# Multifunctionality of Mediasphere in Problematization of Social Contradictions

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**ABSTRACT**

The article analyzes the functions and dysfunctions of mass media in modern society, states the communicative essence of problematization of the contradictions existing in society. The main purpose of the article is to analyze the functions of Media communications concerning socially significant problems that reflect the contradictions existing in the society. As a part of the structural and functional analysis, we have come to the conclusion that the problematization of social contradictions is considered as the result of interactions between individual and collective social subjects, taking place in the social environment that has a systemic character. The authors identified nine basic functions of modern media sphere in the construction of socially significant problems.

**Keywords:** Social Problems, Mass Media, Social Structures, Social Interests, Social Contradictions, Communications
**JEL Classification:** Z13

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the social transformations of recent decades new contradictions, settlement of which requires information and communication configuration of social subjects' efforts adequate to modern challenges, become more and more obvious. Modern media are not only the main source of information of the contradictions of the society functioning, but also communicative means concerning the development and settlement of these contradictions. Therefore Mediasphere determines the dominant trends in the public perception of socially important problems and the formation of attitudes of different social groups in respect of these problems.

Mediasphere in modern society is the main space, where socially significant range of problems is constructed, as currently it is the media that is not only the main source of public information of the contradictions of society functioning, but also communication

means concerning the development and settlement of these contradictions. It is Mediasphere that determines the dominant trends in the public perception of socially important problems, definition and formation of attitudes of different social groups in respect of these problems.

The approach to the analysis of functions (dysfunctions) of media sphere in solving socially important problems suggested in this article is based on the identification of the communicative nature of problematization of contradictions existing in society. By means of communications some or other social contradictions are involved in the media sphere and become the subject of public attention.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The methodological basis of this study is the concepts of modern researchers in the sociology and political science, communication

theory and journalism, which are developed on the basis of the spectrum of neo-institutional approach, structural functionalism, political science concepts of the public sphere, the theory of "participation journalism."

Neo-institutional theory of North and researches of institutional prerequisites for collective actions (Olson, et al.), the concept of network self-organization of modern societies, stated in the works of Castells et al., as well as studies of special aspects of self-organization of virtual communities are important for theoretical researches of the scientific problematics.

Research methods: Systemic, structural and functional, and comparative-historical methods of theoretical analysis.

# 3. DISCUSSION

Obvious and imaginary problems generated by various mass media become a subject of public attention. However, in the subject field of this study there are media communications concerning socially important problems, reflecting the contradictions that exist in the society. So before you turn to the analysis of the functions (dysfunctions) of mediasphere in the generation of (setting and settlement) of socially important problems, it is necessary to consider the process of problematization of social contradictions.

The concept of "social contradictions" was actively developed in the Soviet social science (Rutkievich, 1992; 1995; 2001), however, despite the often fairly critical attitude towards dogma and excessive economic determinism of the Soviet social and political theories, this concept can get a new heuristic potential within new scientific paradigms. In this article the conceptualization of social contradictions is important because the phenomenon of public life problematization is difficult to understand, ignoring the methodological connection between the concepts of "problem" and "contradiction."

Social contradictions are considered in modern science from different angles, determined as a rule, by the basic meaning of the term "social." Let's consider three main angles of social contradiction definition.

First, we are talking about the contradictions between society and nature. In this context, the most common understanding of this group of contradictions are the contradictions between activities of a man and the society according to the change of the environment and the results of these activities. A wide range of environmental problems, the importance of which in modern society and in particular - in the media sphere is critically growing, is derived from the first group of contradictions (Smolyarova, 2011).

Second, the social contradictions are considered as contradictions between social classes, strata or layers. In this sense, the social contradictions are conceptualized in the context of the various theories of social stratification, and reflect the basic polarities in social status, which are essential features of the distribution of people in social classes and strata. A special feature of this group of contradictions consists in rootedness in the foundations of the

different systems of social stratification that confirm social and strata (or social and class) differences (Radaev and Shkaratan, 1995). The process of awareness of its interests by a social stratum is of great importance in the analysis of the impact of this group of contradictions on socially important problems generation. The problematics of awareness by social stratum (class) of its interests goes back to the writings of Karl Marx, who described a class conflict as a form of development of class contradictions in the context of the process of awareness by the class of its common interests. It is the awareness of the interests that transformed the class from "a class in itself" into "a class for itself." In other words, according to Marx, the basis for collective action is formed through awareness of common social interests.

Third, the social contradictions are understood in the broader context as the contradictions between different social groups according to a variety of criteria. As the relationships between people and social groups are diverse, then the classification of such contradictions can be different. Among other things, we can talk about all kinds of subcultural contradictions, inter-religious and inter-ethnic contradictions and socio-demographic contradictions, etc. However, their detailed consideration goes beyond the thesis work object field, which includes the analysis of social contradictions only as an essential element of the socially important problems generation mechanism.

In this generation the attention is paid to the contrast between the presence of certain contradictions in the society, on the one hand, and the degree and nature of the involvement of these contradictions in the public discourse - on the other hand. As a part of the definition of theoretical and methodological approaches to the subject of study it is especially important to identify the character of awareness of social contradictions and their involvement in the public discussion. This process can be defined as "problematization of social contradictions," i.e., conversion of existing, but not always recognized contradictions into socially important problem attracting the public interest.

In his lectures on political philosophy A. Pyatigorsky said that problematization - is "a consideration of the object of political reflection, that leads either to new alternatives or new variants of previous alternatives, or, finally, to a radical change of the object" (Pyatigorsky, 2007 p.70-71). In this definition, the connection between problematization and political reflection is not accidental. Just in the process of reflection of the existing social contradictions, these contradictions are called, defined or redefined, and turned into a problem.

The role of the media sphere in the process of problematization of social contradictions turns out to be fundamental. Not by accident, A. Piatigorsky notes that the need of problematization was previously not understood by researchers and journalists: ".... since the beginning of the twentieth century, the most interesting political diagnoses were made not by politicians and scientists, but journalists" (Pyatigorsky, 2007).

The relationship between the social contradictions and their reflection in the generation of socially important problems is

clearly observed on the example of analysis of such actual for modern Russian society phenomenon as a social polarization. Its origins are social contradictions expressed in a high level of social differentiation between different groups. However, the polarity itself is evident not so much in these contradictions, as in real confrontation of the social groups to each other, i.e., in their interaction, which is defined by opposite interests and attitudes of behavior, gain of value differences, growth of social tension.

Thus, the analysis of problematization of social contradictions should consider not only the existing contradictions, but also their political reflection, which also has two sides - first, a purely mental or individual and psychological one, and second, an external and symbolic side caused by the first one. In terms of methodology, the ratio of the two sides can be described by referencing to the works of P.A. Sorokin, devoted to the analysis of patterns of social life in terms of the objectification of mental component in external symbolic structures. "Each of the countless mental processes which arise between two or more members of communication, in its transfer from one subject to another must necessarily go through the stage of 'reification' or symbolization" - Sorokin wrote (Sorokin, 1992). This stage of symbolization provides the necessary identity of psychological reflection, which provides a base for collective action.

The functions (dysfunctions) of mediasphere in problematization of the social life consist in such symbolic reification of social contradictions reflection.

Let's consider functional aspects of media construction of socially important problems in more detail. Merton developed the main categorical apparatus of the functional theory which was actively developed in terms of the mediasphere analysis (Merton, 1967). As a part of structural and functional analysis the problematization of social contradictions is considered as a result of interaction of individual and collective social subjects, which take place in certain social environment which has system properties. The stable elements of this environment create internal structural bonds. Operations of these structural elements, aimed at support of integrity and stability of the whole system, are the functions.

At the same time, some elements perform both explicit and latent operations, aimed at reduction of the efficiency of the system, and even at self-destruction of the system integrity. In this case, we are talking about dysfunctionality of certain elements.

## 4. RESULTS

The mentioned presuppositions of modern structural functionalism make it possible to analyze the function (dysfunction) of media sphere in the problematization of social contradictions.

Institutional characteristics of the problematization of social contradictions have a certain structural organization. As construction of socially important problems based on such problematization is the subject-subjective or intersubjective communication, its structure will include subjects of communication as key elements. One of these subjects in the beginning of the problematization of

social contradiction plays the active role of the initiator of this process and sets the discourse appropriate to its vision. Other subjects in this phase of problematization act as recipients that receive the transmitted information. When we speak about an interactive model of construction of socially significant problems, such model would necessarily include a stage in which the subject change their positions, and the active role of the initiator of problematization goes to other subjects, playing the role of recipients at the first stage.

Modern interactive media give an opportunity to engage unlimited number of participants in a process of problematization of social contradictions. Therefore, in the interactive media environment active role of the initiator of problematisation discourse will go not only from the first to the second participant, but from the second to the next one. In this process of exchange of opinions, information and arguments its subjects will play the roles of active communicators and recipients of the information and opinions of others. This is the essential difference between interactive media from the classic media, in which the participants' roles of communication are strictly fixed.

This difference creates a fundamentally new opportunities not only in the problematization of social contradictions, but also in the creation of prerequisites for collective action aimed at settlement of socially important problems identified at this process. At the same time, interaction does not always ends in development of the position that is mutually acceptable for all participants and collective action will not necessarily be monolithic.

The procedure of exchange of socially and politically significant information itself has an essential value in settlement of conflicts and deepening of mutual understanding. In the role of the subjects of described interactions not only individual actors - individual citizens, including journalists, bloggers, etc. can act, but also the collective subjects - regulatory and administrative authorities, political parties, social organizations, churches, businesses and others.

The audience for which the active participants of the process deploy a discourse of this problematization should be among other important structural elements of media construction of socially important problems. The composition of the audience, the presence of certain interest groups within it, the specific involvement of these groups in the overall process of exchange of information about contradictions identified, nature and methods of deprivation of certain participants are the significant structural characteristics. A specific aspect of problematization of social contradictions in the interactive media environment is removing of the hard differentiations between active participants and the audience. Passive observers can become active communicators at any time (Gorin, 2011).

Sami means of communication, which are material and technical mediators of interaction of the problematization subjects of social contradictions, are also an essential element of the described structure. These elements can include a variety of media, including electronic, as well as various discussion platforms (not only

virtual, but real ones - political clubs, press conferences, and various forms of direct democracy, such as meetings of citizens necessary for the implementation of a number of authority of local government, etc.).

On the basis of identified structural features problematization of social contradictions basic functional (and dysfunctional) characteristics of the media sphere as a key structural element of media construction of socially important problems can be revealed. For these purposes, let's dwell briefly on some methodological bases of functional analysis important for further analysis.

Interactive media environment is a complex open system with nonlinear behavior, in which mobility and intersubstitutability of both functions and individual and collective social subjects that perform them are observed. Furthermore, the functionality of various structural elements can turn into dysfunctionality in other subsystems.

Therefore, for the analysis of non-rigid and mobile aspects of the media sphere functioning, those adjustments play principal methodological role which are made to the methodology of structural-functional analysis by Merton.

By analyzing the content of the term "function" Merton pointed to its borrowing from biology (at first in the sociology of Herbert Spencer), where the term "function" meant (organic) processes considered in relation to those processes which support the livelihoods of the whole organism as a living system (Merton, 1967). The term "function" was learned in a similar understanding in sociology of Durkheim and anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown.

However, this approach has been substantially revised by Merton in three main aspects. First, Merton denies the postulate of functional unity of the social system, which distracts researchers from the possible negative consequences of the elements functionality. Merton indicates that the same elements can be functional in one subsystem and dysfunctional in other ones. Second, Merton denies the postulate that is based on the fact that each element of culture or society has positive functions. In particular, he criticizes the justification of this postulate given by Malinovsky. And the third postulate of classical functionalism, denied by Merton, consists in the idea of necessity of a number of functions for the system survival and, consequently, the necessity of some specialized structures that fulfill these functions (Merton 1967).

As contrasted to this rather rigid postulates Merton formulates the idea of functional alternatives or, as he puts it, the functional substituent. Redefinition of principles of functional analysis by Robert Merton allows the researcher to apply it not only to study relatively simple systems, taken in a static and peaceful state, but, first of all, to analyze dynamic, internally contradictory, and open social and political systems (Markov, 1988).

In addition, for the analysis of the functional aspects of the subject of our study the statements of functional theory of Merton on the explicit and latent functions and dysfunctions that allow you to analyze the irrational aspects of social (or political) systems

are essential. These aspects may appear in the "prejudices," "stereotypes" and steady "misapprehension" imposed by media.

Taking into consideration these theoretical principles, let's consider first the main and most obvious function of the media sphere. Lasswell pointed out three functions of media communications: Information about the world and warning of the possible dangers of its destruction; correlation with the social structures and the impact on them through feedback; conservation and transfer of cultural experience. These three functions are repeated in various forms by other authors (Zemlyanova, 1999). Subsequently, Wright added entertainment function (Wright, 1986).

Similar logic can be observed in the description of the functions of mass communication in the domestic psycholinguistics. For example, Leontiev, identifies four functions: The function of the optimization the society activities due to orientation on communication, influencing the collective activity, the function of contact and the formation of group consciousness, control function by maintaining of social norms and the function of socialization (Leontiev, 1974).

Modern French researchers of mass communication identify five functions of mass communication, which are called highly metaphorical: The function of the antenna - provision of society with information; the function of amplifier - an exaggeration of the facts and dramatization of the events; the function of focus - the creation of focus of social and cultural movements changes; the function of the prism - the formation of new behavior models; the function of Echo - preservation of symbols of social nature and the maintenance of social structure (Deya, 1993). Overview of approaches to identify the functions of the media sphere can be continued, as this is a key issue. However, for all their diversity the functionality definition logic of the media sphere is stable enough.

Basing on the existing approaches to the identification of the social functions of the media sphere, and relying on a theoretical analysis of the role of the media sphere in the problematization of social contradictions, let's identify the functions of the media sphere in the construction of socially important problems. The following nine functions can be named among the main of them.

1. Communicative function, which consists in provision of communication between individual and collective subjects of problematization of social contradictions based on the creation of platforms, providing maintenance of the general discourse of socially important problems.
2. Axiological function which provides joint development of discourse of value-semantic attitude to the identified socially important problem by the subjects.
3. The function of socio-political socialization, which allows involving wide groups of citizens who previously avoided active involvement in social and political life in process of setting, discussing and solving socially important problems.
4. The educational function, which consists in development of the ability of the subjects of problematization of social contradictions to think independently and responsibly.
5. Integrative and disintegrative function, which is expressed

in the help, on the one hand, to combine efforts by various subjects in the settlement of socially important problems, and on the other hand - to disengage the positions of participants of problematization of social contradictions and the identification of different groups of interests, which should be agreed in the decision-making process.

6. Conflictological function which is related to the previous one and which consists in the timely identification of conflict factors of problematization of social contradictions and in the prevention of acute conflict interaction.

7. The administrative function which consists in the ability of media environment to promote during the process of problematization of socially important contradictions the development of the managerial decisions, quality and effectiveness of which will depend on the concurrence of the positions of diverse interest groups involved in the process of construction of socially important problems.

8. The predictive feature which allows you to foresee the most undesirable forms of social contradictions, to identify potentially emerging problems and to set priorities and prospects of development of various spheres of public life.

9. Humanistic function which consists in attraction of the various social subjects to non-violent actions in settlement of the existing social contradictions and the implementation of civil control over the activities of the authorities, which makes it possible to minimize the negative impact of bureaucracy, corruption, protectionism and other reasons non-reactivity of the authorities to socially important problems.

However, along with these functions Mediasphere may be dysfunctional in the process of problematization of social contradictions. In this case, there will be not only failures in exercise of the above functions, but also the development of negative consequences diametrically opposed to those which should be achieved as a result of the normal media sphere functioning in the described processes of problematization of socially significant contradictions. For example, the communicative function can result in dysfunction associated with the emergence of communication barriers and the destruction of communications, axiological function - dysfunction, expressed in the devaluation of value and the destruction of semantic sphere. The other functions can experience similar transformations.

One of the demonstration forms of dysfunctionality of media sphere in the construction of socially important problems is the so-called phenomenon of "Compassion fatigue" "Compassion fatigue" is expressed in a loss of sensitivity to social problems and apathy. One of the first empirical studies of this phenomenon is the work of Kinnik, Kregman and Kamerona (Kinnick et al. 1996). The phenomenon of "compassion fatigue," is described by the authors as an unexpected side product of the functioning of the media sphere, one of the dysfunctions of which is "narcotizing" effect (the "narcotize dysfunction" of the media sphere was described by Lazarsfeld and Merton (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948).

Compassion according to the authors of the study means the social subject's emotional reaction which is caused by empathy.

The essence of this reaction is that the individual is mentally putting himself in the place of someone who is suffering which promotes consolidation of morality and the feeling of compassion. Thus empathy is a dispositional characteristic that can be detected at various levels of social interactions. Originally, the term "compassion fatigue" appeared in the studies of so-called "burnout," which is experienced by people who help others professionally (doctors, social workers). In these professional groups weakening of compassion towards patients or clients was observed. As several studies show, including the study of Hoffman (Hoffman, 1993), there is a range of optimal level of empathy, in which individuals will most likely try to facilitate their empathic compassion, choosing a strategy of involvement rather than avoidance of assistance. Outside this optimum range there is either low empathy condition in which compassion can be not intense enough to break through the selfish concentration of the subject on himself, or over-empathy condition, which causes so strong emotions that results in avoidance of compassion and, accordingly, in participation in assistance.

However, the problem of the transfer of this hypothesis to the plan of study of social and political functioning of the media sphere requires additional grounding. This grounding is taken in the above study of Kinnik, Kregman and Kamerona. According Chernykh (2007), the term "burnout" was used extended for description of a wider social phenomenon, manifested in the reduction of interest in socially important problems. This phenomenon is explained by significantly increasing fatigue of society of a ruthless filling of media sphere with pictures of numerous tragedies and disasters that are accompanied by requests to make a donation.

It is evident that, the phenomenon "compassion fatigue" is also manifested in the political sphere, the modern transformation of which is largely explained by socio-political and civic apathy and "demobilization" of the society.

The consequences of the phenomenon of "compassion fatigue" are rampant not only in terms of socio-political and civic apathy, but also in relation to the fundamental ability of communities to respond to social problems in general. In Russia, such effects are the most dangerous, if to take into account the degree of "atomization" of society, fragmentation of social relations, a narrow radius of trust and extremely low indicators of social capital. In these conditions, "narcotizing dysfunction" of media sphere results in even more apparent indifference to socially important problems, bluntness of the feelings of care and compassion.

The concept, which explains the phenomenon of "compassion fatigue," explains the inefficiency of technology of drawing attention to charitable activities and donations which is widely used in the media sphere. These technologies are aimed at increase of coverage of social problems in order to cause a sense of compassion. It is obvious that such technology of promotion of charitable funds will not only have the opposite effect, but also lead to more massive dysfunction, expressed in the expansion of the ability of society to feel compassion.

# 5. CONCLUSION

Construction of socially important problems in the media sphere has a certain dynamic that is expressed by its life cycle, reflecting the growth and decline of public interest in a one or another problem. It is evident that, the repetition of the information about the problem creates the effect of saturation and fatigue of the negative images that are able to win compassion only to a certain limit. Under the condition of such saturation addition reports about problem do not bring the desired result, and even have a negative rather than a neutral effect, which has quite measurable parameters (emotional, attitudinal and behavioral reactions of the audience to the problem). Such cyclical effect is well studied on the material repetitive advertising messages, which initially cause a positive response, but after many repetitions often generate negative reactions (Ray et al., 1971).

However, the life cycle of media construction socially important problems depends not only on the frequency of repetition of information and the phenomenon of "compassion fatigue." Under the conditions of the information field expansion and the saturation of media sphere with socially important information the competition between the problems for the public attention is inevitable. Socially important problems also compete for the interest that people have concerning the events going beyond everyday life and immediate cares.

Such a "way out" beyond the immediate circle of the life world is possible as a result of such feature of media sphere as its omnipresence in everyday life. Omnipresence is considered not only as an essential feature of modern mass media, but also as one of the grounds of mediacracy. The life cycle, in which you can maintain the interest of the communication participants to any problem will be shorter, and the degree of audience participation - lower if the audience can not be in line with the flow of information about socially important problems.

The iniquitousness of presence of the media sphere is provided by the expansion of communication channels, the convergence of the mass media, the frequency of messages in various media, which creates the effect of "normalization" of socially important problems (deviations resulted from such "normalization" is perceived as quite normal due to the apparent prevalence of the phenomenon). Such "normalization," blocking the ability to focus efforts, aimed at settlement of socially important problems and are provided by so practices of journalism that are based on the pursuit of sensational information, the predominance of negative news, the unwillingness to introduce broader context of socially important problems and to present the problem itself without discussion of the ways of its settlement.

Socially important problems in this case takes in the media sphere the form of large-scale crises and disasters with which the audience is difficult to be in line. The construction of socially important problems in the media sphere loses mobilizing aspects. In addition, in the revelatory journalistic analytics the existing institutions often appear to be ineffective, it also tears up possible foundations to search settlements of socially important problems.

Positive information, on the contrary, is often caused by the image motives and the need to "raise the rating" of a certain person or structure which also often leads to blocking constructive potential of positive information that distorts reality.

As a result of the described features of the construction of socially important problems in the media sphere the anthropocentric world view and the subjective position of the recipients of information are destroyed. The problems appear as a result of actions of superhuman power, a fatal combination of circumstances, soulless state "machine," etc. People in this context lose confidence in their ability to influence the situation. The characteristic feeling of powerlessness in this case will block the joint efforts to settle the problems causing the apathy and indifference.

On the ground of the analysis of dysfunctionality of media sphere in the setting and settlement of socially important problems, which manifest itself in the growing social apathy against problematization of social contradictions, we can make the following hypothesis. Such negative trends in media construction of socially important problems can be mitigated if, first, the information about the problem is less diffuse and more specific, being in line with the particular characteristics of more structured audience, second, the information itself is structured as a result of interactive interpersonal communication and, third, local knowledge of contexts of development and settlement of socially important problems is built in media constriction of socially significant problems. All three conditions can be created in an interactive media environment.

We can assume that interactive media are able to transform the life cycle of perception of socially important problems due to its ability to establish social interactions around the problems discussed. The stability of these interactions will depend on the ability of interactive media to show and reconcile the interests of participants in the discussion of this problem.

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