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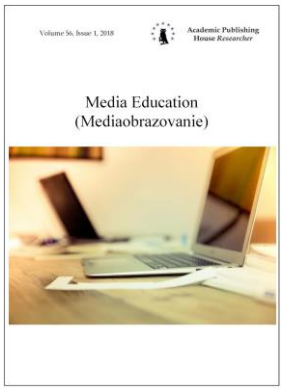

Civil Media Criticism and Political Processes in Mediatized Society

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Abstract

In the conditions of modern mediatized society, in which people's communication is being mediated by technical means of information, the communication of all institutions with citizens is carried out largely through media channels. Possibilities of political and commercial manipulations of the public are growing in number with the use of a powerful media complex and the latest communication technologies. This trend poses a threat to democracy, which degenerates into a manipulative ersatz that excludes the really free and informed will of citizens. In the context of the market functioning of the media, it is increasingly important to formulate and take into calculations the reactions of the audience to the activities of the media industry and to the producing of content. Recently there were no reliable ways to convey to media organizations the needs and requests of the audience and help citizens to become included in the media political discourses.

One of the solutions today can become the civil media criticism, carried out by the authors, not related to media organizations. Media criticism contributes to the development of media competence of citizens, their rational and critical attitude to political discourses formed by the media, which in turn may favor the emergence of a new type of citizenship for the mediatized society of the XXI century.

Keywords: citizen media criticism, political process, media industry, media competence, citizenship.

1. Introduction

In modern media society the impact of the mass media is extremely high, which not only ensures the development of the information component of the political process, but also performs as a force causing the development of political manipulation on unprecedented scales. At the same time along with traditional media the newest forms of media exposure to the masses are involved – as evidenced, in particular, by D. Trump's presidential campaign, in which targeted processing of voters through social networks was used as recommended by Cambridge Analytics. The growing manipulative potential of mass media is also contingent upon some tendencies of their development in the conditions of the information market.

2. Materials and methods

In this paper, the potential of civil media criticism is subjected to a theoretical analysis in its impact on mediatized political processes and in the development of a new type of citizenship based on developed media competence and media activism of citizens. At the same time, practical

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experience of the activities of civil structures and individual citizens monitoring and criticizing the media is considered.

In this paper we use the results of studies in the field of the theory and sociology of journalism (Lichter, Rothman, 1986; Sidorov, 2016 et al.), civilian mass communications (Dzyaloshinsky, 2006; Fomicheva, 2010 et al.), theories of mediatization of modern society and the functioning of the media in a mediatized society (Hepp, Hajarvard, 2015: 314–324 et al.), theories and practices of media criticism (Bakanov, 2007: 195-198 et al.), activities of foreign associations of civil media criticism (Anoshina, 2007: 275-283) The state of the literature reveals a lack of theoretical knowledge of the civil media criticism potential in its affecting on political discourses in the mass media.

3. Discussion

Professional journalism today has undergone significant changes caused by the latest communication tools and market communication strategies, which are built up to provide guaranteed rating indicators and, as a result, the economic prosperity of media organizations. Such strategies include:

– forced content dramatization;

– such content's personalization by virtue of the creation and operation of the "media stars" cult that is not about only show businessmen, but also about politicians promoted through media;

– hedonization through the growing part of entertainment media content,

– and also hybridization of media texts which acquire mixed characteristics of journalistic-promotional, journalistic-PR materials (PRnalistic) and infotainment (Karpenko et al., 2008; Korochensky, 2008; 2009; 2017).

It becomes more and more often when in journalism (including its political component) spectacular, game-based approaches are being used — up to publication of fake news (outwardly plausible, but based on fiction) and the creating of media images that have nothing to do with real prototypes. Being subjected to the market imperatives, the media industry often forms socially defective values and aspirations for its audience (Sidorov, 2016). The postmodern skepticism about rationality and the search for truth based on it, the suppression of the cognitive function of journalism, turns mass media into a curved mirror of reality that entertains and distracts the public from participation in a positive life transformation that forms apolitical, consumer-oriented recipients of media information. As a result, there is an increasing distance of journalism as a public institution from the duties about providing time-sensitive self-knowledge and self-description of society. As well as rejection of the professional ideal of a journalist as a seeker of truth, creator of an adequate media picture of the world, necessary for the correct orientation in social reality and the political process. Against the background of the ongoing transformation of journalism into the so-called "post-journalism" (Bolz, 2007; Hepp, 2013; 2015; Pocheptsov, 2014), producing "post-truth", the problem of ensuring social realism of the media (Korochensky, 2009), becomes increasingly relevant.

Modern democracy and a developed political culture require not only to participate in the elections of their representatives in government bodies, but also to directly participate in political discourses and activism, to join decision-making activities through including mass political manipulations into active public discussion of political and public life by the audience (Alexeeva, 2006; Berezina, 2013; Bobryshova, 2014; Chernega, 2005; Chomsky, Herman, 2002; Dzialoschinsky, 2006; 2009; Edmonds, 2010; Fomicheva, 2003; Korochensky, 2003; 2008; 2009; 2016; 2017; Korochensky, Khmelenko, 2009; Levy, 1997; Mazzoleni, Schultz, 1999; Merritt, 2010; Siapera, 2003; Verhovskaya, 2010). New low-cost forms of network communication allow civil media critics to act without attracting significant financial and other resources.

4. Results

In the reality of the information market, readers of newspapers and magazines, television viewers, and radio listeners are considered to be not only the objects of influence, but also as consumers of media content, who must make their choice based on the offers on the market, that means to play a rather passive role in relations with media suppliers' products (Fomicheva, 2010). The passivity of this role is confirmed by the fact that in modern reality the means of mass communication are, as a rule, not accountable to consumers of media products.

Market mechanisms (which largely determine the "rules of the game" of communication

media) are operating in a competitive environment, they are forced to reckon with market conditions, to build their activities on the study and commercial exploitation of these conditions, which is a requirement for ensuring the survival rate and profitability of the media business. However, it would be a mistake to equal the market conjuncture with widely understood public interests and needs. Due to its narrowly pragmatic nature, marketing research of the audience is not able to reveal the diversity of information requests and reactions of mass media consumers. In addition, the question of taking into account or ignoring the identified audience needs still remains at the discretion of media organizations that are guided primarily by their own commercial interests. In the current situation, when the dependence of media organizations on the audience is significantly weakened, taking into account the demands and interests of mass media consumers is not a priority need. Narrowly focused marketing and sociological empirical market researches are not suitable for identifying the entire complex spectrum of information needs of the society, interests, requests, positive and negative reactions of the audience and its multidimensional dynamics. The study of the comments received by the editor, the determination of rating indicators and the study of audience groups are purely pragmatic goals to solve the problems of increasing market efficiency of the media. Orientation to the accounting and maintenance of rating indicators is not a valid consumer orientation.

An important option for socially correct media activities is to provide feedback between the recipients of information and media organizations, the study and accounting of information interests and requests of various audience categories by the latter. However, even the development of interactivity of modern media, which allows maintaining stable contact with media content consumers, does not really guarantee that media professionals really take into account the opinions and needs of the audience, since media organizations have the opportunity to respond to them selectively, based primarily on their commercial interests. Thus, there is no steady dialogue between the media industry and the audience, and the ability of consumers to influence the behavior of the media is significantly limited. Mythological ideas that in conditions of the market media organizations strive to take into account the reactions of the audience as much as possible in order to resist the competitive struggle are not justified in practice. At the same time, through the media elite (media owners, editors, highly paid leading journalists) the media business is associated with the political establishment — right up to the information service of the latter (Lichter, Rothman, 1986).

How can we bring the voice of citizens-consumers of the media to media organizations and encourage them to listen, make socially necessary changes in the functioning of the media? One of the most noteworthy manifestations of activities that can limit negative trends in the development of the communications media is the media criticism. Media criticism is a relatively new area of critical journalistic creativity. The main source for analysis, interpretation and evaluation in the criticism of the mass media are: a) significant aspects of information production affecting the characteristics of the produced content, b) published media texts, the entire substantive media complex, and c) the social consequences of their activities. The content and formal aspects of media products (media texts), which are the products of the activities of journalists and other creative workers, as well as reproduction in the media of creative works (music, films, etc.) created outside media organizations (Korochensky, 2003).

Having a specific correctional function, media criticism is able to change the audience's perception of media content distributed by leading communications media, to form a conscious critical attitude towards it, to influence media consumption and media practice. However, it we should not that the existing types of media criticism (scientific expert, corporate, mass — or popular) (Korochensky, 2003), as a rule, consider and evaluate the activity of the communications media either from the standpoint of the scientific community or professional media professionals. As a result, the characteristics of the entire mainstream media are manifested in professional and mass media criticism. R.P. Bakanov, who studied the Russian newspaper criticism of television for 1991–2000, noted the tendency to shift its attention to the cult of media stars ("have a penchant for the gossip column"), focused on the implementation of entertainment and commercial promotion functions (Bakanov, 2007). The author concluded that the critical materials on TV are mostly monologue. Opinions and judgments of TV viewers about TV, if presented in the publications of critics, are only in a mediated, non-expanded and fragmentary form.

From the beginning of the new century, in the wake of the development of modern Internet communications in Russia, the emergence of a fourth type of media criticism began - civil, carried out on behalf of various structures of civil society and personally individual active citizens acting outside the media organizations. Considering the colorful composition of "self-motivated critics", among whom there are both well-trained media experts and individuals presenting their immature or limited judgments about mass media activities on the Web, this kind of critical activity is sometimes characterized as "philistine" media criticism.

How to relate to this kind of creative initiative of citizens, does it have any positive prospects - or is it an online version of the usual "kitchen" reflection in connection with the true and imaginary sins of the mainstream media?

The ability to adjust the perception of media content, characteristic of media criticism, is clearly visible in the activities of a number of foreign civil organizations and groups that carry out systematic media monitoring and media criticism. Public media monitoring groups — media watch groups — have emerged in many countries around the world — from the United States, Britain and other European countries to Japan and Brazil. The activities of these organizations and groups are very diverse; it is aimed at ensuring the democratic rights and freedoms of journalists and media consumers, at raising the professional level of the media. An important aspect of this activity is the focus on improving the social realism of the communications media, expressed in creating a more accurate and adequate picture of social phenomena and processes.

The program of such media watch groups may include conducting systematic monitoring and research on the activities of the media, scientific debates and seminars with the subsequent publication of their materials in the form of articles, reviews, reviews, analytical reports as well as media education, activism, including the publication of magazines and newsletters on media monitoring and media criticism; pressure on the sponsors of individual media organizations and their advertisers through boycotting the advertised goods and services; organization of campaigns of civil pressure on the communications media and government circles, including demonstrations, pickets, mass distribution of letters of protest, initiation of public and parliamentary hearings, which address issues of the social functioning of the media. Diversity distinguishes not only the forms of activity of such public associations and groups, but also their ideological and political positions, ideological orientations (Korochensky, 2016).

As international experience shows, addressing media organizations on behalf of civil society structures becomes a significant factor if these structures carry out systematic reasoned media criticism, which ultimately encourages media professionals to engage in dialogue with media consumers and revise their professional standards to requirements of the public, the implementation of socially necessary changes. This is evidenced, in particular, by the experience of such civic groups monitoring media activities such as the FAIR in the USA (Alexeeva, 2006; Anoshina, 2007) and MediaLens in the UK. Left-wing liberal activists and media experts included in these groups are followers of N. Chomsky (Chomsky, Herman, 2002), a well-known linguist and media critic who strongly and skillfully advocated media compliance with the norms of accuracy and balance in covering events, representing different categories of citizens and public associations in the media content. The media organizations that they have publicly argued and documented criticism cannot ignore media organizations, since this is fraught with undesirable reputational losses: under market realities, reputation has not only moral, but also economic importance. Of course, media activists from these organizations do not succeed in changing the dominant characteristics of the mainstream media, however, their role in media education of citizens and correction of their perception of content generated by the "big" print and electronic media should not be diminished.

During the election campaign in the United States, FAIR's activity in identifying and analyzing informational distortions and manipulative elements in the media of a right-conservative orientation becomes an especially important area. Media criticism turns into an essential element of the election campaign in a mediated political process. On the side of the conservatives and the media supporting them and journalists are other media critical organizations, among which the greatest experience of activity — since 1969 — has AIM organization.

Among representatives of civil media criticism, "non-systemic" should be also considered professional journalists, acting not in the staff of media organizations, but on their own behalf. Often, a talented loner who can take full advantage of the possibilities of modern Internet

communications is able to achieve a significant effect with his critical publications. An example of this is the systematic criticism by video blogger Anatoly Shariy and his publications about the communications media (mostly Ukrainian) related to events in Ukraine after EuroMaidan. In particular, the attention of the Internet audience was attracted by the repeated revelations of fake news in Ukrainian communications media produced by A. Shariy on his YouTube channel. The number of views of the videoblogger's critically exposing materials that calls itself a "media expert" is comparable to the audience activity of Internet channels of large media organizations (the blog has over two million subscribers — data for April 2019).

Civil media criticism ceases to be perceived as "philistine" when well-prepared people stand up to protect the interests and rights of citizens-consumers of media content and practices: specialists in pedagogy, social and age psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc. — up to criminology, which allows to recognize social damage elements of media content, provoking an increase in crime. Among the founders and activists of the first in Russia civic group of media criticism (Media Revue, established in 2002 in Rostov-on-Don) were scientists, teachers and researchers of journalism, practicing teachers and professional journalists, university students and graduate students.

Among citizens in modern society there are quite a few educated people who are professionally trained for this kind of media critical activity. In the 24 most developed countries of the world, the proportion of people with higher education in the first decade of the twenty-first century ranged from 15 to 30 percent (in Russia, 21 %) (Karpenko et al., 2008). However, even those citizens who have serious complaints about the media usually do not become media activists — the voice of civil society. An obstacle to the development of this kind of activity in Russia is the relative immaturity of civil society in our country, stemming from the conviction of many ordinary citizens that their active position is incapable of bringing about any significant changes. At the same time, civic activism turned to the media sphere is becoming increasingly important due to the mediatization of all institutions of Russian society.

Political medialization requires not only the highly developed media competence of citizens, allowing them to resist the manipulative effects of the communications media for political purposes. Today citizens have the opportunity to express their communicative subjectness, acting as creators and distributors of their own media texts that form media discourses, parallel with the mainstream or alternative (Fedorov, 2007; Fomicheva, 2010; Platonova, 2008). Among them are critical publications with a reasoned analysis and evaluation of various aspects of the activities of the communications media and the content produced by them, including a critical analysis of political discourses.

5. Conclusion

Developed civil media criticism has the potential to become not only a way for public expression of reactions and information needs of the audience and defending the rights of citizens in their relations with the political system and the media industry, but also a "laboratory" of new citizenship, corresponding to the realities of the information age. The basis of such citizenship should be the media competence of the people, making them not only critically thinking recipients of media information, but also autonomous subjects of mass media communications, able to independently create and distribute media texts, articulating their political, economic and social needs and requirements. From the role of passive consumers of mass media information, citizens should and can move to the role of conscious and active participants in the mediatized political process, forming a collective civic mind and a collective civic action. Potentially, this media competence, formed by media criticism and media education system, can encourage political and civic activity, which is fading nowadays due to the limited ability of citizens to resist large-scale media manipulation for political and commercial purposes. Most of our contemporaries are not trained to realize and defend their interests in the media sphere, which turns them into a convenient object of manipulative influences. Advanced civil media criticism is able to promote the social growth of people, contributing to the formation of the autonomous thinking, socially responsible active citizen and, as a result, citizenship of a new type. Broadcasting through blogs, social networks and websites of public associations of the voice of "ordinary" citizens, merging into a powerful chorus, it will be impossible to ignore or drown out, using internal censorship and self-censorship of journalists in media organizations Without the broad participation of citizens in media political discourse modern democracy is impossible such its positive transformation.

A promising direction for further study of the role of civil media criticism in political processes may be sociological research, allowing to identify how the potential of criticism of the political aspects of the functioning of the media, carried out by citizens and public associations, is implemented in practice.

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