



The Mediatization of Socially Important Issues and the Dynamics of Civil Society

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the complex nature of media design of socially important issues. The author observes the complexity of today's social organization, its differentiation in the socio-economic, political, and cultural-stylistic aspects. The main purpose of the article is to examine the role and influence of the mass media on the processes of agenda-building and formation of civic mindedness in society, as well as to assess the complexity of media design of socially important issues. The author summarizes the dynamics of civic self-organization in the course of collective definition of socially important topics and reveals the significant role of the mass media in their collective representation and elaboration of the ways to resolve them. Author clues the importance of multivariance and unpredictability of the processes of social and political self-organization of citizens in the course of design of socially important issues of present-day society.

Keywords: Socially Important Issue, Mobilization of Society, Communication Technologies, Mass Media, Civil Society, Policy

JEL Classifications: Z13, Z18

1. INTRODUCTION

The explosive development of advanced information and communication technologies, expansion of digital modes of communication, and the advent of social media offers unprecedented access to all sorts of knowledge that increasingly turns the mediasphere into the main social and cultural dominance. These processes not only create new opportunities for the integration of constructive endeavors of social actors, but also contribute to the emergence of significant risks associated with new distribution technologies of resource, power, and control.

When identifying and resolving significant contradictions in the development of modern society, the mediasphere not only has key functions but appears also as dysfunctional subsystem of social and political regulation. Thus, some of the journalistic practices,

based on the pursuit of sensational information, predominance of negative news, unwillingness to introduce broader context of socially relevant issues, including the ways to solve them, block the motivation of civic participation and possibilities to integrate efforts focused on the constructive resolution of socially important issues. Multiple repeatability of messages in various media against the background of proliferation of communication channels, as well as the convergence of mass media create the effect of "normalization" of socially important issues. As a result of such "normalization" the social deviations begin to be perceived as a completely normal phenomenon because of apparent prevalence that has very dangerous consequences. Besides, in traditional media the issues, which are significant for the society, often, take form of large-scale crises and disasters, to which the audience cannot be corresponded. As a result of such practices the social actors lose their ability to be compassionate and more active

in the resolution of the problematic situation. Typically feeling of impotence in this case would block joint efforts to resolve problems, generating apathy and indifference.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical and methodological basis of research include the concepts of contemporary researchers in political science, communication theory, and journalism, which are developing on the basis of synthesis of the neo-institutional approach, structural functionalism, synergy as the theory of self-organization, politological concepts of the public sphere, and the theory of “concerned journalism.”

The important implication for theoretical studies of set scientific problem have North’s neo-institutional theory and studies of the institutional collective action prerequisites (Olson, Biukenen, et al.) as well as the concept of network self-organization of contemporary societies, stated in works of Castells et al., and the studies of self-organization peculiarities of virtual communities.

Research techniques include systemic, structural-functional and comparative historical methods of theoretical analysis.

3. RESULTS

A key factor when problematizing social contradictions and resolving socially important issues is the civil society organization. The combined efforts of citizens, aimed at strengthening the institutional environment, coordination of interests, creation of public goods and reduction of social tension is a necessary condition for the development of modern societies.

It is in the course of civic self-organization where the publicitization of socially important issues takes place. It consists in transition of the set problem from private sphere to public sphere. Therefore, problematization and publicitization are two key components of the genesis of socially important issues in the field of mediasphere (Cobb and Elder, 1972). One can distinguish the problematization of a certain phenomenon and adding it to the political agenda.

In relation to the subject of our research we are talking about the transition of socially important issue from systemic agenda, which includes the totality of the problems identified, into the institutional agenda, where the concerned issue becomes the subject of public discussion by various social actors.

According to Kingdon, an indication of the transition of a problem into the public sphere is the fact that people are starting to think about what can be done to change the situation (Kingdon, 1984). In this process the problem is integrated into public discourse and adapts to the logic and rules of social interactions between the actors involved in the discussion and resolution of the problem. Such an adaptation includes also a translation of the problem definition into the language of the collective public action. Thus, socially important issue legitimates in the public sphere and becomes the subject of institutionalized collective action.

Mediatization of socially important issue can be manifested in different aspects. Firstly, it can be manifested through the mobilization of different social groups and strata affected by the problem; secondly - through transformation of the problem into the object of the public authority’s attention; and thirdly - through the politicization of the problem, its transformation into the subject of political struggle. In all noted cases the problem penetrates into the public space of the mediasphere. If the problem has not been translated into the language of the mediasphere, then there is a danger of blocking the process of mediatization of the problem and adding it to the agenda. The presence of objective fact does not mean its problematization and mediatization. For example, the problem of environmental pollution was recognized only in the last few decades of the XX century, though the fact of environmental pollution has existed since the beginning of the industrial age and the use of non-renewable hydrocarbon energy sources. In other words, we must distinguish the availability of contradiction, its problematization and mediatization. Not every contradiction is problematized and not every problem is included in the public agenda.

Therefore, in order to define more precisely the notion of socially important issue we should elaborate on the role of civic self-organization in its mediatization. Only in the course of mediatization of the problem a certain number of social actors agree about the “abnormality” of a certain situation and qualify this situation in a certain way in order to attract the attention of other social actors. Socially important issue, therefore, is a social construction, which in a certain way is identified as a potential subject of public action.

Such a definition of socially important issue points to the need for analysis of two categories of factors of social contradictions problematization and mediatization of socially important issues. These are, firstly, the factors associated with the mediasphere functioning logic, and, secondly, the factors of civic self-organization. It is obvious that both factor categories have a deep relationship. It is no coincidence that theoretical understanding of the mediasphere and the professionalization of journalism occurred simultaneously with the emergence of ideas about the role of civil society, and redefining power in terms of the social pact theories. The mediasphere was initially understood as a kind of intermediary medium of interaction between public authorities and civil society, as well as between social groups or individuals.

4. DISCUSSION

As was shown by Luhmann, society, being self-referential and autopoietic system, represents itself in the “reality of mass media.” In other words, this media reality is self-closed construction. If so, there is a threat of falling out of media reality from the general social contexts. In other words, we are talking about the threat of increasing “gap” between reality and those scenes of reality, which are created in the media environment. However, this is not happening (at least in the menacing proportions).” The fact that the mass media, despite the asociality of their operations, do not rise above the society, not tear themselves away from

society, is provided through the “communication topics” - states Luhmann (Luhmann, 2012), and thus introduces the concept of “communication topic” as the key condition that supports continuous coordination of “self-reference” and “other-reference” within the communication system. According to Luhmann, communication topics “track the communicative acts into the complexes of the elements belonging to each other, so that in the current communication one could understand whether the initial topic is invaried, developed or changed” (Luhmann, 2012). Topics are segments of communication or some “local modules,” which, if necessary, can be replaced by others.

The communication topics in the Luhmann’s concept serve one of the most important elements to explain how the “reality of mass media” interconnects with other spheres of society. Communication topics must be sufficiently elastic and diversifiable to create the conditions for penetration of the mediasphere through its topics into all aspects of society. The success of the mass media is ensured by the fact that the proposed topics are publicly recognized (regardless of certain positive or negative evaluations concerning the subject matter of these topics). The interest in the certain topic most often is supported exactly due to the fact that there might be different attitudes in relation to it.

However, the communication topics, which in Luhmann’s concept are elements to maintain the relationship between “self-reference” and “other-reference” of the mediasphere, unfold, usually around socially important issues. Recently, a constructivist approach is actively developing in the analysis of the mediatization of socially important issues. Under this approach, the concepts formation mechanisms concerning the problems, most significant for society, are studied. In this case socially important issues are considered not only as a product of the functioning of the mediasphere, but as a result of collective behavior. In particular, G. Bloomer argues that socially important issues do not exist independently as a kind of “objective conditions” but are the result of a collective design (Blumer, 1971).

Often we note a certain inconsistency of this thesis with the classic sociological definitions of socially important issues, according to which these problems are rooted in social contradictions taking place in the structure of any society. However, in this article this inconsistency is determined not from the viewpoint of methodological contrasts of different approaches (“objectivistic” and constructivist), but as inconsistency of various aspects of problematization and the mediatization of social contradictions. On the one hand, socially important issues are rooted in the real structure of society and represent a process of problematization of real contradictions, though, on the other hand, the mediatization of these problems can be considered from the viewpoint of constructivism.

Consequently, this methodological discrepancy reflects the complicated nature of media design of socially important issues. Such a design is capable under certain conditions to hold the audience’s attention and maintain faith in the media reality, however, this is possible only until the gap between the topics

of media discussions and the problems that reflect the real social contradictions, becomes too obvious.

The more complex the system gets the more variable and complicated should be its representation. If the social system becomes more complex and non-transparent to itself, the mediasphere should reproduce this growing diversity on a day-to-day basis that jeopardizes the consensus and creates the risk of conflict (Luhmann, 2012). As the complexity of society increases in terms of its differentiation not only with respect to socio-economic and political aspects, but also in cultural and stylistic meanings, media design of socially important issues should become complex enough to maintain the necessary adequacy of the mediasphere in the representation of social reality and its key contradictions.

If media design of socially important issues will lose the required adequacy, then the designed issues appear as poorly presented and incapable to “run” interactions required not only for discussion and resolution of urgent problems, but for the more fundamental process of maintaining the confidence to the whole media reality. Such depthlessness is mentioned, in particular, by Hensel. He shows that in contemporary society the mediasphere plays a crucial role in determining the socially important issues. The reason is that the mediasphere captures not reality as such, but a certain variation of its perception and interpretation. At that, the main danger associated with the media design process of socially important issues is that these issues create only brief and depthless public interest in their resolution. According to Hensel, in commercialized mass culture, social problems become a kind of “fads” that are “sold” to the public being “packed” in sensational wrappers (Henshel and Merton, 1990).

If we consider the reservations made above, the constructivist approach to the definition of socially important issue under complicating “social reality” is broadly justified because, as mentioned by R. Michalowski, social constructivism focuses on the collective activities of claim-makers (Michalowski, 1993). We should agree with Bloomer that the establishment or identification of socially important issue in contemporary society is possible only after its recognition as such by society (Blumer, 1971). This also explains the numerous cases, where some scenarios of deviance and tension, generated by the development of social contradictions, do not attract public attention and do not reach the status of socially important issues, while others, on the contrary, get such status.

Hence, in the course of problematization of social contradictions and mediatization of socially important issues, the problem is not only to investigate functions and dysfunctions of the media sphere, but also its civil self-organization.

A need for the reorientation of the study of media design of socially important issues to the analysis of the civic self-organization role in this process is caused also by the fact that the socially important issues always focus in themselves different, often conflicting interests and intentions. This is the clash of these interests and intentions that determines the mediatization of the problem and the appropriate response from various social groups.

Today the civic self-organization in the course of collective definition of socially important issues increasingly conditions the process of collective representation of socially significant issues, as well as the process of developing ways to resolve them. This process, according to Spector and Kitsuse includes the emergence of socially important issue, its legitimization, mobilization of actions with respect to this issue, the formation of the action plan for its resolution and the transformation of the plan during its empirical implementation (Spector and Kitsuse, 1999).

Moreover, if society is a self-referential system, then such type of self-examination requires from this system of permanent self-modifications. As shown by Luhmann, society “creates ‘problems’ that require ‘solutions,’ which create ‘problems’ that require ‘solutions,’” while the mediasphere takes up new communication topics (Luhmann, 2012).

The existing interactive socio-technological mechanisms allow starting in contemporary society the process to initiate the dynamics of civil society around certain socially important issues, transforming them into information flow, in which the articulation of interests and their coordination are quite possible.

While the technologies of the industrial era helped to create a layered hierarchical structure of domination-subordination relations, capable to transfer the information vertically, the interactive communicative technologies allow us to effectively transfer the information horizontally. The principle of horizontal integration, which is peculiar to modern interactive media, today competes quite successfully with a vertical hierarchical structures and management principles.

The potential of French political science in general (Descombes, 2000) and politology (Bourdieu), in particular, have substantial significance for the description of the new social reality. And although Bourdieu does not consider specially the interactive civic self-organization, the proposed architectonic of social space is quite adequate to world view, created under the new conditions of expansion of the interactive media environment. It is an interactive media environment where in the course of socio-political self-organization of citizens is created and structured what Bourdieu called “social and political fields.” Under the “social field” Bourdieu implies the ability to influence the reactions of actors in a changing social environment. The field is a responsive environment representing single information and communication continuum in which information circulates so freely that allows one to anticipate and predict the moves of the participants of interactions and allow them to be positioned within the field in relation to each other. Bourdieu describes the field as a network of communication channels, rather than network of participants of interactions. Therefore, changes in one locus of the field immediately cause a reaction in all other loci.

A social system is described by Bourdieu as a set of “habits;” each of them is individual though together they determine the structure of political influence in society. This influence is determined by the different forms of capital, including cultural, social, political, educational ones, and others (Bourdieu, 2005). Interrelation of

these forms, their conversion from one form into another mediates the struggle for dominance in the field.

Among the key theoretical and methodological basis of the study of civil society and its role in the design of socially important issues in an interactive media environment, we must consider specifically the synergistic approach. Synergetics, as interdisciplinary trend of research of self-organization of complex systems and the formation of structures of order in different environments, has considerable potential in the study of the socio-political self-organization processes (though the transfer of the methodological principles of synergetics into political science requires certain stipulations). Obviously, the analysis of civic self-organization and interactions regarding the issues, around which this self-organization is triggered, should be based on the study of systemacity of these interactions, the characteristics of the viability of this systemacity, and the parameters of its self-organization. The leading representatives of synergetics (Haken, 1985) and (Prigogin and Stengers, 1984) reviewed the classical notion of cause-effect relations underlying the systematic determination, and introduced the concept of the dissipation, the randomness, and unpredictability of the processes occurring in complex systems. In the domestic literature there are definitions of interactions in the Internet space in terms of synergetics. An example is the attitude of some authors (Arshinov et al., 1997), who posit a global electronic network as synergetic communications, interconnected with acts of cognition and creation of individual’s coherence mechanisms and sense-making systems.

Synergetic relationship of interactivity, underlying the effects of civic self-organization in the course of formulation and solution of socially important issues, is a very promising research avenue of interactive media (Gorin, 2011).

In the theoretical framework, for the study of these effects of interactivity, very useful are the ideas of the French poststructuralists Deleuze and Guattari, who write about the “rhizomatic nature” of contemporary social reality. The term “rhizome,” borrowed from biology, serves the authors a way of the world, which lacks centralization, orderliness and symmetry. The metaphor of “rhizome” in this context reflects also the internal communication of decentralized interactive structures with ideological contexts of postmodernism. In biology rhizome is a special root system, which is a chaotic tangle of knots and not having the main rootstock. The basic principle of such a system is the connection and heterogeneity. Each point of a rootstock can be connected to any other point; rhizome is decentralized and any of its points has precedence over the other. The metaphor of the “rhizome” by Deleuze and Guattari is used to denote a system, fundamentally opposed to the closed hierarchical and centralized systems, which in classical sociology were described by analogy with the mechanism or organism. The ideas of “rhizomatic nature” of interactive self-organizing systems give the possibility to fundamentally rethink the problem of multiplicity and integration. Deleuze opposes the classic principle of “unity in diversity,” which defines a diversity as the division of a unity. In this principle, the postmodernists see the colonization by the unity in diversity, which is profaned and thereby canceled: “The concept of unity (notion

d' unite) appears only when in the plurality the power is taken-over by the signified" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996). The "rhizomatic nature" reflects another principle of maintaining plurality, freed from the dominance of the original concept of "unity." "Plural" occurs not by adding each time superior dimension, but vice versa: "...by most simple way, by means of moderation at the level of measurement, which we dispose, always $n-1$ (only so singular is part of a plural, being always subtracted). One must subtract singular out of the created plurality and always write -1 after n " (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996).

In the context of these ideas the world is presented as a polycentric, growing out of each individual node. Such world demonstrates the consistency and integrity, though it is freed from the dominating principle of universalism. Hence appears the principle based on rejection of any centralism. In the new environment, consistency can be neither set nor reproduced from one single place, which was formerly known as center. If so, then the essence of socially important issues cannot be identified from one point of the system, no matter how unique it is. The complexity of contemporary society requires re-realization and redefining of reality in general, as well as its contradictions that generate socially important issues in terms of interactive civic self-organization.

Society, as autopoietic and self-referential system, is able to self-reproduction, self-description, and self-awareness through the mechanisms involved in media design of socially important issues. The self-reference property of social systems results in the specificity of orders, appearing in these systems. These orders are always colored by subjective meanings, though objectified in sustainable interactions. In this regard, the essential importance has theoretical and methodological understanding in terms of multi-variance and unpredictability of the citizens' social and political self-organization processes in the course of designing of socially important issues.

Change of approaches, associated with the exhaustion of the classical models explaining the processes of media design of a reality and awareness of the fundamental multidimensionality of these processes, not reducible to simple cause-and-effect relationships, is getting more distinct in recent times. The search for new approaches, allowing one to describe the non-linear stochastic processes, is carried out in various avenues, such as synergy, the philosophy of postmodernism, and some of the concepts, resulting from mathematics and natural sciences (Druk, 2002). The recognition of the fundamental openness of complex social systems leads to the need to adjust the methodological basis of their study, which should allow describing the concerned systems in interaction with the external parameters that cause internal fluctuations and self-organization processes, which cannot be foreseen in advance. A synergistic approach allows one to describe in more detail the involvement in media design of socially important issues of multifarious local knowledge, which is actualized by various participants of the civil self-organization. As noted by Stepin, synergetic paradigm allows one to rethink the problem of interaction between parts and the whole, as well as the consistency of their changes: "In complex historically developing systems non-force interactions based on cooperative

effects play a special role." Such interactions act as designing factors due to which the "system is able to move from one state of self-organization to another, giving rise to new structures in the process of own evolution" (Stepin, 1999). At that, one of the most important manifestations of self-organization is the "resonance" in the functioning of the parts in these systems, as well as the presence of cooperative effects (Stepin, 1999).

5. CONCLUSION

The synergetic approach to the study of socio-political self-organization and problematization of social contradictions allows one to change the analytical perspective in the analysis of the current thesis research object. The essence of this change is that the issues, traditional for political science and journalism, have been addressed in the context of the constructive role of interactivity, which in various trends of political science can be defined in different ways: as communication that updates the structure of senses and meanings, as binary social actions, directed towards each other, as exchange, as institutional communication, etc. Within this framework, the socio-political phenomena appear as a set of "messages" that can be transmitted, moved into virtual space, etc.

It should be understood, therefore, that the emergence of interactive media was the result of not only the evolution of the mediasphere, but the fundamental processes affecting the whole society. The development of interactive media is associated also with the psychological transformation that is experienced by the human in recent decades. He is constantly tied to a mobile phone, and involved in the network of business and personal contacts. His social connections are operationalized, become more impersonal and fleeting. Today social contacts may arise easily and quickly as never before, however they can be completed easily and quickly as well. Thus, to be involved in the social life, the subject must take a proper position among message flows and build more complex communicative configurations. Without inclusion in the structures, which are the subjects of communication, the individual cannot take part in public communication. Never before have people received such a high quality and dense information (or disinformation) as they receive today. Therefore today, the dominance of the major mass media and global information bearer channels seriously impedes the passage of local information through their filters. Network structures can reproduce a new "digital inequality," because they have in possession effective mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

It is obvious that new and promising research will include further analysis of the new cultural and socio-political conditions. This analysis would structure social contradictions, and therefore, focus on the design of socially important issues in the mass media.

Theoretical concepts of mediasphere and media management will be reoriented in terms of the efficiency definitions from the replicability parameters to the breadth and quality parameters of the information channels. This can be explained by the fact that even being a local and low-priority, the content becomes available anywhere in the network under condition of providing

its dominance and importance in the background of diversified informational noise.

Hence it is possible to use new optics that would allow one to redefine the occurrence, escalation or resolution of socially important issues in the context of the dynamics of the transmitted “messages,” which are becoming a motivational basis of social (political) action. Such a shift of optics is of particular importance in the contemporary Russian conditions, where society atomizes, disintegrates, and even destroys, losing its usual forms. This means that the emerging socially important issues lose the ability to be adequately perceived and problematized in traditional communication systems. Consequently, the interest coordination and conflict resolution mechanism, which is the basis of political activity, fails.

The essence of these failures is that the social contradictions and interests that stand behind them are fragmented in contemporary society and become more autonomous, while less stable relationships are set between them. If the political system turns out to be unable to grasp these relationships, to structure interests and to create mechanisms for their coordination, underlying the resolutions of socially important issues, it will lose legitimacy and we will see further “collapse” of the space of political action. In order to prevent this destructive process of policy delegitimization as a sphere of interests’ coordination and resolution of the socially important issues against disastrous consequences, it is necessary reconfiguration of political institutions and processes that would allow building a more flexible and sophisticated system of social (political) interactions. Theoretical models of such reconfiguration can be seen, for example, in the Giddens’s theory of structuration, which aims at explaining the mobility and randomness of forms of new socio-political phenomena (Giddens, 2003).

The above analysis of the theoretical and methodological basis for studying the role of civil self-organization in the design of socially important issues in an interactive media environment allows us, therefore, to consider three key aspects of this process. The first aspect consists in the adequacy of the reference to reality in the course of setting and resolving socially important issues. This aspect is expressed in the need to complicate media reality due to the increasing complexity of society that requires the development of interactive media technologies and greater use of civil self-organization mechanisms to maintain the adequacy of media reality. The second aspect consists in the activity coordination problem of various subjects of media design of socially important

issues in the interactive media environment. And the third aspect consists in the transformation of the coordinated activity of various actors into collective actions towards the resolution of relevant socially important issues.

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