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Opinion Leaders Are New Information Élite

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The article concerns the concept of new information elite defined as opinion leaders in American sociologist P.Lazarsfeld's terminology. The problem of personified influence of leaders upon the public consciousness of the audience is analyzed.

Keywords: popularity, a perception of leadership, information elite, a new public media-hero, opinion leaders, a theory of mass communication.

Point of view

Metamorphoses of the perception of leadership in trends of the historical development are alternating actualization of “special feature” sign – power, authority, knowledge, experience, – making topical images of a hero, a ruler, a prophet, an expert, an aristocrat. The postindustrial epoch has essentially sanctified the notions “information” and “information capital” as significant and practically usable valuables of contemporary culture, has taken ***a new public media-hero*** to the proscenium of the social attention.

The popularity is getting an urgent resource of the postindustrial culture, a kind of symbolic capital, that ensures a bearer of a well-known name considerable dividends, and becomes one of the leading points of welfare list of information civilization, “the stratification indication of social inequality” (L.Greenin), that divides the society into distinctive “interior” and “exterior” social levels. Modern mass media working for

public coverage of the most famous persons gives an opportunity to one, who creates significant information occasions, to get one's own “portion” of fame. They form some “intrusion of leadership” when a spoken person turns out to be automatically reproduced in public mind as one to deserve attention. At the same time the *recognizability* of a personality not always indicates quality characteristics of the popularity of a person in the society that is a combination of the degree of fame (knowledge) and estimating characteristics – public interest and attitude to this personality and perception of him as a leader.

The power of the word recorded by mass media has been exceeding all other forms of distribution of information according to the width of coverage as well as to the length of influence for a long time. At the same time the fairness of transmitting flows, everyday presence of individual consciousness in the common sphere (public opinion) form integration basis for unity, determining the content and structure of

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identity to a considerable degree and forming the generalized character of “we”. Even the greater influence, to our mind, can be caused by **the value personification of mass media sphere** – it’s a certain form of *personification* of value through significant persons. The production of values as a creation of new senses and values, as an experience of the world-view reflection, a diagnostics of the state of spiritual bases, is possible during investigation of the agents of spiritual and intellectual production or of those who bear a set definition of “a person of dominant influence”.

An example

The concept of the immediate one-stage information influence upon the consumer, that is a dominant one in the mass media researches, was contested by an American sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld who registered the increase of information effect due to the people named in his terminology “*opinion leaders*”. The one-stage model of communication (mass media – receivers) has transformed into the two-stage one (mass media – opinion leaders – receivers): *the transference of information* becomes important at the first stage, and there is *the transference of influence* at the second stage.

Yu.M.Lotman says about twice increase of information volume due to the specific sense revival, when values transmitted by leaders perform the function of catalyst contributing to the growth of information volume within a recipient’s mind (the creation of sense at the expense of revival). It is no mere chance that during an election campaign a lot of attention is paid to the fact that a candidate’s image should be associated with urgent social problems and urgent social problems (to be more precise, declared solutions to them) should be embodied into a concrete person. Such a method provides a certain mutual extension of importance – the

image of a candidate adds some significance to the problem and the urgency of an arisen problem grows together with the authority of the leader.

So the value personification of media space enhances the effect of influence upon the consumer through the filter of “value personification”, an operating mechanism of projection (when the charismatic authority of the character transfers the additional influence upon the information he transmits). *A personified value* (as a value proclaimed by a significant person) leads to the appearance of the feeling of “high distinctness” (M.McLuhan), transfers the message from the category of abstraction into the sphere of the utmost concretization.

Under the conditions of enormous information flow received from the outer world the human consciousness has to resort to the “life buoy” of selective perception, to the selective extraction of the materials befallen it in order to avoid a state of surcharge. The personification of transmitted values, senses and meanings helps the recipient to experience great involvement into current events, to identify his own world with the image created by mass media. The image of reality becomes personified and close to the consumer with the help of the participation of those who assume function to clear it up – *opinion leaders*: significant persons, whose personality influence let the apprehending audience trust the transmitted information (or at least consider it).

Due to the participation of opinion leaders the communication is put into effect according to the logic of transformation of “unfamiliar into familiar” (S.Moscovici) making use of the mechanisms of anchoring and objectification. The essence of the first process, according to S.Moscovici consists in a kind of “grounding”, “anchoring” of unknown ideas, convergence them to the usual categories and images, transferring into the context of everyday experience; the mechanism of objectification provides the

conversion of abstract knowledge into the sphere of concretization. In this connection we should remember the mechanism of construction of conception introduced by P. Berger and T. Luckmann – habituation – “making habitual”, transforming into daily routine (the mechanism which content is consonant with Weber’s *ritualization*).

The observable in the theories of mass communication “the halo effect” (or “the nimbus effect”) applying to an authoritative and popular person – is generally created owing to the frequency of presence of a public person in mass media. According to P. Bourdieu’s thought in the modern society the notion “*to be*” is being transformed into “*to be taken notice by journalists*” that promotes forming of the community of “media intellectuals” who control key factors of symbolic authority over the consciousness of apprehending audience. The people of fame become a new ruling information élite, or, as it was defined by R. Mills – “class of the professional celebrities”, determining the barometer of public opinion, normalizing social conceptions and models of desirable social order, controlling “the authority of denomination and classification” in it (P. Bourdieu).

Conclusion

The modern heroes of mass media, determined in P. Lazarsfeld’s terminology as opinion leaders, turn out to be “holders of linguistic capital” (P. Bourdieu), transmitting the major valuable guidelines of social development from the public tribune (in a renewed status – mass media), shaping personality assessment of reality in the category of public, turning out to be a connecting link between the world of mass information and an individual consciousness of a consumer that is in need of understanding.

Thereby the value space of the social medium may be investigated by means of study

of the value space of modern mass media (media space), that is in turn organized by opinion leaders personifying and embodying values, making them closer to the mass acceptance and recognition by majority through the personality influence of a leader.

The image of the future turns out to be closely connected with value perspectives of the reality, lets to predict a priority zone of spiritual consolidation of social medium which can be fixed through **the analysis of the sphere of spiritual production of opinion leaders** – in compliance with a sectoral criterion, a linkage with the professional sphere of activity of publication heroes. As a matter of fact we can speak about the zone of distribution of symbolic capital, realized as a human ability to produce opinions, an availability of a special kind of competence which manifests itself in the right to interpret what is going on.

For a long time “the truth monopolization” belonged to the leading (in such an issue) stratum – intelligentsia which was responsible for finding “the way to the temple”. But if the classical intelligentsia was apprehended not seldom with some certain rupture with the social psychology, meant as an exponent of the *different* (and, frequently, alien) consciousness, opinion leaders act in immediate unity with the world of public opinion, or, at least, eliminate forms of open and declared “separation” from daily routine. Changed conditions of life exceedingly changed also the traditional notion of intelligentsia and moreover changed the intelligentsia itself (having differentiated its content and modified its functions), displayed new subjects of social transformations on the scene of social development, qualifying them to have right of symbolic right and status of “a person of dominant influence”. Such changes are demonstrably proved in O.A. Karmadonov’s research based on the material of content-analysis

of Russian press of the end of the XXth century (“Komsomolskaya Pravda” of 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997 and 1999). On the basis of the settings of frequency of mentioning, amount of attention, general valuation context of publications, the most popular (in O.A.Karmadonov’s terminology – prestigious) socio-economical groups were distinguished. The results of the analysis let O.A.Karmadonov mark out four most prestigious groups of the end of the XXth century: the politicians, the businessmen, the military, the criminals.

Relying on the content-analysis of the text of the interviews with public persons, published in the newspapers “Argumenty I fakty”, “Izvestiya”, “MK-Ural” of the period from 2000 till 2007 (on the whole **700 publications**) we tried to generalize a total portrait of the modern opinion leader in our own research.

The results of the content-analysis let us expose two most popular images of opinion leaders: “a politician” and “an artist” (as well as the popularity of two public spheres – politics / state governing and art culture / art). Thus we can speak about the prevalence of two poles, “codified” in the named images: *emotional-sensual* (an artist) and *rational-pragmatical* (a politician), personifying *cult of spirit* and *cult of mind* (evidently, such an identity is fixed soon in traditionally- stereotype interpretation of images, that however doesn’t disturb us to find “romantic message” in political sphere, nor deprive the sphere of art creativity of rational-pragmatical source).

Enhancing of this or that image identifies also the ways of achievement of set goals of transformation of the reality which are identified with the scripts of *value-spiritual romanticism* and *sensible technocratism*, based already not so much on “holy belief” into moral-ethical revival and spiritual improvement as based on the methods of effective management, planning, organization and control.

The problem of definition of social subjects of changing the social structure and conditions of vital activity, the exposure of dynamics of transforming activity are one of the main conditions of prediction of spiritual perspectives in modern Russia. T.I.Zaslavskaya, analyzing the mechanisms of social transformations, introduces the notion of “transformational social activity” which is interpreted in the narrow sense as social actions carrying innovation character that is deviating from the institutional traditions. The actions, consciously directed or indirectly defining the scripts of social development, are the zone of responsibility of actors of transformational process, forming the so-called *innovational-reformative potential of society*, filled with settings and activities of leaders and élites who work out the rules of social game.

Submitted by us conflicts of contradicting tends, manifesting themselves in the co-existence (and as a matter of fact, in competitive confrontation) of utopianism and pragmatism, romanticism and technocratism, values of primordial Russian and west-oriented ways, designate two major “problem zones” in spiritual-symbolical space of modern Russian reality, demonstrating the absence of needed “the golden mean”:

1. ideological deficiency – a presence in the sphere of means, without precise formulation of goals (question “how?” precedes the basic inquiring – “why?”, “what for?”) – a situation which is characteristic to the script of value technocratism;

2. technological vacuum – a detachment of targeting from practical realization of goals, deficiency of means, contradiction of spiritual project and its empirical embodiment – demonstrated to a considerable extent in the scripts of spiritual romanticism.

Domineering of this or that script in the society determines a corresponding type of

leadership as well as advancing to the forefront of public attention leaders are able to form perspectives of subsequent social development.

To our mind, it is a state of ideological deficiency that turns out to be the most appreciable nowadays on the level of mass consciousness,

gives rise to the state of depersonalization and probably FACElessness of time (absence of fundamental personalities, recognizable face of a prophet, an ideologist), symbolizes in a way drawing a line under the previous epoch of “great people” and “great shocks”.

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