. The second one is Rosreestr. Now it is extremely important. Even if you write about an IT company, it is essential to understand its location and where its plants are situated”* (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

*“Besides, the attitude to information from social networks has drastically changed. It used to be regarded as potentially inaccurate and calling for verification and confirmation from official sources while today information from social networks can be used without any.*

*“Someone can learn from Twitter about his/her dismissal, and journalists learn about it in the same way. Another situation: suppose I write about cultural events. A producer posts in his blog: “We have started shooting the film”. This may be a starting point for my news item* (the editor of a newspaper).

*“Let’s consider a basic case. Suppose there is a statement about an emergency. Previously, we publicized such a statement if it came from an official source. Now a statement can be published on Twitter, and following the rule of two or three sources we can conclude that the emergency event is real if several users post similar photographs or videos. This means that approaches to work have changed. Users are coming to be information sources no less reliable than official ones”* (the deputy editor-in-chief of a news agency).

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<sup>6</sup> <https://top.mail.ru/Rating/MassMedia/>

**Genre structure of media texts.** The respondents talked not so much about new genres as about the modification of the existing ones. A general observation was that the text size has shrunk. Some distinguished a new type of reader interested only in headlines. The main genre of media texts is still news, which prevail in the information flow. Besides, it is common to provide multimedia support to website texts.

*“Texts tend to be shorter. The media continue to publish large materials but only - % of people read them, mostly those who make decisions. And all the rest read only headlines without going any further. People used to pay rubles for their newspaper and wanted to get as much information as possible for this money. Now information is free, and readers spend less than a minute on a website looking through headlines. In the future, there will be more pictures, photographs and videos. Already now, it is considered that a text must be accompanied by a photo gallery and videos. Promptness will be more important than quality: when the news is published immediately but with a lot of mistakes. On the other hand, longreads are still in demand. This is something you can make a name with (the editor of a news agency).”*

*“An apparent trend is making texts shorter and sacrificing content to promptness. Suppose an event happens at the beginning of the day. Our website publishes on the news feed a short message compiled from the material provided by news agencies. Then it asks the newsroom for comments as it is not commissioned to call experts. The comments that arrive are selected, edited and added to the original text. At a certain point, it is decided to write a full-fledged news item. The news item is published, let’s say, at p.m., before the evening peak hours. But if we later look at the readability statistics we’ll see that the winner is the first, compiled message. The most important thing is promptness, talking heads aren’t in demand. It is very much the same as on Twitter. And if the reader is much interested he’ll find comments by himself” (the editor of a newspaper).*

Another evident trend of news journalism is adjusting texts to the requirements of news aggregators in order to attract readers through these channels.

*“You have to adjust the news you write to Yandex News or some other news aggregators, which show the readers only the first line, and you understand that you must squeeze something important into characters” (the editor of an online publication).*

Yet another innovation is presenting the same information in different forms: from short announcements to a long text or multimedia materials. Notably, this is done by one and the same journalist in charge of the topic.

*“When newspaper journalists publish an interview in tomorrow’s issue they themselves warn the website when the interview should go online, send it to news*

agencies and redraft it preparing very short messages for the website. Then the website promotes them on social networks. Thus, several platforms are saturated with the same information” (the editor of a newspaper).

“When you think of a feature you simultaneously think of several other possibilities. You can post on the website a short video with the protagonist provided you have recorded one. You can add some photographs and a reporting element you haven’t used anywhere. A separate news item can be made, too. In fact, you grind content and package it in different formats” (the editor of a magazine).

While preparing the material, the journalist makes a choice not only from the text genres but also from the text form and the multimedia form of material presentation.

“Genres are closely interwoven with the types of perception. If there is an accident, you must respond immediately. It is pointless to spend minutes writing a big news item. If you don’t know any details you write a short news item. Having the details you write an extended news item with a background. If you see that readers would also like to watch a video you go to the scene of the event and do online streaming. The pride of place goes to perception. You make choices looking through the eyes of users” (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).

Large materials invariably become multimedia ones. In addition, the requirements to the quality of such texts, to the opportunities of attracting readers increase.

“The longreads a la Forbes have become multimedia because no one will choose to read online a tome of, characters. To sell the reader a long piece, you must write it as a story, with lots of live descriptions, otherwise the reader will get bored and quit after, characters. Therefore, the advice “make it more dramatic” is no longer a compulsive requirement. It is quite reasonable if you want to detain the reader” (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).

**Requirements to journalists’ professional skills and competencies.** Here the qualitative changes stem from what was said above. First and foremost, journalists must possess skills of searching for information and presenting it on the Internet.

“The skills of working with data are absolutely essential. One must be able not only to write texts in Word but to master new programs. There are services where you enter your data and icons and create your own product in the form of infographics. This used to involve the work of or people; now one journalist is enough” (the editor of a news agency).

“The journalist must certainly know how to use the computer, how to use Word. But he must also know how to use the whole system known as admin

*panel which is engaged in publishing news items on the website” (the editor of a magazine).*

The traditional journalistic competencies (information search, selection and evaluation and text preparation) have been supplemented by new ones. These are the need to work faster, the need to make decisions as to whether the material should be presented in the form of a text or in the multimedia form.

*“Ten years ago, the journalist used to be a person who walked through a dark forest with a torch. Today, the journalist is a person who is sitting on a mountain of gold choosing relevant information sources from among a range of sources, whose number has significantly increased on the Internet. Previously, if you needed a company’s report you had to write them a letter while now you simply have to do a proper Google search, which takes seconds. This “mountain of gold” immediately raises the ante. People must search promptly and evaluate critically” (the editor-in-chief of a magazine).*

*“One must be able not only to produce and convey content (a text, a photo, a video) but also to set priorities. For instance, if I am at a meeting with an interesting speaker it is me who makes a decision on whether to do an extended interview or just shoot a short video and send it to the newsroom in order to establish the topic for the news feed” (the editor of newspaper).*

*“The number of letters the journalist must write in a day has increased. Such is the pressure of the new competitor, citizen journalism. If we don’t make a news item in an hour and a half, we’ll hopelessly lag behind, we won’t have time to share, no one will read the material” (the editor of a newspaper).*

*“Some time ago, the information I happened to get could be saved for a rainy day. Now I must send it to the website as soon as possible. This is a matter of different competencies. This teaches you to be more diverse. The journalist has to be able to write fast, not only coherently and lucidly. To focus on the essentials not only in a long story but also in a short message consisting of two paragraphs” (the editor of a magazine).*

However, the respondents believe that journalists have not become and are not becoming “universal”, i.e. equally able to produce text content and audiovisual content. Moreover, this “universalization” is no longer targeted at, unlike the skills of producing content for different platforms: the print publication, the website, social networks.

*“In Russia and worldwide, there used to be a popular assumption that there existed a “universal” journalist who could take a photo, make a video, collect some data for infographics. It goes without saying that he could write a text and send it rolled in one with the completed multimedia product. The concept has failed. It was found out that people who write well are usually quite mediocre in dealing*



*with visual materials. It is doubtful that a brilliant photo correspondent will bring you good videos from an event because he can do either one thing or the other. Now the concept of “universalization” applies to the people who package the content in the office. The point is that these people are supposed to be multimedia editors of content for the Web. I mean everything: websites, mobile applications, social networks and digital channels” (the deputy editor-in-chief of a news agency).*

*“In large media outlets today, journalists have to be versatile in terms of formats: they must be able to write a short news item or a longread, or compile a gallery. Profile versatility is not needed because there are profile experts. For a beautiful multimedia story, you don’t have to take photographs yourself. If it is a question of make up, there is someone next to you who can do it perfectly well” (the deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).*

**Working from home.** In spite of technical possibilities, media outlets are reluctant to abandon newsrooms and allow the staff to work from home. Almost everywhere, working from home is an exception because of a staff member’s illness or family circumstances. The respondents attribute this to the fact that when people work from home communications are not prompt enough, productivity decreases and the team spirit is gone.

*“This is not a matter of technologies. I do know that it is possible to prepare a text remotely. We all work in this way using Telegram for communication and Google Docs for simultaneous work. It’s a matter of personal contact and ease of interaction. It’s much easier for me to interact with someone who is standing in front of me” (deputy editor-in-chief of a magazine).*

*“People working from home perform much worse. Those working in the office, in a team, exhibit a higher efficiency. At home people get distracted: they may watch TV or cook. Some simply can’t make themselves work. Working in the office is better because people live in each other’s pockets. They exchange information, contacts. Work socialization is very important. When someone works remotely he doesn’t see the goal. It would be more convenient for the employer to have staff members working from home. He wouldn’t have to pay the office rent or for the telephone line. Yet I don’t think that remote working is a near term prospect. This is related to our set of mind and to the fact that we have very few effective employees able to work from home” (the editor of a news agency).*

*“If someone works from home or, say, from Bali, there is a possibility that a piece of urgent information sent through messengers will reach him later than it should. If you’re in the office you can simply shout to a colleague asking him/her to make changes to the lead-in. In the first situation, the communication will certainly take longer. This is a trifling thing but it may become an obstacle if you urgently need something to be done. As today’s competitive environment is very*

*demanding, any delay may cost us a large part of the audience” (the editor of a television channel).*

*“Some news editors ask my permission to work from home on this or that day but they must give their reasons for that. Actually, they can work remotely because remote access to the admin panel is available. Working in the office is a tradition, a kind of inertia” (the editor of a magazine).*

Not much has changed in the engagement of freelancers. The respondents explain that the freelancer must be trusted. Editors won't accept materials from strangers because either it will take much effort to verify the information or there is a risk of reputational and legal consequences for the publication.

**Staff motivation.** In this part, we had an opportunity to evaluate work results through the material's popularity statistics. The key criteria are viewings, scrolls and shares.

*“You open your article and see, viewings; three hours later – viewings; in the evening – as many as, viewings. Plus social shares. The correlation between shares and viewings is indicative of the text's popularity. This is an extremely motivating thing because people see the results of their work, they develop a drive. This real-time thrill was familiar to those working in news agencies: who will launch the news minutes earlier. Now it is possible to see and trace everything in real time on Yandex News – who is the primary source, who is the winner. In terms of technologies, it's a great thing” (the editor of a magazine).*

However, the respondents acknowledge that the viewings and links on social networks as they are do not indicate high-quality work and that the pop theme will always be in greater demand than serious matters.

*“A new wages model is being tested according to which not only the number of clicks determines the payment but also the extra value of the news items. It is unfair when someone who has written about tits and ass and received thousand viewings gets a bonus payment while someone else who has discovered an exclusive story, a niche story, and received only thousand viewings doesn't get anything” (the editor of a newspaper).*

For clarity, the most important changes in journalistic work are shown in Table 1:

Table 1

## Changes in Journalistic Work

Aspect of journalistic work	Key changes
Newsroom structure	Fusion of the traditional media newsroom and the website newsroom. Arrival of staff members and emergence of departments responsible for the technical part of the website and material presentation on different platforms
Communication among staff	Using messengers to collect requests and give tasks. Using Google Docs for collaborative work at the text
Information collection	Using databases and registers, social networks and messengers as information sources and channels of communication with newsmakers
Genre structure of media texts	Decreasing the text size to “headline journalism”, multimediality in presenting large materials, repeated presentation of the same information in different forms (a news item, a quotation from an interview, a recorded interview with the protagonist, a large material and the like), adjusting to the requirements of news aggregators
Requirements to professional skills and competencies	A need to possess skills of working with databases and applications for information processing, to be able to search on social networks and verify information, to be able to create infographics, to be able to quickly prepare materials for different platforms (a print publication, a website, a social network, a mobile application)
Working from home	This has not become widespread not for technological but for psychological reasons
Staff motivation	Awarding bonuses for the material’s popularity with readers and social network users

## Discussion

The conducted research gives the chance to understand profoundly the changes taking place in newsrooms and to imagine a modern journalist, the way he works, what he is required to do and what journalism students should be prepared for.

The hypotheses on the changes in almost all aspects of journalistic work have been confirmed. The two exceptions are that working from home has not taken root and that the “universalization” of journalists is less true of audiovisual content production and more true of content packaging for different platforms. Putting these two things aside, journalists have started to work faster and the requirements to the technical literacy of staff members have increased. Social networks and messengers have turned into the channels of communication with newsmakers, the information search environment and the platform for publishing and promoting journalistic materials.

It is obvious that the speed of changes varies. Not all newsrooms work in the way described above. In fact, the researchers selected interviewees from market leaders, i.e. highly professional and technically well-equipped newsrooms operating in a competitive environment.

The next desirable step is to conduct a quantitative analysis of the prevalence of these or those practices in Russian media. Besides, it is preferable to combine interviewing with observation. Interviewing has its disadvantages: people do not remember everything and tend to resort to wishful thinking.

Lastly, it should be taken into account that this research reflects instantaneous reality, and a few years the picture may drastically change. For instance, many respondents pointed out that a number of services (such as messengers) had come into life 2 or 3 years before and now they were the main working tools.

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# **CONTEMPORARY DEBATE**





# Media theory in Russia: A current wave of fermentation

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on the changing nature of media studies in Russia. The author explores the ‘ferment in the field’ concept, introduced in the communication research in the early 1980s and developed further in 1990s, 2000s and nowadays by different scholars. The author identifies four actual ‘ferments’ as driving forces of media theory change in Russia, becoming a part of a second wave of fermentation process in global media studies, reinforced by digital transformations. The first ferment is the central role of Moscow city based academic centers in Russian media studies; the second one is the high number and intellectual diversity of regional media studies. The pressures from an actively growing media business, the industry and the labor market, is the third ‘ferment’, and the fourth one is the experience, methodologies and conceptual framework of global media studies. The conclusion is that there is a need for the expanded discussion on the nature and principles of media as a research field not only within the academic community, but with public, media industry professionals, and regulators.

## **Keywords**

Russian media studies, ferments in the field, post-Soviet media transformation, digital media

Contemporary mass media studies as a research area have been globally influenced by contradictory and divergent trends of the development of a modern society as well as by rapid digital transformations of the media landscapes and journalism. For many scholars, it is clear that the interrelations between the society and media in the context of digital revolution have become

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deeper, more complex and sophisticated, although they have stimulated more broader interactions and interconnections between the society and media (Athique, 2013; Lindgren, 2017). As early as at the turn of the 2000s, these developments forced media scholars to reconsider conventional theoretical assumptions about mass media, their social and industrial nature, traditional institutions and audience, its need and demands for media. Scholarly approaches to the character, principles, aims and operation effects of journalism, and media have been drastically revised (Van der Haak, Parks & Castells, 2012; Hallin & Mancini (eds.), 2012; Rheingold, 2006; Zemlyanova, 2010).

Like several decades ago when in 1960 – 1970s media developed as an essential social institute under the influence of multiple social processes and forces, scholars claimed about new ‘ferments’ in the media studies (Gerbner, 1983) today’s scholars in their work to conceptualize digital media and their interrelations with a society and people call for new ”ferments questions about the present and re-articulate future alternatives” (Fuchs, Qiu, 2018: 220). Thus, the need for further discussions of the origins, current state and prospect of media and communication studies has been recently re-emphasized by the international academia.

### **Search for the field?**

In the 2010s, the discussion on major theories and concepts of Russian media studies has been intensified; moreover, basic conceptions, terms and even the very object of study started to be debated (Gorokhov, 2012; Lazutina, 2012; Prokhorov, 2012; Fomicheva, 2012). This is not surprising because the debate about the research field has been rather hot in many countries. As Nordenstreng put it, “thought-out this half century the field of media studies has expanded perhaps more that any other academic field apart from computer science and biomedicine” (Nordenstreng, 2004: 8).

This is also true of Russia. Over recent years, Russian academic community has extensively discussed both the boundaries and subject of media theory and media studies. Many research centers at universities and educational institutions hold All-Russian conferences on this topic (in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Voronezh, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk). Academic journals (Moscow University Journalism Bulletin, *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta. Series 9. Philology. Asian Studies. Journalism, Voprosy Teorii i Praktiki Zhurnalistiki*) and other core scientific periodicals published theoretical articles aimed not only at producing new knowledge but also at discussing the renewal, reconsideration and reassessment of the existing one.

As concerning the ‘ferments’ of the Russian media studies, it is obvious that the three major social ‘fields’ – that of media industry, media research and education – have been the most influential in challenging the old – Soviet and early post-Soviet paradigms. To be more precise, it is a social interaction between the fundamental theory, the industry with its actual practice determined by commercial interests, technological challenges of production, the changing regulation and in addition based on its own block of applied, instrumental empirics and analytics, and the higher professional education, whose legitimacy must be confirmed at each stage of media technological development (Vartanova & Lukina, 2014).

Undoubtedly, this interaction has resulted in a number of contradictions existing in all industrial contexts and professional areas in all countries and at all phases of modernity since the establishment of industrial production and the rise of higher education. The general context of the discussions on media theory which have been taking place in the Russian society from the 1990s, was certainly defined by the post-Soviet transformations with their numerous social and cultural consequences. In terms of understanding media, it was a growing inconsistency between the theoretical notions of the media by the academic and educational communities, on the one hand, and the actual functioning of the media as an industry, labor market and professional sphere, on the other. These discussions were also indicative of the attempts by Russian media scholars to consolidate their efforts in working out joint approaches and shaping the identity of Russian media studies. For instance, in 2011 an All-Russian discussion platform, the National Association of Mass Media Researchers, was established as a move to produce a forum for debates and collaboration.

Nevertheless, these efforts have yet resulted neither in a well-developed research area nor in a unity and joint identity among Russian media scholars (Dunas, 2016). This is obviously related to the complicated historical way of the transformations of Russian media and journalism studies. While in the 1990s the Soviet research paradigms were almost totally abandoned and mechanically replaced by the most popular foreign ones and in the 2000s the question of accepting and adapting the foreign experience came to the fore, today there is an apparent need to move away from borrowings and clearly formulate the ferments and basic foundations of the of Russian media studies.

### **‘Ferments’ in Russian media studies**

It would be incorrect to neglect the richest experience of the Russian media studies in 1990s – 2000s, when the research was flooded by previously unused and even unknown foreign media academic thesaurus and concepts. Still,

today there is a clear need to have a well-balanced, critical and at the same time innovative approach to the updating, upgrading and further development of media theory in Russian academia. As several authors argued, media and communication studies do not exist in a vacuum, but respond to different challenges in and outside academia. The use of the 'ferment' approach to highlight the need for contentious examination of communication research and to have a 'meta look' at what is going in the media studies is definitely relevant to the emerging national schools in the field (Nordenstreng, 2004, Fucks, Qiu, 2018). Thus, defining the present state of the Russian media studies, several 'ferments' are important to be mentioned.

The first ferment is the central role of Moscow based academic centers in Russian media studies. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Moscow, the capital, the political heart, economic hub and cultural leader, has historically accumulated enormous intellectual resources. The foundation of the Moscow Imperial (now State) University in 1855 provided the excellent conditions for the development of national fundamental science. It is hard to overestimate the role of Mikhail Lomonosov who, being an encyclopedist, also laid the foundations for Russian humanitarian knowledge and the theoretical basis of journalist' and editor' ethics (Lomonosov, 2011).

Today, the Moscow school of media studies is surely one of the most well-known Russian research schools not only in the country but also abroad. This is historically related to the high visibility of the Faculty of Journalism of Lomonosov Moscow State University in the international academic associations and to its leadership in all-Russian educational process due to its role in setting-up and developing educational standards for Russian journalism education as well as to its role in theoretical studies. Currently the Moscow school of media studies is rapidly expanding due to the emergence of new centers for journalism education and media studies in the Russian capital, which considerably raised its profile.

The second ferment is a high number and intellectual diversity of regional media studies. Such centers are extremely valuable in terms of their original and regionally driven research angles of socio-cultural circumstances for journalism and regional media systems. The St. Petersburg school, which emerged from the academic environment of the Faculty of Journalism of Leningrad State University, holds a unique place in Russian media studies. Due to its fundamental theoretical normativity and adjusting the latest foreign theoretical approaches to digital media communications in the Russian environment, it has undoubtedly retained its national significance (Korkonosenko, 2010; Puyu, Bodrunova (eds.), 2013). Understanding of research representing numerous

Russian schools of media studies is essential for both appreciating the variety and originality of approaches and identifying the “common denominator” for the national Russian media studies (Chernov, 2013).

The third ferment is represented by pressures from an actively growing media business, the industry and the labor market. The academic environment itself would be unable to produce new knowledge without reliance on empirical data and industrial realities of newsrooms, professional managerial and corporate journalistic communities. Fundamental science would be able to conceptualize and theorize with a support of empirical data generated by industrial analysts, corporate research structures, sociological services and media measurement companies. Notably, it has been already reflected in industrial reports and collections of analytical articles produced for the industry managers. Although these publications are far from theoretical science and academic culture of research, they are not only producing industry analytics but also develop the conceptual framework of the emerging processes and phenomena.

In this connection, as a challenge for media studies one should mention industry reports on the state and trends of the periodical press, television, radio, the Internet and the publishing industry, which have been produced with support from the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications. Another example are the series “Russian Advertising Yearbook” published by the Russian Association of Communication Agencies and the series “Theory and Practice of Media Advertising Research” by the Analytical Center Video International (Veselov, Kolomiets (eds.), 2011; Veselov, Kolomiets (eds.), 2012). Such analysis is not always produced within the framework of classical theoretical investigation but representing high-quality analytics of the media industry it lays a sound foundation for further theoretical exploration.

And, lastly, the fourth ferment is the experience, methodologies and conceptual framework of global media studies. In the years of the Soviet Union, Russian researchers positioned themselves as the academic opposition to foreign theories. After 1991, they started to extensively explore and accept theories, concepts and methods adopted from foreign, mostly Anglo-Saxon research. As a result, Russian media studies were enriched with the works written by our foreign colleagues and our academic school acquired fame in the global academic space (Thussu, 2009).

The 2010s brought into focus two new circumstances. First, in the context of the scientific and cultural globalization it became obvious that national circumstances and ‘path dependency’ were relevant concepts to almost all national schools of media studies. And this is why there is an across-the-board need not so much for an adaptation but for a national reconsideration of global

theoretical frameworks. Second, media studies in various countries undergo significant changes, renovation and search for adequate scientific answers to the digital transformations of the media (Fenton, 2009). Consequently, Russian scholars are also faced with the need, shared with foreign colleagues, to join in the global process of critical reconsideration of the media thesaurus, concepts and theories.

These four actual 'ferments' are becoming even more visible in the course of digital transformations of the Russian media and need to be put in the context of the national and global media studies, which both are now at a challenging but exciting stage of new "fermentation", (Fuchs, Qiu, 2018), or identity search, as D. Dunas put it (2016).

Expanding the discussion on the nature and principles of media as a research field one should take it beyond the bounds of the academic community and, communicating with a wide public, discuss the conceptual and terminological framework of the media as a social institution whose understanding is important nowadays for digitalizing societies. Perhaps, it is time to start collaboration with media industry professionals, regulators; educational environment and even the general public to clarify terms, concepts and identity of Russian media operations.

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# ARTICLES



# Crossing ideological borders: How to contribute to depolarization within society and on a global level?

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## Abstract

Polarization is a global issue with many different faces on regional levels. However, the process is the same everywhere. Research has extensively proved that media and journalism play an important role in the development of polarization. This paper presents an overview of the process of polarization and seeks to clarify the role of media and Journalism therein. On the basis of the model of Bart Brandsma, a Dutch polarization expert, the mechanism of polarization will be explained, identifying three ground rules that govern a situation of polarization, five roles or actors which can be identified in a polarization process, and four game changers that can help revert its destructive impact. The context of the paper is the *journalistic practice* and, specifically, the search for innovation of the profession towards a more constructive application. The aim is to further the development of a journalistic professionalism which seeks to depolarize, rather than add to polarization.

## Keywords

Polarization, conflict, identity, journalistic profession, constructive journalism

## A brief research overview

Polarization is a trending topic. Ample research has been done on, specifically, political polarization and the role media plays in it. In a paper presented at the conference of the International Communication Association, San Diego (May 2017), Rachid Azrout and Magdalena Wojcieszak identify two important aspects which, up until recently, have not yet received sufficient attention: one pertaining

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to *scope*, the other to *method*. As to the former: most studies focus on the US. The particular socio-political situation there, with a two-party political system and a strong partisan press, does not, however, apply to many other places in the world. Most Western democracies, for instance, know multiparty political systems, and it is imperative that effects of media on polarization in these contexts also be assessed. New strategies for studying these effects need to be developed, and Azrout and Wojcieszak attempt at providing such a strategy, “offering causal and generalizable evidence in a non-US context” (Azrout & Wojcieszak, 2017b).

As to the latter: Azrout and Wojcieszak state that “the observational work on media effects on polarization rarely attends to actual media content..., and the experimental designs that shows which specific messages exert effects are limited in terms of external validity” (Azrout & Wojcieszak, 2017b). In their own research they seek to remedy these shortcomings by “theoretically and empirically differentiat[ing] between two factors that may drive polarization: mere exposure to media coverage and the tone of the coverage that an individual sees in the outlets s/he habitually uses” (Azrout & Wojcieszak, 2017a).

In attempting to fill the gaps of the empirical research done so far on the topic of (political) polarization and media, Azrout and Wojcieszak provide ample overview of that research.

The focus of the paper I present here, however, is not based on empirical research, but rather presents a model that explains the dynamics of polarization and aims at developing journalistic *practice*. The model is originally developed by Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma, evolving from his experiences of many years as a trainer/consultant in situations of conflict in, for instance, Northern-Ireland, the Lebanon, Congo and Serbia. Brandsma bases his model on the work of the French historian, literary critic and philosopher, René Girard, whose theory of *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry* and the *scapegoat mechanism* are fundamental for the concepts of ‘conflict’ and ‘human nature’. Another fundamental influence has been dialogue trainer Colin Craig and his dialogue training program Dialogue for Peaceful Change (DPC).

Brandsma uses his polarization model in training sessions, nationally and internationally, with mayors, prosecutors, executives, police, caregivers and journalists. His theory has, thus, been field-tested, yet awaits further scientific validation.

At Windesheim University of Applied Science (Netherlands) this polarization model is being taught to students of journalism by the author of this article in the context of Constructive Journalism. Pioneered by Danish journalist Cathrine

Gyldensted, Constructive Journalism aims at innovating journalistic practice by applying the insights of positive and moral psychology and behavioural science (Gyldensted, 2015).

## **Polarization as a notion**

Polarization may be popular and trending as a topic, as a social phenomenon it is, however, neither new nor recent. Polarization, in general, a sharp division between people or opinions, is of all times and all places; rich and poor, high descent or low descent, conquerors and conquered. In a way it is part of the human condition. It takes place on a global scale and on regional or local levels; everyone will be able to give examples from his or her own daily environment. From my own personal history, I can say I grew up in the polarization context of the so-called 'Cold War'. Born in The Netherlands, I was taught we were the Free West and opposite was the Unfree East, stuck behind an 'Iron Curtain'. We did not concern ourselves too much with the image that existed of us on the other side. We sang along with British popstar Sting (Sting, 1985, track 3): "*Believe me when I say to you, I hope the Russians love their children too.*" I guess the people in the East had the same attitude towards us in the West. I do not know what songs *they* sang.

There is a strong connection between polarization and media. Maybe it is even safe to say that there can be no polarization without some form of media involved, be it the travelling theatre company in the Medieval market square or the Gutenberg printing press in the fifteenth century that served as the medium for new ideas and revolutionary tidings. In that respect there have been recent changes and transitions in the media that have given rise to polarization being a topic of particular importance and urgency. In historic times of Medieval market places and printed versions of revolutionary ideas transported in saddle bags, news travelled slowly from town to town. Being told and retold, written and rewritten, news could be filtered and adjusted to the new cultural surroundings it landed in, making it possible for people to digest what new tidings had come to them. Globalization and digitalization in the field of media have changed the speed and the reach of news immensely in the last decades. The news of people and opinions standing in strong opposition towards each other travels faster and further than ever before. We can see it *live*, unfiltered. The question is whether journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently aware of the impact that has on the people consuming that news. Dutch journalist, Joris Luyendijk, gives an example of that impact, as he analyses his work as a correspondent to the Middle-East during the Second Intifada. Being confronted with casualties of the uprising on both Palestinian and Israeli sides, Luyendijk noticed the

impact the images of the burial scenes had on the Dutch (Western) viewers. The burials that were shown of the Jewish Israeli casualties were conducted in a relatively (considering the media attention) quiet and orderly fashion, in a sense compatible to what the Dutch viewers were used to in their own context. The burials shown of the Palestinian casualties, however, appeared loud and chaotic; dense crowds passing on dead bodies over their heads, shouting and crying. To many Dutch (Western) viewers, these overt emotional scenes seemed uncanny and disrespectful. Luyendijk points out the dilemma of the journalist: even *live* transmissions sometimes fail to connect human beings in shared life experiences like death and grief (Luyendijk, 2007). At times, cultural codes get in the way of mutual understanding and, more often than not, news reporting intensifies the division between people and so furthers polarization. In order to substantiate the claim that polarization as a social phenomenon is strongly connected to media and to better understand what, then, the role is that media plays in polarization, we need to analyze the process of polarization. I will do so using the model constructed by Dutch polarization expert Bart Brandsma (2016) and embedding it, for the sake of illustration, in a situation of polarization from recent history. In addition, I would like to give food for thought on how to arrive at a depolarizing and, therefore, more constructive role for media to play.

## **Rwanda**

On April 6, 1994 the plane carrying the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi was shot down on approaching Kigali airport. Both Heads of State died that night. It was the onset of the genocide in Rwanda; 100 days of brutal killing that resulted in 800.000 of the Tutsi minority slaughtered by the Hutu majority. This bare statistic left many a news consumer outside of that region, like myself, baffled and shaking their heads in disbelief: ‘what is *wrong* with these people? What is wrong with that *continent*?’. As always when such frustrations are outed, things are more complicated than that.

The genocide in Rwanda was the violent outburst of the discontent, aversion and hatred that had been festering for a long time in Rwandan society. In its development this particular tragedy is exemplary of the process of polarization. It shows how ongoing and unchecked polarization can result in situations of atrocity and, even, civil war or genocide.

## **Three basic laws**

The process of polarization is governed by three basic laws. The first law is that polarization is based on a thought-construct, with at its core two constructed

opposing identities: a 'we' and a 'they'. Around that core are all those elements that contribute to constructing this 'we' and this 'they'; attributions with which the other side is described ('they' are stern, not free, greedy, fanatical, uneducated, backwards, plainly *different!*), suggestive words and phrases ('streams of immigration', 'islamization', 'immigrants are luck-seekers, profiteers'), thoughts, images, emotions. Take for instance the polarization that existed during the so-called Cold War between the West and the East. From both sides the identity of the opposing side was being constructed, using theories, words, phrases, images, and emotions. It served as a popular theme in songs and movies. Currently, we see polarization existing between, for example, the culture of the so-called Free West over against that of the so-called Islamic World, with as its most outspoken representative, at least in the opinion of many Western non-Muslims, Daesh or IS. That for many Muslims Daesh or IS is not at all the pinnacle representative of Islam in general is often overlooked. But in many, particularly Western-European, countries, this polarization is also seen on a national scale, with a rise in nationalistic or extreme-right movements positioning themselves over against immigrants of particularly Muslim background.

The second law is that polarization needs fuel. The thought construct of what 'they' are like over against the way 'we' are needs to be reaffirmed continuously. If this does not happen, polarization does not enfold. It is here, in particular, that we see the role of media and journalism coming to the fore. In the complexity of today's world, journalists often choose the frame of conflict for their reporting; putting people of two opposite opinions at the table of a talk show or in front of the camera creates a clear-cut image of a situation, which in reality often is much more complicated than portrayed. This way, the adversarial principle appears to be adhered to and, in that, an important journalistic demand to have been met. Whether this accurately reflects the actual situation might be a different matter entirely.

Dutch media professionals Zoë Papaikonomou en Annebregt Dijkman, both with extensive experience in the area of cultural and religious diversity in media and the media profession, give graphic examples of how themes and topics entailing aspects of religious and cultural diversity (especially concerning the place of Islam in Dutch society) are being approached by Dutch journalists. Often lacking the right contacts (meaning: people of another cultural and/or religious background than their own) in their own network, they ask their colleagues with a non-Western and/or Muslim background whether they "... have an angry muslim" for them to interview to counterbalance either a Dutch anti-Islam politician or a well-integrated fellow Muslim (Papaikonomou & Dijkman, 2018). These journalists apparently feel the need (or are assigned

by their editors) to show dichotomy and division. The people featuring in these stories, therefore, have to be angry, different and religious enough to counter standard, 'normal' Dutch society. But, in truth, how *real* is this portrayal?

The third law is that polarization is driven by emotion, not rationality or logic. It is an emotional dynamic. That means that once the process that divides people into two opposing factions is in motion, it can hardly be checked or stopped by reasonable argumentation or even contrary facts. Many people will simply not be susceptible anymore to logic and reason once their emotions have been aroused and set in one direction of thought.

Going back to the case study of the Rwandan genocide, we can see the laws at work. Two clearly defined groups stood in opposition: the Hutu's and the Tutsi's. At the height of the polarization the identity of the Tutsi's was reduced by the Hutu's to one image: they are cockroaches to be exterminated (Brummel, 2004). Fact is, however, that during the preceding decades, either group had been oppressive towards the other. The genocide of 1994 was the result of years of oppression and stigmatizing of the Hutu population. It had produced hatred and frustration and led to this violent outburst. Having said that, if we look at history and observe the development of the tense relationship between Hutu's and Tutsi's more rationally, we find that the divide between them was largely created during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by the European colonial powers. In pre-colonial times, the lines between Hutu's and Tutsi's were fluid and intertwined; the names merely indicating a class distinction, not a racial or ethnic one (Hutu's were peasants, Tutsi's were cattle owners). The colonial regime forged it into an ethnic distinction, using 19<sup>th</sup> century 'scientifically' underpinned racial theories. In addition, the colonial regime favored one of the two groups: the wealthier class of the cattle owning Tutsi's. In the 1930's, every citizen of Rwanda had to carry an identity card, indicating the carrier as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa. So, during colonial times the identities needed for polarization were forged, the fire of division was stoked by favoring one group over the other and the stage was set for an emotional build-up where every incident, large or small, produced fuel for conflict (Brummel, 2004).

The notion that knowledge of the history and culture of Rwanda and its population was not only lacking in international politics, but also in the international media, is shown in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (Thompson, A. et al., 2007). This lack resulted in the tragedy that was taking place being interpreted and reported, certainly in its early stages, as another outburst of irrational African tribalism (Melvern, L., 2007). Journalists on site and editors abroad are described as mistaking the situation as 'merely chaotic', instead of what it really was: planned genocide. Former BBC world affairs correspondent Mark Doyle: "There is a general



tendency to portray Africa as chaotic, the Dark Continent, and so on [...]. But Rwanda was not, after a while, chaotic or impenetrable. It was, as we now know, a very well planned political and ethnic genocide. That didn't really fit the media image of chaotic Africa and various things flowed from that" (Doyle, M., 2007). The contributions of the various journalists and authors give testimony to the failing role of the media (a clear distinction is made between the media that failed and the individual, committed journalists that didn't [Chaon, A., 2007]) that could and should have made the difference. Self-examination, certainly of Western media, shows a polarization at work, where the identities in opposition are the 'Western enlightened minds' and the 'backward African tribalists'. Reporting from this perspective of supremacy has made it possible to overlook a genocide in process for several weeks. Crucial weeks that cost many lives.

## The five roles

In the polarization process, next to the three basic laws, five roles are identified (Brandsma, 2016):

1. On either pole we meet the **pusher**. The pusher makes statements about the identity of the other pole. In the Rwandan case, the statement regarding the Tutsi's being cockroaches indicated clearly that a dangerous line had been crossed. Certainly the Western-European observer could and should have been alarmed by the clear association with the extermination of European Jewry during the Second World War. (That tragedy also became overt by the identification of Jews as rats and vermin.) No doubt, all of us have encountered polarizing statements, be it of a less extreme nature, about 'the other', like: 'they are uneducated, they are greedy, stern, backwards.' Polarizing identity-constructs like: East-West, religious-secularist, Islamic world-Western world are further 'enhanced' in stigma's like: 'they are fascists, they are communists, they are extremists, they are terrorists, they are godless.' Who hasn't heard (or even made) remarks like: 'they take our jobs, our wives, our security; they take advantage'? The message of any pusher in any polarization always is: they are *not like us!* The pusher is the exponent of the pole: He takes the spotlight and shows himself at all times to be 100% in the right. This visibility is often quite demanding on the part of the pusher. Dutch politician, Geert Wilders, for example, a strong polarizer with an anti-Islam standpoint, needs to take security precautions wherever he goes. The pusher creates a sense of urgency and pressure in the public domain. He is not interested in dialogue or achieving mutual understanding. Quite to the contrary: his position depends on the 'over-against'.

2. The second role is that of **joiner**. The joiner chooses sides in the polarization process and, in doing so, steps out of the pressure zone. He may do

this cautiously or even reluctantly, but he *does* choose. He is the one who may say casually and often in informal settings like a birthday party or a night among friends in the pub: ‘well, this Geert Wilders, he’s too extreme for my liking with his Islam bashing, but somewhere he does have a point. And let’s be honest: he is the one who dares to take a stand.’ Joiners are willing to enter the discussion and bring the arguments the pusher often lacks. Consciously of their role or not, the joiners are the foot soldiers of the pushers.

3. Between the spheres of the joiners on both sides exists a middle ground, and it is here that we find the third role: that of the **silent**. The silent are those people who do not choose sides. They cannot or do not want to choose, either out of indifference or as a matter of principle. In this middle ground we also find the people who need to stay neutral because of their function: the mayors, the policemen, the civil servants, the clergy, the judiciaries. All those who comprise the group of the silent resist the pressure of the pushers and their joiners. In all their different motivations for being in the middle, they have one thing in common: *invisibility*. Most of them (apart from the officials) do not appear in talk shows, are not being interviewed by journalists. One can draw a line showing the increasing visibility of the roles involved in polarization. Therein, media coverage is an important indicator. The silent are a diverse group; they offer a diversity of stories. As a journalist, how do you find good stories in this amalgamate? Most journalists focus on the easily identified counter groups of the pushers and the joiners. The middle group of the silent has long gone unnoticed or has been seen as uninteresting by the media. But it is important to consider that the middle group, the silent, is the media’s public. They are the news consumers, the clients. They make up society.

The three roles of the pushers, joiners and the silent create the field of tension that polarization feeds on.

4. The fourth role is that of someone wanting to rise above the opposing parties in order to relax the tension. He is the **bridge builder** who wants to bring the parties back together. We see initiatives on every level of society - from local interreligious dialogue groups to international peace conferences. The strategies of bridge building vary, but the core is found in producing the counter-narrative to the message of the pusher. When Geert Wilders says Islam is incompatible to Dutch society, the bridge builder will want to show the opposite: Muslims partaking in Dutch society. In Rwanda, when Hutu pushers shouted that Tutsi’s are cockroaches, the bridge builders may have stressed that Tutsi’s had been neighbors and friends for many years (George, T. 2004). Although the motivation of the bridge builder is to secure peace and establish harmony, his action only affirms polarization; the starting point of

dialogue *still* being the difference between the poles and the topic of discussion *still* being identity. However, much is stressed that the identity of the other is OK too, it is *still* a 'different one from ours' and, therefore, by definition suspect.

5. The last role, the **scapegoat**, comes into play when polarization culminates in excess. When that happens, the pushers tend to move to (yet more) extreme positions, and so do the joiners. The pressure on the silent in the middle to choose sides intensifies, up to the point where it is virtually impossible to retain a middle position. People are driven to one side or the other in the polarization process. The middle ground is no longer an option. Neutrality is no longer possible. This is a starting point for civil war and atrocity. At this point, a target for all the frustration and hatred is sought. Here we come across the fifth role: the scapegoat. Often, it is the bridge builder who turns into the scapegoat. He had been suspect all along, since he refused to take sides, but did, however, mingle in the discussion. Now *he* becomes the target. In Rwanda this was seen when the plane with the politicians came down. The next morning, a Rwandese Hutu radio station indicted the Tutsi revolutionary army as the perpetrator, using the term 'cockroach' (Brummel, 2004). In a matter of days, polarization maximized: you either belonged to the Hutu or the Tutsi camp. There was no neutral position possible anymore. Since the Tutsi's were a clear minority on account of numbers alone, it were the moderate Hutu's, the ones who had tried to keep the middle position, who were among the first victims during the killings in Kigali (Brummel, 2004). They became the scapegoat.

The genocide in Rwanda caught many outside the African continent off-guard. Many of us did not see it coming. It was the gruesome tip of the iceberg. Polarization as a process can, indeed, be compared to an iceberg: most of its development takes place under the water-line of a society, on grass-roots level of a community. In understanding the course a society is taking, it is important to be in contact on grass-roots level with the middle ground of society. This is an important insight for journalists and for the self-understanding of the journalistic profession. In media and journalism, the attention is all too often on the visible and the extreme: the conflict and the poles. But in a situation of polarization the two sides focused on do not necessarily reflect society; the poles propagate adversary, based on constructed identities. They serve themselves first and foremost. By focusing attention on these poles, media and Journalism provide a stage for the propagation of adversary in society, often missing out on the experience of people in the middle, on grass-roots level.

In his doctoral dissertation, Theogene Bangwanubusa compares two neighboring communes in Rwanda, Giti and Murambi (Bangwanubusa, 2009).

Murambi fell prey to the polarizing process and partook in the genocide; Giti resisted. The question why genocide occurred in one commune and was resisted in another is obviously not an easy one to answer. Bangwanubusa, therefore, emphasizes that there are many factors involved and in his careful wording we find the attempt to do justice to what happened and to all who are affected. In conclusion of his extensive research, Bangwanubusa points to presence (or absence) of a working civil society as the crucial aspect that made the difference between violence and safety. In Giti, the empirical material of the research showed a civil society where people were aware of their history and identity and experienced an interconnectedness within the community. This interconnectedness was furthered by and reflected in different levels of communal and religious leadership. It was this communal interconnectedness that failed in Murambi (Bangwanubusa, 2009: 232f).

The role of journalism is to provide information, clarification and interpretation on matters of general concern. It stands in the service of society and is indispensable as a safeguard for the independence and freedom of the people. Yet, we have seen how journalism and media often provide fuel for polarization and division in society. How can this destructive impact be turned around? Brandsma's polarization model discusses four game changers that can provide new insight for a more constructive form of Journalism.

## **Game changers**

Media often focuses on the poles in polarization. That is where the action takes place and where the opinions are most explicit. The impact of polarization is mostly felt in the middle ground. It is there that people experience polarization in daily life and are put under pressure. The first game changer for anyone who wants to contribute to depolarization focuses on **change of target group** of attention: away from the poles, towards the silent in the middle. That means: creating a diverse network, getting to know all kinds of people that live, move and have their being in that middle ground.

The second game changer focuses on a **changing of subject**. The first law stated that polarization objectifies identity. Identity is the key subject that divides the groups. So, in order to turn the polarization dynamic around, one needs to find the subject that connects the groups. In the case of Rwanda, the underlying problem was the access (or lack of it) to resources and political power. The colonial powers had favored the Tutsi's above the Hutu's, giving them access to political power. This had produced hardships and emotional responses. So, here the subject of the debate should no longer be whether the Tutsi's really were the usurpers and collaborators with the colonialists or the Hutu's the backward

brutes, but rather how to arrive at a fair and equitable sharing of resources and political powers?

The third game changer focuses on a **change of position**. As the focus of attention in the polarization process goes out to the poles, so does the focus of attention of many a bridge builder and peace keeper. More often than not, attempts at appeasement are made from a standpoint over and above the opposing parties. The idea being that the position over and above is a position of neutrality, objectivity and fairness. But we have already seen that this is a tricky position; the bridge builder is maneuvering on very thin ice and his best intentions often produce an intensifying of polarization. Meanwhile, the people most under pressure from the polarization process, the group of the silent, are not affected by the peacekeeping attempts. In the period leading up to the Rwandan genocide, peacekeeping attempts had also been made; President Habyarimana, under pressure from his international allies, signed a peace treaty that entailed a sharing of power with Tutsi's. But reinforcing this from above had no real impact on the emotions on grass-roots level. The UN sent a small peace keeping force to Rwanda, but without a real mandate. The attempts of peacekeeping and bridge building remained hovering over the impending catastrophe and never made a difference on grass-roots level to the people involved. It never reached them. The change of position is a change from 'above' to 'in the middle'; in the middle of the debate, amongst the people, there where it matters. For journalists, this is a particularly important notion and change of how to work. It requires networking in the community, being sensitive to nuances, identifying a red line through many individual stories. More often, however, journalists tend to go with the prepped and structured outlines of the official spokesperson.

The last game changer focuses on the **change of tone**. If you want to depolarize, do not moralize (Brandsma, 2016, p.89). This means talking *with* people, not to them, and it requires having sincere interest, acknowledging people in their life-situations, and being able to suspend your own judgment. These are matters of subtlety and nuance, and it is imperative, as a journalist, to develop these dispositions. People will sense the sincerity of your dispositions and it will make all the difference in whether or not they will open up to you. This also requires reflecting on your own positions in life, relating on a very personal level to the people and topics you cover. Having taught prospective journalists for more than twelve years, it is my firm opinion that the aspects of self-reflection and philosophy-of-life have been underrated in their education. If there would be more substantial and structural attention for these aspects, I believe, prospective journalists would be better equipped and capable of working more constructively.

Four years ago, Dutch philosopher and publicist Rob Wijnberg launched the online journalistic platform *De Correspondent*. Therein, the role of the journalist is transformed, away from the traditional one: in the assumption that journalism's role is to provide information, clarification and interpretation on matters of general concern, the journalist is taken to be the expert on what the matters of general concern are. The journalist is assumed to know what 'real news' is. His/her coverage has the goal of explaining the world and informing people about what is going on around them. However, if we look at the big shifts that have happened in the world recently, like the election of Donald Trump as President of the US, Brexit, the financial crisis of 2008, but definitely also the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the question afterwards has always been: 'what happened and how did this happen?' Many journalist also asked: 'how did we NOT see this coming? What have we missed here?' According to Wijnberg, journalism has failed to look at structural daily changes in society on grass-roots level, but has only looked for the exceptions to that change, focusing on exceptional events, things NOT happening every day (International Journalism Festival, 2017). In Rwanda, the every-day signs of change were there, but, being 'just every-day' events, they were not picked up for what they really were: the indicators of the upcoming genocide. If they had been perceived as such, the catastrophe might have been averted.

The concept of *De Correspondent* is community-based journalism where journalists cooperate with readers in uncovering the deep-seated change in society. Very practically, this means the journalist starts his work with a call-out to the readers, asking them what they know about or have experienced with a particular subject. The question to the readers – 'what do you know and what can you share with me?' - invites people to come forward with *their* stories, to be heard and be involved. The news is about what truly concerns *them*. The different stories put together add insight in what is really happening. This way, journalism does not focus on what went wrong today in which far away part of the world, leaving readers often puzzled and frustrated ('what is *wrong* with these people, what is *wrong* with that continent?!'), but rather explains more comprehensively how the world, on the basis of grass-roots level experiences, works. Explaining how their world works helps readers to see how they can *live* in this world, help solve the problems of this world, and how they can make changes to improve it. That way, journalism can become a more constructive force in society.

Rwandese journalist and genocide survivor Thomas Kalindi was asked by fellow journalists how they could know whether they were doing the right thing. His answer: "[L]ook at what you write. Listen to what you say and analyze

yourself. If you are demonizing people, if you are stigmatizing other tribes, other clans, you're involved in violence" (Kalindi, 2007).

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# **Social media as an effective communication tool for youth engagement on social political issues: A case study of the affirmative repositioning movement in Namibia**

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## **Abstract**

This study assesses the impact of social media as an effective communication tool in mobilizing youth engagement in socio-political matters that affect them. This form of communication engagement has brought a paradigm change to the communication process in Namibia. Using a qualitative method in the form of a case study, the researchers focused on Namibia's socio-political movement, the Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM) to predict the impact of its use of social media, particularly Facebook, in engaging its followers.

## **Keywords**

Affirmative Repositioning Movement, social media, netizens, social movement, mass mobilization

## **Introduction**

Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM) is a youth driven movement which has put immense pressure on the Government of Namibia to make access to land to the Namibian youth imperative. It was established in 2014 with the aim of mobilizing Namibian youth to demand access to urban land. In November 2014, ARM used social media to mobilize over 51, 000 landless Namibian youth to submit mass application for land. This was coordinated among 14 political regions of Namibia and the numbers of applicants caught the local authorities by surprise. Facebook was the social media platform that was extensively

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used by ARM to achieve its objectives. The recent advances in communication technology such as Web 2.0 and especially the participative social media internet, has had dramatic impact in transforming the patterns of communication (Fox & Jones, 2009). Social media, in particular, has increased both connectivity and participation in all spheres of social life, transforming what was previously known as audience to netizens which is defined as the citizen of the net (Luoma-aho, 2010). This transformation has been observed in Namibia where the number of people using internet daily has risen from 16 percent in November 2012 to 39 percent in September 2014 (Stoman & Stoman, 2014). This study shows a paradigm change social media has brought to the communication process in Namibia and in particular its power as a communication tool for youth participation in matters that affect their lives. The Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM) was the unit of analysis to predict the impact of social media in Namibia.

The ARM leadership embarked on a mass mobilization of the Namibian youth to apply for land (Immanuel, 2015) through which it coerced government into action in favor of its demands. ARM used Facebook to mobilize the Namibian youth to apply for land in all fourteen political regions of the country, hence the focus on this social media platform to measure its impact. According to (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009) Facebook is a social utility that helps people to communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and co-workers by facilitating the sharing of information and political beliefs.

## **Impact of social media**

Luoma-aho (2010: 3) defines social media as “writing and broadcasting carried out by the people formally known as the audience.” This change from audience to creators of information, signals a huge transformation in the communication media because information users and receivers have become information generators (Ngai, Tao & Moon, 2014). This conclusion is supported by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010: 61) who also agrees with O’Reilly (2007) defines social media as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. The former audience, who are now the generators of information, can use social media to create, share and exchange information in a virtual community. The digital revolution as Levick (2012) suggests, has changed several aspects of society including democracy and the way human beings react to certain situations to which Miller (2011) concurs and argues

further that the impact, in the case of Facebook, on humanity is immense. In Namibia, the IPPR (2014) confirms the increasing use of information technology during elections and posits that it is now positioned to facilitate communication between governments and its citizens.

The advantage of this constant virtual connection and sharing of information, ideas and opinions helps to display a collective opinion that has not been experienced before in the traditional media, a conclusion that is supported by Holmes, Hadwin & Mottershead, (2013), Ngai, Tao & Moon (2014). The later catalogue the impact and changes brought by the social media to which Tang, Gu & Whinston (2012) agrees. Improvement in technology has made it feasible to access the Internet almost anywhere with Siapera (2012) suggesting that portability of communication devices such as cell phones has had a huge impact in the growth and usage of social media claiming that “this portability introduces an element of continuous availability and connectivity to the Internet across boundaries of space and time” (p. 8). Social media has become an important resource for the mobilization of collective action and subsequent creation, organisation and implementation of social movements around the world. Eltantawy & Wiest (2011), further state that there is little doubt that social media played a significant role in the revolutions that have struck the Arab world. In countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, rising action plans such as protests made up of thousands, have been organized through social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Kasslm, 2012). Social networks have broken the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information and that it has given most people in the Arab world the knowledge that they are not alone, that there are others experiencing just as much brutality, just as much hardships, just as much lack of justice. In Namibia, the mass application of land by the Namibian youth, is an impact that can be attributed to the adoption and use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter by the ARM.

According to Malumo (2012) approximately 470 000 Namibian citizens had access to mobile cell phones with potential to internet while figures from the Internet World Statistics (2016) indicate that the number has grown to 520 000 in 2016 representing 23.4 percent of the 2.2 million population.

The uptake of social media in Namibia has been exponential especially among the youths as can be seen from Facebook and Twitter users (Stoman & Stoman, 2014). As an emerging highly participative and empowerment communication channel, social media has an impact on the way people communicate. It connects people faster and has an advantage of instant communication where the exposure, engagement and the exchange is long lasting and constant. Although

still a developing nation, Namibia is part and parcel of the global village which is embracing technology fast. IPPR reports that Namibia, with a population of 2.1 (NSA, 2016) is increasingly taking to social media. It is estimated that 10 percent of the population is on Facebook, with a large percentage of these being in the youth age group of 18-35 years old (IPPR, 2014). It was also noted by IPPR (2014) that the use of social media in Namibia will become more prevalent. Statistics show an increase in the uptake in the use of mobile phones which ITU (2012) findings shows that the mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants stands at 103 and the number of mobile phone users with potential access to the Internet at 470,000 (Ministry of ICT, 2012). Although the figures keep surging, politicians such as President Hage Geingob and the leader of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) which is the official opposition party, McHenry Venaani, are active on social media platforms (Stoman & Stoman, 2014).

Future social media platform will only survive if it allows itself to change function and format over the years lest it fails as Ryan (2015) suggest. While for many, social media is a simple means of communication making it easier to stay in contact with friends and family, it is for others an inexpensive marketing channel they can leverage to power their businesses (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). In both contexts, social media has become a permanent fixture of society, and it's almost impossible to imagine a future without it. The brands might change and the platforms might evolve, but the social media concept is here to stay.

Some advantages of social networking include open communication and networking opportunities. On a personal level, it allows friends and family to connect no matter where they are in the world, and on a business level it allows companies to share information with employees and customers quickly (Ryan, 2015). No matter which profession an individual works in, networking is a vital part of success. Social media makes connecting with like-minded professionals easy and, through quality interactions, professionals can significantly grow their contact lists. Internet-savvy companies are using social media to advertise their products, build customer loyalty and many other functions. Interactions and feedback from customers help businesses to understand the market, and fine-tune their products and strategies (Ryan, 2015). Many business organizations organize promotions, contests and give away prizes to enthruse consumers to visit their social website page more often. Compared to television advertisements and other expensive forms of marketing, social media presence is a cheap and effective means to enhance brand image and popularity (Ryan, 2015). However, one of the downsides of social media is the overshare of personal information. Not only does this reflect a lack of social etiquette on the participant's part, it also endangers the security of their privacy. This is especially relevant when

employees use social media in the workplace, as they may inadvertently give away information which compromises company security (Miller, 2011).

## **Methodology**

This study was carried out using a qualitative method in the form of a case study which Marshall & Rossman (1999) suggest it offers opportunities for conducting exploratory and descriptive research that uses the context and setting to search for deeper understanding of the subject of investigation and therefore best suited for this study. The purpose of a case study is to understand the case under investigation in its natural setting, acknowledging its complexity and context (Maree, 2007: 83). The Affirmative Repositioning Movement was the unit of analysis to determine how a social media platform such as Facebook, can have significant impact on its users. This research method is suitable for elaborative explanation of the impact of Facebook which was extensively used by the Affirmative Repositioning Movement during its 10 months campaign for access to land from November 2014 to July 2015. The research population for this study consisted of the leaders of the Affirmative Repositioning Movement, news editors of the traditional media and members of the ARM who are active on Facebook. This target population was identified as it constituted the audiences who were involved with the ARM activities. Leaders of the Affirmative Repositioning Movement were the initiators of the land activism communication which is under review in this study. News editors were responsible for editing reportage on the ARM activities while Facebook account holders, especially the youth debated the issue with intensity. The total sample of 10 comprised of five (5) most active users on the ARM Facebook page; one (1) news editor of New Era; one (1) news editor of the Namibian Sun, one (1) news editor from the Namibian and two (2) leaders of ARM.

## **Results**

Scholars assert that what receives attention in the media is regarded very important by the audience (Akpabio, Mwilima, 2017). The two scholars opine that media framing can enhance understanding from an individual or broader societal context (p. 2). There are many theories and perspectives of framing such that it has been referred to as “fractured” (Entman, 1993: 51) and “passe-partout” (Van Gorp, 2007: 60). Framing still offers a way of understanding the power of a communication text and its ability to impact human consciousness (Akpabio, Mwilima, 2017). The way media context is framed influences human thoughts and actions and has the potential to foster empathy or indifference towards a group of people. Framing in traditional media is inherently shaped

through the journalism process, while scholars enlarge the theory of framing and refers to it as evolution frame (Guzman, 2016). In framing the events associated with the Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM), government allied media framed the ARM revolution as conflict against government while the independent media framed it as delinquent and violent youths who are set to disrupt the normal functioning of government (Haidula & Mongudhi, 2015). This study reveals how ARM has used the social media to frame their revolutionary activities to influence its actions by the Namibian youth. Namibia has a population of 2.3 million (STA, 2016) of which 36.4 per cent are below the age of 15 years. Statistically, the majority (57.32%) of Namibian population are young people aged between 0-24 years. Those aged between 25 and 54 years constitute 34.37%; 55-64 years (4.35%) and 65 years and over (3.96%).

Research shows that among the institutions least trusted by the young people is the media. The Nestle (2003) research which was conducted among young people shows that six in ten young people would trust a journalist to them the truth. This findings is reflective of the Namibian young people's negative attitudes towards the traditional media and relative choice of social media. The research further shows that two in five young people would not trust government minister or politician and this mistrust in government ministers continue to rise. In Namibia there is growing skeptical attitudes towards politicians by the Namibian youth. This may well explain the ARM revolution against local authority which were perceived reluctant to resolve the land question in their favour. Given the popularity ARM has enjoyed, the importance of its cause resonated well with the youth. The high rate of participation also signifies the relevance of the the research topic to the youth. Social media is being embraced everywhere because of its potential for instant interactivity and to spread news fast through mobile devices.

In terms of demographics, the findings show that 50 per cent of the respondents were below 25 years with 25 per cent of the research population in the age range of 25-35 years and another 25 per cent in the age category of 36 to 45 years. None of the respondents was above the age of 45 years. These figures gives a glimpse of the dominant group that are susceptible to the adoption of social media and give an impression that social media use in Namibia is dominated by the youths. This is also confirmed by Mutonga (2017). Coincidentally, these are the majority of people that are highly affected by urban land scarcity. The message by the ARM was well received by the Namibian youths because it sought to address issues affecting them socially as well as economically and the medium used perfectly suited the target population.

The findings show a 100 per cent mobile connectivity to social media through mobile phones by the research population. This connectivity is attributed to cheaper internet rates and the need to stay connected to social media. A total of 75 per cent of the respondents obtained real time information on social media more than other media channels. All participants were connected to Facebook and to different Namibian social groups on networking sites. It was also observed that more than half of the participants used social media to search for affordable accommodation and would read newspapers only when their stories were uploaded on social media. Social media continues to dominate as the latest competitive form of communication. A total of 63 per cent respondents are of the opinion that indeed internet has become part of their daily lives. Six respondents (75 per cent) believed that indeed ARM's campaign was highly successful because of the high rate of smart phone usage amongst the targeted group. Because of internet connectivity through mobile phones, the six respondents were convinced that social media impacted highly on the success of the ARM in championing its cause. The other (25 per cent) opined that that social media had an impact on their information distribution but it was not as "significant as it might look". This segment of the research population was still getting accustomed to social media and its ever increasing influence.

## **Conclusion**

From the results gathered in this research study, it is clear that since the advent of internet, consumption of information via traditional methods such as television and newspaper have been losing their strength as we forge ahead in the 21st century. Dutta-Bergman (2004) suggests that this significant shift from the use of traditional media methods can be attributed to the formation and growth of - first the World Wide Web – then social media. For instance, in the second quarter of 2008 alone, Forrester research predicted that 75 per cent of all internet surfers use social media by either posting videos to sites such as YouTube, joining social networks on websites such as Facebook, or even posting blogs, showcasing increase from the year before (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Furthermore, research conducted by the Nielsen Company (2010) in the United States of America indicated that citizens spend virtually 25 per cent of their free time on social networks and blogs. Although the number of individuals that are using social media avenues to connect to others is increasingly growing, many agree that a Facebook fan page or a Twitter account is not a substitute for an integrated marketing plan to reach a target market.

In an attempt to understand why individuals are more susceptible to attend to one particular media avenue versus another, various media consumption theories have been proffered. Although this study did not centre on determining which marketing method (new or old) is better, it is imperative to understand why individuals obtain information from the sources that they do. It is theorized that if any individual is interested in one particular topic, s/he will consume information on that topic in not only one medium, but most likely read, watch, or listen to information that is closely related to this topic in various other forms of media (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Although social media can be measured in various ways, Turner (2010) believes that quantitative metrics, qualitative metrics, and return-on-investment metrics are the most substantial categories that determine the effectiveness of an awareness campaign promoted via social media. The research findings as discussed in this chapter indicate that social media is a communication force to be reckoned with. Pressure groups such as ARM and other can take advantage of the prevalence of smartphones to plan and disseminate information that can assist the citizenry in, for instance, staying in touch with government ministries and departments.

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# Middle range theories in the research of information and communication media systems

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## Abstract

The article analyzes the theory and methodology of media systems research. The author considers the possibilities of studying modern media through the application of middle range theories, which will result in changes to the traditional approaches grounded in philological and historical methodologies.

## Keywords

Theory, methodology, information and communication media systems, middle range theories

In the present context of multimedia the traditional notions such as “news media”, “mass communication”, “mass media” and others don’t fully reflect the work of the press, television, radio, Internet and other channels of preparation, accumulation and dissemination of information in society. Media space has seen many changes as the new opportunities of interaction with audience appeared: various gadgets have become irreplaceable; channels of information dissemination by the means of global networks and communication systems have become widely used. With the development of the new roles, functions and structures by each of the traditional and new media channels *information and communication media systems* are formed.

The terms which could explicitly characterize the media processes have been selected for several decades. This is a standard development of scientific searches which means the graduate comprehension and reinterpretation of such a complex phenomenon as media functioning in society. The term “information

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and communication media systems” may seem to be exaggerated. However, this is only at first glance. Collecting and disseminating information, having an opportunity to conduct a dialogue with the audience online the present-day media perform *informative and communicative functions*. Along with that, the functioning of all media industry channels and resources has all the characteristics of a system.

Information and communication media systems may be characterized as a brand new, multiple and complex phenomenon which is oversaturated by information and communicative opportunities requiring the development of some previously unknown communicative strategies of audience interaction (to be more precise for the interaction with communicative communities) that have their own opportunity to produce information and to enter the communication both on the horizontal and vertical levels of media systems. There is an ongoing competition, fight for the audience, for users, for new information and advertising markets etc. between all the elements of the information and communication media systems. At the same time the system phenomenon considered requires a comprehensive analysis and elaboration of new theories, methodological reasoning and study approaches. In this sense the results of the recent international sociological project “Generation’s View: Future of the Media, Leadership and Communications” are rather indicative. According to the project the youth is expecting the emergence of the new mass media in already five years time. It is typical for all the survey participants, both for the youth and the professional community, to agree on the opinion that in the short and mid-term perspectives media landscape will be defined by social networks, digital editions and *even not yet existent types of the media*.<sup>1</sup> The term introduced in this article “information and communication media systems” does not contradict this prognosis.

The emergence of the previously unknown media types will inevitably require new methodological approaches and methods of their comprehension which should already be found and applied nowadays in spite of the existent restrictions and terminological inaccuracies.

When considering this subject matter for the first time some fundamental ideas and questions arise. What are conditions, factors and mechanisms of the new information and communication media systems’ development? Which opportunities of the media systems are available in relation with communicative communities? What are the consequences of media systems’ functioning in the modern society for an individual and for the generations to come? Which theories may be valid for the comprehension of the present-day information and communication media processes? Researchers and working journalists

in the present-day multimedia conditions are inevitably faced with these questions.

Traditional methodological and theoretical approaches to studies of the place and role of the media in society which are connected with dissemination analysis, frequency of audience appeals to the media, turned out to be inapplicable for journalistic creativity. High abstractions and models of academic science most frequently don't fully correspond to the media communication practice and to the real conditions. The most sophisticated methods of media measurement in advertising placement, used by advertisers and advertising "sellers" turn out to be ineffective in writing texts, shooting and directing screen works, in journalistic creative works as a whole.

The author in no way is close to a thought that the resource of the classical methodology and systematic theories has been exceeded. This refers to overcoming of certain limitations inherent to some particular disciplines, which are now studying media processes. For instance, in thesis studies for degree in journalism, it is required to additionally justify the philological matter of a work relying on the content analysis. However, a researcher of communication processes cannot find and solve a problem only by analyzing the content. Therefore, almost in every dissertation, the analysis of the media content is often supplemented by sociological surveys data reflecting the audience reaction to the performance of the press, television and radio. It is fair but along with that it reveals the limitations that exist in the application of the philological methods in the studies of information and communication media systems.

Still little is known about the nature and unpredictable character of the media industry development in connection with the digital revolution and the rapid spread of information technologies, and it would be premature to say that some theories have lost their relevance. Another matter is that alternative and additional methodologies, based on research principles which could naturally combine the academic theory achievements with the rapidly developing media industry practices, are in demand.

The theory of journalism and mass media has always followed the socio-political and socio-economic theories, which mainly revealed total dependencies of an individual on the social and state structure, on scientific and technological progress. According to these theories, it seemed that a change of a social system was enough to transform the way of thinking, and that a person could become different, having read the "right" texts or having watched a good movies and television programs. But each time it did not live up to the expectations since any transformations of external and internal world of a person turn out to be fruitless without a deep inner work on oneself.

Thus, for example, the tendency of personification in the use of modern information and communication technologies is well within the framework of a solipsistic (from Latin “solus” – “single” and “ipse” – “self”) doctrine that rejects an objective reality and recognizes individualized consciousness as the only and undoubted reality. The extreme form of subjective idealism as the basic statement of the solipsist doctrine was formulated by Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis in the following aphoristic form: “Si fallor, ergo sum” (“If I am mistaken, therefore I exist”) (Blessed Augustine: 73). This phrase can also be interpreted as: “It is me who must exist, and the existence of anything else is doubtful”. And if we continue the logical chain further, we will notice that the well-known statement “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) belonging to the great French philosopher Rene Descartes, almost word by word reproduces the statement of Augustine “I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am”. Thus even the great minds used to borrow some thoughts of predecessors without making references. For contemporary researchers, that lack the in-depth analysis in studies and, unfortunately, reject the origins of the ideas and theories, such a simplified approach has almost become the basis of methodology.

The virtualization of reality is considered to be the most typical of the present-day tendencies of communications development. It was picked up by Russian researchers from the essayist judgments of a French sociologist Jean Baudrillard and in effect it is a development of the solipsist traditions, stated by an English philosopher George Berkeley in 1710 in his program work “A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge”. According to G. Berkeley those things that people usually call material objects in fact are a range of ideas in human conscience. As far as the sensible world is concerned, it exists only in our perception. Thus, if a human cannot visualize in his mind an image of something than this “something” does not exist in reality in accordance with a well-known statement of G. Berkeley “esse est percipi” (Latin – “To be is to be perceived”). The study of the phenomenon of reality virtualization is based on the sensual theory, on the psychological laws of perception. Media technologies foster the reorientation on the inner world of senses, emotions and inner turmoils of a person. The mentioned tendency is proved (illustrated) by, for example, an overwhelming interest in selfies which reflects the necessity of an individual in self-actualization by the means of fixing a standard experience and as a result in self comprehension. According to the futurologists’ prognoses this century of information will be followed by an epoch of psychology with a more delicate socio-psychic information and therefore with a refined change of the whole information and communication media system with a natural combination of rational and sensual-visual structure.

The virtual reality where the information and communication media system advocates the values of conceit, self-love, rivalry, cynicism, cult of violence is trying to substitute the true reality with all might and main by of information channels and rigorously picked up facts. In pursuit of ratings and incomes the meanings and quality of human capital are being overlooked. For some two decades the youth has accustomed to an aimless pastime. According to sociological studies “doing nothing” in the youth sphere has become a stable tendency. (Gorshkov, Sheregi, 2010: 191)

Crisis, negative phenomena in socio-economic and political spheres are not explained by the weak economic backdrop or imperfection of laws and concepts of the state construction, but rather by the nature of psyche that is built into human genes. “The orientation on dominance and material values, anger and greediness lead to the formation of an aggressor and consumer, semiautomatic biobot that is easily manipulated. When people do not control their consciousness, other powers begin to manipulate and control their behavior. It leads to the moral and mental degradation and opens up possibilities for psywars. That may be psywars on the global scale, taking place along with global wars and leading to the degradation or destruction of the whole mankind” (Rubel, Savin, Ratnikov, 2016: 493).

Considering the scale of development of information and communication systems, one may speak about their all penetrating and global influence on the formation of value orientations and role models. Despite the critical attitude to television which a number of scholars refer to as an archaic information and communicative means, it remains the main source of media consumption. According to the polls of 2015 the audience devotes about 177 minutes a day to the watching of television programs. Internet takes the second place among the budget leisure time activities which is given 110 minutes of the users’ daily time. If in 2015 41% of all the media consumption in the world was streamed through television than according to the prediction this number will decrease to 38% with the Internet taking up 31% of all the time of the total amount of media consumption. The mobile Internet which is used approximately 86 minutes a day may be considered to be a steady trend.<sup>2</sup>

Pandering to audience interests for the sake of rating has transformed the mass media performance as educator and enlightener, as an institute of direct democracy into the “journalism of services” and infotainment servicing of the audience. Specialists notice an increase in numbers of entertaining programs in Russian TV-programs structure. It’s noteworthy that the market growth of this segment of programs is typical for developing countries, where the entertaining content is integrated into the “industry of distraction” of public from critical problems in socio-economic and political life (Dugin, 1998: 73).<sup>3</sup>

Managers are prone to explain the increase in numbers of entertaining programs on Russian television by the needs of the audience. The communicative strategy of infotainment has been consistently pursued on the federal channels for several decades. According to the psychological law of “imposed demand” the audience has been taught to spend time mindlessly with some groundling, primitive “entertainment” which, to tell the truth, not only has the function of distraction from critical life problems, but may also *dehumanize* personality. “Gaudy video jokes and light mash-ups may seem trivial and harmless, but as a whole this common practice of fragmentary, depersonalized communication has played down the role of interpersonal interaction as such <...>. The new generation has grown up with lower expectations of what an individual could be and what an individual may achieve” (Lanier, 2011: 14).

Within the tendency of entertainment and individualization of media consumption methods and techniques associated with customizations (customer – client, consumer) are being increasingly applied. As one may know, the main objective of customization is to create the sense that services are being “adapted” to the customers’ personal tastes, requests, to meet their personal needs.

If the purpose of mass media and communications was previously interpreted as the development of a world view beyond the sensory experience of a person, now taking into account individualization tendencies and information personalization technologies, it is possible to say, that present-day information and communication functions of media systems along with the creation of the external world view include both sensual and personal experience of a person. The traditional media used to have audience “feedback” with editorial offices by means of letters. Nowadays, with the help of information technologies of customization it is possible not only to track each website user by some special services, but also, more importantly, automatically generate personalized content in accordance with consumers’ interests by content, themes, genres and etc.

The emergence of interfaces such as “smart glasses”, “smart watch” which have BBC and WSJ newsfeed is gradually replaced by a sensor-receptive systems in the form of virtual reality helmets headed by Oculus Rift. The experiments of tagging human bodies by microchips in order to monitor and record their parameters are also known. News of the changes, taking place in a human body and in his or her mental condition is becoming more important than political situation analysis and reports from the financial sphere. Personality’s interest to the inner world stimulates the further development of “selfie-effect”. If the traditional media functions have always been viewed as complementary to the reality, the wide use of information technology innovations marks the victory



of the virtual reality over an augmented one. With information technologies an individual, self-mediatized conscience is always within the access of the global network. This interconnection of various scales of reality reflection is the consequence of *mediatization* of human's life and society, which is reflected in the following aspects and tendencies of media system's developments:

- digitalization;
- internetization;
- spread of mobile technologies;
- individualization of developed media resources use;
- media saturation increase;
- multiple media consumption (simultaneous operation of all the types of distribution of television from analog to digital, multiplexes and etc.);
- convergence (unification of television and Internet, smart phones – an emergence of new media platforms as 3-4 screens);
- mobility;
- change from the lineal television viewing to “stream viewing” (more detailed information about mediatization and tendencies of media system development in: Kolomiets, 2014: 119-120; Dugin, 2016: 83-99).

Under the influence of information technologies a new type of media consumer, who is commonly referred to as the “user” is being formed. Unlike the traditional audience, the user is not satisfied with the ready information product. By becoming the subject of the communicative model, he has the ability to control the relationships with the media, thus creating his own media space. The user lives in conditions of “cognitive dissonance” and (in accordance with the effect of the “public opinion loop” of Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann) constantly emphasizes his uniqueness, while at the same time being afraid of being different (Kolomiets, 2014: 164-165).

Ideas of the content presentation, aimed at activating meanings, symbols and cultural codes are also changing. It is indicative that there may be not the meanings themselves, but rather mechanisms that may stimulate the emergence of new meanings, moods, associations which affect the transformation of thinking patterns and behavior of different audience groups. The content itself in multimedia conditions is also undergoing changes in accordance with the following tendencies:

- graphomania, decrease in text quality criteria, the emergence of “user content”;
- spread of crowd sourcing technologies;
- the predominance of the entertainment in media content, which suggests the advance of the entertainment society, but not an information one;

- customization of content;
- reduction of the content duration;
- multimization of content delivery in any space and at any time;
- immediacy of content delivery/ receiving (instant messaging) by SMS messages belongs to the new type of communication, reminding interpersonal communication but at the same time having opportunity to save and broadcast content (Kolomiets, 2014: 131, 136 – 137).

Taking into account the tendencies of personification of the human interaction with media systems considered, it is possible to assume that the paradigm of the classical methodology of mass media studies, which operates the mass character categories, is transformed into non-classical theoretical and methodological approaches which in particular are based on the consideration of individual differences (Dugin, 2005: 197 – 204).

At the same time the theory of communication based on the audience participation in the production and consumption of media product is becoming more widespread. In particular the founder of the “*Theory of the Participatory Culture*” Henry Jenkins fairly supposes that it is the participation of users in the production of media content that turns an information channel into communication medium. In addition, the media product should contain not only the elements aimed at the audience perception, but also technologies and mechanisms that encourage communicative communities to participate in content creation process. In support of the “*Theory of the Participatory Culture*” the users are encouraged to share stories (transmedia storytelling), on the multiplatform basis, with the use of crowd sourcing technologies and other forms of interaction with the media. The logic of audience participation in the media production based on the digital technology is subjected to the computer program algorithm. The creative part is based on the combinatorial thinking according to which for the creation of the comprehensive picture one needs, as if it were a puzzle, to complete the “semantic puzzle” from the prepared set of elements, in fact, without contributing anything new to the subject of the future media product. In other words, the “*Theory of the Participatory Culture*” presupposes the *imitation of the communicative process* which has no aim of introducing real changes in politics, economics, social and everyday life of the population and bringing anything new.

The application of the “*Theory of the Participatory Culture*” to the Russian realities seems to be dubious considering the unprecedented growth of public mistrust to the media. Unless the audience participation is planned in advance as “*imitative*” media model. The real conditions are as such: about 70% of the population do not trust the media and do not believe in the possibility to change anything in the socio-political, socio-economic life of a city, region, village or

an institution. According to the studies conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences only 15% of the respondents expressed confidence in their opportunities to influence the state policy in general, 20% – on the actions of the regional government, 25% – on the local government and local institutions.<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to see the direct dependence between the degree of trust and the level of authorities: the lower the level of authorities the less trust they have. However, at the same time there are more opportunities to influence authority actions and vice versa.

According to the study, the analysis of the public trust level to the state and public institutions also reveals the dependence of trust from the financial position of respondents. The high standard of living in metropolitan cities contributes to the increase of public trust to the government institutions and state governance. At the same time, such factors and living conditions of metropolitan-city inhabitants as a rational way of life, high level of education, engagement in intellectual and creative activities, access to alternative sources of information, determine a low level of trust of the citizens to the information and communication media system.

The lowest level of trust to the media system, authorities and management, socio-political, socio-economic institutions is observed in the regions, territories, areas and republics of the country with the concentration of the main human capital assets with the lower level of material status. Thus, 77% of the Russians polled claimed that their own financial situation worsened during the last year, 57% expected the further decline in the standard of living in the nearest perspective, 82% described their personal socio-psychological state as negative. More than half of the Russians notice an increase in anxiety (31%), irritability, exacerbation and aggression (26%) among the people around them.<sup>5</sup>

In the studies of psychoemotional moods dynamics in the Russian society, an accumulation of negative tendencies caused by the deterioration of financial and status situation, revenue declines and the simultaneous rise in prices and tariffs in housing and public utilities is marked. As a result, only the one third of Russians have positive attitude to their life and people around them.

The recipient's level of education is also the fundamental factor that reduces people's trust in governmental bodies and media system. Many years' researches record an unprecedented decline in credibility to institutions that ensure the interaction of the government and population, in particular to the press, television and radio broadcasting. Over the past ten years, the confidence indicator has declined by more than 10% (in case of the press: 37%–23%; television: 43%–30%).<sup>6</sup>

An important factor affecting the participation of the population in the functioning of the media industry is the structure of the value-based orientations. The analysis of worldview positions and attitudes reveals the strengthening of self-oriented and activist views and positions. If ten years ago the group of “self-sufficing” was almost half the group of “dependent” (34% versus 64% in 2005) nowadays the sociological surveys indicate the “convergence” of these groups (48% and 52% respectively).<sup>7</sup>

It is believed that the group of “self-sufficing” Russians in the nearest future may come to the leading position. Thus, according to a sociological research, the access to information, communication in social networks among the Russians polled is almost at the very end of the scale of values, communicative capabilities and skills (10% of respondents).<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note for comparison that sociologists from the University of Würzburg (Julius-Maximilians – Universitat Wurzburg, Germany) and the Nottingham-Trent University (Great Britain) conducted studies according to which almost one third of the respondents (29%) appreciate their own gadget more than parents and friends. For 37.4% – smartphone and their loved ones have almost the same importance. 16.7% of the respondents spoke out about the extreme importance of the gadget in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Such significant differences in the value scale between the Russian and western youth make questionable the correctness of the extrapolation of western theories to the Russian society, where other socio-psychological attitudes of society, models of communication behavior, systems of values, credibility in media system, governmental institutions and management are observed.

However, Russian researches make use of theories, paradigms and recommendations of the western analysts. It may be explained by the lag of Russia in the sphere of information technologies. According to the study conducted by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), our country is left behind the world leaders in the sphere of digital development at the average by 5-8 years. With the high speed of the innovations spread and global changes along with the lack of coherent actions of the Russian economic system participants in stimulating the digital component, the digital technological gap may be 15-20 years and it seems impossible to overcome it.<sup>10</sup>

It should be admitted that the Western theories of communication have more experience of information and communication systems studies in the market conditions. It does not mean that there should be direct borrowing and adaptation of the western methodology to the studies of Russian media systems.

If we compare mentality, value orientations, socio-psychological attitudes of the Western and Russian population, we would see considerable differences, that

were shown in the example of the use of gadgets by young people. A complex and contradictory situation has emerged in comprehension of the Russian practices in functioning of the information and communication media systems. On the one hand, groups of theoretical views on the abstract level persuasively explain and prove functions, structure and specific aspects of information functioning in society. On the other hand, numerous empirical studies that serve advertising and image companies do not set targets to create some conceptual theoretical generalizations. As a rule most of these studies are not processed with an aim to formulate theories. Moreover, pragmatically oriented studies invariably limit the information and communication activity to “customisation” and “conceptual provision of services” which emerged in commerce and management. That is what happened not only in the advertising sphere but in the media system activity as well.

Thus, neither the theoretical approach of the academic studies, nor the pragmatic line of research can't provide a conceptual statement of the general theory of the information and communication media systems. More than half a century ago a famous American sociologist Robert K. Merton believed that the creation of the “general theories” for the information, communication and social processes was preliminary. It seems that this position still remains as the common theory of communication has not been developed yet. In practice, is it necessary to explain pragmatic goals or economic aspects of an advertising campaign by methodological means of “general theories”? A set of conventional explanations, empirical methods and methodologies is quite valid for these aims. Can empirical studies develop or restrain the development of the theory? This question requires special analysis.

Media system is something more than just the traditional media. It is mainly the development of horizontal connections between people on the basis of information and communication technologies, which probably unite the society more than the vertical ones. In this sense media systems are some special social institution which in particular conditions performs the function of an “institute of direct democracy” (Dugin, 1990; Dugin, 2005: 32-49).

The present-day theoretical concepts justify the statement that “there are no humanitarian grounds to consider the audience or business to be the cornerstone criteria in journalism. The evaluation of success by business criteria is the product of the epoch rather than men”.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the sense of media system functioning cannot be only limited to business and revenues. On the whole, media did not appear as the result of business. From the very first steps they completed the functions of informing and stimulating relations between different social layers, in particular between power structures and

people. It is the different matter that later business made the media serve the trade, customer demands and advertising. However, that are not the only spheres of media system functioning. It would be a methodological mistake to study only the business sphere of information and communication media system functioning.

The analysis of the total relations that arises as a result of interaction between the audience and the media system, may become one of the leading theoretical and methodological directions of research of information and communication media systems. It's about the studies of relationships, their functions, structures, modalities, intonations and other characteristics that are included as the constituent part of consciousness, actions, and behavior motivation of audience and even the decision-making algorithm. The methodological foundations of such an approach are limited to the framework of interaction schemes between "theory and facts". In such cases, the theory is bound to perform an orientation function when creating tools for ordering and organizing systems, classifying, typologizing, systemizing facts and phenomena. However, typology and classification cannot be applied as independent theories. They are rather *pre-theories* which may be used as basis to formulate conceptual theoretical statements. Russian working-outs in the sphere of media systems appear to be, on the one hand, *metatheories*, on the other hand – *micro theories* in the form of a typological level of media research. These, of course, are important stages in the comprehension of information and communication processes. However, unfortunately, so far, the results and conclusions of these research trends can be applied only in educational purposes. It is not possible to talk about the creation a certain unified theory of media systems as a working tool to improve the effectiveness of journalistic activity.

Since neither the academic studies nor applied researches can justify conceptual theories suitable for the development of the practice of the contemporary information and communication systems. The truth is, as always, somewhere in the middle. The theories of middle range may resolve this contradiction. It is generally accepted that the theories of middle range appear in researches as a kind of intermediary between theoretical and methodological statements, working hypotheses and a set of empirical data. Theories of the middle range have different interpretations and explanations. The author of the "middle approach" Robert Merton strictly defined the theory as "a complex of logically interconnected assumptions from which empirically verifiable hypotheses are derived, and an empirical generalization as a separate statement summarizing the observed patterns of relations between two or more variables" (Merton, 2006: 97).

Dialectic connections and transitions from empirical data to theoretical generalizations and back on the following round of the analysis generate new senses and give the grounds to believe that the theory of media systems may be the special theory of the middle range theories studying scientific and practical aspects of mass communication process. It is also important to note that theories of middle range are capable to synthesize an interpretation of interrelations between behavioural models, actions of a person within individual distinctions and social structures. In other words to explore that problem field which, as a rule, serves as the subject of description, analysis by the means of journalism.

Theories of the middle range act as special micro theories which include a set of methods, working tools of research within the algorithm of the structure and functional analysis of social systems offered by R. Merton (motive - action - result) (Merton, 2006: 201-207).

In addition, middle range theories don't only have to unite wide theoretical statements with working hypotheses which are formulated in empirical researches, but also to suggest an algorithm, humanitarian technologies and realization of ideas, enshrined in the theoretical and methodological concept, in particular, to be the basis for the development of communicative strategies of certain media system channels. According to the concept of the outstanding Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, which he proposed while developing of the theory of structure and dynamics of the corresponding class of the sociocultural phenomena, the middle range theories may be assigned to special sociological theories of media systems. In the analytical review connected with the search of the system of the general sociology, P. Sorokin draws a distinct line between "finding of the facts" and "consistency of the middle range generalisation" (Merton, 2006: 92).

It appears that for the study of media functioning in the new multimedia conditions the middle range theories should satisfy the following demands:

- explain the entire model of the communicative cycle including the functioning of institutions, processes and mechanisms of their functioning;
- consider the multiple aspects of media systems and complexity of interaction of all elements of media communication with diverse interests and aims of the participants;
- understand the digital inequality as various degrees of application of digital media technologies, starting with their spread on a certain territory and finishing by the skills and frequency of their application in every-day life.

Development of the middle range theory in a research of information and communicative media systems offers broad and fruitful perspectives for the analysis of social networks. In particular the “method of social coordinates” introduced by P. Sorokin allows us to reveal not only preferences and value orientations of users, but also motives of social behaviour and social actions according to the status and social position of a personality. Connections within the communicative communities and the relations in short form project the role models of a structural and functional configurations of various social communities, socio-cultural strata of society.

Following the methodological approaches of P. Sorokin on justification of a socio-culture as one of civilizations that has its mentality, worldview, ideology, it is possible to define the subject field of media system as sociocultural space of meanings, set of material and spiritual cultures, as well as behaviour models, actions, laws and behaviour patterns that are developed and followed by a person. Application of the “communicative space” concept which is frequently postulated in Russian researches narrows down the scale of understanding of media system and, most importantly, simplifies the understanding of a role of a human being, his motivations and social actions.

However, the application of the middle range theories introduced in this article is possible in condition of changing of the traditional methodological approaches to the journalism which exist within philological and history scholarship. Considering the technological effectiveness of the present-day media systems, the traditional philological approaches to the classification, revealing of the role and functions of mass media and studying of the texts without considering the “feedback”, appear to be insufficient for the complex research of the media and journalism. The media system theory justification cannot entirely rely on technology-related transformations may that be the generational changes of gadgets or the ways of content delivery. As the famous software specialist Jaron Zepel Lanier claims: “In future with the arrival of the so-called “post symbol communication” <...> people will need to be considered separately as some unique category <...> as any gadget may bore you, but the *in-depth sense* (emphasis added by me. – E.D.) is the most attractive potential adventure available” (Lanier, 2011: 300).

Creation of the sense, the enhancement and interpretation of the sense, recreation of the sense of the image and symbolism of the social reality space which are the basis and result of communication – that is the subject and problematic field of the new middle range theories of the information and communication media systems (Dugin, 2015: 130-139).



It is rather obvious that the changes of methodology, transformation of the methods, object and the subject of the study will demand changes in traditional professions from the Higher Attestation Commission of the Russian Federation in conferment of higher degree in methodology of journalism and methods of sociological sciences which have the studies of communicative institutions and processes within their problematic field. There are some implications to these changes at the Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov MSU and in the Academy of Media Industry where the researches of the new media, media sociology and media system economics have been undertaken during the last decades (Project studies of Vartanova E.L. (Vartanova, 2014, 2015), Kolomiets V.P. (Kolomiets, 2014), Dugin E.Ya. and Kokhanova L.A. (Dugin, Kokhanova, 2013) and many others).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Survey: the youth is expecting the emergence of the new mass media types // Sostav.ru. 11.11.2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gipp.ru/opennews.php. 16.06.2016

<sup>3</sup> Epple N. Rynok razvlecheniy bystree rastet v razvivayushchikhsya stranakh // Vedomosti. 17.06.2016.

<sup>4</sup> Rossiyskoe obshchestvo vesnoy 2016 goda: trevogi i nadezhdy. M.: IS RAN, 2016. P. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Informing.ru. 2016.06.10.

<sup>10</sup> Belyakov E. Rossiya otstaet na 5-8 let v tsifrovom razvitii. Available at: // droider.ru/post/rossiya.

<sup>11</sup> Available at: <http://www.gipp.ru>. Date of reference: 13.05.2015.

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# Media futurology: “Journalism of sense” and robotization of media industry

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## Abstract

The author focuses on the development of media futurology as a separate research field, and argues that it can be used for more detailed description of changes taking place in media production and journalism today. According to his forecast, there is going to be an unavoidable reduction of journalists engaged in the production of technologically simple news content due to robotization of mass media. At the same time, there still remains a demand for journalists specializing in more complex types of activities: interpretation of events and comprehension of the reality.

## Keywords

Media futurology, futurology, future, media production, robotization, media education, the mission of journalism, the end of journalism

## Introduction: The urgency of media futurology

Thinking about the future of journalism and its perspective is not a new topic. For example, at the beginning of this century Joseph B. Atkins, John C. Merrill and their colleagues were trying to observe contemporary trends in their paper “The Mission: Journalism. Ethics and the World” (Atkins, 2002). However, at that time various kinds of influence upon journalism and media, including political and finance pressure, marketing influence, which transformed journalism into public relations, etc. were in the main focus of researchers’ attention. At the end of 2010s, the development of new media and rapid growth of user generated content made some researchers speak about “the end of journalism”, meaning the end of the traditional “serious” and ethic journalism (Ashton, 2008:

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Jacobson, 2013; Miller, 2009). The influence of new technologies upon media sphere and the society was discussed even by such a well-known theoretic of mass communication as Denis McQuail (McQuail, 2013). In spite of it at the end of 2020s we see that earlier forecasts of media and journalism's development didn't take into account such factor as robotization of the humanitarian sphere. Meantime this trend is likely to change the discussion about the existence of journalism as a mission, a profession and even as a kind of human activity.

Mediasphere is coming across with strengthening crisis phenomena and it highly requires the emergence of such a direction of knowledge which can be called media futurology. Nowadays mass media are not only included in political, economic, social processes, they are a part of our being. Therefore, issues that at first sight should only "concern industry" experts – media consumption, economy of the media, relations between media and power – are actively researched by a wide range of scholars. At the same time there is a shortage of academic research that would prepare us to an approximate understanding of the future of mass media and journalism with the help of foresight methods.

Today we can observe the results of want of information about the future: the expansion of the World Wide Web inexorably destroys the traditional media economy with deficiency of content and channels of its distribution, leads to increasing difference in styles and ways of media consumption among different age and social groups. On the one hand, it further complicates the work of media organizations, especially small ones, and, on the other hand, strengthens the continuing fragmentation of society into different information worlds (Boltz, 2011: 15). How successful is the strategy of maximum content customization in these conditions? Or is it better to work with certain, but numerous age groups, for example, only with retired people? These and other questions remain unanswered.

However, the development of media futurology is possible even under these conditions: the lack of sectoral foresight research within the media industry is partly compensated by wide variety of works studying the development of various social, technical and economic processes in which the mass media are involved. On its basis, some predictions can already be made. Undoubtedly, this method does not allow you to make attachment to time (to say, when exactly one trend can be changed), but at least it allows identifying key trends and trajectories of movement. That means that media organizations and higher schools training personnel for the mediasphere have some extra time to find solutions.

Such studies are particularly relevant for universities, because it is impossible to adapt students to work they will face in the future in the labour market if we rely only on past experience and the current problems of the media industry. So, we should play ahead of the game. But, unfortunately, now the future (perspective 5-10 years) does not represent an interest of both theorists and practical workers. Firstly, for understanding that fact, it is enough to get acquainted with the topics of scientific conferences which are held by the departments of journalism: the focus is on the history of the press and the trends including in the current agenda. Secondly, attempts to speak with practical workers about the future also do not lead to any success. In March, 2015 the Department of Journalism of the Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk held the 1st interdisciplinary conference “Siberian Media Space 2020”. Representatives of three Siberian universities took part in this conference: Siberian Federal University, Novosibirsk State Research University, Tomsk State University, Higher School of Economics, as well as media managers and journalists from one of the most media developed regions of the country and representatives of regional authorities. One of the results of the conference was the statement of the fact that not only do the representatives of the media industry not have a vision of medium-term prospects, but also an understanding the reason behind those thoughts about it, although today the Krasnoyarsk Region is one of the few regions of the country with partly “programmed” future: in 2019, the World Universiade will be held in Krasnoyarsk.

## **Robotization of media production and fact journalism**

The contemporary process affecting all spheres of public life is the development of the technosphere. The influence of this factor is so total and strong that we no longer think about it. And it does not cause much concern. As Norbert Boltz notes (2011: 64-69), today even wars are conducted not by people, but by machines which are organized by means of communication between themselves, and the pilots of passenger liners do not “fly” in the former sense of the word: they are just managers. And in fact, today the same managers, “controllers” of technological processes are representatives of many professions.

In a certain sense, now we are witnessing the realization of Galileo’s idea of the mathematization of nature. After all, the digitalization of reality with the help of modern technologies has led to the results which the researcher Scott McQuire exactly called the replacement of people by numbers and the rewriting of nature by technology as industrial mechanisms are supplemented by information ones. At the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, the spatial experience of man was enlarged due to events that took place somewhere far away, and the

gap between the way of life centered on one place and the new forms of being was shortened. Then the man achieved more success in overcoming his own physical limitations. And the emergence of the cybernetic paradigm after the Second World War, as well as the emergence of the idea of creating a cyborg – human-machine – significantly changed the relationship between information and matter. Moreover, the proposal of the scholar to abandon the paradigm about the representative role of the media is still concerned to be relevant. More specifically, to abandon the assumption that the media is something separated from the external world and thus it is reproduction. S. McQuire (2014) points out that nowadays the media has become something that McLuhan called the human environments. Even the movement around the world is connected with the crossing of different media streams and participation in them. McQueer emphasizes that neither the house, nor the street, nor the city today are inconceivable apart from the media apparatus which redistributes the scale and speed of social interaction.

Today the technosphere began to invade even the humanitarian fields traditionally considered to be exclusively human. And one of these spheres is the mediasphere. The development of information and communication technologies changes the ways of mass communication, changes the ways of media consumption and the media landscape itself. The agenda consistently includes the question: if the process of searching, treatment and dissemination of information is increasingly becoming more automatic do we need professional mediators who participate in the process of mass communication in the future? If so, what should they do, what is their being?

The answer to this seemingly purely futurological question is necessary to be found now, because for journalists the process of labour automatization is much more crucial than for many other specialists, because it is a question of preservation or disappearance of the profession. Once the technique has already replaced the “young ladies” who used to provide telephone communications. This process has just started: the American media use robot programs to create news reports (*Los Angeles Times*) and automatic fact-checking of politicians’ speeches (*The Washington Post*). One of the technological platforms for making analysis of data and creating a textual description, for example, is offered by *Narrative Science Company*. It conducts a direct analogy between the program and the calculator relieving the calculation process. And at the forum “Media of the Future”, which were held in Moscow in 2014, experts not only explained to the Russian media community the key role of technology for the survival of the mass media, but also introduced the concept of “journalism of drones”. The idea of this concept is the following: an operator and a correspondent are replaced by

a special aircraft with HD cameras. In November 2015, the company “Yandex” announced that robots will be used for writing news.

The question of survival of journalism in the era of robotics would not have been such a hot topic today, if international media corporations and several western funds hadn’t tried to plant universal model of fact-based journalism in different countries for such a long time. After all just this model is often portrayed as most objective and correct. Within the framework of this model (and the genre system related to it) most journalists are given the role of dispassionate “registers of reality”, and only a few authorised have the right to interpret these facts, to make them into a single picture of reality. Professor R. Mack Chesney (2009) writes about the results of implementing such professional standards in the US media: many problems cannot be covered in the framework of this paradigm. To mediate any social problem, there must be at least two sources of information, experts for example. If they refuse to discuss the problem, the journalist is powerless. And those journalists who are allowed to explain the reality, as a rule, are incorporated into the elite, and it is advantageous for them to maintain *the status quo*. So as a result, as McChesney stresses that the American media today broadcast only a picture of the world of those who belong to the middle and rich classes.

For journalism developing within the framework of the “service provider” model, the problem of robotics really raises the burning issue of the displacement of human labour by machines. After all, if the main task of the basic mass of journalists is collection, verification of facts, their packaging and distribution, their replacement by automated systems is not only appropriate, but also desirable in a certain sense.

Firstly, drones, robots, surveillance cameras and DVRs are much more objective than humans: they are deprived of emotions. The data of video surveillance systems and DVRs is complete documentary evidence, in contrast to subjective descriptions of reality by eyewitnesses. The statistics on the users’ behaviour on the Web, space transference of persons (which can be monitored with the help of geolocation systems) also looks as objective. And, probably, in the nearest future this information will be used by robots when answering classical news questions “who?” and “where?”

Secondly, programs are easier to be managed for creating an appropriate picture of events. There is no need to spend money on persuasion, motivation or solving numerous ethical dilemmas. It is enough to modify the scheme of the selection of events to create the proper “agenda”. Thirdly, the workforce productivity of machines is much higher: computers can work 24 hours a day, so they can replace several people at once. Fourthly, a lot of modern

computer programs are automatically taught systems. So in the course of time such programs will be able to solve more sophisticated problems and will be able to gain “experience” from their work. And what is a critically important robots can easily be dismissed without any observance of the Labour Code.

While main obstacles to the rapid implementation of this scenario are the cost of such systems and the fact that the present programs work only with a limited number of types of news. Today, the major obstacles for the rapid implementation of this scenario are the cost of such systems and the fact that current programs function merely with a limited number of types of news. With news that can really be written by applying the same algorithm, operating with wide digital scope (weather, market quotes, sports news, news about RTA). But one way or another every program is improving and is falling in price. Therefore, journalism simply registering events is doomed to be replaced by robots. And the topic of “the end of journalism” discussed by theoreticians and practical workers in a certain degree confirms this as far as the incomes of many mass media in different countries of the world obtained from the sale of news do not cover the cost of their production, which involves expensive human capital.

But nevertheless the replacement of people with machines in news journalism is already taking place. As financial analysts of RBC admit robot programs are also used to read news lines. “The readers of news in the financial markets are not people at all, but machines. It is computers that analyse headlines and news in an automatic mode and instantly give out cue for buying or selling on predetermined algorithms”.

### **“Journalism of sense” as a way of preserving the profession**

The current existing trend can be described as follows. Only yesterday when journalists creating mass information, competed with journalists only. Today they compete with each other and the audience also involved in the process of creating and distributing messages. And tomorrow they will be competing with each other, with users, and with drones (from computer programs to complex devices that fix fragments of the world around us).

Theorists, as well as some practical workers, indeed are preparing to compete with machines. Ideologists of modern media assert that mass media employees are obliged to know programming languages. Now not only the metropolitan universities but also the regional universities of Russia have started to teach multimedia journalism, the teachers are being upgraded. However, in spite of all advantages of this approach, one thing is still obvious: it is senseless to compete with a computer in terms of data processing speed.



It is important to bear in mind that the journalism of “facts/events registration” is not the only direction of development. As E.P. Prokhorov (2003: 46-47) wrote: a journalist works with different types of information and we define certain genres depending on it. Factual information is the basis of all information genres and namely is the result of “registration of facts”. But a journalist can also work with prescriptive information describing the desired future and related to ideals, idealized notions, as well as with values and ideas about the world and society. The comparison of factual with the prescriptive information allows us to create evaluative and normative information which to describe how everything should be, what to do to solve the problem situation and achieve the desired future?

However, people themselves need more than naked facts. It is important for each member of a society to any extent not just to get an “objective description” of what is happening. He also wants to know who and how value the events, to which desirable future the majority of our society or at least the reference groups for the individual are seeking for. And this is one of the fundamental human needs, which was once proved by E. Noel-Neumann (1984), who explained that an individual’s study of opinions of those groups to which he belongs is one of the mechanisms of human survival in society.

In the nearest future, both robots and ordinary users will not be able to competent work with prescriptive, evaluative and normative information. Many journalists lack of skills, life experience, flexible mind or mature opinions to compare one event with another, to search for cause-effect relationships, to estimate of what is happening. That is why the robotization of information journalism, depriving the work of simple “fact collectors” in some ways dispenses journalism from routine. Robotics returns it to its origins, when a journalist was not just a “recorder of reality events,” but a public figure, a thinker.

The demand for “journalism of sense” (we call it this conventional name because a journalist within the framework of this model will increasingly try to find the sense of events, separate opinions besides establishing simple facts) will remain because it works with something, which is impossible to “sew” in the computer code, namely: with thought forms, metaphors, insights and many other things that are connected with creative process, and it is not fully understood even by creators themselves. After all, only hard news can be written according to a scheme above all existing journalistic genres. Interesting reports, sketches, analytical materials, interviews can be obtained if an author relies not only on algorithms but also on the sensory perception of the real world. And it can be proved by the mere fact: for more than a hundred years of existence of journalism as a profession, small numbers of textbooks have appeared which

train specific methods of creating materials in various genres. Existing books are mainly focused on how to shape any available data in a text but not on what actions the journalist should take to collect information. In other words, journalists learn to “feel the sense” of reality, to understand what information will be most expressive and important. It can be reached only by communicating with experienced colleagues and using their own trial and error methods.

There are many other fundamental reasons for the development of “journalism of sense”. The first is the complication of social processes affecting the media sphere. Social diffusion in contemporary society may lead to digital divisions, to asymmetry in media consumption. As a result, different groups of people find it difficult to understand the same obvious facts: they are interpreted and contextualized depending on many factors that create the image of the world of a particular community. It means that the need for mediators will grow. Such intermediary will help these communities adequately understand each other in order to avoid mutual destruction.

The second reason is the devaluation of the picture of the world that physics has been dictating to us for a long time, which is expressed in the idea of the mathematization of nature and is understood as a mechanism, a device. Of course, this picture of the world still exists and stimulates the development of the technosphere, supports the hopes of some people that even a society can be controlled if one understands the laws of this “mechanism”. And it prevails even in the mediasphere, where, as G.L. Tulchinsky (2013: 41-54) called “the marketing of humanism” can be noticed. It is a process in which all values are organized horizontally with no hierarchy and even the transcendental is turned into a market segment. But today a new, postphysical picture of the world begins to manifest itself, within which physics is reconciled with metaphysics, and different trajectories are possible, and development is nonlinear. And in the framework of this new paradigm a journalist who actively works with a mental scheme that modifies the perception of the real world by creating images and thought forms can be seen even as a kind of urban “shaman”, a Jedi that cannot be replaced by a machine.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper the author described some strengthening crisis phenomena in journalism due to development of the technosphere. However, robotization in media turns us to fundamental topics: what is a human, what is creativity. And journalism is a field, where not only technologies of finding facts, data and their verification take place. This is a profession, where tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) plays an important role in finding stories, interviewing people, searching for new senses and other activities. Interaction of technologies and

a human was a topic of 2st international conference “Siberian Media Space 2020” in Krasnoyarsk in November or 2017. And the participants of a panel discussion founded, that there was a return from technologies to a human in majority reports. Understanding that robotization in media forces departments of journalism searching for such practices of interaction journalist with reality, where he can’t be changed on computer technique (Zorin, 2017).

Reorientation of the industry from journalism of facts to “journalism of sense” is a great challenge. First of all, this is a challenge for universities. The whole point is that we need to look for tools to change the consciousness of graduates of the school, which does not teach to comprehend the world around us and to receive information about this world, partly turning people into “bio robots.” We need to work not only with the development of traditional media competencies (information search, fact-checking, ability to work in a team, etc.), but also with the development of the emotional and sensory perception of the world. Unfortunately, this work cannot be reduced to a revision of curricula or to the introduction of new disciplines. Here, the understanding of the professional mission should be brought in the limelight. Either it is just a “service”, or it is a kind of “Way” that allows you to remain people and help others not to become cyborgs. The alteration of consciousness is impossible without awareness of responsibility for the consequences of their decisions and actions as well. Only theoretical acquaintance of students with problems of deontology is not enough: journalists (as well as managers) cannot be taught without training in real conditions on real people. This idea can be explained by reference to the already used metaphor. A Jedi is not someone who waves a plasma sword, but one who is fully aware of his connection with the Force and is able to control it.

Anyway, both now and all the times the most vantage place is among people, who can be called creators or rulers. Those who cannot just react to events, but are able to bring into being something new.

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